

The Knowledge Frontier in Student Assessment: A roundup from recent learning events

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What are the latest hot topics in student assessment? The READ 2 Trust Fund team is continuing its quest to learn from top experts about the most recent assessment trends and innovations for informing our dialogue with country teams and partners, as well as for sharing this knowledge with a wider community of stakeholders. In the past quarter, two conferences – the [American Educational Research Association \(AERA\) Annual Meeting](#) and the [Comparative & International Education Society \(CIES\) Annual Conference](#), and two study tours – to the Netherlands and to Finland, provided valuable opportunities for learning about the design and implementation of key student assessment activities. Below we report on the main takeaways from these learning events.

- **International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) provide invaluable data, but publication of their results can also carry risks from improper causal claims and misleading reporting of results.** The new [report](#) from the U.S. National Academy of Education examines ILSA design, analysis, interpretation, and reporting, and how each of these may be improved in the future.
- **Parental education explains a large portion of the variation in attainment and cognitive skills, which mediates the relationship between family background and income.** Analysis based on data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) finds that these relationships are qualitatively similar across 21 OECD countries but their strengths vary ([Braun](#)).
- **Reliance on performance standards can lead to improvements in student performance due to more efficient and thoughtful time spent on learning.** The New York Performance Standards Consortium improved learning and achieved higher graduation rates (compared to New York City public schools) by using a system of performance-based assessments in lieu of most State Regents exams. ([Cook](#))
- **Measuring social-emotional learning (SEL) constructs using student self-reports yields valid data, but measures could be improved and caution in interpretation is warranted.** Analysis of the first large-scale SEL survey (400,000 students in grades 3-12) identified the psychometric properties of four SEL constructs – self-management, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and social awareness. ([Meyer et al.](#))
- **A variety of emerging tools measures higher-order cognitive and socioemotional skills online.** The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Survey Assessment Innovations Laboratory (SAIL) initiative has supported the design of the Virtual Worlds online platform, which assesses in real time students' ability to gather, process, and evaluate information and to work collaboratively ([Coiro](#)).
- **Scenario-based assessments could provide deeper information about students' abilities.** Global Integrated Scenario-based Assessment ([GISA](#)) elicits a deeper sense of students' reading comprehension by integrating multiple tasks (selecting, comparing, and evaluating information) and giving students a purpose for reading.
- **New tools for accessing and visualizing assessment data can inform policy.** The [Early Grade Reading Barometer](#), an online tool developed by USAID, increases access to and use of data from Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and similar assessments in Asia, Middle East, and Africa.
- **Global Networks for Measuring Student Learning and Assessments are working to develop more and better data on learning outcomes.** A new UIS indicator, "children not learning," can help countries to report on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 4.1.1. Data sources for this indicator would include administrative data and household surveys as well as results from ILSAs and national assessments. ([Huebler](#))

CICED Study Tour to Cito, Netherlands

In May 2018, the [Center for International Cooperation in Education Development](#) (CICED), with support from the READ RAS team, organized its annual study tour for a group of experts from Armenia and Belarus to [Cito](#), the institute for educational measurement in the Netherlands that has extensive experience developing and implementing assessment activities in the Netherlands and around the world. The purpose of the annual CICED study tour, currently in its ninth year, is to provide an opportunity for participants to engage in theoretical and practical capacity-building on assessment topics, to share knowledge and best practices, and to observe and learn first-hand how a leading assessment system functions.

As part of the study tour, CICED staff and representatives from Armenia and Belarus participated in an intensive short-term course on educational assessment. The course included practical training sessions that were equally beneficial for education policymakers and for psychometric research specialists. Topics included training on data analysis and its use for decision-making, developing national assessments and maximizing the value of student monitoring systems, applying modern approaches to test development, and supporting evidence-centered assessment design, among others.

World Bank Education Study Visit to Finland

Also in May 2018, the READ Trust Fund was represented at the World Bank Education study visit to Helsinki, Finland, which aimed to: (i) establish an understanding of the Finnish education system and its history of education development; (ii) discuss the cornerstones of the Finnish education system and its current reforms in selected thematic areas; (iii) share experiences of different countries related to challenges and opportunities of education reforms; and (iv) discuss implications for research, policy development, and practices when planning and implementing education reforms in different countries.

Insights from the visit provided important lessons about the Finnish experience. Specifically, in Finland:

- *The focus is on classroom assessment as a tool to support learning.* In Finland, the focus is on learning rather than testing, and there are no national tests for students in basic education. Teachers are responsible for assessing students based on the curriculum objectives, and the aim of assessment is to guide and encourage learning, and to develop the students' capability for self-assessment.
- *Equity is at the center of basic education.* In Finland, pedagogy is centered on fostering a joy of learning, with child-centered methods and absence of tracking. On PISA, Finland has the smallest share of performance variance explained by between-school variance among OECD countries. While the OECD average was 37 percent, in Finland it is 6 percent. The 2016 curriculum reforms focused on fostering a sense of community, with learners actively setting targets, reflecting on and analyzing information, and solving problems.
- *Emphasis in vocational education and training (VET) is on competence and flexibility.* VET has been growing in popularity in Finland, with 42% of basic school leavers choosing VET. There are 164 Finnish Vocational Qualifications, which focus on competencies and individual learners. They operate on the principles of flexibility, optionality, individual learning and qualifications pathways, and validation of competences.

All presentations from the study visit are available [here](#).