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Measuring Learning Outcomes in Developing Countries

Measuring learning outcomes provides useful information for improving educational planning, management, and teaching. Learning outcomes measurements can be grouped into categories based on who or what is being measured and the purpose of the measurement: low-stakes measurement of individual outcomes, high-stakes measurement of individual outcomes, low-stakes measurement of system outcomes, and high-stakes measurement of system outcomes. All assessment programs should be based on sound frameworks; strive to be valid, reliable, and fair; and carefully consider how results are presented.

When designing an assessment, a clear conception of its purposes is imperative. The first task is identifying who is assessed and any group to be excluded. Defining what is to be measured is the second task. The design strategy should make explicit the rationale for selection, describe how the domain will be organized for measurement, and indicate the types of items on which the assessment will rely. The overall strategy should also specify methodologies used, how frequently data are needed, and agreed-upon sampling plans. Field testing and time required for students to take tests also need to be considered, along with who delivers, marks, and analyzes results.

Design approaches are a special issue in developing countries. An approach that goes beyond a curricular focus and taps into a broader range of knowledge or skills that students develop outside of school may better capture assessment objectives. Assessments might also focus on integrated subject areas and the measurement of affective outcomes—positive dispositions for learning, motivation, self-assurance, and flexibility. Because improving the quality of teachers and teaching remains the primary vehicle for improving education in the developing world, learning how teachers influence students' motivation may help improve outcomes. Participating in international assessments is helpful to developing countries, providing benchmarking opportunities and allowing researchers to network, observe assessment functions and phases, build skills, and realize macro-level data. Among developing countries that have developed assessment programs, Brazil leads the way.

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