

RISE

RESEARCH ON IMPROVING
SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

RISE Annual Conference 2018

Blavatnik School of Government,
University of Oxford

Thursday 21 June – Friday 22 June 2018

Conference Report

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BACKGROUND

RISE is a large scale, multi-country programme aimed at conducting high-quality research to build evidence to enhance children's learning levels throughout the world. Nations around the globe have been remarkably successful in making progress toward universal primary schooling, but in many places, learning levels are poor, or have declined. As a result, even when children finish many years of schooling, they still lack basic maths and literacy skills. The RISE agenda emphasises the need to make changes that can provide children with the education they need to be successful adults in their local, national, and global communities. RISE recognises the urgent need for education solutions beyond business-as-usual incremental increases in materials, infrastructure, or other inputs. The vision of the RISE programme is to understand how school systems in the developing world can overcome the learning crisis by seeking holistic, practical answers about how education systems can innovate, improve learning outcomes, and better serve all children and communities on a global scale.

ABOUT THE EVENT

The RISE Annual Conference took place on 21-22 June 2018 at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. The event brought together representatives from various organisations for two days of lively debate on education systems reforms. Over 170 attendees and 33 speakers participated in the event with an additional 608 people viewing online. In excess of 1,000 tweets were posted by attendees (and those watching online) using the event hashtag [#RISEconf2018](#). The tweets gained a unique reach of 4 million people and a total reach of 8 million people according to the analytics from Twitter.

This report provides a summary of the conference proceedings. Publicly available papers can be accessed by clicking on the presentation title within this document. Links are also included to additional material related to the conference. More information on the event, including presentation slides, can be accessed via the [RISE website](#). A recording of the event is also available on the [website](#) and the [RISE YouTube Channel](#).



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THURSDAY 21 JUNE

Session 1: Setting the Scene

Chair: Lant Pritchett (Center for Global Development/RISE)

Emilie Berkhout (Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development/RISE): *15 Years of Education in Indonesia: Rising Enrolment and Flat Learning Profiles*

Michelle Kaffenberger (RISE/World Bank): *Estimating the Impact of Women's Education on Fertility, Child Mortality, and Empowerment When Schooling Ain't Learning*

Rebecca Thornton (University of Illinois): *Making the Grade: The Sensitivity of Education Program Effectiveness to Input Choices and Outcome Measures*

Tessa Bold (IIES/Stockholm University/CEPR/RISE): *The Lost Human Capital: Teacher Knowledge and Student Achievement in Africa*

The papers in this session elucidate four central themes that motivate the entire RISE Programme.

The first message is that, despite significant improvements in enrolment and attainment, learning profiles remain appallingly flat. In short, there is a global learning crisis, with children leaving school lacking basic competencies. Emilie Berkhout presented some stark evidence from Indonesia, based on a forthcoming RISE Working Paper. Together with co-authors, she has examined 15 years of data from the Indonesian Family Life Survey to estimate descriptive grade learning profiles—the fraction of students at each grade level who are able to answer given questions correctly. Her results show that, in 12 years of schooling, only 1 in 10 students learned to master basic mathematical concepts.

The second message is that it is learning, or competencies mastered, rather than simply years of schooling that matters. Using data from the Demographic and Health Surveys across 54 countries, Michelle Kaffenberger documented the impact of a basic education—completing six years of schooling and acquiring literacy—on measures of female well-being. Her results indicate that learning produces much of the well-being gains, and that

the returns to investing in cost-effective actions to improve learning outcomes of girls already in school could be very high.

The third message is that ambitious learning goals need audacious new approaches; tinkering with interventions without a deep understanding of the system context and construct validity is unlikely to resolve the global learning crisis. Rachel Thornton presented results from a randomised controlled trial of two versions of a teacher training program (the Mango Tree Literacy Program in Uganda) that provided a powerful illustration. The two versions of Mango Tree, which seemed largely similar with one version modified as little as possible in order to be less costly, had wildly different results and spanned the entire range of impacts from a recent systematic review of 50 education interventions.

