A Call to Action: Funding for the Evaluation of Education Technology

Today, fifty-five million primary-school age children still do not attend school. Even in areas which have shown improvement in enrollment, low quality schools have led to functional illiteracy and innumeracy for many more. Educational attainment correlates with economic potential; the barriers that hold back education in the developing world restrain entire economies.

Technological innovations will play a key role in strengthening education systems. Technology is not a single intervention, but rather an ever-growing set of tools. These tools can target different actors and barriers within an educational value chain. Interventions exist which target teachers, students, and administrative staff performance, as well as providing new and exciting approaches to curriculum development and delivery. The potential of technology to transform education systems is seemingly limitless; however, ministries of education are faced with a lack of evidence about which innovations actually yield educational outcomes.

USAID and its partners in the Mobiles for Education (mEducation) Alliance jointly call for increased funding for evaluation research concerning the use of education technology in the developing world to support learning gains in schools.

Funding is needed to provide actionable evidence surrounding best practices for the use of educational technology. The technology ecosystem is overflowing with ideas for the next big thing in education, but there is a lack of attention given to testing whether any of these innovations do work.

We need answers to foundational questions to justify the adoption of education technology interventions. We need evidence that technology can be a catalyst for helping interventions achieve their intended outcomes.

The most important question is: “What works?” Without rigorous impact evaluation, we have too many interventions from which to choose. All too often, evaluations focus on questions of acceptability of a technology than impact of an intervention. The evaluation of Project ABC is a rare case where these types of questions (looking at causation) are directly addressed.

Project ABC: A Success Story in Evaluation

Project Alphabétisation de Base par Cellulaire (ABC) represents a collaborative initiative between Catholic Relief Services, Tufts University and the University of Oxford that uses mobile phones as a tool to promote adult literacy and numeracy in Niger. The program has been implemented in over 110 villages and evaluated using a phased-in cluster randomized control trial design. Villages were randomized between conditions with roughly half receiving an adult education program with instruction on how to use a mobile phone (Project ABC) and half receiving only the adult education component. Project ABC has been shown to generate statistically significant gains in literacy and numeracy for participants compared to those who only received the adult education program.

For more information: http://sites.tufts.edu/projectabc
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After we know what works, we can ask further questions to establish best practices. Through a structured research agenda, we can establish:

- The cost-effectiveness of technology supported interventions.
- How to match particular technological interventions with community needs.
- How a technological intervention is received differently based on context.
- How technological interventions can help sustain learning gains.
- How technological interventions can be financed to encourage local economic empowerment.

To discuss how you can support USAID and the mEducation Alliance in strengthening the use of education technology for children, please contact Tony Bloome at abloome@usaid.gov.