



CONVERSATIONS
A Global Forum

Jaime Saavedra

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

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To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020 CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa on important questions on democracy, business, markets, and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This was the 26th event in the series.

Ann Bernstein: I am delighted to have Jaime Saavedra as my guest. He has served in several senior positions in the World Bank in Washington, DC, where he has focused on dealing with poverty and shared prosperity, as well as education reform, especially in Latin America. During his tenure as minister of education in Peru from 2013 to 2016, he introduced critical reforms to the schooling system with remarkably positive results.

Jaime, you came from the World Bank to take on the role of Peru's education minister. What made you decide to make such a career change?

Jaime Saavedra: It was definitely a risky move. If you accept a ministerial position, you find yourself in the world of politics, like it or not. In that world, there is always a great deal of uncertainty. You could accept the post, and then, within three months, there could be a Cabinet crisis, and you find yourself out of a job. I had just finished the work of redefining the World Bank's mission on poverty and shared prosperity, so the timing was good.

With respect to what was going on in Peru, I felt it was a good time to take on the post of education minister because the President and other members at the highest levels of government had signalled their determination to do something about the state of education. That political support would be critically important. Also, the government had a relative majority in Congress, so it would be possible to push through some major reforms. Those two political windows of opportunities opening up at the same time seemed fortuitous and made it difficult for me to pass up the opportunity.

Ann Bernstein: You took over as minister at a difficult time. Peru had come last in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) designed by the OECD to evaluate the performance of learners in science, reading, and maths in participating countries across the world. Can you tell us how you decided to respond to that and the different ways of dealing with it? We have seen this in South Africa. How did you deal with coming last?

Jaime Saavedra: It was an unexpected surprise, one of those moments you can't engineer. Two months after I took over the ministerial position, in late 2013, the 2012 PISA results were released. We had been given a heads up before they were made public, so we had a few days to decide on how to respond. We saw that Peru's scores had actually improved in science, reading, and maths. However, due to a combination of some countries improving faster than us and other lower-performing countries abstaining from the 2012 tests, Peru ended up coming stone last.

We could have responded by pointing out that PISA is really an OECD assessment for rich countries, and that it is not attuned to the realities of Peru. Instead, we decided to own the results. We reached an agreement with the main Peruvian newspaper to go public with the announcement at 6 am local time, which was the exact time the results were being released in Paris. That motivated the newspaper to put the story on the front page. Education was in the news, which, unfortunately, had hardly ever happened before. As minister of education, I described the result as a disaster for the country. We said that this showed that we were not just in trouble; we were in deep trouble. Our country's economy had grown during the previous 15 years, but, unfortunately, that growth had not translated into education improvements or a commitment to improve education.

In response to this news, a lot of people got upset. On radio shows, they would express dismay that "Peru is last in the world" and doing worse than many poorer countries. This wasn't actually true, because only 65 countries took the PISA test in 2012, and they were mostly OECD, upper and middle-income countries. But we decided not to spend time clarifying that, and rather used it as a motivation to urgently implement measures to improve the situation. All this publicity helped create momentum for a big education reform push.

Ann Bernstein: Tell us about the critical reforms you introduced for teachers, for principals, and any of the others that you think are really important, because South Africa is wrestling with a lot of this as well.

Jaime Saavedra: One of the most important issues I felt we needed to address was to prevent any selection or promotion of teachers based on politics or length of tenure or having papers that showed they had completed some kind of training course. A key issue for me, and actually critical for any education reform, was to take politics out of human resource allocations in the education sector. What needed to happen instead was that the selection and promotion of teachers had to be totally meritocratic. A law had just been passed that reformed teacher careers within a meritocratic framework. But the law had to be implemented. To achieve that, we introduced a new examination for teachers, which was designed to give us a better sense of their actual capabilities. We also introduced assessments to determine which teachers would get promoted. These were huge undertakings and never straightforward, but they signalled a shift towards a new, meritocratic approach.

A second priority was to strengthen the role of principals. In many Latin American countries, and in other regions as well, principals are usually selected because of their political connections or because they are teachers with the longest tenure. Neither of those ensure that they will be the person with the leadership qualities required to manage an institution as complicated as a school. There is far too little recognition of how challenging it is to manage a school. As a principal you are often responsible for the lives of 1 000 or more children, a staff of 30 to 40 teachers, and all the other aspects of maintaining a functioning organisation. Then you need to deal with the surrounding community and the parents. And with the local and central education bureaucracy. It is a very tough job. It requires someone who has the motivation and the skills to pull it off, and they need the right training in managerial and leadership capabilities. That is the basis on which principals should be selected. To allow us to hire the right people for the job we implemented a special principal's examination.

