P91 / From Evidence to Policy? What Works to Keep Students in School and Learning in the Global South, and What Gets Adopted

Topic : Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

Chair : Sandra Garcia-Jaramillo (Universidad de Los Andes)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Education systems in the Global South have expanded access over the past three decades, yet three challenges persist. Many students, especially in secondary education, attend irregularly and leave school before graduating. Most critically, enrollment has not translated into learning: an estimated 70 percent of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text (World Bank et al., 2022), and these gaps accumulate in secondary school. These deficits concentrate among poor, rural and disadvantaged students, reproducing inequality across generations.

Evidence on how to address these problems has grown rapidly. Hundreds of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations have tested conditional cash transfers, structured pedagogy, teaching at the right level, tutoring, early warning systems, information on returns to schooling and school management reforms, and syntheses such as the “Smart Buys” (GEEAP, 2023) rank interventions by cost-effectiveness. Yet this literature centers on primary education; less is known about secondary education, where dropout and learning gaps converge. We know little about what happens after an evaluation is published. Knowledge use is rarely linear: evidence may be used instrumentally, conceptually or symbolically. Policymakers do update their beliefs in response to research (Hjort et al., 2021; Vivalt & Coville, 2023), but adoption depends on implementation capacity, political incentives and the intermediaries who translate findings (DellaVigna et al., 2024). Promising pilots often lose effectiveness at scale, and cost data are seldom reported in ways that inform budget decisions.

This panel connects the “what works” literature in education with research on policy learning, transfer and diffusion. It asks three questions. (1) What works, and what does not, to improve attendance, graduation and core learning (literacy, numeracy and other key competencies) in K-12 education, particularly secondary education, in the Global South? (2) To what extent, through which channels and under what conditions has evaluation evidence been translated into policy design, reform, scale-up or termination? (3) What is known about the cost-effectiveness and scalability of effective interventions, and does this information reach decision-makers?

The panel explores four hypotheses. First, evidence uptake depends less on the strength of the evidence than on whether evaluations are co-produced with, or embedded in, government. Second, interventions that fit existing delivery systems and teacher routines are more likely to scale while retaining their effects. Third, evidence is more often used to legitimize or adjust existing programs than to launch new ones or end ineffective ones. Fourth, the absence of credible cost and implementation data is a binding constraint on cross-jurisdictional learning. By bringing impact evaluation and policy process research together, the panel clarifies the potential and limits of evidence-informed education policy in the Global South.

References

DellaVigna, S., Kim, W., & Linos, E. (2024). Bottlenecks for evidence adoption. JPE, 132(8).

Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP) (2023). Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning. World Bank et al.

Hjort, J., et al. (2021). How research affects policy. AER, 111(5).

Vivalt, E., & Coville, A. (2023). How do policymakers update their beliefs? JDE, 165.

World Bank et al. (2022). The state of global learning poverty: 2022 update.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers that examine how evidence on education interventions in the Global South is produced, interpreted and used in policy. We particularly welcome contributions on secondary education and on three outcomes: school attendance and retention, graduation, and core learning, from foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school to key competencies in secondary school.

We expect three broad types of papers. First, empirical impact or results evaluations of concrete programs, strategies or policies aimed at improving these outcomes in K-12 education. Papers in this group are especially welcome when they go beyond estimating effects and document what happened next: whether results were communicated to, read by or incorporated into the decisions of governments, and whether programs were adopted, adapted, scaled or discontinued as a result. Null or negative findings, and evidence from programs that failed to scale, are equally welcome: knowing what does not work is as important for policy learning as knowing what does.

Second, analyses of the cost-effectiveness and scalability of education interventions, including studies comparing pilot and at-scale effects, examining implementation by government systems, or tracing whether cost and scalability information has shaped budget and design decisions.

Third, studies of how policymakers, civil servants and other actors in the Global South access, interpret and use evaluation evidence when designing or reforming K-12 education policy. These may draw on case studies, process tracing, interviews, surveys or experiments with decision-makers, and may examine the role of research-government partnerships, evidence intermediaries, international organizations and donors, or the political conditions that enable or block evidence use.

We welcome quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, single-country and comparative studies, and contributions from both researchers and practitioners. Papers by scholars based in the Global South are especially encouraged. Proposals should state clearly the policy or intervention studied, the context, the data and methods, and, where relevant, the evidence on the link between findings and policy change.