

MEASURING *what* MATTERS

2nd LEARNING PARTNERSHIP CONVENING

2020 VIRTUAL CONVENING REPORT

APRIL 27 — MAY 1

Entrenched in the goals of the second annual Measuring What Matters Learning Partnership Convening (MWM-LP) was the desire to support dialogue, learning, and collaboration across Porticus partners working globally at different levels of the wider education system. A focus on Whole Child Development (WCD), through the lens of measurement and the assessment of learning, brought members together, albeit virtually, to address common challenges around integrating WCD skills into systems.

Throughout the week, partners engaged in sessions on Community Systems, Practical Measurement, National Systems, and Framing WCD. From these sessions several themes emerged and several discussions proved particularly salient. In addition to these themes and discussions,

this report reviews the primary objectives and key learnings of each session as well as partner insights on the future of the learning partnership.

Brought together amid a global pandemic with severe ramifications for education globally, partners had the opportunity to examine their work through an acute lens of urgency and address the gaps COVID-19 has further exacerbated in education equity and the opportunities the pandemic presents for ensuring inclusion of marginalized learners through partners' work moving forward. Although all of these ideas are not detailed in this report, please see the accompanying attachment that highlights the innovations discussed.

Table of Contents

“We are born with bonding social capital, a sense of belonging to our family or other people with shared experiences, cultural norms, common purposes or pursuits. But it requires deliberate and continuous effort to create the kind of binding social capital through which we can share experiences, ideas and innovation and build a shared understanding among groups with diverse experiences and interests, thus increasing our radius of trust to strangers and institutions.”

— Robert Putnam

	Page
Session Summaries	1–2
Community Systems and COVID-19 Responses	1
Practical Measurement: Practitioner-focused best practices in measuring children’s learning and development outcomes	1
National Systems: Global Trends and Whole Child Development	2
Framing WCD: The Power of How	2
Themes	3–4
Partnership	3
Research Translation	3
Context	4
Key Discussions and Challenges	5–7
Prioritization of Academic Skills	5–6
Impact of Evidence and Assessment	6
Communicating WCD	6
Solutions	7
A Way Forward	8
Summary	9

Community Systems

Neil Boothby, Anasthasie Liberiste-Osirus
John Mugo, Cyril Pressoir, Wendy Smith

1.5 billion children are out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the digital divide disproportionately-negatively affecting those in low-resource countries. Using the Haiti Strong Beginnings program as a case study, the presentation examined how the activation of school community systems enabled the Haiti team to transition to a distance learning program relatively quickly in light of COVID-19 school closures. Presentations from partners in Kenya and Colombia, highlighted how different ed-tech approaches and public-private partnerships are being used to include children in extreme adversity in distance learning programs and beyond.

Objectives

1. Differentiate the components of WCD, including SEL.
2. Highlight the importance of community systems activation in WCD. Through a Haiti case study, we will see that small partnerships are essential to activating a WCD system.
3. Reflect on how resilient education systems need to incorporate distance learning capacities that include all student learners

Key Information

1. Practices born out of COVID-19 responses are opportunities. There is an important opportunity to hold onto what we learn from this experience in order to improve education systems in the medium and long term.
2. WCD is broader than SEL. Complementary partnerships may be required to promote WCD approaches.
3. Families, schools, and other social entities are the day-to-day mechanisms that can be activated and aligned to meet the multiplicity of WCD capacities and needs in extreme adversity.
4. Donor flexibility and complementary partnerships are key to moving from school-based to school-community approaches for children in extreme adversity.
5. Rapid Evaluation, Assessment, and Learning Methodology (REALM) create opportunities to learn what is working and what is not working in intermediate time segments and is a means to extend the efficacy and reach of programming.

Practical Measurement

Patricia Cabrerizo, Nikhit D'Sa, Alex Rios,
Martin Vegas

The session began with a framing of practical measurement as the measurement of children's and adolescents' learning and development that is driven-by and focused on the needs of practitioners working with limited time and resources in low-resource and fragile contexts. Using Peru as a case study, participants engaged in a series of group activities to practice developing practical measurement skills.

