

Beyond the basics: Educating and training out of poverty

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1. Introduction

The *International Journal of Educational Development* exists to debate issues about the relationship between education and development. One of the perennial elements of these debates has focused on identifying the most suitable types of education to ensure the maximum impact on particular visions of development.

The very first article to appear in the journal in 1981 was a statistical review of progress towards universal primary education targets (Fredriksen, 1981) in the pre-Jomtien era. As the 1980s progressed, *IJED* was one site where the growing academic and policy thrust away from vocational and higher education as developmentally appropriate was regularly analysed (e.g., Mingat and Tan, 1985; Heyneman, 1985; Colclough et al., 1985; Bray, 1986). Equally, in the 1990s, the journal saw explorations of the extent and effects of the post-Jomtien orthodoxy, and, over time, its interactions with the broader poverty reduction discourse (e.g. King, 1992; Verspoor, 1993; and a special issue on the World Bank—*International Journal of Educational Development*, 1996). One feature of these

debates is the way that international development agencies have often undermined national ownership of educational policy in their drive to implement the latest development orthodoxy.

Some of these concerns remain pertinent for this decade, as highlighted in an earlier Special Issue of *IJED* on International and National Targeting of Education (King and Rose, 2005a. See also King and Rose, 2005b). Both the 2005 and current special issues are based on papers presented at the biennial UK Forum for International Education and Training (UKFIET) 'Oxford' Conference on Education and Development. The majority of the papers included in this issue also arise from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on post-basic education and training (PBET). DFID's sponsorship of this work on PBET is itself significant given the organisation's concern over the past decade to supporting the trinity of Universal Primary Education, poverty reduction and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as remains evident in their 2006 White Paper:

Our priority is to get the 100 million children of primary school age who are not currently attending school into a classroom with a teacher. Education is both a right and a route out of poverty. People who have been to school are

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most likely to find work, look after their health and demand that governments act in their interests (DFID, 2006, p. 54).

Even so, the 2006 White Paper marks a move towards supporting other levels of education in recognition that poverty reduction requires economic growth, proposing that ‘there is a growing need to invest in secondary and higher education and vocational skills training’ (p. 54). It is apparent that the focus of a number of other international agencies, including the World Bank, is also swinging back to addressing the role that other aspects of education play in reducing poverty (see, for example, World Bank, 2006). At the same time, interest is focusing downwards towards early childhood development (UNESCO, 2006). There are potentially at least three aspects to these new directions.

First, the anticipated positive developmental outcomes of primary education (for example with respect to agricultural productivity, healthier and smaller families, and decent work) are often cited as self-evident. However, much of the research that this relates to is out-dated, methodologically problematic and contextually specific (King et al., 2005; King and Palmer, 2006; Rose and Dyer, 2006). To the extent that national governments and international agencies have been successful in expanding basic education systems rapidly over the last decade (including as a result of fee abolition in a number of sub-Saharan African countries), questions arise about whether primary schooling can still claim the same kind of benefits when it covers a more significant proportion of the cohort (Kadzamira and Rose, 2003; King, 2007). As previous debates about the relationship between education and employment have indicated, the benefits of a mass primary education system are likely to be weakened where certificates are used as a screening device. As education systems expand, qualification inflation is likely to ensue with higher levels of education seen to be a prerequisite of economic success (Dore, 1976; Woodhall, 1987).

Moreover, when primary education systems expand dramatically, much of the evidence indicates that this is at the expense of school quality, as King and Wedgwood both note in this issue. This further brings into question the perceived relationship between education and poverty, which is based on research drawing on data from the 1980s and earlier. The relative success of achieving universal

primary education without concomitant economic development has had the inevitable effect of overturning the argument of the rate of return analysis that was so fundamental to the initial thrust towards prioritising basic education over higher levels in the 1980s. Whereas papers produced for the World Bank prior to Jomtien (e.g., Psacharopoulos, 1981, 1985) show a clear decline in rates of return for levels higher than basic education, more recent evidence indicates that the increased supply of primary education in Africa is leading to a shift in rates of return in favour of secondary and higher education (e.g., Appleton, 2001; Palmer et al., 2007). Similarly, Tilak (2007) reviews data that indicates that private rates of return for wage workers in India rise with educational levels, as does the contribution of education in wage regressions. Problems with primary school quality under conditions of massive expansion have also led to a greater focus on early childhood development as a way of ensuring children are better prepared for their experiences in school, as discussed in Kholowa and Rose’s (2007) paper in this issue.

