



The policies, politics and progress of access to basic education

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EDITORIAL

The policies, politics and progress of access to basic education

This special issue arises from the work of the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity www.create-rpc.org. Access to basic education is a central plank of the global Education for All (EFA) initiative and is the key to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that relate to education. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are the regions of the world which have the lowest indicators of educational access. Over 55 million children of school age are not enrolled at the primary level and as many as 250 million fail to attend secondary schooling in these two regions. Those effectively excluded from basic education are a much larger number. Many of those who are nominally enrolled do not attend regularly. Many are two or more years overage and almost certainly will not complete a full cycle of basic education before reaching their late teens. Many more have unacceptably low levels of achievement (Lewin 2007; Little 2008a; Waage et al. 2010).

Though access to basic education has improved since the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All, and especially since the World Education Forum at Dakar in 2000, progress has been uneven, rapid expansion has degraded quality, and it is becoming clear that the restricted definitions of access used to monitor progress mask much silent exclusion (children enrolled but learning little) and conceal very unequal patterns of participation below the national level by rural/urban location, income group, gender, caste and ethnicity.

Yet, access to education lies at the heart of development. Lack of education is both a part of the definition of poverty, and a means for its diminution. Sustained access is critical to long-term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women and reductions in inequality. Educational policies and politics are central to progress on access to education; so too are underlying conditions of demography, economy, society, culture and educational histories.

In most countries the concept of basic education extends beyond primary education, sometimes including several years of secondary education and sometimes including non-formal education provision. Indicators of progress, however, generally focus on the gross and net enrolment ratio (GER and NER), on survival rates to grade 5 or 6 in primary and on gender parity indices (GPIs). Globally and regionally, the news on progress is positive. In developing countries as a whole the NER increased from 80% in 1991 to 86% in 2007; in sub-Saharan Africa from 53% to 73% and in South Asia from 72% to 86%, over the same period. The ratio of girls' enrolment in primary school relative to boys in all developing countries increased from 87% in 1990 to 97% in 2007. These aggregate figures, however, mask wide variations by country with Niger, Demo-

cratic Republic of the Congo, Burkina Faso and Eritrea reporting NERs of less than 50% in 2005. Pakistan has a low of 68% while Sri Lanka reports 97% (UNESCO 2010).

The policies and practices that lie behind much of this progress are driven mainly by national governments. In some countries state/provincial and local governments play an equally important role, especially in large federal states like India. There are policy actors at many different levels. Schools and communities have responsibilities under various types of decentralisation, while district and zonal level administrative officers coordinate and implement above the level of the school. Provincial and regional authorities oversee local education officers, and are themselves responsible to national-level bodies. Finally, bilateral and multilateral agencies interact with governments as development partners with mutual accountabilities. Actors at all levels play roles in influencing policy and practice and in designing and developing programmes.

The gap between policy formulation and policy implementation is a recurrent theme in the research literature on the expansion of access to basic education policy to universal levels in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Much early analysis of the gap focussed less on the processes of policy or programme formulation and more on why reform implementation failed (Grindle 1980; Hurst 1983, Lewin 1984). Subsequently, the focus shifted to successful innovations, especially in schools, and to the role of leadership, local commitment, processes of implementation and institutionalisation, monitoring and problem solving and community support (Fullan 1989; Lewin 1991; Levin and Lockheed 1993). Through the 1990s, when attention focussed more on the formulation of policies and on the relationship between formulation and implementation, the notion of 'policy cycles' appeared (e.g. Haddad and Demsky 1995; Evans, Sack, and Shaw 1995). The policy cycle concept is evident also in writings about education in Europe (Ball 1994; Lingard and Ozga 2007).

Despite their common origins in Western social science, the literatures on education policy reform in the countries of the North on the one hand and countries of the South on the other diverge in important respects (Little 2008b). While the concepts of 'policy as text' and as 'discourse' have been widely used in studies of educational policy in the North, their use in the analysis of policy in developing countries is embryonic. The policy goals of social justice and equality have framed many contemporary analyses of educational policy in the North (Lall 2007). The often competing goals of economic growth, of improved educational quality, of cost containment and of nation-building are also addressed in studies in the South. In the North, the role of policy actors in supra-national and multilateral organisations is becoming apparent, in for example, the harmonisation of qualification systems, but has yet to become a defining influence across many aspects of education policy. In the South by contrast, development partners have long played a much more pivotal role in the determination of aspects of national education policy, especially in the more aid-dependent countries (Jones 2007; King 2007). With compulsory basic education implemented in almost all countries in the North there has been little need in recent years to analyse policies for access to basic education provision. In many countries in the South, universal access remains an elusive policy goal. As a result, programmes for access to non-formal basic education attract policy attention

and remain the only channel for a basic education for many children in Africa and Asia.