Another aim was to get everyone in the education system to focus on learning outcomes. I was fortunate that in 2007 Peru had established a very strong measurement unit, which introduced and managed learning assessments and measurements. Instead of sample-based data providing a general sense of where the country was, the census-based nature of our national assessments allowed us to see how each school performed over time. We found this incredibly useful to ensure that all schools had a clear understanding of their specific learning trajectories.

Ann Bernstein: I was interested to read that you told the President that you had some preconditions before you took the job as minister. What were those preconditions and why did you demand them?

Jaime Saavedra: I had one really important precondition, and that was to have the freedom to choose my own team without being subjected to political pressures. Of course, I also wanted to be assured that the priorities and policy directions I chose would not be determined by political considerations. However, of the two issues, the most important was the composition of my team. I wanted to choose the right people in all the key positions.

Ann Bernstein: I understand that both the President and the minister of finance supported you, enabling you to initiate these major reforms. How important was their support?

Jaime Saavedra: The support the President and minister of finance provided was critical. The President agreed that I could choose who I wanted on my team, as long as I didn't choose some radical from the opposition party, or someone who would be a blatant enemy of the government. What was even more important was that the President stuck with the assurances he gave at the outset and supported me throughout the three years of my tenure. He also never forced me to do anything I did not want to do. He did have a lot of questions, and was often pushing me to do more, faster, even when I knew we were going as fast as possible. Mostly it was good pressure, although it wasn't always easy to deal with his questions. He would regularly ask: "Why are we not making faster progress? Why is the bureaucracy so inefficient? Have you got the best people on the team?" It kept us on our toes, and it was worth it as long as he provided us with the political backing we needed to deal with Congress and with the teachers' union.

It was also very important and useful that I got on with the minister of finance. I only had to work with two different ministers of finance during the time I was education minister, which for Latin America amounted to an unusual level of stability. There was a lot of tension between my ministry and the treasury, because we were always pushing for more resources. It was a complex relationship, with each ministry focussed on pursuing their mandates. As minister of education, I needed to push for more resources, whereas the minister of finance would ask me to rather use what had been allocated to us more efficiently before we asked for more. We managed to raise the level of expenditure on education by a whole percentage point of GDP but achieving that in the face of resistance from the finance minister was like pulling teeth. To get education reform off the ground, I needed to do two things at the same time: I needed more resources, but I also had the aim of becoming more efficient which was very important. There was a lot of debate between us, and in the end, we probably ended up in the right place.

Another area of tension sprang from my determination to get the right people into the ministry. To do that, I head-hunted competent people from the ministry of finance for my budget and planning units. The finance minister was not happy that we stole some of his people, but it was critical that when you have budget discussions between a social sector like education and the finance ministry that the people in education can also speak the language of finance.

Ann Bernstein: I liked your story about the joke that the finance minister used to make before you arrived about the education ministry being the bank. Could you tell us the story behind the joke, and how you changed that?

Jaime Saavedra: The joke related to the way the ministry of education used to spend the budget the ministry of finance allocated them. They were always underspending, not because they did not need the money for education, but because they did not have the operational capacity to manage and deploy the resources they received at the beginning of a financial year. That led to the minister of finance jokingly referring to the education ministry as 'the bank'. He would say, "We deposit money into education at the beginning of the year, but we know that they won't be able to spend it. So, we can withdraw our money at the end of the year, or even in the middle of the year, and invest it somewhere else."

That was something I really wanted to change. To do that, I did not need people who had been teachers or were education experts. I needed people who understood very well the intricacies of financial management in the public sector. Those skills were in the finance ministry, which is why I needed to steal people from there and bring them to education. That was the only way to ensure that the education ministry would stop being the bank for the rest of the public sector.

Ann Bernstein: I often think that managing education in a developing country like South Africa or Peru is one of the hardest management challenges. We tend to focus on what you might call technical education issues

(curriculum, teachers, infrastructure), but we neglect the reality of managing all the people, institutions and processes required for a large-scale education system. Tell us a bit about the kind of people you brought into the department. I think you said that you brought in 55 new people into the education department in critical jobs. What sort of skills did they have? How did you select them? How much impact did they have on the way the department was run compared to what you found when you first got there?

Jaime Saavedra: That is a very good point. In many countries, the education sector often absorbs around one-fifth of the public sector budget. It is often the largest public sector employer and exceeds in scale even most private employers. Education impacts on a country's productivity and innovation capabilities. In a medium-sized country like Peru, where there are about 60 000 schools, it is a gigantic sector. In a centralised, national system, an education minister is in charge of delivering a service in 60 000 places every day, catering to 8 or 9 million students and half a million teachers.

