

REPORT

# Widening the Evidence Base in Education: Bridging Local and Global Knowledge for More Inclusive Decision-Making



# List of acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BE2	Building Evidence in Education
EEF	Education Endowment Fund
ESSA	Education Sub-Saharan Africa
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge Innovation Exchange
IWG	International Working group
LIFTED	Locally Inclusive Framework for Transforming Education Decision Making
MMAT	Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PACE	Pan-African Collective for Evidence
RAG	Retrieval-Augmented Generation
UKAID	United Kingdom Agency for International Development
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEIRD	Ways of Evaluating Important and Relevant Data

# Introduction: Building a more inclusive evidence ecosystem

**“Within the current system of knowledge production, where academic peer reviewed publications are presented as the most valid form of knowledge, voices from the Global South are marginalised.” – [Shuayb and Brun \(2025\)](#)**

The lack of access to diverse, high-quality educational evidence—particularly localised research and non-academic insights, published and unpublished—perpetuates systemic inequities in education policymaking and practice. Despite recent efforts to localise research agendas in the field of education and international development, methodological and practical challenges hinder equity (Cameron et al., 2025). Academic peer reviewed literature, often valued above all other evidence, continues to be dominated by authors from the Global North (Shuayb and Brun, 2025; Amarante and Zurbrigg, 2022). As a result, decision-makers in low-resource contexts, especially the Global South, are often forced to rely on research that is inaccessible behind paywalls, written in highly technical language, or disconnected from their unique contexts. This gap hinders effective decision-making, especially where insights are most needed. As the Deputy Director of Ghana’s Ministry of Education noted, “Most of us in the policy department are often groping in the dark when promulgating education policies because we rarely have relevant data to support our actions.”

Valuable knowledge generated by local educators, communities, and organisations whose lived experiences hold critical insights for improving education systems is being excluded. As a result, policies are frequently shaped by perspectives that do not fully reflect the realities on the ground, reinforcing gaps in equity, inclusion, and effectiveness. Addressing this imbalance requires a fundamental shift, extending beyond the inclusion of academic literature in evidence syntheses. Education.org’s (2021) White Paper, *Calling for an Education Knowledge Bridge*, laid out a critique and proposal for addressing the knowing–using gap in education by expanding beyond the use of academic evidence, enabling the capacity for comprehensive and up-to-date syntheses, and ultimately leading to clear policy guidance that can be implemented at scale.

Education policymakers and practitioners operate in complex environments where timely, relevant, and actionable evidence is essential for effective decision-making. While academic research plays a critical role in shaping education policy, it is not the only source of valuable knowledge. Given its nature, policy-oriented research can draw valuable insights from reports by governments and research institutes, websites, or non-English language literature, all more likely to be found outside of academic journal articles (Petticrew and Roberts, 2008). Non-academic evidence can therefore provide real-time, context-specific information that can complement and enhance traditional research. A more inclusive approach to evidence strengthens the foundation for education policymaking, ensuring that decisions are informed not only by rigorous research but also by the lived experiences and practical knowledge of those working to improve education outcomes on the ground.



# Expanding beyond academic evidence: Why it's important

‘Those closest to a development challenge are generally those best positioned to innovate a solution’ – [McLean and Sen \(2019: p.123\)](#)

While academic evidence often answers what works it does not always provide valuable insights on why, how, in what contexts, under what conditions, or for whom. Drawing on wider evidence, including non-academic sources, helps to bring different elements and perspectives together to tell a more complete narrative. While academic institutes have historically been significant sources of knowledge, there is now a diverse array of actors involved in knowledge production (Baek and Khamsi, 2024). Examples of non-academic evidence include:

- **Government policy documents, administrative data, and national statistics** offer insights into system-level trends, resource allocation, and policy priorities.
- **Press releases** from governments, multilateral organisations, and education institutes serve as official records of policy decisions, funding commitments, and program launches, providing critical context on policy direction and priority areas for investment.
- **Reports and evaluations from multilateral agencies, NGOs, or think tanks** synthesise research and field-based knowledge, providing practical recommendations for policymakers.
- **Media reports and investigative journalism** highlight emerging challenges, service delivery gaps, and stakeholder perspectives that may not yet be captured in academic literature.
- **Blogs, webpages, and videos** often contribute practice-based evidence, such as teacher and school leader testimonies, community and indigenous knowledges, and innovations from the field. This offers valuable firsthand perspectives on the feasibility and impact of education policies and interventions in different contexts.
- **Social media and podcasts** further enable real-time information sharing and dialogue among

education stakeholders, shedding light on pressing issues as they unfold.

- **Conference proceedings and working papers** – while not yet peer-reviewed – capture emerging research and innovative policy discussions, offering timely evidence on education challenges and potential solutions before they appear in formal publications.

Collectively, these sources provide a richer, more dynamic understanding of education systems, helping decision-makers craft policies that are evidence-informed and contextually relevant. At the same time, the rise in knowledge producers has led to a surplus of evidence, creating challenges for policymakers who must navigate a crowded landscape of information (Baek and Khamsi, 2024).

Indeed, not all non-academic evidence is of the same quality. Critics of non-academic evidence argue that these sources lack peer review, may be shaped by political or organisational agendas, and do not always adhere to standardised research methodologies, leading to biases or making them unreliable. While these concerns are valid, no single source of evidence is without limitations. Academic research itself is influenced by funding priorities, disciplinary boundaries, and publication constraints that may limit its applicability to real-world policy challenges. Rather than dismiss non-academic evidence outright, quality control mechanisms can be put in place to uphold rigor and relevance. To do this, we created LIFTED, the Locally Inclusive Framework for Transforming Education Decision Making.

# LIFTED: Including non-academic literature while upholding rigor

In 2023, Education.org, in collaboration with USAID, SUMMA, ESSA, PACE, EEF, and other key leaders, began addressing this global challenge, namely – the limited access to diverse, high-quality educational evidence, particularly localised research and non-academic insights—both published and unpublished. The [International Working Group \(IWG\)](#) was launched, uniting policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and evidence synthesisers to design a system for more accessible, inclusive, and actionable educational evidence. At its core, the IWG sought to increase the credibility of locally generated evidence while ensuring rigorous yet flexible quality assessment that empowers decision-makers to leverage diverse, actionable evidence for education reform. To help inform the work of the IWG, Education.org (2023) conducted a landscape report to identify and learn from 26 existing initiatives already advancing the use of inclusive evidence in education, health, and other sectors. The work of key stakeholders, such as EEF, SUMMA, and Cochran, were formative in shaping the IWG.

**Phase 1: Defining the Challenge:** The IWG identified that much high-quality evidence, particularly non-academic sources, was inaccessible to education decision-makers. This reliance on narrow academic research excluded valuable local insights, especially from the Global South. To bridge this gap, the IWG promotes including "grey literature"—unpublished or non-academic evidence from NGOs, civil society organisations, and governments. Recognising the value of these sources helps decision-makers craft policies that reflect the realities of education systems, particularly in underserved regions.

**Phase 2: Designing a New Appraisal Method:** By early 2024, the IWG developed a framework and guidance to transform evidence appraisal. Key elements of the IWG guidance included:

- **Enhanced access:** Tools to utilise unpublished works.
- **New classification system:** Valuing grey literature alongside traditional academic evidence.

- **Contextual appraisal:** Criteria emphasising relevance to local needs.

