

INTRODUCTION

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This book brings together diverse yet practical perspectives to ensure that all children and adolescents, particularly those in the Global South,¹ are improving their foundational learning, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic around the world.

In recent decades, societies and their governments have made enormous efforts to ensure that all children and adolescents receive the education they need for life-long learning. However, in the twenty-first century, we have learned that it is not enough to go to school. Before the pandemic, we knew that a significant percentage of children were not attending school and that many of those who did attend school were not learning the minimum to at least continue their educational trajectories.² Therefore, ‘schooling ain’t learning’, as said Pritchett in 2013.³

1 We use the concept of ‘Global South’ descriptively to refer to the countries and regions of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia, always with a view to promote south-south cooperation. Some discussions on these concepts can be found in (Dados & Connell, 2012; Gray & Gills, 2016).

2 In this regard, review the UNESCO’s and World Bank reports, for example (UNESCO, 2018; World Bank et al., 2021) and the information that has been generated through the PAL network (Banerji, 2017; Banerji et al., 2013; Munene, 2021). Also the annual ASER Reports on the state of foundational learning in India.

3 (Pritchett, 2013).

School closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation. In many African, Latin American, Caribbean and Asian countries, schools were closed for months or even years. As a result, it was estimated that decades of effort to get children into schools were lost. Moreover, these system-wide closures generated learning loss in practically the entire world. The losses were disproportionately higher in the Global South. Thus, the learning crisis in countries like India worsened after 2020.⁴

Due to this situation, the work being done by more than 17 organisations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and those that form the People's Action for Learning Network (PAL Network) has become relevant. PAL's mission is 'To generate evidence through assessment and action to inform, influence and improve children's learning'. One of the actions to fulfil this mission is to systematise the experiences and generate evidence about PAL member organisations' actions to ensure fundamental learning.

This book incorporates the reflections and works of educational professionals, academics, and activists from the Global South into a discussion on education. The various chapters in this book pose some relevant questions: How to ensure fundamental learning? How to recover and accelerate it in a post-pandemic scenario? What were the emerging actions when schools closed their doors? How to promote learning in native languages? How to take advantage of not only new technologies but also of the 'old' methods? How to scale up the

4 UNESCO's institute of statistics shared a dashboard about school closures related with COVID-19 pandemic between 2020-2022 (UNESCO, 2022b).

existing systems? What roles do partnerships and collaborations play in education?

This introduction has two main objectives: 1) Identifying the significant reflections on education related to expanding the Right to Education and the learning crisis in the twenty-first century and 2) Analysing the relevance and pertinence of the texts that make up this book in these discussions.

Expansion of the right to education

Improving fundamental learning is part of expanding the Right to Education that has characterised the twenty-first century. Since its inception in the mid-twentieth century, the movement for the Right to Education has focused on the right to schooling, and ensuring that children attend school.⁵

This involved decades of effort by societies and their governments: building schools, providing teachers, printing educational materials, and, most importantly, enrolling millions of girls and boys in these new schools. This titanic

5 This process includes compulsory schooling in various countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also includes expanding educational systems linked with the generation of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in other regions of the world. See (Acosta, 2021; Maynes, 1985; Tröhler et al., 2011) "ISBN": "978-987-722-854-0", "language": "spa", "note": "OCLC: 1283852756", "publisher": "CLACSO", "publisher-place": "Buenos Aires", "source": "Open WorldCat", "title": "Derecho a la educación y escolarización en América Latina", "editor": [{"family": "Acosta", "given": "Felicitas"}], "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2021"}]}, "citation-key": "acostaDerechoEducacionEscolarizacion2021", {"id": "20684", "uris": ["http://zotero.org/users/474412/items/QM6ZJJJ"]}, "itemData": {"id": "20684", "type": "book", "call-number": "LC191.8.E85 M39 1985", "collection-title": "SUNY series on interdisciplinary perspectives in social history", "event-place": "Albany", "ISBN": "978-0-87395-976-6", "language": "eng", "note": "HOLLIS number: 990003820 130203941", "number-of-pages": "ix+177", "publisher": "State University of New York Press", "publisher-place": "Albany", "source": "hollis.harvard.edu", "title": "Schooling in Western Europe: a social history", "title-short": "Schooling in Western Europe", "author": [{"family": "Maynes", "given": "Mary Jo"}], "issued": {"date-parts": [{"1985"}]}, "citation-key": "maynesSchoolingWesternEurope1985"}, {"id": "20671", "uris": ["http://zotero.org/users/474412/items/S89VY2MU"]}, "itemData": {"id": "20671", "type": "book", "abstract": "This book is a comparative history that explores the social, cultural, and political formation of the modern nation through the construction of public schooling.