Finally, the fourth message is that, in many countries, the learning crisis persists because the education system is incoherent around learning. Using data from the World Bank's Service Delivery Indicators (SDIs), Tessa Bold documented one such system incoherency—teachers often lack knowledge of even the basics they are expected to teach. Teacher subject knowledge is an important determinant of student learning. Yet the SDI data suggest that many countries across sub-Saharan Africa have delegated the task of trying to teach students mathematics to individuals who barely grasp the basics themselves.

You can read more about the papers in this session in two blogs posted to accompany the conference:

[The Learning Crisis and How to Fix it: Reflections from the RISE Conference](#)

[Considering Construct Validity: Seemingly Minor Design Changes Within the "Same" Project in Uganda Make it Either the Best or Worst of all Global Literacy Interventions](#)



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Session II: Curriculum

Chair: Clare Leaver (Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford/RISE)

Richard Shukia (University of Dar es Salaam/RISE): *Is the System Tuned to Deliver? Evidence from the Competence Based Curriculum Reforms for Basic Education in Tanzania*

Julius Atuhurra (Twaweza, East Africa): *Basic Education Curriculum Effectiveness in East Africa: A Descriptive Analysis of Primary Mathematics in Uganda Using the 'Surveys of Enacted Curriculum'*

Tarun Jain (Indian School of Business): *Reshaping Adolescents' Gender Attitudes: Evidence from a School-Based Experiment in India*

Baela Jamil and Saba Saeed (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi): *Ins and Outs of Rolling Out Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in Pakistan*

System incoherence was a topic that also featured in the first and second papers in this session on curriculum. Richard Shukia summarised insights from a rich, qualitative study of the implementation of the new Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) in Tanzania. He emphasised a number of system incoherencies that may explain the perceived poor performance of the CBC reforms. In particular, the government failed to communicate the goal of CBC to teachers, and to provide accompanying materials such as guides for teachers and textbooks for students.

Julius Atuhurra began by noting the extremely low learning gains made by children in East African schools. To probe whether these flat learning profiles might be due to shortcomings in the basic education curriculum, he and his co-author developed a subject taxonomy for primary-level mathematics in Uganda. To achieve

basic education goals, a carefully crafted articulation of the curriculum would systematically list the topics, sub-topics and performance expectations to be covered in each learning cycle or grade level. Instead of this, Julius found evidence of a non-systematic approach to content coverage within the prescribed curriculum across grades, as well as inconsistencies between the prescribed curriculum standards and end-of-cycle national exams. He concluded that the low learning gains observed in Uganda may well stem from these system incoherencies.

The session then switched focus from diagnosing system failures, to evaluating curriculum reforms. Tarun Jain reported results from an intervention aimed at changing gender attitudes. Over the course of a multi-year school-based intervention in the Indian state of Haryana, adolescents in treatment schools were engaged in discussions about gender equality that sought to 'create awareness of gender-based discrimination, change dominant gendered perceptions and promote gender equitable attitudes, raise aspirations, and provide tools to participants to be able to translate attitude change and greater aspirations into behavior change.' Tarun reported that the intervention improved gender attitudes for both boys and girls. Behaviour change was more limited and larger for boys than girls, pointing to possible barriers for girls in operationalizing their personal attitudes.

Baela Jamil and Saba Saeed reported results from a randomised controlled trial of a curriculum intervention, Learning for Access in Pakistan, that was modelled on Pratham India's 'Teaching at the Right Level' (TaRL) pedagogy. The intervention targeted out-of-school children aged 6-12, and in-school children at risk of dropping out from Grades 3-5, across four rural districts of Pakistan. Consistent with previous findings in other contexts, children in receipt of TaRL outperformed children in the control group across all subjects (English, Urdu and Mathematics). The authors concluded by pointing to factors that they felt explained why TaRL works.



