

Stakeholder Collaboration: An Imperative for Education Quality

Introduction

Education quality improvement experiences emphasize the potential benefits of collaborative practices. Although international education literature highlights the desirability of participation, the development community has had little success implementing collaboration-based processes, and participatory efforts are often piecemeal and ineffective.

This paper draws on examples of successful stakeholder collaboration in existing projects to reason the importance of collaboration in education quality improvement. Stakeholder collaboration in the definition, implementation, measurement, and evaluation of education quality improvement projects arguably increases the likelihood that the resulting policy will more effectively meet the needs of various beneficiaries and donors, be judged meaningful and successful by a wide range of stakeholders, have fewer unintended consequences, and be more sustainable. Participatory approaches also support democratic principles and efforts to move from top-down to partnership models of international development.

Over the past decade, international education development has shifted focus from access to quality. This shift reflects improved worldwide gross enrollment rates following the 1990 Education for All (EFA) declaration and a growing acknowledgement that students require high-quality education experiences to remain in school and to achieve the development outcomes they expect. There are many definitions of education quality. The 2000 Dakar Framework, for example, defines education quality in terms of the desired characteristics of learners, processes, content, and systems.

Despite progress, it has become evident over the past decade that teacher:pupil and textbook:pupil ratios, retention rates, and other common global educational quality indicators do not adequately capture daily education experiences and outcomes. Program and policy efforts to improve these indicators have neither sufficiently impacted education quality—as reflected in dropout, retention, achievement, and school effectiveness and outcome measures—nor fully addressed pupil, parent, and teacher concerns. One goal in the shift from access to quality in policymaking to deemphasize the quantitative aspects of education policy and emphasize daily school experiences.

The shift from linear models of inputs, outputs, and processes to dynamic models of socio-cultural relations and interpersonal interactions has resulted in more experiential, learner-centric approaches to identifying, measuring, and improving education quality. These approaches require qualitatively different design, implementation, and measurement/evaluation tools. They focus on regularized collaborative mechanisms among local, national, and international stakeholders for policy and program conceptualization, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.



Defining Education Quality

As school-based experiences vary across environments according to various factors, so, too, do definition and measurement of education quality. For example, inequalities between groups of students may affect quality, school may be determined an unsafe physical and emotional environment for children, and the lack of basic infrastructure and materials may be the most pressing quality concern. Even in cases where education quality is measured in terms of per capita expenditures per student, for example, research indicates that the actual effects of the input differ across groups (e.g., age and gender).

Moreover, education quality concerns not only vary across settings, but also across institutions, actors, and time. In a given school, teachers, village elders, religious leaders, and female students may have very different ideas about what constitutes quality and which quality concerns are most pressing, which may change as social, political, and economic factors change.

The fact that different definitions of education quality reflect different ideas about the purpose and expected outcomes of education further complicates the diversity of views. The nature of education quality concerns varies depending on the myriad goals of schooling: to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills to all, to lead to personal employment, to improve marriage prospects, to create active and engaged citizens, etc.

Measures of Education Quality

Measures and definitions of quality are reflexively interrelated. Definitions of quality shape the measures used to judge quality improvement. The opposite is also true—measures influence definition—particularly in situations where such measures have been codified. Within the international development arena, education quality has historically been measured in terms of easily quantified and collected indicators like enrollment rates, availability of instructional materials, education infrastructure, normalized measures of teacher quality (e.g., certification level), and education efficiency rates (e.g., repetition, dropout, completion). Within and, increasingly, across countries, quality is also measured by performance on high-stakes tests. These measures are powerful in that they are codified in international agreements like EFA and funding streams, shape judgments of states' education success, and are closely linked to international norms of progress and development. They play a key role in shaping policy and programs at the state and international levels.

While useful in understanding certain aspects of education quality, these measures have been ineffective at capturing the quality concerns that arise from pupils', parents', teachers', and administrators' daily education experiences. For example, such measures fail to capture students' interactions with teachers, the safety of the educational environment, pupils' preparedness for school, relations between teachers and district administrators, and families' sense of the effects of school attendance and completion on future opportunities. These issues tend to determine local perceptions of school quality and influence community support for and involvement in schools.

Education Quality in Context

In terms of education quality, policymakers are charged with incorporating the various definitions and measures while monitoring resources and ensuring that demands for sustainable outcomes are met. Case studies from sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia—Malawi and Tajikistan—compare and contrast two models of education quality investment and draw on valuable lessons learned to outline a framework for improved education quality policymaking and activities.

Top-Down Approaches in Tajikistan

Education quality improvement activities are generally based on international definitions and models of education and quality. While a useful starting point, international standards often seem inappropriate or even counterproductive from a community's perspective, as was the case of an initial donor-funded effort to improve children's learning in Tajikistan by supporting teacher training in child-centered methods.

