

Annual research digest 2017-18

Introduction by Lee Crawford



CENTRE FOR EDUCATION ECONOMICS

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Introduction

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This year's edition of the CfEE Annual Research Digest focuses exclusively on studies from across the developing world, including Africa, Asia, and South America. "Developing countries" (those below the \$12,000 GNI per capita threshold for high income countries) make up 36% of the world economy, but 83% of world population, and 87% of the world's school pupils. So as education economists we have every reason to be interested in their schooling experience.

There may also be more direct lessons for countries in the developed world. Though the specific challenges are inevitably very different when per student spending is measured in tens not thousands of pounds, there are principles that remain relevant. First and foremost is a focus on scale. In England, for example, one in three schools has now participated in a randomised trial, but most of these studies have involved fewer than 100 schools. Making the next step up to nationwide policy change is a whole different matter, requiring either experimentation at scale, or serious thinking about how systems function and the theory of scaling innovation. Fixing a dozen schools is very different to the thousands that we need to think about. This digest includes recent studies selected by leading thinkers on global education, and includes descriptive work highlighting the scale of the global learning crisis, causal studies investigating large-scale system reforms and new pedagogical approaches,

and going beyond test scores to look at the effects of schools on socialisation and social mobility.

The digest is opened by Lant Pritchett, Director of the largest ever British government-funded global education research programme (“RISE”). He discusses a descriptive paper highlighting both the scale and intractability of the global learning crisis. Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world. Over the last 15 years the country has made substantial efforts to improve the quality of its schooling, including a tripling of spending. This new paper demonstrates that despite these good faith efforts, progress has stalled, and at shockingly low learning levels. The lesson? We cannot be complacent; there are no easy answers; just doing more of the same is not enough; and we must look for new solutions. This story is broadly true across much of the developing world.

So what might work to improve things? Aidan Eyakuze (Director of leading African think tank “Twaweza”) reports on a pair of papers from Tanzania studying the government’s “Big Results Now” reforms, a major new high-stakes accountability exercise. A new national league table of schools based on standardised assessments led to improvements in test scores at the lowest ranking schools. This improvement was driven in part by strategic gaming of the measure – schools encouraged low performing students to drop out or not sit the test. But gaming did not explain all of it – there was real learning too. Encouragingly, a companion study focused on what parents actually care about, found that though they do highly value convenience, they also value learning.

To get better outcomes, schools and teachers need more than just accountability though; they need support too. Celeste Carano and Nomtha Sithole (Advisors with the Tony Blair Institute in the Liberia Ministry of Education) discuss a new paper from researchers at the World Bank

that establishes a new typology of teacher professional development programmes. Research shows huge variation in the effectiveness of teacher training programmes, so this paper sets out to document which features are most important for success (e.g. live lesson practice), and which are seen in large-scale government programmes (quite different features, as it turns out).

Barbara Bruns (Visiting Fellow at the Center for Global Development) discusses two papers on Kenya’s use of research evidence to design and scale-up a major reform of early grade literacy teaching. The design of the programme – Tusome – was based on an 800-school randomised trial that tested different combinations of programme elements. The most cost-effective combination included books for all children, coaching for teachers, and detailed teacher guides (“scripted lesson plans”). Keys to success were communicating clear outcome goals (hardwired into lesson plans) and supporting teachers in the classroom with regular visits from coaches.

Beyond test scores (which are of course important), education is also about shaping what kind of society we want. Schools are about more than just learning. We often talk in economics as if human capital was the prime motivation for governments to expand schooling, but other motivations abound. One might be social mobility. But are schools a leveller? Jishnu Das (Lead Economist at the World Bank) brings a note of scepticism. He focuses on a new World Bank report on social mobility. In the US, your chance of going to university is determined more by your ability at school than by your parent’s wealth. So if schools could be made to be fair, then equity in life chances should follow. Das shows that the same is not true in developing countries, raising questions about the ability of schools to level the playing field for later life chances. University attendance in Pakistan is better

predicted by parent's background than by test scores at school. The brightest poor kid is less likely to attend university than the least bright rich kid.

Finally, Susannah Hares (Global Education Director at the Center for Global Development) discusses Gautam Rao's Job Market Paper (recently published in the American Economic Review) looking at school desegregation in India. A policy providing subsidised places at private schools for poor children made the wealthy children nicer – more likely to share with and socialise with poorer classmates. Economists are usually sceptical of stated preferences: "talk is cheap". Where possible they like to look at revealed preference – what people actually do. So Rao devised a clever test, observing which kids were picked for a sports event: rich kids in integrated schools were indeed more likely to pick poorer kids.

Overall this is a fantastic set of papers from some of the top economists in the field. For those new to the field, I hope this digest helps to ease you into the world of global education economics, and to seasoned policymakers and practitioners, I hope you discover something new.

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