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Session III: Information and Assessment (system in/coherence)

Chair: Justin Sandefur (Center for Global Development/RISE)

Louise Yorke (REAL Centre, Cambridge/RISE): *What is the Role of Information on Access and Assessment in Ensuring Equitable Learning in Ethiopia?*

Ricardo Estrada (CAF-Development Bank of Latin America): *Predicting Individual Wellbeing Through Test Scores: Evidence from a National Assessment in Mexico*

Abhijeet Singh (Stockholm School of Economics/RISE): *Testing for What? Audit Study Evidence on the Reliability and Effectiveness of Large-Scale Test-Based Accountability in India*

This, the first of two sessions on Information and Assessment, also focused on issues of system coherence. Louise Yorke presented findings from a study of the role of data and information within the education system in Ethiopia. She pointed to a number of factors that may help to explain why, despite considerable political will, learning outcomes in Ethiopia are still low. Notable problems documented were: insufficient resources (financial and human) to adequately collect, analyse and manage

education data; a focus on ‘thin’ inputs and what can be measured—key outcomes such as learning are not captured; and the data that are collected are not used to inform decision-making.

After this broad snapshot of the Ethiopian education system, the focus of the session narrowed to a particular type of information, namely data from student assessments. Specifically, the next two papers asked: What, if anything, do standardised test scores actually measure? Ricardo Estrada presented findings from a study of national standardised assessments in Grades 6, 9 and 12 in Mexico. The results struck a note of optimism—test scores are informative about both future educational performance and future educational outcomes (above and beyond a potential correlation with family background).

Abhijeet Singh presented findings from an audit study of the annual census of student achievement in Grades 1-8 in government schools in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. These results were more pessimistic. The audits revealed substantial upwards manipulation in officially-reported levels of student achievement—the reported percentage of students answering a (common) question correctly in official assessments is higher (by as much as 100 percent) in comparison to audit data on the same students. The authors conclude that the official assessment system is unlikely to be useful for monitoring student learning levels, or for instituting a test-based accountability system.



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Session IV: Information and Assessment (evidence on accountability)

Chair: Pieter Serneels (University of East Anglia/RISE)

Karthik Muralidharan (University of California, San Diego/NBER/RISE): *Improving Public Sector Management at Scale? Experimental Evidence on School Governance in India*

Andrew Zeitlin (Georgetown University/RISE): *Accountability and School Performance: Evidence from the Big Results Now Reform in Tanzania*

The second session on Information and Accountability focused further on the use of information to improve governance. That is, can the collection and dissemination of more and/or better information improve school accountability and, in turn, student learning?

Karthik Muralidharan broadly concluded 'no'. He presented results from a large-scale experimental evaluation of a school governance program in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The program introduced comprehensive school assessments by external school inspectors and then made this information visible throughout the education system via the use of ICT tools. Results were mixed. The initial assessments were conducted by government with significant oversight from a technical advisor and were implemented well. However, after this support ended, subsequent assessments were not conducted, with little substantive difference in monitoring between treatment and control schools. Consistent with this, the authors found no evidence of improvement in school governance, pedagogy, or indeed any aspect of teacher or student behaviour. Most importantly, there were no program impacts on student learning outcomes.

In contrast, Andrew Zeitlin's analysis was more positive. He presented results from a study of Tanzania's Big Results Now in Education Initiative (BRN). Under BRN, results from nation-wide and within-district school rankings were published (a so-called 'traffic light'

score), and additional prizes were offered to the best performing and most improved school at national level. Since this was a nationwide programme rather than a randomised controlled trial, the authors exploit (quasi-experimental) variation across districts: schools with the same performance level received a different rank in different districts. There is evidence that BRN increased test scores for low performing schools. The authors note a point of caution, however, as they do not find any changes in resources or teacher inputs, while the number of test-takers actually falls.



