

Never Too Late to Learn? Investing in Educational Second Chances for Youth

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Abstract

A strong foundation for learning through basic education has rightly been the top priority for developing countries in recent years. These efforts have led to a higher proportion of children entering primary school than ever before. While these successes should be celebrated, too many of these children are entering adolescence poorly prepared for work and life. In many countries, young people who complete primary education are barely able to read a sentence, which means that the quality of education being provided is low. To compound this problem, many drop out of school early, and in some countries, many of those from disadvantaged backgrounds never enter school at all. Should countries be spending their scarce public resources on helping these young people to recover from these false starts? This paper says yes because there can be high economic returns from investing in educational second chances for young people when policies and programs are well designed. In this paper, we present a series of principles on which interventions must be based to be effective. We also discuss the roles that government will need to play to meet the challenges ahead.

By many measures, the world has made remarkable progress in improving educational outcomes in developing countries. Primary school enrollment rates in low-income countries other than China and India rose from 50 percent in 1970 to 88 percent in 2000. Including these two countries, an average of over 80 percent of children are now completing primary school (UNICEF 2003). Moreover, the secondary gross enrollment rate has increased by more than 20 percent over the past decade across the world (UNESCO 2004). This strengthening of human capital presents the world with an unprecedented opportunity to accelerate economic growth and reduce poverty.

However, dramatic as these numbers are, many children are still being left behind. This is partly because the progress in enrollment and completion rates has been uneven. Many children in Sub-Saharan Africa never start school. Even in countries where large numbers of children do attend school, early dropouts, high rates of grade repetition, and low-quality education mean that children are entering adolescence poorly prepared for work

and life. In countries such as Ghana and Zambia, fewer than 60 percent of all 15 to 19 year olds who have completed six years of education can read a simple sentence in their own language. Fewer than 40 percent know that condoms can prevent HIV/AIDS (World Bank 2006). The youth unemployment rate is two to three times higher than the adult unemployment rate, ranging from 7 percent in East Asia to 13.4 percent in industrialized countries, and 25 percent in the Middle East and North America. In most cases, the reason for this high youth unemployment rate is a lack of skills. (World Bank 2006)

These alarming figures have prompted policymakers and experts to renew the emphasis on investing in basic education. The multi-donor Education for All/ Fast-track Initiative (EFA/FTI), for example, is aimed at helping the poorest countries catch up in four areas of education – finance, policy, capacity, and data. Efforts are also being made to improve educational quality (including the quality of teachers) by 2015. Some recent evidence has shown that early child development can also have enormous payoffs in improving educational outcomes. (See Van der Gaag & Tan 1997; Young 2002).

Preparing young people well and giving them the opportunity to access quality secondary and tertiary education are priorities that have been shown to have high returns both to the young people themselves and to society as a whole. However, many young people never start school or to drop out because of poverty, civil conflict, economic shocks, and bad schools, without having acquired the basic skills that they need for work and life. Many countries operate a variety of programs to get out-of-school children back into school or into informal training courses and to get illiterate young adults into literacy programs. However, a recent report shows that these second chance programs are, for most part, small-scale and fragmented and are not part of a coherent strategy to educate out-of-school young people nor are they integrated into the overall human development strategy of the countries in question. (World Bank 2006)

This paper reviews the key issues regarding such second chance programs. Specifically, it aims to answer three questions: What are the characteristics of those who need second chances? What are the justifications for public intervention? How can these programs be made more cost-effective?

Who Needs Second Chances in Education?

In this paper, we focus on those young people who lack the basic skills for life and those who have failed to acquire the skills needed to find or keep good jobs. Some of these young people never started school and are functionally illiterate. In fact, 113 million primary-school-age children around the world were not in school in 2000. (UNESCO 2000) These children will become the next generation of illiterate adults. While their numbers are declining in most countries, this is still a major problem for some disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic minorities.