Most of the studies of the politics of policy in the North have been undertaken in countries with predominantly democratic political regimes. In the South, democracy is less widespread and the varied political regimes within which EFA policies have been promoted offers new dimensions to understanding the interaction of politics with policies to influence progress (e.g. Kosak 2009). The influence of political characteristics and policy environments on policy formulation and implementation across sectors including education are analysed by Grindle (1980) and Grindle and Thomas (1991). Case studies of the politics of national education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America are offered by, *inter alia*, Haddad and Demsky (1994), Evans et al. (1995), Grindle (2004), Bown (2009), Lewin and Akyeampong (2009), Little (2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

The cases presented in this special issue add to our understanding of the policies, politics and progress in basic education in a range of developing countries in the context of global agenda of EFA and the MDGs. They present case studies of national and local policies for improved access to education and set these in historical, social and economic context. These case studies embrace policies for both formal and non-formal education. They explore the influence of political regimes on policy content and the concept of 'political will' for basic education. They explore the interactions between the politics of change at the local, national, international and global levels. They illuminate the influences of international partnerships and networks on national policy-making and practice. Finally, they interrogate the current tendency for targets and indicators to drive and determine policy in practice and suggest that the choice of indicators can lead to misconceptions of what is to be achieved, overemphasis on some goals and silences on others, and the costly pursuit of unattainable levels of precision in measurement of progress which overlook the limitations of useful indicators.

The first four papers focus on policies and politics at the national and local levels. Tony Somerset offers an historical analysis of policies for free primary education in Kenya since the 1940s and highlights the underlying tensions between two dominant policy goals – the widening of access and the containment of costs. A third desirable and often competing policy goal, the enhancement of quality, is present in policy discourse but is largely sidelined as policies move into implementation. This gap, Somerset suggests, has profound implications for learning outcomes. The gap between formulation and implementation is the theme of Angela Little's account of the Sri Lankan Education Reforms of 1997 with a particular focus on the concept of 'political will' frequently employed in the discourse of multilateral organisations such as the United Nations and UNESCO. This paper demonstrates the positive role played by political will in the formulation of the 1997 policy. During implementation however, a myriad of actors with political will engaged at many levels and it was their motivations and actions that became critical in determining whether formulated policies are translated into practice. Political will, it is suggested, is a double-edged sword that can catalyse and can block reforms designed to provide more equitable and universal educational access. The theme of local-level political will is also pursued in the third paper in relation to the national policy of decentralisation of education management and community participation in

Ghana. Ato Essuman and Kwame Akyeampong present case studies in two districts to show how, contrary to policy expectations, local elites and more educated community members become the new brokers of decision-making, and through their actions, close up the spaces for genuine representation and participation by community members in the affairs of schools. In the fourth paper, Wim Hoppers moves beyond the formal system of education and addresses the politics and policy-making of alternative forms of basic education in the context of EFA, with special reference to Uganda and Kenya. He explores the gap between policy rhetoric and practice and the problems inherent in low capacity of non-formal education, government resistance to 'tamper with the integrity' of inherited education systems and the continued fragmentation of civil society.

The fifth, sixth and seventh papers redirect our attention from the local and the national to the international and the global. Michael Ward presents the case of India's *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), currently the world's largest basic education programme, and discusses the significance of external assistance for achieving increased access to elementary education particularly for the most disadvantaged members of Indian society. Ward's paper provides an upbeat account of how multi- and bi-lateral development 'partners' can work to support rather than direct national and state-level policy and practice, while simultaneously identifying some of the inevitable tensions. Ward offers a useful counterpoint to accounts which stress the seemingly inevitable 'dependence' of aid-recipient countries on development partners' policy priorities. In the next case study – of the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (FTI) – Desmond Bermingham moves us from the politics of aid partnerships in particular countries to the macro- and micro-politics of a global 'networked' organisation intended to support the implementation of policies for basic education, especially in low-income countries. Among the policy tensions arising out of competing global political pressures and complex institutional interactions, are those between global policy setting and local decision-making, between the narrow MDGs and the broader EFA goals, between enrolment and quality and between levels of domestic investment and external assistance. The final paper, by Keith Lewin, discusses critically the targets and indicators promoted by bilateral and United Nations organisations to monitor progress in universalising access to basic education. The goals of EFA are much broader than can be assessed with the indicators of enrolment rates and gender balance, the focus on which has resulted in restricted patterns of investment. Moreover, several of the indicators used are technically flawed and ambiguous to interpret. Improving target setting and devising better indicators which allow progress to be assessed and understood requires a more nuanced understanding of what indicators do and do not measure, and an appreciation of the virtues and vices of setting targets when 'target setters' are not necessarily 'target getters'.

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