Furthermore, the service being delivered is highly complex. It is not like providing a vaccine. That is challenging, but it is often a once-off challenge. Education delivery needs to happen on a daily basis, and it consists of complex interactions between hundreds of thousands of government employees and millions of young people. The machinery required to ensure that all happens efficiently is gigantic and complex. You need an institution that has teachers at its core, and then also employs planners, lawyers, engineers, software programmers and public administration experts.

Do we know what is needed for one school to work well? Yes, to a large extent. A good school needs good teachers and good lesson plans, and it must employ the right teaching methods and have good planning. All the learners have to have workbooks and classrooms, and other basic infrastructure has to be in place. If you have all those things, you have solved a good chunk of the problem in many low and middle-income countries. That doesn't feel like rocket science. What seems much harder is making it all work across thousands and thousands of classrooms every day. That is a management challenge, much more than it is an education challenge.

Ann Bernstein: In many countries, most teachers are unionised, which often makes it very difficult to make education reform happen. Can you tell us how you thought about this? What challenges did unions create for you? How were you able to move forward with teachers, who are central to the kinds of education reforms countries need?

Jaime Saavedra: That is an absolutely critical challenge and must be dealt with if reform is to succeed. Teachers must have the right motivation. Teachers need to adopt the view that it is their job not just to teach but to ensure that all the children in their classrooms are learning. That sounds like a subtle difference, but it has a massive effect on what actually goes on in the classroom. If I see it as my responsibility to teach, then I will teach in a way I think best or adequate, and if you learn, good for you. If you don't, well, what can I do? Maybe you are a child that came to class without breakfast, or there are problems at home, but those are your problems, not mine.

That is not how good teachers approach their job. It is their responsibility to ensure that everyone learns, which means that some learners will require more support and attention than others. That attitude adjustment must happen, and teachers have to adapt and develop their teaching methods to ensure everyone is learning. In any case, that is what good teachers do.

No such attitude change will happen if teachers feel attacked. That meant we had to establish a close working relationship with the teachers' union. That task was made easier than it might have been because we were lucky to be able to increase teacher salaries. But we used that carrot in a context that by law, salaries would not be increased in a flat way, across the board. Instead, we made it clear that some teachers might get a 70

percent increase, while others would only get 10 percent, or nothing, depending on how they performed in their evaluations. New teachers' selection and entry-level salaries would also depend on their test performance.

It was helpful that the government's narrative at that time was very different from the previous government's. We said that teachers were the main partners of any reform, and nothing could be achieved if teachers didn't voluntarily commit to new practices and better learning outcomes. We therefore focussed on increasing and raising the quality of teacher support, including training and coaching. We started a process of shifting from training that consisted of sitting in a room and listening to a trainer, to much more active, hands-on coaching by a more experienced teacher. That was quite complicated to get right, and efforts along those lines are still going on.

Throughout, we were engaged in a complex dance with the union. Our success with that depended importantly on shifting public opinion in favour of meritocratic reforms. There had been a growing sense amongst the public that the failures of public education were related to the weak capabilities of teachers. So, in that regard it was quite easy to shift public opinion in favour of assessing teachers, which made it more difficult for the union to oppose that.

Ann Bernstein: One of the things that intrigues me is your argument that reform needs to be explained to ordinary people in such a way that they can understand the challenges and the response required. One would think this was obvious to politicians and to officials, but clearly not. What were the circumstances which led you to make this statement?

Jaime Saavedra: From the perspective of the education ministry, the key issue was teachers and how they teach. What we needed to improve was the quality of the human resources engaged in an activity intense in human interaction. The magic of learning happens in the interaction between the teacher and the student, so the human factor is the most important issue. So, given the poor performance of our schools, we had to see teachers to a certain extent as the problem that had to be solved. At the same time, however, teachers must be the main partners in making any change happen and in really improving the quality of schooling. Teachers are, therefore, both the problem and the solution. That meant we had to develop a positive narrative about the importance of teachers. We had to remain resolute in our determination to bring about improvements, but we had to emphasise supporting and working with teachers to get there.

Like many other countries, Peru had a well-developed education plan, which essentially looked like a thick book, covering all the angles and elements that affect schooling outcomes. The problem is that this very long and detailed plan was read by a few experts, and no one else. No politician, no journalist, no member of the public would take it upon themselves to read it. What we needed, therefore, was a simple message that conveyed the idea of a plan and reduced the things that needed to be done down to a few elements.