The guidance outlines three steps: framing analytic questions, systematically identifying diverse sources, and appraising the quality of evidence using inclusive criteria in a bespoke Appraisal Tool. The Appraisal Tool was informed by other instruments that have been used in the fields of education and health. These include the [Joanna Briggs Institute framework](#), and the [Ways of Evaluating Important and Relevant Data \(WEIRD\)](#) tool, both of which were developed and used by health researchers to assess the quality of non-traditional evidence sources, including implementation reports, policy briefs, and opinion pieces. Lessons were also pulled from the [Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool \(MMAT\)](#) and [Building Evidence in Education \(BE2\)'s \(2015\)](#) guidance notes, both of which describe criteria and considerations for assessing the quality of empirical research. Developed through an 18-month collaboration with experts from 27 organisations, the resulting IWG Appraisal Tool evaluates research and non-research sources based on relevance, credibility, and inclusivity, ensuring a broad spectrum of perspectives is considered. The complete IWG guidance and its Appraisal Tool can be found [online](#).

**Phase 3: Trialling in Kenya and Sierra Leone:** The framework was trialled in Kenya and Sierra Leone, chosen for their diverse educational contexts. Local stakeholders, including civil servants and academics, adapted and tested the framework, which received praise for its potential to transform evidence-based policymaking. At the same time, challenges emerged when accessing and reviewing sources, especially for users who did not have formal research experience. Some stakeholders encountered copyright barriers when sourcing evidence; others recognised the need to look offline for evidence that was only available in printed or hard copies. Generally, there was also consensus around the need to simplify the guidance and provide more concrete instructions on how to apply it, especially for non-researchers. The feedback collected through the country trials is informing a second revised, more user-friendly version of the IWG guidance, which will also undergo another round of trialling.

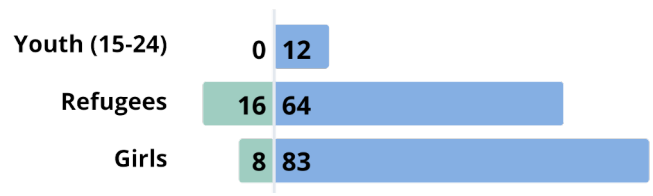


**Phase 4: Developing LIFTED for Evidence Synthesis:**

In 2024, Education.org adapted and trialled the IWG Appraisal Tool in its evidence synthesis on the topic of accelerated education. The newly adapted tool was named LIFTED, or Locally Inclusive Framework for Transforming Education Decision Making. While it draws on the same criteria established in the IWG Appraisal Tool, LIFTED applies these criteria differently in order to facilitate the analysis of large quantities of diverse sources of evidence (academic and non-academic). This includes guidance on how to operationalise the criteria to different types of sources, such as policy documents or blogs, while also using the tool to prioritise deeper analysis of sources identified as most relevant or inclusive of diverse perspectives. Figure 3 below illustrates the LIFTED approach (for access to a more expansive version of LIFTED, please email: [info@education.org](mailto:info@education.org)). While the initial IWG trials in Kenya and Sierra Leone focused on general appraisal of non-traditional evidence, LIFTED goes further by integrating non-research sources directly into synthesis work. What did we learn?

- Drawing on non-academic evidence truly expands the breadth and depth of the insights produced, capturing more diverse voices and experiences.** By using a more inclusive approach, our current synthesis on accelerated education was able to identify evidence from 70 countries. More than half of these countries (41) would be excluded from our review if we were to draw on academic literature alone. Similar results are seen when considering evidence of specific marginalised groups. For example, the number of sources with evidence on girls grows tenfold from only 8 academic sources to 83 with non-academic sources included (see Figure 1). The number of sources on forced migrants and emergency contexts quadruples, from 16 academic sources to 64 sources including non-academic literature. We found no academic sources that closely examine the experiences of out-of-school youth in accelerated education programmes, but this number grows to 12 when including reports, policy briefs, blogs, and other non-academic evidence. Thus, by including non-academic sources, the experiences of youth are made visible.