Objectives

1. Understand the main considerations for practitioners when attempting to measure learning and development outcomes in children and adolescents.
2. Gain insight on what Practical Measurement looks like in context.
3. Reflect on what practitioners should consider when they have limited resources and technical support.

Key Information

1. Practitioners with limited time and resources must consider the appropriateness, feasibility, utility, and rigor of measurement assessments.
2. It is a challenge to prioritize skills and understand which skills and competencies are foundational to other skills and competencies.
3. When assessing the utility of a measure, practitioners must consider the time, resources, and commitment available for a given study or research project.

National Systems

Ryan Burgess and Eileen O'Malley

Using the Porticus and Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) study as a framework, the session directed partners through findings on the current climate and perceptions of WCD at the global level, prompting participants to compare the findings to their contexts.

Objectives

1. Explore the current climate of WCD and how it is defined, understood, valued, and assessed at a policy level across the systems in which MWM-LP partners work.
2. Share the latest insights, learnings, and trends emerging across the sector at national and global levels, particularly in relation to those in adversity.

Key Information

1. Although there is increasing momentum around education systems adopting WCD, the improvement of academic skills and preparation for employment remain key motivating factors for why policy makers value a WCD approach and participate in such global initiatives.
2. Viewing policy makers as stakeholders is crucial to advance WCD in policy.
3. Funders are increasingly looking at opportunities for co-creation and partnerships across the sector.

Framing WCD

Moira O'Neil, FrameWorks Institute

Using common mental models as a framework for understanding how to approach WCD communications, the Frameworks Institute walked partners through effective and ineffective examples of communication.

Objectives

1. Equip partners with an understanding of narrative theory, so they can develop effective story structures in their own work to promote systems and societal-level changes.
2. Understand how communications decisions promote or impede systems-level understanding of social issues so that partners can improve WCD communications in their own work.

Key Information

1. Mental models are the frames or predispositions with which people enter a conversation. They have a powerful influence over how someone will assign responsibility for a given issue.

Common Mental Models:

Family Bubble: In this model, people believe that children's actions and ways of thinking develop directly from their families. This way of understanding an issue often leads to the mindset that parents or the family structure is what needs to be "fixed" to address an issue.

Age Up: In this model, people approach issues of children with the mindset of children being older than they are. Practitioners must be intentional in emphasizing and reemphasizing children's appropriate ages and related competencies.

Compartmentalization: In this model, people believe skills develop independently of one another, in different ways, and in different contexts. This leads to the mindset that schools are for academic skills, and the home is for SEL.

Passive Model of Development: In this model, people view a child as an empty jar, and it is incumbent on adults to fill the child with what they identify as good (i.e., development happens solely through mimicry and absorption).

Themes

For the purpose of this report, themes were identified as overarching ideas that recurred in multiple discussions throughout the week and play crucial roles in the day-to-day work of partners. Thus, they are significant ideas for partners to keep in mind and prioritize as the partnership evolves.

Partnership

Learning partners and presentations continually emphasized the importance and value of partnership in ensuring the inclusion of the most marginalized children and adolescents in program work and measurement. The role of partnerships in achieving goals was seen poignantly in the Community Systems session's emphasis on emerging partnerships in response to COVID-19. Dr. Neil Boothby highlighted for participants that it is important to remember that **“with whole child development, you cannot do everything, but you can partner to do more.”**

This theme was further developed in the National Systems presentation when partners discussed the implications of funders increasingly looking at opportunities for co-creation and partnerships across the sector. The session also urged participants to view policy makers as potential partners and stakeholders in WCD and to identify political champions, at all levels of the sector, who will partner with learning partners to advance WCD.

Finally, it was fitting that the week ended with learning partners reflecting on the value of their own partnership with one another. Partners reflected on how the learning partnership enables them to learn how one another handles adversity, which enriches how partners approach adversity in their own contexts. Ultimately, the partnership has created a sense of belonging in a niche area of work, which has subsequently instilled the confidence of partners in their work.

Research Translation

Throughout sessions, partners discussed the challenge of balancing program agendas with political agendas in order to advance policy. Adapting research findings so they are relevant and usable in specific contexts is a universal difficulty, and given that from a policy perspective what gets assessed garners attention, the theme of what data to generate and how to effectively translate it for increased shareability was salient throughout the week, particularly within the Practical Measurement and National Systems sessions.