We came up with four elements: teaching, learning outcomes, infrastructure, and better management. Each of those elements contains detailed and complex components, but the average politician, journalist, and businessperson can relate to those four elements. We spoke about these elements as the 'four wheels of a car'. For the car to move forward, we said, it needs all four wheels to be moving at once.

One of the elements was a bit of a fudge. When we made 'learning outcomes' one of the elements, we were using a term that was essentially the ultimate goal of the other three elements, i.e., if those three improve, then that should lead to improved learning outcomes. What we really meant was that we wanted to improve pedagogical programmes. However, very few people would have understood what I meant when talking about the need to

improve 'pedagogical programmes'. Just by using that phrase, I would have lost half of the audience. So, I decided to replace the phrase with 'learning', even though that wasn't completely accurate. When I was communicating with education experts, I could go back to using 'pedagogy' and that kind of terminology, but my main focus was to develop one clear message that was easy to articulate on the radio or newspaper, for a broad audience.

Ann Bernstein: How does one get parents and other parts of society and the media to become as concerned about the quality of schooling as you are? You seem to have done quite well with that in Peru. How did you do it? Are there any lessons you can share with us?

Jaime Saavedra: I think one mistake that sometimes many people working on education make is that they preach to the choir, and only know how to engage with the experts. That has to be part of it, but you need crucially to convince other people who aren't experts, starting with those in the Cabinet who might have strong opinions but don't really know much about education.

To make progress you need the Prime Minister and minister of finance, at least, on the same page as you, and you need to make sure that Congress understands what the challenges are, and what must happen to overcome those. And then you need to convince the public.

When you communicate with the public you must avoid delving into the technical details and instead explain what the problem is, and then convince everyone of the urgent need to improve what is happening in the classroom. And to achieve that we are going to make progress in these four areas and explain why they are the interventions to prioritise.

Another critical issue is to have the right data, through which you can clearly demonstrate the depth and extent of the challenge, while also pointing to progress and/or ongoing areas of disappointment or slippage.

One issue that is often raised is that the quality of education is a holistic issue. What you really want is a child that is happy and has all the tools to be a good, productive citizen. There are many aspects of that, but unfortunately, we don't yet know how to measure that holistic experience. We can properly measure whether a child can read for meaning or not, whether they can do basic maths, and what their grasp of basic scientific knowledge is. So, let's keep measuring that, and let's keep tabs on what the trends are with respect to those capabilities.

Some people then claim that measuring these narrow skills ensures that teachers will focus only on the skills that can be measured. Even if that were true, would it not still be a great achievement if everyone could read for meaning at the end of primary school in low and middle-income countries? And what else can children really learn if they cannot even read?

Lastly, it is likely that if children are learning to read, they are doing so in a positive learning environment, they will have a sense of achievement and be eager to learn all sorts of other things. There is evidence that schools that do well on literacy and numeracy also do well in providing students with all sorts of socio-emotional skills. The argument against measuring the measurable fundamentals seems misguided to me.

Ann Bernstein: Isn't it a challenge that parents often have had worse schooling than what their children are getting, however bad that is? That's often provided as an explanation for why parents are not going out in the streets to shout about the terrible quality of education that their children are getting. Were there examples where parents came out in support of your reforms?

Jaime Saavedra: You are right. In many low and middle-income countries parents usually have less education than what their children will attain. That does create challenges. I like to compare it to your child deciding to learn Chinese. If you don't speak Chinese, how would you know if she's learning anything when she goes to Chinese school? You may see that there is someone there who looks like a teacher, and there are desks and books, so you will infer that something must be happening. Unfortunately, we know now that schooling is not learning and that in many classrooms with teachers and books, not much is happening. So, you need to find ways to make it clearer to parents whether learning is happening or not.

One thing that could happen is that when reforms are introduced, and they start impacting on some schools and not others, parents will ask how this school has improved up the road but not the one where their child goes. What are you going to do about that? The other critical issue is to assess teachers and schools and to make that transparent. Parents need to get information about how well teachers and schools are actually doing.

Because we were able to do some of these things in Peru an interesting thing happened. When two years ago a new president, who used to be a unionised teacher, was elected in Peru, he declared his intention to reverse the education reforms and do away with teacher assessments. Unfortunately for him, the backlash against that was so strong he had to abandon it and stick with the assessments and other reforms.

Ann Bernstein: What did you achieve in Peru in your time as education minister? What were the big indicators of success? I like your comment, that Peru can't beat Brazil in soccer, but you could beat them in maths. The question is, did you?