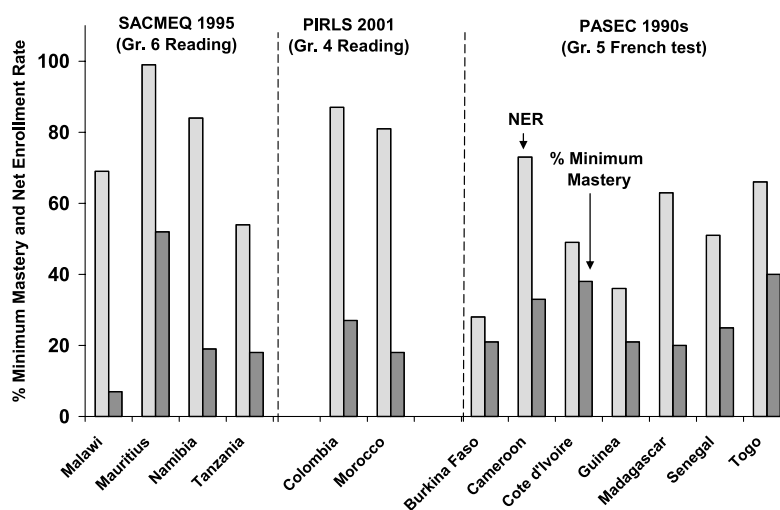
There is a larger group consisting of young people who dropped out of school before they learned the basic skills to function in society. In Sub-Saharan Africa, which lags behind

the rest of the world in basic education, the primary completion rate is still less than 60 percent. The many children who either drop out of or end their education after primary school acquire only minimal skills along the way. In countries ravaged by civil war, roughly 40 percent of 12 to 24 –year olds and 63 percent of 25 to 35 year olds have never attended school, and only 20 percent of 25 to 35 year olds have finished primary school.

Even among those who finish primary school, the poor quality of most education means that many children do not learn enough to function effectively to meet the demands of daily living or working. Figure 1 shows that less than one-third of children in those countries achieved a minimum mastery of the relevant topic by Grades 4 to 6, even though the average net enrollment rate was about 65 percent. In Mali, only about 20 percent of 15 to 19 year olds had completed the primary cycle of six years of schooling, and of those, only 60 percent could read a simple sentence. In Nepal, 15 to 19 –year olds who had completed the five years of the primary cycle could typically read a sentence, but among the nearly 30 percent who dropped out in or before Grade 3, fewer than 60 percent could read a sentence. (World Bank 2006)

In middle-income countries, many children are unable to make the transition to secondary school, especially those from poor families (Figure 2). And because past education

Figure 1. Attending is not always learning.



□NER: Net enrollment ratio is the ratio of the number of children of official school age (as defined by the national education system) who are enrolled in school to the population of the corresponding official school age.
 ■Minimum Mastery %: percentage that achieved mastery is calculated by multiplying the percentage of children in the study who have achieved the minimum standards (in brackets) by the percentage of children who survived to grade 5.
 SACMEQ: Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education- Grade 6 Reading test
 PASEC: Programme d'Analyse des Systemes Educatifs de la Confemen- Grade 5 French test
 PIRLS: Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study, % of Grade 4 students with reading scores above 25th percentile of international

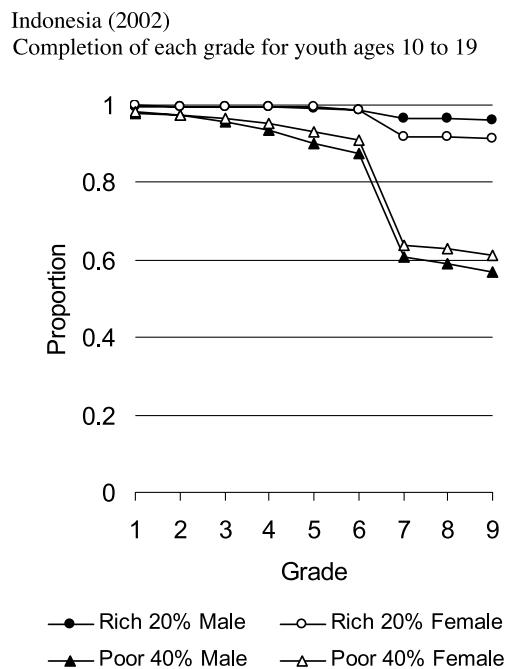
Source: World Bank 2006.

policies have focused on increasing the number of people who passed through the education system rather than on learning achievement, even those who do get access to secondary school are often not well prepared. Adolescents from middle-income countries perform on average well below the OECD average of 500 on standardized tests (Figure 3). UNESCO (2003) has estimated that roughly 10 to 20 percent of the world’s population is not getting its learning needs adequately met by the current education system.