Although more and more countries are placing WCD into national curricula, how it is assessed, on the national and global levels, remains unclear. At the local level, practitioners must balance the desire for real-life assessments that are “closer” to youth (e.g., one-on-one interviews or extended observational studies) with practical measurement. Knowing that what gets assessed generates the most attention further complicates the discussion, especially when there is limited guidance on how to decide which skills to focus upon and how collected data should be used. Ultimately, research translation remains a ubiquitous challenge for partners, and there is ample room for contribution in this discussion.

Partners agreed that a good initial step was the generation of more evidence that addresses the impact of WCD, acknowledging that evidence is at the core of creating system wide changes. Recognizing these gaps, the OECD is adjusting the PISA to be more representative of WCD frameworks as well as more reflective of low and middle income countries. Colombia is also integrating a new portion of national testing (Pruebas Ser) that addresses citizenship, the arts, and physical well-being.

“Our program becomes greater than just an education moment [...] it becomes a bubble of relief, a safe zone for learning and play.”

“SEL is not possible in a vacuum. Community, identity, and rights are key to understanding SEL in different contexts.”

Context

The role of understanding one’s context whether it be while designing research and programs, conducting research and implementing programs, or communicating research and the impact of programs was repeatedly highlighted across sessions. In the Community Systems session, partners from Haiti unpacked the role of context (in this case cultural momentum around the use of radio in Haiti) in their efforts to develop a radio distance learning platform that would reach their students and families. In doing so, one partner noted that their **“program becomes more than just an education moment [...] it becomes a bubble of relief, a safe zone for learning and play.”** Partners from Kenya and Colombia also shared how context, in the form of the availability of technological infrastructure as well as the culture of education, has impacted distance learning strategies in their countries during COVID-19.

A key facet of the Practical Measurement session was considering one’s context in designing measurement assessments. Given limited time and resources, practitioners must balance several factors when designing an assessment: appropriateness, feasibility, utility, and rigor. As one participant noted, **“SEL is not possible in a vacuum. Community, identity, and rights are key to understanding SEL in different contexts.”** This means that when designing assessments or frameworks it is paramount for practitioners to understand local ideologies and perspectives.

Horizontes’ development of a framework to measure SEL is a prime example of this. Their development process began with assessing what was available at the global, national, regional, and finally local levels before creating a three dimensional framework, addressing the personal, social, and “horizon” dimensions of an adolescent with an intentional link to cultural identity and the community’s sense of belonging.

The National Systems session extended the conversation from the practitioner side of the equation to the policy side, noting that how policy makers view and receive the case for WCD will also depend on context. In some countries, linking WCD to the ability to continue studying and working, advances its priority. For example, skills such as inner motivation and self-organization are viewed as traits that can help children and adolescents be successful in the future and thus have value. In Kenya, linking WCD to the resolution of social crises such as ethnic conflict and corruption are motivating factors; while in Peru, motivation stems from viewing WCD as a path to citizenship and democracy.

Finally, the Framing WCD session offered practical insights into how to communicate WCD to others depending on context. People approach conversations with set mental models that influence their ways of thinking about an issue and assigning responsibility. These mental models are heavily contextualized and therefore will vary. When sharing policy recommendations and evidence, it is essential for practitioners and advocates to anticipate the mental models of their audiences and adjust their communications accordingly.

Key Discussions & Challenges

Throughout the week, three discussions and challenges permeated all of the sessions: the prioritization of academic skills, the role of evidence and assessment, and communicating WCD. All of these discussions are interrelated, and all three bear important implications for the priorities of the partnership moving forward.

Prioritization of Academic Skills

Throughout the convening, partners discussed the challenges they face when framing the importance and value of WCD, especially in relationship to academic skills. The Porticus/ACER study showed that a primary motivator for participating sites in supporting SEL and WCD was grounded in the connection between SEL, WCD, and higher academic achievement. This finding resonated with many partners who have found that linking SEL capacities with academic performance and likelihood for employment is the strongest way to make the case for WCD. Without linking WCD to academic achievement, partners have not experienced as much advocacy success.