Second, since the 1990s there has been growing acceptance that a more genuinely sectoral vision of education is required in order to ensure that individual sub-sectors, most importantly basic education, function effectively. This appears to have been relatively successful in shifting sector-wide approaches to be more genuinely sector-wide. For instance, Hayman (2007) notes how the Government of Rwanda has been able to get some acceptance from leading donors that there is a need to think beyond basic education. However, both her paper and King’s point to continued tensions, in both policy and practice, between national governments and international agencies on the breadth and comprehensiveness of sector-wide approaches.

Third, international debates about economic development and competitiveness, linked over the past decade to notions of globalisation and the knowledge economy (King and McGrath, 2002; World Bank, 2002), have increasingly been accepted as requiring a greater developmental role for further and higher education. Moreover, these debates about what is required for economic success have also brought into greater question the appropriateness of a narrow pro-poor approach to development, as we shall consider below. This requires more attention to whether and how skills training, secondary schooling or post-secondary education

can deliver some of the benefits related to education's role in poverty reduction through economic development.

In general, whether the focus is on pre-primary, primary or post-primary education, there continues to be a need to understand *how* the purported link between education and poverty reduction can be realised in particular contexts (Rose and Dyer, 2006). Drawing on evidence from Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania, this special issue engages with these debates in four main ways, which we outline below.

2. Limitations of universal primary education

Wedgwood's analysis of Tanzania highlights that universal primary education could only ever be a partial response to the educational challenges of development, a point echoing Bray's *IJED* paper of two decades earlier (Bray, 1986). As Wedgwood reminds us, universal primary education was largely achieved in Tanzania by the 1980s but this achievement was insufficient in itself to bring about economic development or widespread poverty reduction. Not only are such cases a cause for concern for international agencies and national governments, but also for parents, households and communities.

While households continue to place considerable faith in the magic bullet of education, in some situations they have also become disillusioned with the benefit that sending their children to primary school has brought them. Where possible, this has led them to invest in pre-primary education in the hope that this will provide better preparation for their children as they enter primary school, and give them an advantage over other children. However, as Kholowa and Rose point out in the context of Malawi, coverage of pre-primary education is extremely limited (and mainly confined to those who can afford to pay). Since the Malawian government continues to struggle to provide fee-free primary schooling of acceptable quality, the possibility of extending coverage of pre-primary education, including through paying attention to appropriate curriculum design, training of instructors, etc., remains unlikely for the foreseeable future. Even in the very different South African context, the state's aspiration to deliver universal early childhood development as the foundation of an overall human resources development strategy (Department of Education and Department of

Labour, 2001) appears little more than rhetoric in the light of the scale of current provision and funding, as McGrath and Akoojee note in their paper.

3. Towards a sectoral vision for education

As King and Rose (2005a) argued in the *IJED* Special Issue on International and National Education Targets, attention given to the MDGs in broader development debates has contributed towards the narrowing of the education agenda down to a focus on primary schooling, which began after Jomtien. This is also reflected across several of the papers in this special issue which again highlight the importance of remembering and maintaining the broader vision that was established at Jomtien and reinforced at Dakar.

At the same time, however, the rise of sector-wide approaches and poverty reduction strategies has led to a complex interaction between narrowness and breadth of educational vision. Early sector policies for education, and education elements of poverty reduction strategies, showed a strong tendency to prioritise basic education. However, as King argues explicitly in his paper in this special issue and other papers (Hayman, 2007; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007) also illustrate, governments in Africa have demonstrated little buy-in to the notion that it is possible to concentrate attention on one sub-sector of education. It should be noted that the positive dimension of this—a commitment to seeing education in a sector-wide manner—can also be construed more negatively—as a refusal/inability to prioritise when faced with resources that are far outweighed by aspirations and needs (cf. Hayman, 2007; Smith, 2005).

The Rwandan example illustrates how a complex situation can arise in which there are core donors supported a sector-wide approach, including through budgetary support, whilst other donors, apparently more peripheral to the development of the sectoral approach, are active around the margins in delivering support to other parts of the sector (Hayman, 2007). Vocational education and training support, for instance, is largely the preserve of a small number of donors. Some of these, such as the Dutch and Danish, are often core supporters of education sector policies, whilst others, such as Germany, may see their involvement in skills development as part of their work in the economic sector.

The current revisiting of post-basic education and training, and the growth of a pre-school focus, may suggest new possibilities for truly holistic sector-wide approaches that better fit the broad range of national and international thinking about education's role in development.