Tajikistan had historically received education budgetary support as part of the Soviet Union. Tajik schools reflected many of the Soviet education system's strengths: broad coverage, trained teachers, a centralized core curriculum that offered some measure of quality control, and community support. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan endured a civil war that decimated the education system and the daily operations of many schools. After the war, donors supported child-centered teacher training, which was presented as an important tool to support the democratization of schools, society, and the state.

While many Tajiks backed democratization, school salaries and conditions plummeted. Many older, well-trained teachers fled the profession to be replaced by younger, inexperienced teachers with little content knowledge or pedagogical skills. Although parents and teachers had concerns about the new child-centered models of teaching, learning, and citizenship, which were a significant departure from Soviet-era models, it seemed imperative from a community perspective to maintain a professional, experienced teaching force.

However, due to the donors' commitment across states to implement child-centered learning methods, they failed to collaborate with communities, address questions of quality, discuss teachers' or parents' concerns, or identify potential investment points. Success indicators, such as number of teachers trained, primarily captured information according to the donors' terms, not measures of quality important to communities.

In the Tajik post-Soviet environment, community and donor representatives could have collaborated to define goals and measures of success. Such a meeting might have led to the creation of a symbiotic program to address multiple stakeholders' education quality concerns and effectively strengthen project outcomes. Hypothetically, such a process might have resulted in incentive programs for older teachers to pursue training in child-centered methods and adapt such pedagogies to their classrooms in collaboration with donors. Teachers would have received much-needed support and professional training,



and donors would have learned about the education environment and potential improvements to their design and implementation plans. Measures of success might have included not only the number of teachers trained, but also the number of experienced teachers retained and the number of teachers required to work only one shift per day, as opposed to the common but physically taxing and less effective practice of double shifts during teacher shortages.

Interactions among stakeholders to define goals and success measures might have also led to serious dialogue between donors and communities about the new education model, which might have improved donor-developed teacher training programs and increased teacher and parent support for child-centered approaches. This, in turn, might have impacted sustaining child-centered models. Instead of improving sustainability and long-term potential of newly implemented methods, community, teacher, and donor goals and ideas about quality remained distinct and, in some cases, at odds.

Collaborative Models in Malawi

Education quality improvement efforts benefit from open and deliberative discussion between stakeholders. An education quality improvement project carried out in Malawi offers some insight into the potential benefits of more participatory, collaborative policy and programming approaches.

Donors in Malawi aiming to improve education quality funded a social mobilization campaign that provided resources for project personnel to travel to districts and schools. Staff interviewed teachers, parents, and education officials about their quality concerns, helped create action plans and resource access and allocation strategies, and provided training to support quality improvements. Community activities included helping parents monitor teacher and student absenteeism and behavior. When problems were widely identified, Ministry of Education personnel and donors worked with communities to create a broad response to the problem. For example, the project created and funded nationwide teacher trainings on using local resources to create learner-centered materials.

Success measures included a range of indicators, from easily quantified numbers of initial training meetings to local innovations and diverse community mobilization activities, collaboration between the Ministry of Education and communities, and case studies of local quality improvement initiatives and national efforts responding to local concerns. The project's collaborative elements and measures were designed to fuel policy reform efforts and shape government and donor education funding and quality improvement programming.

Project staff worked with the Ministry of Education to create an environment in which local stakeholders had real input and power to determine the project's shape and scope. Although these efforts did not create full partnerships, they provided real mechanisms through which to transmit local ideas and concerns to policymakers. This strengthened local support for the project, improved local sentiment concerning the state's

performance in the education arena, and improved project efficacy by identifying problems of which policymakers had been unaware. The project was less successful at creating ongoing dialogue among local, national, and international stakeholders.

Insights from the Malawi education quality improvement project include:

- Treat local stakeholders as full collaborators.
- Provide broad frameworks, space to identify local problems, and support to effect change.
- Create ongoing and generative communication between actors and institutions.
- Allow local realities to lead policy and programming reform.

Policy Change through Collaboration: Malawi School Uniforms

The Malawi government banned schools from requiring uniforms in an effort to assure poor children had access to school. Many communities and school personnel, however, felt that school uniforms served an important function by decreasing competition and social stratification among students. The project worked with district education officials to clarify the uniform policy, and, after some brainstorming, the community decided to purchase uniforms for poorer children and maintain a non-exclusive uniform policy. District officials shared the schools' concerns about the new uniform law with the Malawi Ministry of Education, resulting in discussions at the national level about how to support communities' reclaiming of the school uniform policy in effective and equitable ways.

