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Early learning, the one certainty

Early learning is – or should be – a certainty if we agree upon the axiom that education systems are meant to prepare young people for the way they will live, transform their lives and contribute to their societies in the future. In the late 1990s, the OECD and UNESCO made major attempts to define the key competences or capabilities that people must have in the future, even if the more specific knowledge and skills requirements fluctuate heavily and unpredictably. “Acting autonomously” (as the OECD’s DESECO project named it), or “learning to be” (UNESCO’s Delors Commission) were prominent outcomes of these two intellectual undertakings. Both agreed that interacting in heterogeneous groups (learning to live together) is key to the development of autonomous individuals, as well as a strong set of more instrumental abilities (literacy and numeracy, flexibility in knowledge acquisition, technical/motor skills).

Early learning, enhanced by parental education for ages 0-3 and by preschool education from 3-6, can provide the basis for *all* of this, and according to recent insights in brain development it is even a “Pathway to Peace” (Leckman et al, 2014).

This introduction will very briefly rehearse what we already know: (i) that brain development as well as economic benefits of learning peak when the investment is in the early years; (ii) that investment in learning over the lifetime is contrary to these findings; and (iii) that disadvantaged children would benefit most from support in their early learning.

But the introduction will zoom in on some hopefully interesting trends that seem to change the game, for better or worse. Fertility rates are decreasing globally – with Africa lagging behind – giving governments a much better chance to increase enrolment. The poorest countries tend to have the highest GDP growth rates – even if GDP per capita is still low – providing at least the potential to invest substantially. While this growth does not translate in much larger public budgets due to tax evasion, weak policies and corruption, it does trickle down boosting private enrolment in even the most terrible slums. And remaining gaps tend to be filled by religious, NGO-supported and community-based provision. This is creating a very in-transparent “universe of early learning”, which we can hardly call a system and raises many concerns with regards to quality, relevance, access and equity. The introduction will conclude with the kind of policies that governments can apply successfully and affordably to provide a good preschool education to all.