4. Basic education out of poverty, or post-basic education into growth?

There is also some greater assertiveness from a range of national governments that the simple UPE-poverty reduction relationship is less attractive a model than one which seeks to use the whole of education and training to contribute to economic development. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya and South Africa see MDG1—poverty reduction—largely as a matter of employment, whether through waged- or self-employment (King, 2007; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007; Palmer, 2007). For instance, the African National Congress explicitly placed halving unemployment alongside halving poverty at the heart of election pledges in its *Manifesto 2004: A People's Contract to Create Work and Fight Poverty* (African National Congress, 2004) and have subsequently made this the core of national policy for the period 2004–9 (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007).

This employment perspective leads governments to see education and training (or sometimes human resources development – as in Rwanda and South Africa) as a whole as a developmental tool. Such a focus is likely to place more emphasis on forms of post-basic education and training, most notably skills development and higher education (Hayman, 2007; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007), although such a focus is essentially sector-wide in its coverage.

Reflecting national circumstances, the exact nature of this presumed relationship between education and employment varies. For Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa and India, the desire to compete in a global knowledge economy through the provision of ICT-related services sees a focus on ensuring high levels of English competence, on expanding higher education and on developing specific vocational training programmes such as call centre management and network maintenance (Hayman, 2007; King, 2007; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007; Tilak, 2007).

In South Africa, considerable attention since 1994 has been given to renovating the national skills development system (McGrath and Badroodien,

2006; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007) and, since 2004, the public further education and training college sector (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). Indeed, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa identifies a skills deficit as the most important constraint on both infrastructural development and private sector investment. Since the state argues that poverty reduction requires greater national and foreign direct investment to create employment, it follows that a shortage of skills is a key constraint on development, employment and poverty reduction (Republic of South Africa, 2006).

Kenya also sees the development of technical skills as central to its industrialisation ambitions. As the 2005 Sessional Paper on Education, Training and Research puts it: “The country needs a critical mass of Kenyans with some technical skills for technological take-off and sustainability” (Government of Kenya, 2005, p. 27).

Equally, higher education is seen to play a central role in capacity development for the public, private and third sectors, in line with recent multilateral thinking (e.g., Commission for Africa, 2005; United Nations Millennium Project, 2005). In South Africa this has been linked explicitly to a revisiting of the developmental state debate (Southall, 2006). There it is argued that the achievement of growth with equity can only be achieved through the creation of a strong state that is able to facilitate economic growth, promote socio-economic inclusion and ensure a social safety net for the poorest (Republic of South Africa, 2003). This in turn requires a competent state, supported by higher education and its own training institutions (Pater-son, 2006). Elements of a similar argument are also evident in Rwanda, as Hayman's paper in this issue shows.

Tilak's paper draws attention to the broader developmental impacts of higher education. His review of Indian econometric data leads him to posit four developmental effects of higher education:

1. that it enhances earnings and contributes to economic development;
2. that it contributes to the reduction of relative and absolute poverty;
3. that it negatively influences infant mortality; and
4. that it is positively related to life expectancy.

In countries such as Ghana and Kenya, national understandings of the employment–education relationship also draw upon long-established discourses

about indigenous forms of both, as Palmer and King's papers remind us. Both papers draw attention to the ways in which both states seek to co-opt traditional apprenticeship and the informal economy to the service of development. However, as both authors have shown in earlier work, this is something that both national and donor policies have attempted over at least three decades in both countries, with rather limited success (King, 1977, 1996; Palmer, 2006).

One of the most striking elements of the current Ghanaian attempt to formalise traditional apprenticeship is its ambition to link this mode of skills development to a national qualifications framework (NQF). NQFs are currently exercising great interest among African governments and certain international agencies (e.g., the ILO, the European Commission and Danida) but their suitability for poorer countries remains questionable (McGrath et al., 2006a; Young, 2005). Even in the wealthier context of South Africa, Petersen (2007) notes how little positive benefit from the NQF can be discerned for the poor and marginalised fishing communities that are the focus of her paper. Both she and Palmer refer back to earlier work on the limited engagement of the South African NQF with smaller enterprises, whether formal or informal (McGrath, 2005; McGrath et al., 2006b).

Certain national development strategies also note the importance of looking at the micro and small enterprise (MSE) sector in a holistic way that sees a contribution from both formal and informal MSEs to national development. In Kenya, the latest Sessional Paper on MSEs (Government of Kenya, 2003) contains a clear official view that not only the urban informal sector but also rural enterprises, including small farms, need to be integrated into national approaches to business and economic development.