The failure to acquire the skills necessary for life and work has very negative consequences for individuals and for society. Many young people have difficulty finding productive employment. One measure is the high rate of youth unemployment; worldwide, young people make up 25 percent of the working-age population but 47 percent of the unemployed. Another indicator is the large proportion of young people neither in the labor force nor in school (sometimes referred to as “idle youth”). The uneducated are disproportionately represented among “idle youth.” The proportion of “idle youth” can be high as 30 to 40 percent of youth population in many developing countries, and as high as almost 50 percent in Dominican Republic and Afghanistan. (World Bank 2006)

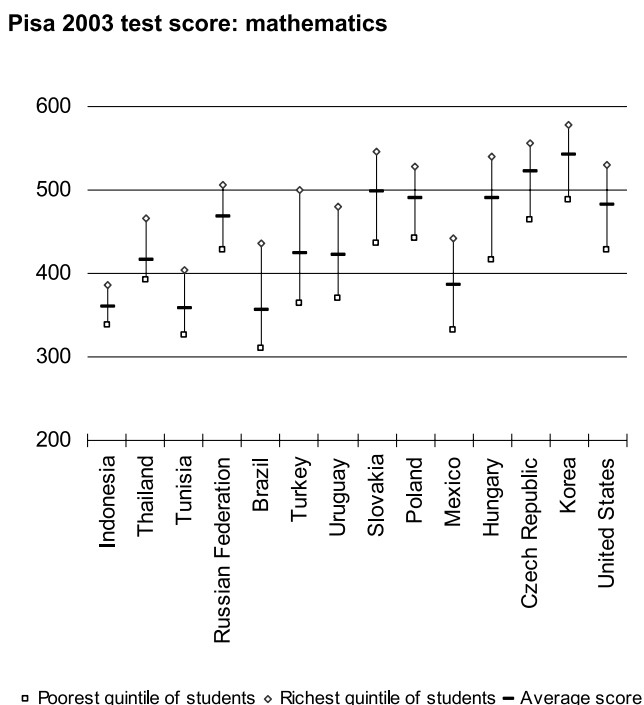
Many young people also start working at a very young age and then find it difficult to move into more productive jobs. In Burkina Faso, more than 90 percent of teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 with no education started working as family helpers in 1993. Five

Figure 2. The transition to secondary school remains a barrier for poor young people



Source: World Bank 2006.

Figure 3. Learning achievement can be low in developing countries.



Source: World Bank 2006.

years later this percentage had only fallen to about 80 percent. In contrast, while more than 80 percent of teenagers between 15 and 19 with some secondary education had started working as family helpers in 1993, this share fell to about 40 percent in five years. (World Bank 2006) This suggests how mobility within the labor market is positively correlated with higher levels of education.

Why Should Governments Get Involved?

There are several reasons government intervention is warranted in the case of young people needing second chance educational opportunities. First, most of those who need second chances are poor, who were unable to benefit from their first chances because available opportunities were either too costly or of poor quality. Also, a lack of adequate credit in most developing countries means that poor students have no opportunity to borrow funds against their future earnings to finance their education.

Second, even when young people do have a say in the decisions being made about their education, they often lack the information needed to make good choices or they simply have erroneous perceptions. Ignorance of the true value of investments in education may

result in under-investment in education from a social perspective. An experiment in the Dominican Republic showed that boys enrolled in the final year of primary school severely under-estimated the returns to completing secondary school, a misperception that led to high dropout rates. (World Bank 2006)

Third, dropping out of school and failing in the labor market increases the likelihood that young people will indulge in or be exposed to risky kinds of behavior, including drug abuse, unprotected sex, and violence, which have enormous social consequences. Also, recent studies have shown that education increases voter participation (Hall 2006), which is an important measure of the active citizenship essential for countries' political and economic stability. Education also appears to delay childbearing; recent evidence from Guatemala has shown that education reduces the probability that young women will become mothers while they are still in their teenage years. (Behrman et al. 2006)