Agustina Paglayan (Center for Global Development/University of California San Diego): *Why Do Politicians Invest in Education?*

[Paper 1](#), [Paper 2](#), [Paper 3](#)

The last part of this session made the transition to political analysis of education systems. Agustina Paglayan gave a presentation summarising three of her recent papers on the politics of education. You can read more about her talk in the following RISE blog: [Who Do Politicians Respond to When Expanding Education?](#)



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Invited Session: Key Elements for a Successful Educational Reform

In this section Jaime Saavedra, ex-Minister of Education in Peru (2013-2016) and current head of Global Education Practice at The World Bank, shared his experience about what makes education reform successful. His insights were discussed by Emma Duncan (The Economist) and Alec Gershberg (University of Pennsylvania/ RISE). The session is summarised in a DEVEX blog by Sophie Edwards: [Jaime Saavedra: 'There's nothing soft about education reform'](#)

Special talk: Speech by Minister Harriett Baldwin

RISE welcomed the UK Minister of State for Africa at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Minister of State at the Department for International Development (DFID), Harriett Baldwin, to close the first day of the conference; her talk is summarised in the following RISE news item: [RISE Welcomes UK Minister to Annual Conference](#).



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Session V: Methods Morning (classroom observation and ethnographic research)

Chair: Alec Gershberg (University of Pennsylvania/RISE)

Ezequiel Molina (World Bank) and **Julia Ladics** (Brown University): *The Measurement Crisis: An Assessment of How Countries Measure Classroom Practices*

Joan DeJaeghere (University of Minnesota/RISE) and **Phuong Luong** (Hanoi University/RISE): *Qualitative Analysis of Teaching and Learning Competencies: Video Study of Secondary Classrooms in Vietnam*

Surayya Masood (Center for Economic Research in Pakistan/RISE): *Self Expression, Relational Ethics, and Small Freedoms: The Domesticity of Young Women in Rural Pakistan*

Barbara Bruns (Center for Global Development/RISE) and **Masooda Bano** (University of Oxford): *Reflections on Methods for Classroom Observation and Ethnographic Research*

The theme of the second morning of the conference was on methods for qualitative research, with the first two presentations focusing on methods for classroom observation. Ezequiel Molina and Julia Ladics began by noting that, to improve the effectiveness of teacher training programs, it is essential to accurately measure what teachers actually do in the classroom—"if teachers' strengths and weaknesses are not identified, they cannot be addressed, and their teaching practice is unlikely to improve." Classroom observation tools are one way to

undertake this measurement. Ezequiel and Julia summarised results from their recent analysis of the use of classroom observation tools. The headline findings are that only 50 percent of the countries in their dataset (countries where the World Bank has an active education portfolio) use classroom observation tools. And, of the countries that do use tools, the vast majority of these instruments are of questionable quality.

Joan DeJaeghere and Phuong Luong from the RISE Vietnam Country Research Team discussed the video techniques that the Team is using to conduct classroom observations in Vietnam, and then shared some of their initial findings. They showed short video clips from two primary classrooms. These short clips provided a stark demonstration of how different pedagogical approaches can lead to very different learning experiences. Barbara Bruns, a member of the RISE Intellectual Development Team who has written extensively on the subject of classroom observation, then offered her own reflections on conducting research in this area.

In the latter part of the session, the focus moved to ethnographic research. Surayya Masood from the RISE Pakistan Country Research Team discussed the diary techniques that the Team is using to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of education on women's employment and marriage choices, in particular why more educated girls are choosing to work and marry later in life. The Team has a sample of 29 personal diaries from unmarried, unemployed women aged 18-25 with varying levels of education. These diaries reveal that education has led to girls delaying marriage and taking on major responsibilities for running the household, but also to joys such as greater religious cultivation and opportunities to earn income from school tuition. Masooda Bano, an expert on ethnographic research, concluded the session by offering her own reflections on diaries and, more generally, what makes for good ethnographic research.