Although many learning partners would personally prioritize SEL and other elements of WCD in policy, particularly for those children and youth facing the greatest adversity, partners articulated two important reasons why academic skills tend to carry more weight in discussions at the systems and policy level:

1. There is momentum and buy-in around academic education.

“As a sector, especially working in crisis and emergencies, it has taken a long time to get academic education on the global agenda as a priority for funding. We’ve seen how long it’s taken to even get an agenda around education as a global need. If we suddenly restructure and focus on something else [SEL or WCD competencies], we will lose a lot of that momentum that we’ve built up, especially in contexts of emergencies. The protection that even just an academic setting can provide a child in terms of normalcy and routine is valuable.”

Building on this insight and recognizing the current global context for WCD, partners addressed the need to be strategic in integrating WCD into the global discourse on education.

“When working in systems of extreme scarcity [Haiti], academic knowledge is the one thing you can take with you. For schools or children to be viewed as successful, you have to achieve a baseline of academic success. This develops a hierarchy of needs. The academics have to be achieved before other competencies are considered.”

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The OECD shared from their emerging findings from the Study on Social and Emotional Skills that one of the main obstacles to the implementation of SEL in schools is that WCD/ SEL, as a concept, is still not fully recognized or understood by key stakeholders. With an already crowded education agenda that focuses on reading and mathematics, it is difficult for policymakers to prioritize WCD when they see where low and middle income countries are in terms of these academic markers.

2. Academic skills are valued in national narratives and thus dictate policy.

“If college admissions and employment start looking for the SEL skills explicitly, the systems will have a different priority...it is currently the tail wagging the dog, so we need to change the tail.”

In identifying the “whys” behind the prioritization of academic skills, partners extended the conversation to address how practitioners and WCD advocates could address the “whys” and place WCD more centrally in national narratives. Partners voiced how the key to shifting the global conversations on education to include WCD lies within evidence of impact and assessment.

Evidence of Impact and Assessment

Throughout the week, partners delineated how evidence of assessment is at the core of creating system wide changes. Assessment creates powerful advocacy, and partners expressed how one cannot have an either-or mentality when championing the WCD cause:

“To advance and advocate the WCD case most effectively, we need evidence of WCD’s positive impact on retention and academic achievement.”

“Assessments are a prop to a system-wide focus.”

“We need evidence-based advocacy, or we are part of the problem.”

“Building evidence of the impact of programmes, enables a broader acceptance of measurement itself.”

Even with strong evidence of assessment, one must be equipped to communicate evidence effectively to policy makers.

Communicating WCD at the Policy Level

Within the sessions, a recurring challenge was how to effectively communicate WCD at the policy level:

- How do we help ministries and governments prioritize and recognize the most salient needs of youth and adolescents? (Community Systems)
- How can we elevate the importance of SEL skills within policy that often focuses on academic and cognitive skills? (Practical Measurement).
- How do we get people, in particular policy makers, to recognize the importance of WCD? (National Systems)
- What concrete ways or opportunities are there to support policy makers? (National Systems)
- How do we engage with different stakeholders and get them to “take a hold” of WCD? (Framing Communications)
- How do we deepen people’s understanding of SEL skills? (Framing Communications)

Solutions

Throughout discussions and presentations, several concrete ideas and solutions emerged in response to how to effectively address the challenges addressed on previous pages:

Find the "Pain Point"

When presenting evidence of assessment and data from programming, partners articulated how it is necessary to meet policy makers where they are and not where partners want them to be. Oftentimes, this means leveraging relevant social data as an inroad to program data and the impact of WCD. In other words, there is benefit in finding the "pain point" in a given context and presenting WCD's case in terms of how WCD can appease the "pain point." An example of this is seen in Korea, where the Ministry of Education is now taking WCD seriously because despite top academic rankings in the PISA, Korea has one of the highest youth suicide rates.

Powerful Assessment = Powerful Policy

As discussed above, the role and influence of assessment and evidence cannot be overstated. Policy makers need to see more evidence of the impact of WCD, in particular the role it plays in fostering academic and employment skills.

Identify political champions

Consider who those players are that will bring WCD to the forefront of policy and advocate for it on the systems level. Partner with them.