Fourth, waiting until adulthood to invest in human capital has high costs. As people age, the opportunity cost of keeping them in a second-chance program is higher as labor productivity tends to increase with experience. Also, when first opportunities are missed, remediation can be extremely costly. Evidence from the US shows that, when holding everything else constant, the rate of return to a dollar of investment in education diminishes with age. (Carneiro & Heckman 2003) Thus, it is critical for educational second chances to be provided to young people when the returns to investment in education are still sufficiently high. Also, investing in young people has a larger pay-off than investing in adults because of the longer period of time over which to reap the benefits.

Fifth, not investing in educational second chances wastes earlier childhood investments. On average, young people today have higher educational base on which to build human capital than older cohorts. Learning is cumulative, and knowledge and skills acquired earlier make it easier to continue learning later. Thus these earlier investments would yield higher private and social benefits if further investments were provided to those who dropped out of school with some basic skills.

How Should Governments Get Involved: Towards a More Effective Delivery of Second-chance Programs?

Given the case for government intervention, how should it be done? This is a complex question because various actors are typically involved in designing, funding, and implementing educational second chances programs. These actors can be classified into four categories: (1) governments and governmental institutions, (2) non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), (3) private enterprises, and (4) international organizations and donors. The extent to which each kind of actor participates in and is responsible for these programs and the level of collaboration among them vary greatly across countries.

Table 1 summarizes the providers of educational second chances in six countries. The information given in the table is by no means comprehensive; it only gives a glimpse of the

overall picture based on facts that are readily available in existing literature. The programs are not exclusively targeted toward young people, and they consist of various kinds of interventions from literacy programs to vocational training programs and adult education in developed countries. Very often, educational second chances programs are only one component of larger projects. For example, in Ghana, out of five projects that were identified as having prominent second chances component, two were water and sanitation projects with an emphasis on community participation and ownership. (ADEA-ABEL 1998) Moreover, the information in Table 1 may not reflect the current situations in these countries (especially the African countries) as the information source used is dated.

From the readily available information, it is clear that multiple stakeholders are involved in all of the countries cited in the table and that there are variations in the extent to which stakeholders are involved in different phases of service provision. In many countries, the central government used to be the only provider of second chance programs, but this is increasingly changing to a decentralized system in which more NGOs and private companies are providing these services. Governments are gradually taking on the more general roles of regulator, advocate, and creator of policies.

Given the multiplicity of actors involved, many countries have created a body to coordinate the work of different stakeholders (see the bottom row of Table 1). Although this certainly is a critical step towards increasing the efficiency of service provision, not all of

Table 1. List of Education Second Chances Providers

	Ghana	Senegal	Burkina Faso	Denmark	France	Germany
Governance and Administration	Public	Public	Public (H) NGO (L)	Public	Public	Public
Financing	Public Donor	Donor Beneficiaries	Donor NGOs	Public Beneficiaries	Public Beneficiaries Private	Public Beneficiaries Private NGOs
Service Delivery	Private	Private NGOs	Private NGOs (H) Public	NGOs Public	Private Public	Private NGOs Public
Central Coordination Body (✓ if exist)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

Source: ADEA (1998) for Ghana, Senegal, and Burkina Faso. Powell et al. (2003) for Denmark, France, and Germany.

Note: Information on the degree of involvement is provided where available: (H) for high and (L) for low engagement.

Governance and Administration

Policy development and implementation of policy, including enforcement of regulations or sanctions.

Financing

Provision of funding

Service Delivery

Providing teaching and training services. (This excludes other services such as water supply, facilities, and technical services.)

these bodies have proved to be effective. For example, in Ghana, although such committee exists, it is still difficult for many NGOs to influence the government at the policymaking level because of political tensions between the two. In Senegal, efforts have been made by the government to bring together representatives of the state and civil society, but a lack of coherent strategy has caused this attempt at collaboration to fail and has engendered distrust on both sides. In Burkina Faso, there are two coordinating bodies, one to facilitate collaboration among various NGOs and another to coordinate between NGOs and the government, but there are overlaps of purposes and activities between the two bodies. (ADEA-ABEL 1998)

In some countries such as Chile, the public sector plays very limited role and the private sector is the dominant actor in providing most of the services in education sector. However, the government has failed to devise a framework to guide investments and to ensure articulation or to set out clear standards of quality that providers must meet.