Effective Approaches to Improving Education Quality

Despite acknowledging participatory development approaches as best practices and the importance of local needs and values, donor and government norms, interests, and programming niches usually shape education quality improvement efforts. Top-down approaches are faster and more easily managed. They assure little debate concerning frameworks, activities, or processes considered verboten by governments, donors, and the international community. However, such approaches are often inflexible and unsustainable, have unintended consequences, and do little to improve children's daily educational experiences.

Regular and effective collaboration among donors, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and communities can strengthen education quality improvement efforts. Early agreement between stakeholders on two key issues—the instruments used for collaboration and core definitions and values—is essential to such collaborative approaches. Ongoing collaboration can occur during various planning phases, including:

- Defining the purpose and goals of schooling;
- Defining educational quality;
- Defining top priorities to improve educational quality;
- Defining goals and expected outcomes for planned policies and activities;
- Conducting cost-benefit analyses of top priorities;



- Planning initial policies, processes, and activities;
- Budgeting for local and sub-national education quality activities and having accountability oversight for budgeting at the national level;
- Planning and conducting research on education quality issues;
- Monitoring education quality improvement efforts;
- Improving education quality policies, processes, and activities;
- Planning for sustainability of education quality efforts; and
- Evaluating education quality efforts (i.e., formative and summative).

In some successful projects, effective collaboration has taken the form of regularized discussions and feedback loops between stakeholders, as opposed to information extraction (e.g., a one-off needs assessment). At each stage, the early development of tools to collect, manage, and feedback data among stakeholders will further support the collaborative process.

A shift towards a consensus-building model requires addressing a number of issues, including stakeholder concerns, lines of effective communication, and flexibility to improve outcomes and sustainability.

Identifying Stakeholders

Stakeholder participation efforts are often inaccurately described as elite, token, or piecemeal. Although stakeholders have traditionally included elites at various levels, the broad array of community members must be regularly involved to facilitate effective understanding of and impact on school experiences.

Development education efforts to include local stakeholders have often consisted of irregular information gathering sessions held at schools or district headquarters. Though laudable, such efforts are not sufficient. Local stakeholder participation is most useful when arranged around the schedules and meeting norms of the hardest-working and poorest community members. Effective stakeholder participation initiatives:

- Occur regularly and provide standardized feedback mechanisms that are easily accessed by less powerful community members;
- Collect information from and discuss new ideas or approaches with stakeholders; and
- Potentially lead to changes in the definition, implementation, and evaluation of education quality efforts and the roles all stakeholders play in the process.

Many of these stakeholders will not regularly interact with one another. However, occasional meetings may provide them with the opportunity to discuss activities and concerns together, understand the types of data collection each type of stakeholder is undertaking, and provide constant virtual interaction through the feedback tools. Project literature indicates that national and international stakeholders who spend time with local stakeholders in schools and communities have the best understanding of the daily education activities and experiences they hope to impact.

Building Consensus

The Tajikistan and Malawi examples discussed here suggest that building consensus on effective education quality activities should be bounded by international frameworks of human and educational rights. These core values can be explained and agreed upon during early stakeholder meetings. Effective communication methods provide regular, structured, flexible opportunities and space for stakeholders to communicate with each other and disseminate information on goals, processes, and intended outcomes to a broader audience.

Project or activity management personnel may play a key role in coordinating and improving communication between stakeholders, but formalized tools for communication are necessary. For example, early stakeholder meetings can be used to establish the importance of and design for an instrument to collect teacher absenteeism, teacher assessment practices, parent involvement, and student attendance data. A classroom observation tool allows parents or ministry of education personnel to regularly collect data on classroom processes. A district ministry of education tool can provide information about district resources for schools and school responsiveness to various district and central ministry projects.

Reporting norms and collection and analysis of data to compile and disseminate quality communication is a priority. This may require incentives for good data collection and reporting at the school and community level, which are generally less expensive than the cost of top-down monitoring or a failed program.

Building in Flexibility

Development projects often result in unintended consequences that cannot be easily picked up or addressed with inflexible monitoring and evaluation processes. The collaborative, participatory, and regular monitoring and evaluation processes described here can help to identify these consequences as they arise by broadening stakeholder discussions about the effects of quality improvement efforts. Once identified, projects can build in mechanisms that allow for some flexibility in goals, intended outcomes, funding streams, and management streams to address these unintended consequences, strengthen development efforts, and improve the likelihood of sustainability. A culture of collaboration-driven change will strengthen sustainability.

Conclusion

Research on best practices highlights the potential benefits of participatory, collaborative, and flexible approaches to education development. Research on education quality has begun to emphasize the need to move from technical and linear models to more dynamic ones that address daily education experiences. Improving the effects of reform efforts is particularly important in resource-poor settings where failed development programs represent a particularly onerous burden on students, education systems, and states. Combining these findings into policy practices is not an easy task. However, the time and energy required to create and support ongoing collaboration among key stakeholders will help support more effective, efficient, and sustainable education reform.



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