Practical Tips from Frameworks

1. Name specific skills rather than simply saying SEL.
2. Identify specific links between SEL and academic skills.
3. Avoid the term "soft skills."
4. Emphasize how SEL skills are developed skills rather than inherent skills that some individuals possess while others do not.
5. Describe less, explain more. Be concrete in your examples.
6. Analyze your communications at the sentence level: question where people will assign responsibility.

Develop Clear Explanatory Chains

Clear explanatory chains are vital to making knowledge that is implicit to experts, explicit to policy makers. In order to ensure an audience follows the connection between a problem and solution, practitioners must identify the problem, articulate its cause, outline steps that arrive at the consequence, and then present a solution. The clearer and more specific the steps between cause and consequence, the more impactful the explanatory chain.

Anticipate

Common mental models become the dominant way that people understand and think about issues. In order to effectively communicate WCD, we must anticipate the frames with which people come into a conversation and develop communications that account for and combat the biases models introduce.

Attribute Responsibility

This refers to framing who or what causes a problem. Often when communicating WCD, audiences will attribute responsibility for an issue to a specific person or group of people rather than a system (e.g., assigning responsibility for student drop-out rates to parents rather than an education system). This is problematic because too frequently sympathy is harnessed for a person, misdirecting the need for action. Issues at the system level affect people, but the system is what needs to be addressed. Therefore, our communications need to clearly articulate how responsibility lies with the system.

A Way Forward

Partners identified some of the primary benefits of the learning partnership to date:

- Intercultural challenges, diversity, and exclusion influence how you measure and use measurements. The partnership provides opportunities to learn how others handle similar challenges in developing contexts.
- Developing and implementing measurement tools and cultivating measurement efforts have been a concrete benefit of the partnership.
- Opportunities to present ideas for feedback and appraisal have been particularly helpful.
- In respect to advocacy, it is important to have a network of support to implement ideas at a policy level. There is weight in coming together and sharing recommendations as a united community.
- The partnership has created a sense of belonging in a niche area of work, which has subsequently instilled confidence for partners in their work.

There was enthusiastic consensus around the continuation of the partnership as well as a unanimous desire for the partnership to embrace a multi-pronged approach that focuses on both assessment and advocacy. The partners broke into groups to brainstorm various forms the partnership could take in the future. Common ideas included a multi-group system with small groups, focused on REALM and on the creation of evidence-based reports, and a larger group, focused on advocacy at the national and global level that will leverage work from the smaller groups. Other ideas included:

1. The incorporation of partners who already lead system level efforts around WCD in order to learn from their experiences in implementing agendas at the policy level.
2. Increased development of concrete tools and instruments.
3. Maintain annual in-person meetings in order to develop trust among partners and to facilitate meaningful discourse.
4. Integration of more voices across all levels of a system, from policy makers to teachers and principals.
5. Increased space and means to share work (e.g., a blog to which partners contribute).
6. Concrete working groups that create opportunities for smaller connection points in order to dive deeper into specific instruments, challenges, and deliverables. This would be particularly helpful in the context of connecting partners with those who have already made progress in addressing a specific challenge.
7. Although it is difficult to have common research, partners identified the opportunity to have a common set of policy recommendations. A common set of policy recommendations would establish a united front in policy advocacy, ultimately giving more weight to research that does emerge across contexts.

Summary

As the MWM-LP continues to evolve, the 2020 virtual convening identified the importance of the partnership continuing in a manner such that partners have the space to engage in opportunities to shift national narratives to strategically include WCD. The convening further revealed that doing so would not be possible without effective assessment and powerful communication. Although shifting national narratives is a long term and challenging goal, the convening displayed how recognizing the value of partnerships, context, and research translation are more immediate and achievable goals that partners can set to strengthen their day-to-day work, which can eventually be leveraged to impact policy.

2020 Virtual Convening Participating Organizations

Asia Society, Global	UNESCO Lima, Peru
Centre for Science of Student Learning, India	Universidad de los Andes, Colombia
Dream a Dream, India	Zizi Afrique Foundation, Kenya
Educapaz, Colombia	Alliance for Catholic Education, Haiti, University of Notre Dame
FrameWorks Institute, United States	Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child, University of Notre Dame
Kaivalya Education Foundation, India	Porticus
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	