Super synthesis: Evidence of what works in education for development

A synthesis of research evidence identifies the impact of interventions that offer high value in meeting education's greatest challenges in development contexts, as **Jeaniene Spink** explains.

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A new at-a-glance report by ACER's Education Analytics Service identifies what works when it comes to getting all children into school, keeping them in school, ensuring a quality education and ensuring they graduate with the knowledge, skills and abilities to make a positive difference in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Given the plethora of evaluations of intervention programs in education systems in the development context, as well as system-wide reforms, asking what works is not a simple question.

To address that, the education and development team at ACER and education team at Cardno have collaborated to develop a 'super synthesis' of evidence for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The super synthesis distils the findings from robust syntheses of the 'what works in education' research, in essence synthesising these syntheses into a brief, easy-to-use document.

ACER and Cardno's super synthesis of evidence from 18 systematic reviews, meta-analyses and comparative reviews of what works in education for development identifies costed interventions as having the greatest impact on participation in education and on education quality.

The core of the report is a two-page at-a-glance table of evidence addressing seven domains: economic incentives; sector planning and financial reform; infrastructure, supplies and facilities; the teacher workforce; health care and nutrition; educational programs; and school management, communities and classrooms.

Each of the seven domains is evaluated across a series of intervention types in terms of the evidence of impact and cost, with evidence of impact on student participation and student learning outcomes rated on a four-point scale.

So do system-level investments work? According to the super synthesis, 'The weight of evidence…shows that the lowest "evidence of impact" is in the sector planning (and) financial reform domain.'

Does that mean that it is not worth investing in education sector plans, or strengthening education monitoring information systems, or supporting

INDICATIVE EFFECTIVENESS AND COST PER TYPE OF INTERVENTION

Levels of Participation and Quality Key

Participation: x 4, x 3, x 2, x 1

Quality:
- x 4 Evidence of high impact
- x 3 Shows promise of high impact
- x 2 Limited impact
- x 1 May show promise but limited evidence

Costing Key (AUD)

$ = < $100 $$ = < $100–$300 $$$ = > $300

- $ = Per community/town/village
- $ = Per school
- $ = Per teacher
- $ = Per student

Domain	Intervention type	Evidence of impact (Participation / Quality)	Cost
Infrastructure/ supplies/ facilities	New buildings, libraries, water supply	Participation x4, Quality x2	(community) $$$
	Textbooks	Participation x4, Quality x2	(student) $
	Provision of reading materials (especially in the early years)	Participation x2, Quality x4	(student) $$
	Provision of materials in mother tongue	Participation x2, Quality x3	(student) $$ → $$$
Economic Incentives	Cash transfers/school grants	Participation x4, Quality x2	(school) $$ → $$$
	Fee reduction or eradication	Participation x4, Quality x2	(student) $ → $$
	Vouchers	Participation x4, Quality x2	(student) $ → $$
	Provision of uniforms	Participation x3, Quality x2	(student) $
	Microfinance loans	Participation x3, Quality x2	(student) $$ → $$$
	Fellowships and scholarships	Participation x4, Quality x2	(student) $$ → $$$
School management/ communities/ classrooms	Support for school development plans	Participation x2, Quality x3	(school) $
	Est. of School Development Councils	Participation x3, Quality x2	(school) $$
	Community level advocacy campaigns	Participation x2, Quality x3	(community) $$
	Providing report cards	Participation x2, Quality x3	(student) $
	Targeted school management training	Participation x3, Quality x2	(school) $
	School supervision (Pedagogical Support)	Participation x1, Quality x1	(student) $
	School Inspection (Inspectorate Functions)	Participation x1, Quality x1	(student) $

the professional skills of Ministry of Education personnel?

'Not at all,' the authors of the super synthesis conclude. 'Detailed sector planning, robust education statistics and skilled personnel represent the critical backbone of a well-functioning education system.'

The super synthesis reveals that educational programs like the provision of reading materials, especially in the early years, targeted teacher training, the provision of teaching materials and curriculum reform, and teacher workforce interventions like recruitment and retention reforms, improved personnel management information systems and performance-based contracts are both high impact and cost-effective in education for development. ■

The Education Analytics Service (EAS) was established by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, through its Education Section, to improve the extent and quality of evidence and expertise used to inform its education policy and programs. The EAS is managed by ACER and the Australian-based international development company Cardno.

LINKS

For more information on ACER's education and development capability, visit www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development

For more information on Cardno, visit http://www.cardno.com/en-au/MarketsandServices/Pages/Education.aspx

To read *What Works Best in Education for Development: A super synthesis of the evidence* by Jeaniene Spink, Elizabeth Cassity and Adam Rorris, with editorial support from Amy Denahy and Meredith Bramich, visit http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/super-synthesis-report.pdf