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Session VI: Teachers (motivation)

Chair: Justin Sandefur (Center for Global Development/RISE)

Fei Yuan (World Bank): *The Working Conditions of Teachers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*

Naureen Karachiwalla (International Food Policy Research Institute): *Educator Incentives and Educational Triage in Rural Primary Schools*

Youdi Schipper (Twaweza/RISE): *Designing Teacher Performance Pay Programs: Experimental Evidence from Tanzania*

Clare Leaver and Daniela Scur (both Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford/RISE): *Why Does Management Matter? A Theoretical Framework*

This, the first of two sessions on teachers, focused on the topic of motivation. Fei Yuan began by noting that analyses of the proximate causes of low student learning levels often point to failures among teachers. But teacher performance needs to be put in context of the education systems which affect teachers' job satisfaction and commitment. Fei then summarised her recent review of teacher conditions across countries that focused on the challenges that teachers face and which may inform weakness in motivation. The key insight was that many systems fail to provide the basic working conditions for teachers to perform. She suggested that a systems approach may be well suited to addressing shortcomings in teacher motivation and performance.

The next three papers zoomed in on one aspect of the working environment likely to affect motivation, namely teacher compensation. One possibility is to make teacher pay contingent on student performance, for instance via a Pay for Percentile (PFP) incentive system that rewards each teacher for the performance of each of her students relative to comparable students in other schools. Naureen Karachiwalla presented findings from an experimental evaluation of PFP in Ugandan primary schools. PFP improved student attendance and achievement, although impacts were concentrated among more able students who had access to textbooks.

The theoretical advantage of PFP is that it incentivises a teacher to support each student in her classroom, rather than to focus only on students who are likely to

pass an absolute standard of proficiency. The downside of PFP is that it is logistically complex to administer, and its subtleties may not always be well understood by the teachers themselves. Youdi Schipper presented findings from a randomised controlled trial that compared the effectiveness of PFP against a simple proficiency design (with multiple thresholds) in raising learning outcomes in primary schools in Tanzania. The proficiency design performed at least as well as the PFP scheme, which the authors argue may make it attractive in countries such as Tanzania where administrative capacity is limited.

The presentations by Naureen and Youdi emphasised that teacher compensation can incentivize a given set of teachers to improve their performance and, ultimately, the learning outcomes of their students. The final paper in the session made a related but distinct point: management practices that affect the structure and level of teacher compensation can impact who chooses to become and remain a teacher (the selection margin), as well as how these individuals behave once on-the-job (the incentive margin). Daniela Scur first presented a new management index constructed from PISA survey data and showed the strong positive correlation between this index and student learning outcomes. Clare Leaver then summarised a simple theoretical framework which encompassed both the incentive and selection margins and that offered an explanation as to why management matters for test scores.

Lunchtime Panel Session: Global Indicators for Education

RISE Co-Director, Calum Miller, chaired a lunchtime panel session on global indicators for education. Silvia Montoya (UNESCO) spoke about the challenges of compiling information, Kirsty McNichol (Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) discussed how and why research is used by development practitioners, and Roy Carr-Hill (UCL Institute of Education) pointed out some of the difficulties related to a lack of data.



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Session VII: Financing and the Role of the Private Sector

Chair: Daniela Scur (Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford/RISE)

Michael Kremer (Harvard University): *The Impact of Free Secondary Education: Experimental Evidence from Ghana*

Vijay Kumar (Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford): *Choice for the Poor or Poor Choice? Experimental Evidence on the Impact of India's School Choice Policy*

Mauricio Romero (University of California, San Diego): *Outsourcing Service Delivery in a Fragile State: Experimental Evidence from Liberia*

Jishnu Das (World Bank/RISE): *Upping the Ante: The Equilibrium Effects of Unconditional Grants to Private Schools*

Michael Kremer opened the session by discussing experimental evidence on the impacts of free secondary school on the lives of young Ghanaian adults, disaggregating by gender and across academic and vocational tracks. In 2008, 682 secondary school scholarships were awarded by lottery among a little over 2000 Ghanaian students who had been admitted, but could not currently afford to enrol. Michael presented downstream impacts by age 25. Contrary to the negative impacts that some have hypothesised, the scholarship increased educational attainment, cognitive skills, and life outcomes. The authors estimated that the internal rate of return to investments in vocational education was an impressive 13 percent. It was too early to calculate a rate of return for academic education as many students in that track were still in school.

