

Book Reviews

Education Policy in Developing Countries

Paul Glewwe (Ed.). 2013. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 978-0226078717. \$40.00 (paper).

Reviewed by David C. Phillips, Hope College

Why does this class work so much better than that one? Why are these students clearly learning, while those are not? The college professor who teaches two sections of the exact same course with different results, the outside observer of a pre-school who sees one classroom descend into chaos while the room across the hall moves with joy and efficiency, and the policymaker trying to create equitable opportunity and prosperity all try to sort out the mystery of what helps people learn. In the developing world, national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations have pumped money into expanding schooling access, and enrollments have risen dramatically; more children, especially poor children, are in school. However, as noted by this volume edited by Paul Glewwe, *Education Policy in Developing Countries*, increased funding or even school enrollment do not always lead to educational achievement and poverty alleviation. Aid for education makes no difference if it builds empty or ineffective schools. Education matters for poverty reduction, but how can governments, international organizations, and donors actually help kids learn so that they can build the human capital that will pull them out of poverty?

This work clearly and successfully summarizes the state of knowledge among economists on what works and what does not for education policy in developing countries. In doing so, the authors bring a pair of clear criteria for sifting through the evidence. First, this book heavily prioritizes research that uses randomized control trials (RCTs) or similar quasi-experiments to clearly separate the causal effect of an education program or policy from confounding variables. Second, the book frequently, though not exclusively, places an emphasis on academic achievement measured through test scores rather than just school enrollment. In the end, the book offers a readable and generally non-technical summary of the current state of knowledge on education policy that will be a worthwhile read for academic economists, graduate students, those working in policy organizations, and perhaps a few especially sharp and interested

undergraduates. Those with experience in either education policy or development economics but not the intersection of the two will find this volume particularly helpful, as will those wishing to learn more about evidence on a particular education policy.

The particulars of the volume are divided among a first-rate group of economists. University of Minnesota economist Glewwe was one of the early adopters of randomized experiments, particularly applying them to measure the effects of educational interventions in Western Kenya. He assembles a group of prominent economists to tackle different aspects of education policy in developing countries, each of which represents a chapter of the volume. The book reviews the literature on the test achievement and student enrollment benefits of various policies and interventions, including school inputs like textbooks and chairs (Glewwe, Eric Hanushek, Sarah Humpage, and Renato Revina), pre-school programs (Jere Behrman, Patrice Engle, and Lia Fernald), child health interventions (Harold Alderman and Hoyt Bleakley), parent and student incentives including conditional cash transfers (Behrman, Susan Parker, and Petra Todd), management practices at individual schools (Sebastian Galiani and Ricardo Perez-Truglia), and system-wide school choice (W. Bentley McLeod and Miguel Urquiola). In all cases, the volume attracts the top academics active in their assigned area, leading to thoughtful and clear summaries of the current state of knowledge. The reader interested in a particular topic will be well-served by the relevant chapter in this volume.

On a broader level, a volume summarizing the state of knowledge among development economists regarding education policy aims to bring to fruition the promise of recent trends in development economics. Development economics as practiced at top research universities has veered sharply toward field-based, micro, empirical work. In particular, the past 20 years have exhibited a dramatic increase in the tendency of academics to measure the effects of particular interventions in particular locations using a comparison of a treatment group receiving the policy and some appropriate control group, selected either randomly in an experiment or in a manner approximating an experiment. Those promoting this shift argue that the complexity of development requires careful and painstaking effort to document individual facts about what works and what does not. Only after establishing solid (if small) facts can we slowly accumulate knowledge about what to do. The final chapter of the volume

(Iqbal Dhaliwal, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, and Caitlin Tulloch) makes this goal explicit. Once evidence has been accumulated, the goal is to measure the cost-effectiveness of various options, provide this to policy makers, and advocate for shifting resources to effective programs.

However, prominent critics of this approach exist. Perhaps most significantly, 2015 Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton has critiqued an over-emphasis on randomized experiments (Deaton, 2009). Philosopher Nancy Cartwright (2007) has voiced one part of this critique eloquently:

Economists make a huge investment to achieve rigor inside their models, that is to achieve internal validity. But how do they decide what lessons to draw about target situations outside from conclusions rigorously derived inside the model? That is, how do they establish external validity? We find: thought, discussion, debate; relatively secure knowledge; past practice; good bets. But not rules, check lists, detailed practicable procedures; nothing with the rigor demanded inside the models. (p. 18)

One major concern brought by Deaton, Cartwright, and others is the classic concern regarding ‘external validity.’ Through the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs, researchers may achieve internal validity, knowing whether providing deworming medication in a particular area of Western Kenya will raise school enrollment. But will this work in other parts of Kenya? Other countries? Will it work in the country where the Minister of Education is thinking about a nationwide deworming campaign?