**Figure 1. Number of sources with evidence on marginalised groups**



- We are more likely to include the work of researchers (and non-researchers) from the Global South when we look beyond English-written academic sources, though there is still much to be done to reach true equity.** Our synthesis found only 26 academic sources authored by at least one institute (mostly universities) based in the Global South. The majority of these (15) were written in Spanish, 10 were written in English, and 1 in French (see Figure 2). The inclusion of Southern authors grows fourfold when we include non-academic sources. We found 87 non-academic sources written by at least one author from the Global South, including universities, for-profit think tanks and research institutes, regional, national, or local NGOs, news and media outlets, or state institutions. Importantly, our analysis did not capture differences between first and second authorship, nor did it capture gender differences amongst Southern authors, two critical factors contributing to inequality in the field of academic educational research (Asare et al., 2020; Iddrisu and Williams, 2024; Shuayb and Brun, 2025). Moreover, and despite our best efforts, authors from the Global North continue to dominate non-academic literature: approximately two thirds (67%) of the 263 non-academic sources we found did not have any authors from Southern contexts. This echoes previous research indicating the same (Menashy and Read, 2016; Read, 2019). Much more is still to be done if we are to reach true equity in educational research.

**Figure 2. Number of sources written by Global South authors**



- LIFTED helps address some of the challenges that come with expanding the evidence base beyond academic literature.** These challenges include making sense of large quantities of sources and ensuring the evidence base is not skewed by multiple publications of the same study. For example, recent efforts such as Global Partnership for Education's Knowledge Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) or UKAID's Girls' Education Challenge have produced a significant number of research outputs, sometimes drawing on the same findings from a single study or series of studies. These efforts to translate evidence for different audiences or specific thematic areas are commendable. However, without carefully considering how to incorporate them in an

evidence synthesis, they could potentially lead to biases in the overall evidence base, making certain findings appear more relevant than they actually are. The LIFTED approach helped us mitigate these challenges, allowing us to filter and prioritise those sources that were most relevant—not only in relation to geography and thematic area—but also the originality of the insights provided.

More recently, Education.org tested the LIFTED approach with artificial intelligence (AI). This integration enabled faster evidence appraisal by reducing manual review times, helping tailor insights aligned with policy needs, and broadening the inclusion of diverse actors, countries, and languages. As we continue to iterate and embed digital technologies into our LIFTED approach, we expect to expand the scale of our reach, while maintaining inclusivity and contextual relevance.

**Phase 5: Launch of LIFTED:** In 2025, Education.org will launch the LIFTED Evidence Appraisal Method and Guidance, building on the IWG’s foundational work. This approach bridges evidence generation and decision-making by prioritising inclusivity and contextual relevance. The LIFTED approach incorporates diverse evidence sources, including academic studies and grey literature from governments, NGOs, and practitioners. By making appraisal processes more transparent and accessible, the guidance aims to improve evidence use in education policy, ultimately fostering equitable and effective education systems worldwide.

**What’s next:** In the coming months, Education.org will work on scaling the impact of LIFTED. We will be convening stakeholders to launch the next phase of trials to test and refine the second version of the IWG

Guidance. This will involve iterative testing across different contexts, gathering feedback from different stakeholder groups—policymakers, researchers, and practitioners—and refining the guidance based on the collected feedback. We will then also revise LIFTED in light of this feedback loop, ensuring alignment and seamless adaptation for the IWG guidance in evidence synthesis work. The main objective of this collaborative approach is to position LIFTED as the cornerstone for inclusive evidence synthesis, establishing it as the ‘gold standard’ for integrating diverse evidence types into education decision-making. By working closely with governments and other stakeholders in the policy ecosystem, we hope to embed LIFTED methodologies into policy design systems and processes, making it feasible for countries to draw on, analyse, appraise, and use evidence in everyday decision-making.

In parallel, Education.org is exploring how to continue to leverage AI to enhance and optimise our evidence synthesis process. This means continuing to test, iterate, and refine an AI-powered LIFTED method. This would result in an AI-powered appraisal tool, made available as a global public good, and which would enable synthesisers and other evidence users to easily generate an appraisal score for a particular source of evidence. It also means embedding AI into other aspects of the evidence synthesis process, including training AI models to identify and access diverse evidence sources, and to recognise and extract from these sources the most relevant and robust insights for different policy contexts. A second global public good emerging from this work is a bespoke, user-friendly Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) model that will enhance access to the evidence base, specifically on the topic of accelerated education.