As another paper from the 2005 'Oxford' Conference Section highlights, it is important to understand the *processes* through which vocational and skills training can help to enhance livelihoods and so influence poverty (Shiohata and Pryor, 2008). The authors' evidence from Senegal suggests that it might be more appropriate to see apprenticeships that provide a livelihood for children from poor households as a way into education in a broad sense given the skills that they can develop through their work, rather than expecting schooling to provide opportunities for improved livelihoods. This is particularly the case in settings such as Senegal

where a significant proportion of children are still unable to gain access to the formal schooling system, a situation that is envisaged to continue for the foreseeable future. Their argument is of relevance to other contexts where schooling opportunities may not be as constrained, and relates both to Palmer's concern to explore the multiple pathways from learning to such improved livelihoods and Petersen's exploration of skills interventions within a sustainable livelihoods framework.

For some of the countries considered in this issue there are powerful non-economic drivers of the renewed focus on PBET. For instance, Hayman suggests that the Rwandan interest in these aspects of the education system is, in part, motivated by a desire to create a new post-conflict, post-ethnic society. Equally, McGrath and Akoojee note that South Africa's interest in PBET as part of post-Apartheid redress can be seen as based on a belief that PBET can contribute to economic development in a way that differentially benefits the previously marginalised through gender, disability and race targets for both access to PBET and for employment equity. In both cases, there is an additional sense that PBET can be pro-security, reducing the threats of violence and crime.

5. Health warnings about an expanded notion of education for development

Whilst we have pointed to long-standing concerns about a narrow, donor-driven vision of basic education for poverty reduction, it is important to note that there are also inevitable dangers in broadening the education and development agenda. For example, it is important that arguments about economic development or participation in the global knowledge economy do not result in an equally problematic bias towards PBET. The old concerns about the costs of higher and vocational provision do not go away simply because PBET comes back into fashion.

There is a danger at the moment that the growing acceptance of a need to expand post-basic provision could lead the educational field back into several of the policies and practices that were so roundly condemned as EFA ascended to its dominant position (cf. World Bank critiques of vocational and higher education—World Bank, 1991, 1994). In keeping with several of their OECD counterparts, many African governments are concerned that an expansion of senior secondary schooling cannot be

on the basis of simply increasing numbers of students in academic tracks. As in England, for instance, it is widely believed that the only viable strategy for engaging with a broader range of youth lies in diversifying the curriculum through more vocational offerings (cf. Levesque, 2007 for an overview of the place of vocational education and training in African national development strategies). However, there is little sense of either an awareness of the weaknesses of previous diversification waves in Africa (see, for instance, Heyneman, 1985; Psacharopoulos and Loxley, 1985; Lauglo and Lillis, 1988) or of similar programmes in more developed contexts.

Equally, as Akyeampong's paper presented at the 'Oxford' Conference highlights, concerns raised by Foster (1965) about the 'vocational school fallacy'¹ are still relevant in the current context. Based on evidence from Ghana, Akyeampong (2005) argues that, regardless of whether vocational education is viewed in principle as supporting a move towards poverty reduction and/or promoting economic growth, parents and students continue to regard it as second-best. This weakens its effect in practice as there is selection bias of stronger students into more academic routes. As a result, employers continue to place more value on graduates from conventional schooling, probably more due to the screening it provides than the actual skills that students acquire. Furthermore, the papers in this issue from Palmer and McGrath and Akoojee note the continued weaknesses of public vocational training. Thus, the growing interest in vocational streams and expanded vocational schools and colleges runs the risk of repeating many of the problems that the World Bank so clearly identified in the early 1990s in its Vocational and Technical Education Training paper (World Bank, 1991).

Dangers lie too in continued attempts to bring skills development for micro and informal enterprises and the traditional apprenticeship system within the formal education and training system, as Palmer and Petersen both note. Such interventions have shown little success over the past 30 years and may have the effect of undermining the self-reliance of this non-state system rather than strengthening it.

¹A phrase coined by Philip Foster in the mid-1960s. Foster argued that it was a fallacy to assume that introducing vocational subjects into a school curriculum could have some impact on orientating the aspirations of youth towards manual work. Rather, he proposed that the labour market acted as the largest determinant of youth aspirations towards work.

Moreover, as discussed above, a danger of broadening to a sectoral vision for education and training is that governments will fail to prioritise. The potential for extending education downwards to cover early childhood seems unlikely where primary education systems are severely constrained. Furthermore, international approaches in this regard, as exemplified in the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2006), potentially give rise to serious tensions between different conceptions of parents, practitioners and policy-makers regarding the nature and function of early childhood development, as Kholowa and Rose's paper highlights. Non-formal education is another approach to come back on to the agenda in countries such as Kenya and Malawi in the recent past, driven largely by the poor retention rates in rapidly expanding public primary school systems. Here too, there may be lessons to be learned from when NFE was previously in fashion (see Rogers, 2004; Hoppers, 2006).