Vijay Kumar reported on a study of a policy granting free places at private schools to eligible students in the Indian State of Karnataka. Under the Right to Education

Act 2009, 25 percent of the places at private schools must be made available to children from disadvantaged households. The government pays the tuition costs and allocates places among eligible applicants by lottery. Vijay reported that, after 1.5 years of schooling, there is no evidence of a difference in the test scores of lottery winners and losers. He hypothesised that this is because the policy was mis-targeted and did not actually shift children from government schools to private schools; fully 93 percent of the students who applied for a free place, but by chance lost in the lottery, went on to attend private school.

Mauricio Romero also discussed a policy—the Partnership Schools for Liberia program—that involved partnering with private providers. Rather than subsidising places at private schools, the Government of Liberia paid private providers to provide management functions within public schools. Mauricio reported results from an experimental evaluation of the program. After one academic year, students in ‘outsourced’ schools run by private providers performed significantly better in English and mathematics than in control schools. There were, however, substantial variations across providers, in part reflecting differences in the terms of the procurement contract.

Jishnu Das presented results from an experiment that focused exclusively on the private sector, alleviating financial constraints for private schools in rural Pakistan. In this experiment, villages in the province of Punjab were assigned either to a control group or to one of two treatment arms. In the first ‘low-saturation’ treatment, a single randomly assigned school received an unconditional cash grant. In the second ‘high-saturation’ treatment all private schools in the village received the grant. Jishnu reported that, consistent with a model of oligopoly, schools in the low-saturation treatment expanded enrolment (capacity), while schools in the high-saturation treatment improved student test scores (quality). Welfare estimates suggest that the high-saturation approach is more socially desirable.



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Session VIII: Teachers (support)

Chair: Pieter Serneels (University of East Anglia/RISE)

Mary Breeding (World Bank): *Global Landscape of Teacher Professional Development Programs: The Gap Between Evidence and Practice*

Belay Hagos (Addis Ababa University/RISE): *The Nexus Between the Practice of Induction and the Formation of Novice Teachers' Professional Identity in Ethiopia*

Janeli Kotze and Stephen Taylor (both University of Stellenbosch): *Moving Towards Cost-effective Delivery Models of Teacher Coaching: Evidence from Field Experiments in South Africa*

The final session of the conference returned to the theme of teachers, this time focusing on the extent to which education systems provide coherent and appropriate pre/in-service training and support. Mary Breeding summarized a recent review of the characteristics of the most effective teacher professional development (PD) programs. She began by presenting a new In-Service Teacher Training Survey Instrument that can be used to characterise PD programs, and then reported results from applying this tool to two datasets. Mary explained that PD programs which provide complementary materials, focus

on a specific subject, and include follow-up, have the biggest impact on learning. She also highlighted that most government-funded, at-scale PD programs do not feature these characteristics.

Belay Hagos from the RISE Ethiopia Country Research Team reported on a mixed methods study examining how the practice of induction shapes novice teachers' professional identity in Ethiopia. Induction was defined as the support novice teachers received from their school principal and head of department during their first three years of service. The main quantitative finding was that novice teachers who reported receiving an adequate induction experience also reported a higher teacher professional identity.

Janeli Kotze and Stephen Taylor presented results from government-led experimental evaluations of different models of teacher training and coaching in South Africa. Stephen began by presenting results that showed sustained on-site coaching to be more cost-effective than either short coaching interventions or centralised teacher training workshops. However, since it is not clear that on-site coaching is feasible at-scale, the team also examined the effectiveness of a virtual coaching program. As Janeli explained, initial results are promising: after one year of intervention, virtual coaching was no less effective than on-site coaching at improving teacher instructional practice and student learning outcomes.