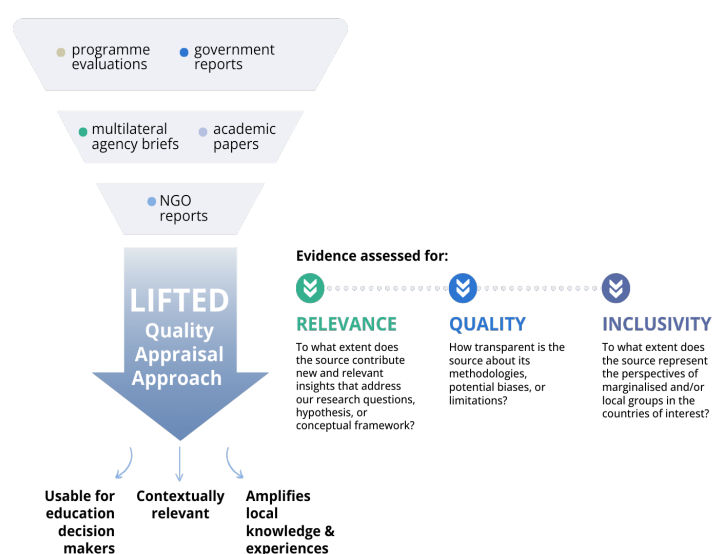


Figure 3. LIFTED quality appraisal approach for non-academic evidence

# Conclusion: Why building a more inclusive evidence ecosystem matters

The way we currently use evidence in education policymaking is failing us, and it's failing the millions of children whose futures depend on better decisions. We know the numbers: globally, 7 in 10 primary-age students do not know how to read a simple text designed for their age; in Africa, the number rises to 9 in 10 children ([World Bank, 2022](#)). This is not due to a gap in knowledge; it is a structural failure of the education evidence ecosystems in which we operate, that can often exclude the contextual realities of classrooms and communities. Too often, policies and teacher training efforts are shaped by research conducted in vastly different contexts, failing to account for the unique social, economic, and cultural factors that influence teaching and learning environments ([Mitchell et al., 2024](#); [Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012](#)). If we continue relying on a narrow and incomplete evidence base, we will keep making policies that are disconnected from real needs, reinforcing inequities.

There is an incredible mutual value of integrating local evidence into global approaches. By integrating locally generated evidence into global knowledge networks, we ensure that decision-making is grounded in the lived experiences of teachers, students, and communities. We tap into tacit, practice-based knowledge. We include more marginalised voices, of both research participants and researchers, many of whom have grown up in these communities and know them firsthand. This not only strengthens the relevance and potential impact of policies but also accelerates the flow of practical, field-tested solutions across borders—allowing regions to learn from one another while adapting insights to their specific needs.

At the same time, local evidence can challenge dominant narratives that often marginalise or overlook critical issues affecting underserved communities. Ensuring LIFTED is valued, adopted, and used (contextually) at a wider scale, requires a fundamental shift in the way that evidence and scientific research is viewed. It means challenging dominant discourses regarding academic peer reviewed literature as 'the most valid form of knowledge' ([Shuayb and Brun, 2025](#)). LIFTED thus raises epistemological questions, such as: what constitutes evidence? What is scientific research?

How can we more justly integrate local and indigenous ways of knowing and learning into our current frameworks? And who gets to decide? A truly effective education system cannot be built on assumptions or external models alone; it must be informed by those who experience its successes and failures firsthand, researchers and non-researchers alike.





# VISION

A world where the education of all children and young people is transformed by the best evidence.

# MISSION

To improve the learning of every child and young person by helping leaders access and use the best evidence to guide their national policies and plans.

For more information about who we are, what we do and to learn more about our unique approach to widening the evidence base in education, visit us at:

[education.org](http://education.org)