Alongside the return of NFE to policy agendas in recent years is the continuing growth of non-state provision of education and training. Kholowa and Rose show in their paper that this is an important element of the Malawian expansion of pre-primary education. Equally, as King notes for Kenya, the expansion of poor quality, non-fee primary schooling can have the unanticipated effect of fostering low cost private provision, a trend recently reported in *IJED* from India, as well as in papers in two special issues of *Compare* arising from the 2003 and 2005 'Oxford' Conferences (Tooley and Dixon, 2007; Day Ashley and Caddell, 2006; Dyer and Rose, 2005). Moreover, any return to a policy stress on vocational or higher education will need to respond to a new environment in which private providers are increasingly significant actors (Oketch, 2004; Akoojee, 2005).

Several papers in this special issue recall the long-standing weakness of institutional cooperation and systemic coherence in the area of education, skills development and employment (see King and McGrath, 2002; Akoojee et al., 2005 for earlier critiques). McGrath and Akoojee argue that, in spite of an over-arching human resources development strategy and a clear presidential vision, the Departments of Education and Labour in South Africa have largely failed to cooperate effectively. It has taken till 2007 for the education-controlled public vocational colleges to offer new qualifications aligned to the NQF, but these are still distinct

from those developed by the sector education and training authorities under the auspices of the Department of Labour and are of questionable labour market relevance. Palmer points to the historical failure of the Ghanaian government to build a robust vocational education and training system and its continued weak articulation with the labour market. As McGrath and Akoojee note, it is unclear whether such historical trends, rooted deeply in institutional cultures and rivalries, can be overturned, even where high-level political champions are in place.

Finally, several of the papers in this special issue place considerable emphasis on seeing education and training's impact on development as being highly conditioned by the wider developmental context. For instance, Petersen places her study of fishing communities on the West Coast of South Africa firmly within the sustainable livelihoods tradition. Through this lens, she explores the way that international, national and local policies and institutional politics have served to undermine the scope that the poor have for achieving sustainability. In this view, weak education and training provision is part of a larger disabling environment.

The notion of disabling environments was a central one in the DFID project from which several of these papers come (Palmer et al., 2007). Three papers in this special issue (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Wedgwood, 2007) go back to the 1980 paper of Lockheed, Jamison and Lau, another key influence on the EFA debate. All of these papers note that Lockheed et al. (1980) made it clear in their paper that the positive effect they found for primary schooling was only present in "modernising conditions". This leads these authors to reiterate the importance of seeing education and training as part of a broader development strategy and to expect education's developmental effects to only be really dramatic when they are part of a broader transformation. This, of course, is a lesson that can be taken from the most developmentally successful region of the past half-century—East Asia (Morris and Sweeting, 1995; Mingat, 1998).

Moreover, they question whether such a transformation is likely to be fuelled by the universal primary education, poverty reduction and millennium development goals model or will require a more balanced model of cross-sectoral educational improvement and, in current South African parlance, accelerated and shared growth. In spite of recent, more upbeat analysis of Africa's development prospects, the

potential for education and training combining with an enabling environment to drive forward African development must be treated with caution, as McGrath and Akoojee's paper notes.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that a broader sense of education as a sector is emerging within international agency and national government strategies. This is related in part to a move of some governments towards stressing the role of economic development and employment as central to the achievement of the first MDG on poverty reduction. As McGrath and Akoojee argue, this constitutes a significant deviation from the education–poverty orthodoxy represented by universal primary education and poverty reduction strategies. However, it is clear that there are tensions both within and between national and international agency understandings of the education–development relationship and how best to allocate finite resources. Moreover, parents, households and communities experience the reality of whether or not education improves livelihoods and well-being, influencing their decisions about education. As Kholowa and Rose highlight with respect to recent trends in debates and experiences related to early childhood development and pre-schooling, it is important to take heed of their priorities if education is to fulfil its promise.

The special issue highlights the importance in particular of paying attention to PBET if development goals are to be achieved, while taking heed of dangers of shifting focus from one sub-sector to another. What makes any imminent return to PBET in Africa challenging is one issue not explored in these papers: that of international capacity on skills development. The post-Jomtien neglect of skills development by donor agencies and the gradual decline of many national systems of delivery has led to a loss of intellectual capacity in this sub-sector both in the policy and academic communities. Thus, at the very time that this field is regaining external and national interest, it is ill equipped to understand either the lessons of the past or the challenges of the future.

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