Perhaps most striking—and frustrating and dismaying—about the World Bank’s 2020 education strategy (World Bank, 2011) is the tension between its title, *Learning for All*, and its content. *Learning for All*, it turns out, has hardly anything to say about learning.

The explicit commitment to learning for all is an imaginative and potentially transformative reconceptualization of a global challenge. For more than two decades, formally confirmed in Thailand in 1990 and reconfirmed in Senegal in 2000, the world has agreed on the importance of education for all. Education is both a right and a necessity. Individual learners, communities, countries, and the global political economy all benefit from broad access to quality education.

Expansively conceived, education for all has most often been narrowly implemented, if that. Nearly everywhere, education for all became schooling for all, ignoring the clear and reiterated commitment to providing learning opportunities for the very young and for those beyond school age. Schooling for all has advanced unevenly, nearly accomplished in some places and still a distant goal in others. As many, including the World Bank, have observed, schooling for all has not achieved education for all: “more schooling, little learning” (World Bank, 2011, p. 3). More children are in school. When they arrive, many find overcrowded classrooms, poorly equipped facilities, insufficient instructional materials, and teachers who are both over-worked and under-prepared. In some settings parents articulate the embarrassingly obvious: what is the point of all the effort to get children into schools where they do not learn?

Learning for all is a creative response. Refocus the education for all campaign away from schooling and toward learning. Insist on different indicators. Recognize that even more important than the number of children in school or the rate of progress through basic education are measures of learning. Understand that learning is not simply acquiring disconnected bits of information to be recalled on demand but must be rooted in curiosity, concept development, systematic experimentation, structured comparison, scientific analysis, creative insight, problem-solving, and more. Here, then, was an opportunity for the World Bank to support efforts to move global education’s center of gravity away from schooling.
toward the emancipatory and empowering potential of education. International cooperation to end poverty could become something more than a slogan.

An opportunity lost. The World Bank’s 2020 education strategy (WBES 2020) makes “learning” a catchy title, not a carefully grounded, systematically analyzed, and creatively developed objective. When we look for guidance on how schooling and education are to be different, we find instead inattention to the learning process and more of the same schooling. More of the same will not do.

RESEARCH ON LEARNING

Quite reasonably, WBES 2020 insists that policies and practices be evidence-based. Relevant research is to inform the analytic framework that identifies problems and points to promising solutions. Relevant research is to guide choices among alternative public policies. Relevant research is to develop and apply the indicators necessary for monitoring and assessment. Research on learning is not the obscure preoccupation of ivory tower gnomes but the essential foundation for practical action. In my chapter on research and the knowledge environment, I have addressed the development of the education research community in Africa. Strengthened research capacity in Africa is in the global interest and requires moving beyond funding individual researchers to supporting the interrelated activities necessary to establish and sustain an innovative and productive research environment.

Research on learning is an important foundation for developing a strategy to achieve learning for all. What, for example, does research tell us about the roles of teachers and about different sorts of professional preparation for teachers? How does focused research help us understand better the difference between teaching as telling and teaching as motivating learning? For a third example, what has recent research found about the roles, both promising and problematic, of school committees?

Research findings, of course, are regularly disputed. That is an essential part of the process of testing observations, conclusions, and analytic frameworks against relevant evidence. Hence, Learning for All—a statement by the World Bank on what is to be done—should reasonably be expected to review the relevant research and to indicate the studies and findings that have guided its recommendations. Alas, not. Since WBES 2020 does not include that demanding and critical review of research on learning, with careful attention to context and conditions, readers can determine only by inference which research the World Bank deemed relevant and persuasive. Sweeping claims and confident recommendations stand ungrounded. Those who are to implement the proposed strategy must remain unclear on why that strategy has been recommended and why it is expected to be effective.

Even worse, as I have noted in my discussion of creating the knowledge environment for Learning for All, for the most part, the World Bank talks with itself. It continues to rely on the research it has undertaken and commissioned, with very little documented attention to the much larger body of research on learning and schooling.