Toward Universal Learning
What Every Child Should Learn
(Report No. 1 Of 3
Learning Metrics Task Force)
UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution,
February 2013.

Introduction:

Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn is the first in a series of three reports from the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at Brookings have joined efforts to convene the Learning Metrics Task Force. The overarching objective of the project is to catalyze a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access *plus* learning. Based on recommendations of technical working groups and input from broad global consultations, the task force aims to make recommendations to help countries and international organizations measure and improve learning outcomes for children and youth worldwide.

When and Where Children Learn

Early Childhood: Globally, 164 million children are enrolled in preschool programs, and the pre-primary gross enrolment ratio (GER) is 48 percent (UNESCO 2012). However, access to pre- primary programs is unevenly distributed — in low-income countries the GER for pre- primary is only 15 percent. The children least likely to be enrolled in preschool are those belonging to minority ethnic groups, those with less educated mothers, and those who speak a home language different from the language used in school (UNESCO 2012). These are also the children who are most likely to benefit from high-quality pre- primary programs.

Primary: Partly as a result of the push for universal primary education, the majority (89 percent) of primary age children are now enrolled in school (UNESCO 2012). Free, compulsory primary education is recognized as a fundamental human right (United Nations 1948), and primary education is compulsory in almost every country (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS] 2012). Still, there are nearly 61 million out-of-school children of primary-school age, a number that has stagnated since 2008 (UNESCO 2012).

Post primary: For most children, "post primary" refers to secondary education. Given the diverse areas of specialization students engage in after secondary school, the task force decided to limit its recommendations at the post primary level to lower secondary. It is estimated that globally, 91 percent of children who entered school stay there until the end of primary school, and 95 percent of those students' transition to secondary school. However, for children in low-income countries, only 59 percent make it to the last year of primary school, and 72 percent of those students successfully transition to secondary school (UIS 2012). For children who do not attend secondary school, learning occurs mainly through work, family and community experiences (i.e., non-formal, unstructured contexts).

Proposed Framework: Seven Domains of Learning

Given the diversity of structures, places, and times at which children and youth learn, it is a challenge to define what outcomes related to learning are important, especially at a global level.

Global Framework of Learning Domains		
Domain	**Description**	**Subdomain Examples***
Physical well-being	How children and youth use their bodies, develop motor control, and understand and exhibit appropriate nutrition, exercise, hygiene and safety practices.	• Physical health and hygiene • Food and nutrition • Physical activity

| Social and emotional	How children and youth foster and maintain relationships with adults and peers. Also, how they perceive themselves in relation to others.	• Social and community values • Civic values • Mental health and well-being
Culture and the arts	Creative expression, including activities from the areas of music, theatre, dance or creative movement, and the visual, media and literary arts. Also, cultural experiences in families, school, community and country.	• Creative arts • Cultural knowledge • Self- and community identity • Awareness of and respect for diversity
Literacy and communication	Communication in the primary language(s) of the society in which children and youth live, including speaking, listening, reading, writing, and understanding the spoken and written word in various media.	• Speaking and listening • Vocabulary • Writing • Reading
Learning approaches and cognition	Learning approaches describe a learners' engagement, motivation and participation in learning. Cognition is the mental process of acquiring learning through these various approaches.	• Persistence and attention • Cooperation • Problem solving • Self-direction • Critical thinking
Numeracy and mathematics	The science of numbers and quantitative language used universally to represent phenomena observed in the environment.	• Number concepts and operations • Geometry and patterns • Mathematics application • Data and statistics
Science and technology	Science is specific knowledge or a body or system of knowledge covering physical laws and general truths. Technology refers to the creation and usage of tools to solve problems.	• Scientific inquiry • Life science • Physical science • Earth science • Awareness and use of digital technology

Considerations Related to Equity

Children with Disabilities: An estimated 15 to 20 percent of students worldwide have special learning needs, and children with disabilities are less likely to enrol in and complete school than their nondisabled peers (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011). With targeted instructional support and accommodations, children with disabilities can make progress toward learning goals in all seven domains. When assessing learning for children with disabilities, as with all children, a focus on individual progress can be more relevant in measuring and improving learning outcomes than a focus on absolute learning levels. More frequent and fine-grained monitoring of progress may be necessary to capture improvements in learning for children with disabilities.