Jaime Saavedra: Yes, we did, in PISA and in some of the Latin American assessments done by UNESCO. Peru's improvements in maths were higher than Brazilian improvements, so we beat them in maths even though we have not been successful at beating them in soccer. Within Latin America, Peru improved faster than any other country taking these international tests.

An indication of the speed of our improvements comes from our national assessments regarding reading. From 2009 to 2015, Peru improved by 15 points, from 35 percent of learners being able to read for meaning to almost 50 percent. That is a very significant jump and shows you what can be achieved with the right approach.

It is clear to me that if you shift the school system to focus on changing what is happening in the classroom and get the whole country to understand that schooling must be about learning, you can generate big changes in a short space of time. It is wrong to say that changes in education will take a long time. Of course, if you want to convert middle-income countries like Peru or South Africa into countries that achieve the education levels of Estonia or Finland, then that will take time. It will require persistence and patience. But if you tackle the foundations of underperformance in a system, then it is possible to see large improvements in the space of three or four years.

And you can achieve such improvements with the teachers you already have, if the teachers adopt the right methods, get the right support and guidance, take responsibility for learning outcomes, and are managed by competent principals.

Ann Bernstein: How unusual is Peru and the successes you were able to achieve? Are there other countries in Latin America, or middle-income, developing countries, that also introduced reforms and managed to get improved results that they were able to sustain?

Jaime Saavedra: Not a lot, unfortunately. Peru has definitely made impressive progress, but I wouldn't label my country a success yet. We are a long way away from where we should be.

There are a few provinces or regions in Latin America that have improved. There are very interesting examples of rapid improvements in some states in Brazil, particularly Ceará, where they also shifted to a meritocratic system with respect to the way they selected teachers and principals. They started measuring the performance of all schools on a census basis, which provides information on learning outcomes, on whether teachers are receiving the right support and whether the incentives are properly aligned. There have been dramatic improvements there in the last 15 years. We have also seen some more recent improvements in Mendoza in Argentina, and there have been long-term improvements in Chile.

Unfortunately, the world is not moving in the right direction. If we look at the data on learning poverty, which measures the percentage of children who cannot read by the age of 10, the average in low and middle-income countries was 57 percent – and this was before the pandemic. Things then got significantly worse because of Covid-19. Our estimates after the pandemic indicate this number rose to 70 percent. That is why we concluded at the World Bank that we were experiencing a global learning crisis before the pandemic, which has now massively deepened. There is a lot to do to address these challenges and to turn the situation around.

Ann Bernstein: Let me ask my last question, which is about the pandemic. People say that in many countries learners have lost at least a year of education. What do you recommend countries do? Are there some countries that are not just going back to business-as-usual and are trying to deal with this unprecedented crisis?

Jaime Saavedra: There is a package of interventions that countries can implement to cope with the education crisis, to accelerate learning and to make up for lost time. It won't be possible, unfortunately, to recover all the learning that did not happen during the pandemic, but it is crucial to adjust curricula and to develop additional support for children, so that over the course of three to four years, they can accelerate their learning and catch up to the levels they would have achieved without a pandemic.

Are countries simplifying their curricula, providing more tutoring, adding hours to the school day, and implementing the measurement of learning in ways that will allow them to understand the extent of the deficits and whether interventions are working? Mostly not! The World Bank published an assessment of the global situation a few months ago, and we found that only one in five countries have implemented any interventions aimed at recovering learning, such as focusing more intensively on foundational skills like reading and maths.

One place that has developed a raft of interesting recovery interventions is the Western Cape, which I visited a few months ago. The MEC of education there, David Maynier, accepted that there was no possibility of carrying on with a business-as-usual approach. That was an important first step. Then they designed and implemented a package of interventions along the lines I discussed earlier. Unfortunately, that approach is the exception rather than the rule at the moment.

If the situation doesn't improve very soon, we are likely to have a generation that is less productive than the previous generation. That means that the Covid generation will be poorer than they would have been, simply because they had the bad luck to have been between the ages of 5 and 20 when the pandemic hit. On top of that, the virus also created a huge shock for early childhood education (ECE). It is clear that the highest returns in education are to be found in ECE, and it is therefore extremely concerning that in many countries, ECE disappeared completely. It was not replaced by Zoom, or anything else. We have yet to fully understand the consequences of that for those children. The challenges of dealing adequately with all of these massively disruptive effects are huge.

Jaime Saavedra in conversation with Ann Bernstein on 27 September 2023

Ann Bernstein: Thank you, Jaime, this has been a real education in education reform. I think Peru was very lucky to get somebody like you to take over the ministry, and to implement the reforms that have borne such fruit.

Jaime Saavedra: It was a pleasure talking to you, Ann.

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