In the Philippines, on the other hand, the public sector plays a significant role. In fact, because the country has promoted decentralization, not only the central government but also many local government bodies are involved in designing educational second chance programs. However, a lack of coordination between the central and local governments seems to be holding up the flow of funds to support the local government. Also a lack of leadership from the government on the ground rules for articulation is causing problems in linking second chances with formal education and labor markets. (Fretwell and Colombano 2000)

Given this multiplicity of ways that governments can affect second-chance outcomes, what are ways to make sure they do so in a cost-effective way? We find that improving coordination, designing diversified programs and addressing accountability are three important lessons from the country experiences we reviewed.

Define Roles and Improve Coordination among Different Stakeholders

In order to provide second chance programs efficiently and to ensure that they are sustainable, it is essential to involve various actors at the local, national, and international levels. At the outset, the government must commit itself to developing a framework for ensuring efficient service delivery and to acting as the coordinator of the various providers and stakeholders. In particular, the government needs to:

Develop strategies for developing and implementing second chance programs. It is crucial that the government set out a strategy for how to integrate second chance programs into the national development strategy. This strategy should clarify the targets and priorities, the allocation of resources, and the role and responsibilities of different stakeholders, including the private sector and NGOs.

Unify standards and provide a uniform quality assurance system. Clearly defining standards and establishing related testing and certification processes are critical steps in the creation of a successful competency-based second chance system. Several middle- and high-income countries (such as the Philippines, Malaysia, the

UK, Germany, Romania, and Turkey) have developed literacy standards and indicators and national occupational standards and certification programs. (Fretwell & Colombano 2000)

Ensure appropriate articulation of second chance programs with the formal education system and their compatibility with the labor market. For students to be able to use the skills that they acquire in second chance programs in the labor market, providers will need to collaborate with industry in setting occupational standards and developing curricula, to solicit constant feedback on the quality of the courses, and to persuade companies to offer internships to young program participants. One way to encourage training providers to work with private companies in this way would be for the government to promote competition among training providers as in the *Jovenes* programs in Latin America, which solicit bids from public and private training institutions for their contracts. (World Bank 2006)

Diversify sources of financing. Because the resources available to fund second chance programs are limited, governments need to explore a wide range of different funding options, including reaching out to the private sector and introducing public financing instruments that promote efficiency and equity such as vouchers and competitive and performance-based financing. In many countries, vouchers and payroll levies are increasingly being used to finance vocational training programs.

Recognize the Diversity of the Youth Population

The demand for educational second chances comes from a diverse youth population, including those who are out of school, those still in school, those who have left school at different points in the schooling cycle, and those who have different levels of skill attainment, including some who are functionally illiterate. Even among young people with the same skills, the appeal and effectiveness of second chance programs are likely to depend on age. Second chance interventions also need to be tailored to the young people's local environments, which might be rural or urban in either a low-income or a middle-income country.

For those young people who are still in school, one policy may be to offer supplementary instruction to poorly performing students. However, identifying the students who need such instruction is a challenge in many developing countries. In some developed countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, if a student performs badly on a standardized test, then this automatically qualifies him or her for a supplementary tutoring program. However, in many developing countries, standardized tests are nonexistent or uncommon, which means that teachers have to rely on subjective criteria to identify students at risk. Successful programs in Israel and India have shown that teacher assessments can be an effective way of identifying poorly performing students if classes are small enough for teachers to be able to monitor their students closely.

For second chance programs to appeal to young people who are out of school, policymakers need to understand the reasons young people dropped out or never attended

school, the challenges that they will face in staying in a program, and how they can later progress to studying in the formal education sector or find employment.