effort bore fruit in the second half of the twentieth century in the form of higher enrolment and improved access to schools. Additionally, this period also saw an increase in the number of years of schooling in various regions of the world.⁶

Despite these efforts, millions of children have not learned foundational skills such as reading and basic mathematics, even with multiple years of schooling. International literature refers to this phenomenon of schooling not translating into equivalent learning outcomes in many ways – educational crisis, learning gap and more recently, ‘learning poverty’.⁷ The definitions of these terms vary but share a central idea: There is a vast gap between what children are learning and what they should be learning, according to the school curricula of each country. This gap increases with each passing year and becomes more and more difficult to bridge as children grow older.

In some contexts, evidence of this learning gap sparked discussions and debates about the quality of education. Once the issue of access to schools had been more or less resolved, the quality of education had to be strengthened. This idea led to various educational reforms that focused on school autonomy and management, policies aimed at teacher training, and accountability.⁸ Before 2020, it was believed that education systems could be improved by improving teacher recruitment and training processes, increasing societal pressure to achieve better results and establishing ‘high consequence’

6 Ibid

7 On educational crisis, see (Banerji, 2014; Montoya, 2018; World Bank, 2018); on learning gap, see (Akmal & Pritchett, 2019; Vergara-Lope & Hevia, 2018; Writer, 2022) and Uwezo data from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda that test all children of given ages, whether in school or not, on simple measures of learning in math, reading (local language); on learning poverty, see (World Bank, 2019b, 2019a, 2021).

8 See, for instance (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayhew, 1990).

accountability systems.⁹ As a result, educational evaluation systems were created that sought to measure and compare progress in the quality of education. However, this perspective did not specifically address the fundamental learning gap. Instead, it incorporated this issue within broader proposals to ‘improve the quality of education’, seeking to increase scores on international standardised tests.¹⁰

In these discussions, the Right to Education expanded and broadened its goals to the Right to Schooling and the Right to Learn. This transition was evident in the most critical educational declarations at the turn of the century. Whereas in 1990, the Education for All by the Year 2000 declaration had focused on meeting basic learning needs through effective access to schools. The Dakar Framework for Action of 2000 specified that access to primary education should be free, compulsory, and of good quality. By 2015, the Education 2030: Incheon Framework for Action (SDG4) proposed to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.¹¹

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and its targets and indicators are best understood against this background. Target 4.1 not only incorporates access to and graduation

9 See for example, (Anderson, 2005; Hanushek & Raymond, 2004). For a deep explanation about educative accountability, see (Hevia & Vergara-Lope, 2019).

10 See, for instance (Ball, 2015; Grek, 2009).

11 See (UNESCO, 2022a) Scientific and Cultural Organization. It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in education, the sciences, culture and communication. UNESCO’s programmes contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015. Serving as a laboratory of ideas, UNESCO helps countries in adopting international standards and manages programmes that foster the free flow of ideas and knowledge sharing. In this spirit, it develops educational tools to help people live as global citizens free of hate and intolerance. UNESCO works so that each child and citizen has access to quality education.

from primary and secondary education but also states that this education should ‘produce relevant and effective learning outcomes’. Thus, indicator 4.1.1 for this target defines the proportion of children and adolescents with minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics.¹²

Fundamental, lifelong learning for all

Guaranteeing an inclusive, equitable, quality and lifelong education requires, among many things, ensuring that all children, adolescents, young adults and adults secure fundamental skills. In general, foundational learning has focused on fundamental reading and mathematics because of their importance in building critical thinking, problem-solving and other fundamental skills both in and out of school. Thus, target 4.1.1 of the SDGs mentions that learning outcomes should be achieved at least in reading and mathematics. Nevertheless, there are other learnings that can be considered fundamental. Some of these are self-care, managing emotions, caring for the environment and digital skills.

Ensuring this range of fundamental learning requires, first of all, continuing coverage efforts and reducing school dropouts and exclusion. Secondly, it is necessary to ensure that all children, at an appropriate stage, acquire this fundamental learning that enables them to continue learning, both in and out of school. Here the role of the mother tongue in education comes into play. Literature points out the growing loss of languages or native tongues worldwide in recent decades, especially in the emerging countries in the Global South.

12 See (United Nations, 2022).