Many prominent advocates for the recent trend argue that the body of knowledge will slowly accumulate to answer these questions; 10, 20, and 30 years of research will accumulate enough facts on the same policies in enough different contexts to be a reliable guide to policy. The present edited volume, then, is a vital contribution because it updates us on the progress of the broader agenda of development economics as it relates to education. So, where do we stand? Several successes stand out. We have strong evidence on many broad topic areas as a whole. For example, in many countries and many contexts nutrition early in life affects schooling later on (Chapter 4). The accumulated evidence can sometimes speak to individual policies. Experimental evaluation of conditional cash transfer programs did not stop in Mexico; we have several evaluations from around the world showing that providing cash with the attached

requirement that the child attend school consistently improves school enrollment (Chapter 5). The chapter on school inputs (Chapter 2) in particular provides an impressive, important, and complicated roadmap for basic policy interventions built on the accumulated evidence from 43 studies that pay careful attention to cause and effect. Teachers who know more about their subjects are dramatically more effective, but teachers with more formal education are not necessarily better. Providing desks and chairs provides robust benefits, but the benefits of textbooks are unclear. On some particular policies, 20 years of slowly accumulating knowledge has given clear lessons.

However, to its credit this volume honestly documents the incomplete project that is small-scale, empirical development economics. The proposition that de-worming provides dramatic educational benefits for very low cost rests almost entirely on evidence from one experiment in Kenya and historical evidence from the development of the United States. While these studies achieve very high quality individually, the lack of wide-ranging evidence surprises. Similarly, the particular challenges of measuring the long-run benefits of pre-school programs means that the entire developing world has no study of comparable quality to the celebrated Perry Pre-School study (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, and Schweinhart, 2006) in the United States. On the incredibly applicable and practical issue of whether school administrators in countries with rising enrollment should separate their students into high and low achievement tracks, we have to rely heavily on one experiment from Kenya. This is not a criticism of the present volume. The contributors clearly indicate gaps in current research and avoid over-interpretation of what we know. But this honest assessment often leads to the conclusion that broad-based evidence frequently cannot be brought to bear at the level of detail that policymakers would desire.

In the current paradigm, development economists often point to medicine as the gold standard for evidence-based decision-making. One major value of the present volume is that it provides the data for making this comparison across disciplines. Where does development economics currently stand relative to medical research? Chapter 2 identifies 43 high quality studies on school inputs; the most studied topic is the pupil-teacher ratio, with 14 high quality studies. The official trial registry in medicine, clinicaltrials.gov, indicates that 99 interventional studies have been completed testing an intervention of the pain-reliever acetaminophen

(i.e. Tylenol). Even for the most studied educational interventions in developing countries, we know far less than we do about Tylenol. There are reasons for this. Teachers are more expensive than pills, painkillers have a more profitable market than education policy in developing countries, and medicine has a 50-year head start on implementing experiments. But the conclusion is clear. The inductive approach to development policy is still decades behind the same approach to medicine.

Altogether, Glewwe and an impressive assembly of development microeconomists successfully summarize the state of knowledge on education policy in developing countries as seen from the vantage point of the experimental revolution. They successfully document where this agenda has succeeded in generating clear, generalizable, and evidence-based recommendations for education policy in developing countries, and where it has led to a murkier set of ambiguous or context-specific evidence.

Given that Christian economists have a particular call to work on issues related to poverty, the efforts of this volume will be very helpful in at least two ways. The first is straightforward: nearly all Christian economists have some practical connection to work on education in developing countries. Policy economists advise governments, academics consult or serve on the boards of non-profit organizations, and even those with no vocational connection to development work hear a call to be generous in giving. All of these will want to read this book for its detailed accounting of what works and what does not work. Second, this book will help the Christian economist looking to wrestle with the big, thorny question of why people are poor. Christian faith and the biblical narrative offer a world of broken systems and broken people as a deep explanation. Many Christian economists work to put a finer point on this view by integrating into Christian faith theories from mainstream economics on institutional failure or coordination problems. The recent trend of micro-empirical work in development economics offers a relatively young but powerful option. Authors like Banerjee and Duflo (2012) make the case that poverty primarily results from the complex accumulation of small failures rather than some large-scale disaster. For the Christian economist interested in this approach, the present volume provides the detailed results of 20 years of top minds grinding toward knowledge on how to best give the poor the opportunity to learn and gain human capital. Perhaps some readers will be convinced by not only the evidence but also the approach to studying poverty: The slow ac-

cumulation of evidence on what works and what does not can lead to progress, but we have only just begun.

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