Many of these young people are out of school because they have only limited resources to spend on education. This problem is compounded by the fact that credit markets in most developing countries are under-developed, which prevents individuals from borrowing against their future income. This significantly affects the demand for schooling in developing countries. (World Bank 2006) Even when young people's parents have sufficient resources or access to credit, they can often be unwilling to finance investments in education. Other young people cannot pursue an education because they have to work to support their families or, as young parents, to raise their children. Governments can help young people who have limited resources by designing an appropriate package of demand-side financing mechanisms for second chance education that also take opportunity costs into account. Some examples of these mechanisms are conditional cash transfers, vouchers, and individual learning accounts, all of which have been used successfully in various countries to reduce the price of schooling and weaken the attraction of activities that compete with schooling. (World Bank 2006)

Young people face other constraints as well, such as a lack of information about the benefits that accrue from education and a lack of decision-making skills, which may have led them to fail the first time. Thus, comprehensive second chance programs have the best chance of succeeding (for example, literacy and equivalency programs that include life skills and vocational training and vocational training programs that include life skills).

The time needed to travel to school or college is often another reason that young people stay out of school. In this case, it is important to develop ways of delivering education services that address that problem. For example, in Mexico, the Telesecundaria program offers lessons by video to ensure that education reaches remote rural areas of the country. Distance learning using computer and Internet are also popular ways to offer education to young people in remote areas. Other programs, such as the Tutorial Learning System in Colombia, allow students in rural areas and their facilitators to choose a schedule and a pace that accommodates the other responsibilities that adolescents bear, which is of particular benefit to students from poor households who need to work to support their families.

Because of the diversity of the youth population in need of second chances, programs must be well targeted and tailored to match their needs and to ensure cost-effectiveness. For younger children who are out of school, the main aim is often to reintegrate them into the formal education system. This can be done by setting curriculum standards for second chance programs so that they allow students to catch up with mainstream education, and by engaging parents to reduce attrition and boost student performance. For older adolescents, flexible literacy programs that emphasize practical vocational and life skills are likely to meet demand and be cost-effective from a social point of view. The Mexican National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), Entra 21, and Joven programs that are operating widely across Latin America are all successful examples of programs that provide remedial education combined with flexible courses on vocational and life skills for older students.

Offer Remediation with Accountability

Second chance programs can involve what economists call a moral hazard. If someone knows that the consequences of his or her risky behavior will be mitigated by a government program or insurance, then that person may be encouraged to continue engaging in risky behavior. Thus, programs must include incentives that encourage beneficiaries to abandon negative kinds of behavior. The key to intervening successfully is to provide a comprehensive range of services and to design the curricula to enhance young people's ability to make good decisions. Two examples of such comprehensive programs are the Giddings State School in Texas, which offers a multifaceted rehabilitation program to youth offenders, and the Women's Center of Jamaica Foundation, which provides education to teenage mothers who dropped out of school (see World Bank 2006 for more details).

Next Steps

A potentially large number of young people could benefit from educational second chance programs. However, instead of simply expanding the existing educational second chance system, it may make sense first to redesign the system to increase its efficiency. The question is, how? There are three critical ways to do this.

First, the government must take the lead in coordinating among all the actors involved. Involving actors from different sectors in providing second chance programs is essential for ensuring that these programs are of high quality and are sustainable, but very often, there has been a lack of coordination across different ministries, and among the public, private, and NGO sectors. Government establishment of a framework with clear lines of accountability will help avoid duplications of effort. It is important for governments to take on the roles of standard setter, regulator, and facilitator.

Second, educational second chances should be integrated into mainstream education programs. It is vital for the government to ensure the articulation of programs and to set up a framework to ensure that second chances are provided efficiently as a complement to mainstream education.

Third, there is an urgent need for rigorous evaluation of second chance programs to ensure that they are operating effectively and efficiently. This is a pressing issue for youth interventions in general, but even more so for second chance programs as literacy and vocational training are often embedded within bigger projects and, thus not distinguished in the overall project budget. This makes it difficult to monitor and evaluate these training programs and, thus, to ensure their quality. Even if data on costs are available, because of various externalities that may arise, it is still difficult to estimate the overall impact of the intervention. This means that governments need to develop their capacity for carrying out this kind of continuous assessment and to develop a series of evidence-based criteria to use in deciding whether programs are succeeding or failing.

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