Gender: Gender may be more important in discussing the determinants of learning in the classroom than in making choices about outcome measures. When looking at the physical well-being domain and the social and emotional domain, one needs to recognize that physical and emotional development may also be affected by age as well as by level. This is compounded by the fact that girls tend to reach puberty about two years before boys do.

The Global Framework of Learning Domains
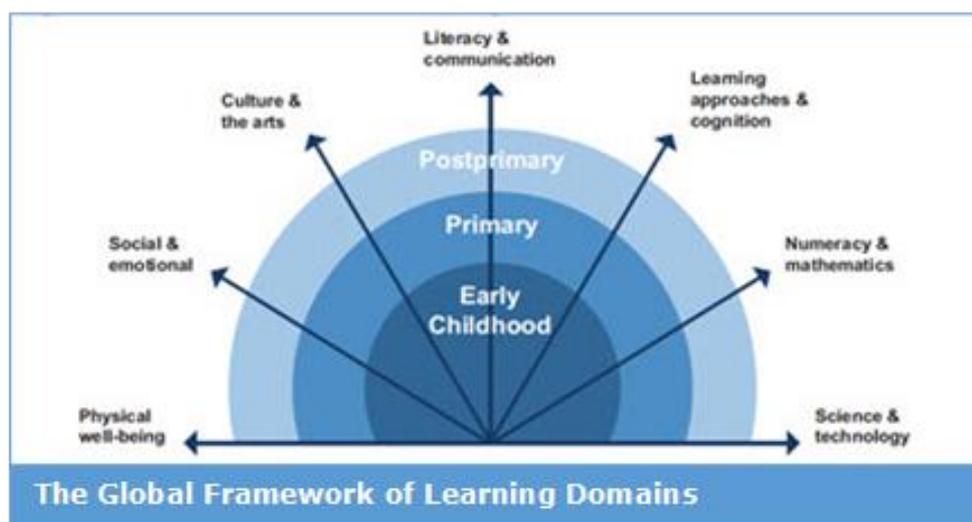
Learning in Conflict and Emergency Contexts: A high-quality education in emergency situations can provide physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection that can sustain and save lives {Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) 2010}. War and natural disasters can significantly disrupt a child's education and learning trajectory.

Countries Demonstrating Low Levels of Learning

Currently, international capacity for measuring learning is concentrated most strongly in the domains of literacy and communication, numeracy and mathematics, and science and technology. While these measures do not provide a complete picture of what children and youth have learned, they form the basis for analysis of learning levels globally. There is an argument that any learning goals proposed as part of the post-2015 development agenda should be "based on feasibility, not wishful thinking." In many developing countries, learning progress in the areas of literacy, mathematics and science is stagnant or even declining based on results from national and international assessments. The authors estimate that given current trends, it would take many years and decade for many countries to reach mean Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) levels of learning as measured by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

Remaining Issues

- The LMTF is interested in a tiered model of measuring learning that takes into account internationally comparable assessments in some contexts and alternative assessments in others.
- Countries with universal or near-universal enrolment may compile accurate assessments of learning through schools, while countries with lower levels of enrolment may need an alternative strategy for learning assessment, such as household surveys.
- Some argue that an age-based model would keep governments accountable for the learning of all children, whether or not they are enrolled in school.
- Others argue that the varying ages at which children begin school globally would make grade levels a fairer way of measuring learning, especially in any internationally comparable way.

Next Steps

This report documents Phase I of the LMTF project. It describes the research and policies the Standards Working Group deemed most relevant, but it is by no means a comprehensive report of education policy and learning research.

In Phase II of the project, the Measures and Methods Working Group will investigate the feasibility of measuring learning in the seven domains, taking into account current initiatives to measure learning at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Conclusion

The human right to education cannot be achieved simply by ensuring children attend school; they must also be learning while they are there. Setting goals and measuring progress have the potential to accelerate learning at the global level and building consensus around these goals and measures for learning is a crucial step toward ensuring a worldwide focus on access plus learning.

The Learning Metrics Task Force was convened to provide a forum for all interested stakeholders to work collaboratively and share their expertise and ideas for what learning is important and how it can be measured to improve education quality.

Read the full report at the official website: http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/lmtf-rpt1-toward-universal-learning-execsum.pdf

This is a joint publication of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution.