

Effectiveness of minimum quality standards for primary education in low and lower middle-income countries

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Question

What is the evidence of the effectiveness of the introduction of minimum quality standards for primary education in low and lower middle-income countries?

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1. Overview

Minimum quality standards for education are common in low and lower middle-income countries. However, the scope and use of these standards are determined by the country's level of development. Therefore, some countries have advanced standards, whilst others have simple tools and frameworks to guide the quality of their basic education. Minimum standards are used to monitor, evaluate and inspect the quality of education provision. As such they can also improve accountability in education. However, the availability of minimum quality education frameworks and tools in a country does not always mean they are effective as the availability of both technical and financial resources affects implementation.

Overall, minimum standards of basic education contribute to different aspects of quality education. For example, compliance to school infrastructure and environment might promote the safety, health and general well-being of the learners but if the standards of the teacher quality and teaching learning resources are not met then good students' learning outcomes may not be achieved. Generally, there is an agreement and assumption that the use of minimum standards supports the harmonisation of education provisions and can contribute to quality education.

The key findings include:

- Generally, the conceptual frameworks of most countries' minimum standards of basic education is organised as standards that cover wide areas such as education management and leadership; learners; teaching and learning resources including teacher quality; general school infrastructure and environment; curriculum; learners' outcomes. There are quality indicators drawn against each of these standards for the purpose of measuring attainment and achievement.
- In some low-income countries affected by conflict and humanitarian crises, international education actors such as UNICEF, UNESCO, Save The Children, Plan International, among many other groups, have developed their own organisational minimum quality standards of basic education. These standards may not be consistent with the existing national standards, thus it's difficult to determine the overall effectiveness.
- Global education initiatives such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), 'leave no one behind', Global Partnership for Education (GPE), International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) have led to increased standardisation and use of minimum standards of basic education. Aspects of education such as the wider social equity including geographic, socio-economic variations, gender and disability have gained prominence in terms of education standards and accountability measures.
- Generally, there was very limited academic and grey literature covering the effectiveness of the minimum standards in the target counties. However, there is some evidence relating to their effectiveness as a strategy of improving quality education in countries such as Vietnam, Pakistan, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan.
- If the quality of basic education is narrowed to the conceptual view of only improvement in learners' outcomes then results from international assessments such as PISA, MLA, EGRA and EGMA can be used as indicators of quality basic education. However, it is important to note that not all countries participate such assessments. Many countries give priority to their national tests such as end of primary education leaving exams. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Reports are also useful in terms of highlighting

the quality of education in low and lower-middle income countries thus providing an indication of the effectiveness the countries minimum standards.

2. Scope and approach

The purpose of this review was to examine and summarise the broader literature relating to the evidence of the effectiveness of the minimum quality standards in low and lower middle-income countries. The effectiveness of minimum standards was conceptualised in terms of their ability to contribute to the broader sense of quality basic education and in particular to improve students' outcomes. However, in most cases it was difficult to access any specific literature relating to the effectiveness of minimum standards. Therefore, literature relating to monitoring, evaluation and overall accountability in education in target countries/regions was used to gain an insight of the effectiveness of the existing standards.

Due to the broadness of the scope of the countries that can fall within the specified development spectrum a methodological approach of searching a multi-county or regional countries studies was prioritised, however, such initiative did not result in any adequate relevant literature. To mitigate this limitation a specific country case studies and or reports was searched.

The main body of the report consist of four sections. The first section briefly provides an introduction of the question in terms of its scope and methodological approach, the second section provides brief illustration of the conceptual frameworks of minimum standards, the third sections draws evidence of effectiveness from country cases and donor reports.

For the purpose of this review and in general terms the word *effectiveness* was conceptualised as the ability of minimum standard frameworks and tools to contribute to quality education and in particular to improvement in pupils learning outcomes. However, depending on which principle or lenses researchers use there are many perspectives and dimensions of quality education such as human capital, social justice, rights based, inclusivity and relevance (Tikly, 2011). These dimensions are beyond the scope of this review but are relevant to the development of laws, regulations and guidelines that inform the development of the minimum standards of quality basic education in all contexts as suggested by the following definition:

“A good quality education is one that enables all learners to realise the capabilities they require to become economically productive, to develop sustainable livelihoods, to contribute to peaceful and democratic societies, and to enhance wellbeing. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context, but at the end of the basic education cycle must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy and life skills, including awareness and prevention of disease. A good quality education needs to be inclusive, relevant and democratic (EdQual, 2010)

Scope

The geographic focus of this review was low and lower-middle-income countries. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, south Asia and Caribbean region fall under this development spectrum. Initially, due to the limited time available for this review it was not possible to search for individual country situations rather comprehensive studies covering regions or global perspectives was prioritised. However, the limited availability of literature relating to regional studies in the subject matter has led to a shift to investigate country cases. As a result, literature relating to countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Pakistan, Uganda, Rwanda, Nepal and Haiti were selected and

examined because of their availability. In addition, minimum standards developed and used by international intuitions and INGOs was also examined to inform the research question.

Methodology

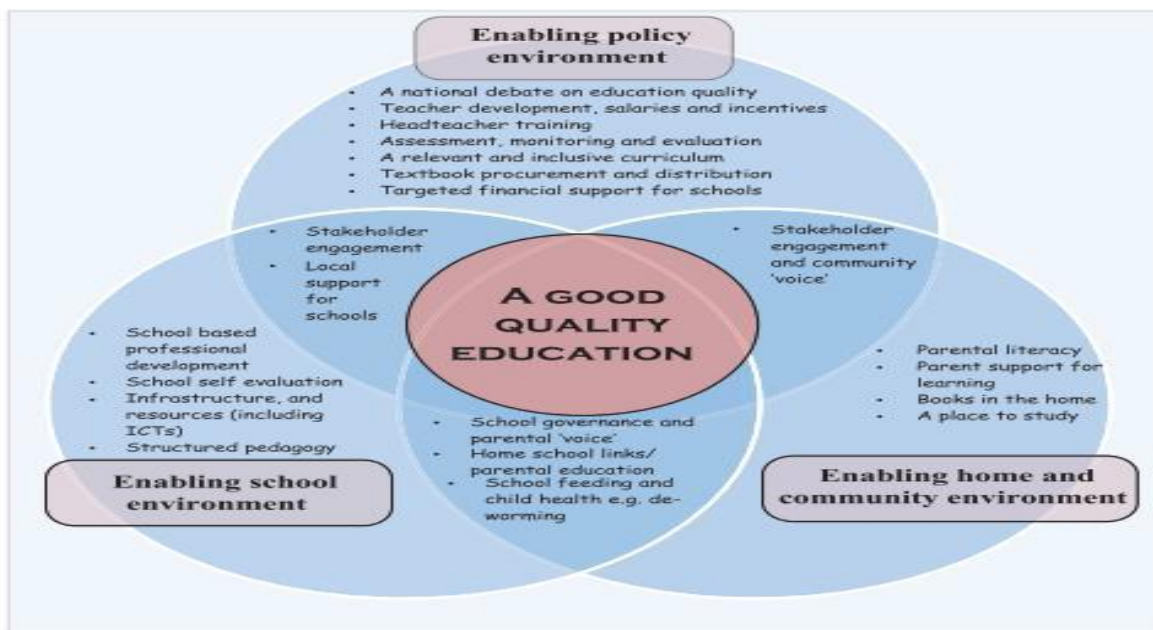
A search and review of both published research publications and grey literature relating to the issue of the effectiveness of minimum standards of quality basic education was undertaken. The search was done through the search engines of ERIC and google. Key words and or combination of words relating to the research question such as “*minimum standards, effectiveness, quality basic education, low income countries*” was used to identify relevant literature in both academic and gey literature areas. The second aspect of the search involved the use of the acronyms of major education aid donors i.e. DFID, USAID, EU, JICA etc with the words funding, projects, minimum standards for basic education. The third aspects involved the use of the words and or phrases such as: *effectiveness and minimum standards for quality basic education*.

3. Conceptual frameworks of minimum standards for quality basic education

Minimum quality standards are frameworks that define country’s desired quality in education. These frameworks comprise of specified standards and indicators that measure the levels of achievements. These standards and indicators are linked to countries monitoring and supervision systems.

A DFID funded research consortium comprising of six higher education institutions in the UK and Africa (EdQual) present a simple context-led framework for implementing education quality in low income countries.

Figure 1: EdQual’s context-led framework for implementing quality basic education



Source: EdQual policy brief No.10: November 2010

According to this framework a good education arises from the interaction between the enabling environments: policy, the school and the home and community. Creating enabling environments requires a mix of inputs and processes that interact to produce the desired outcomes.

International Standards

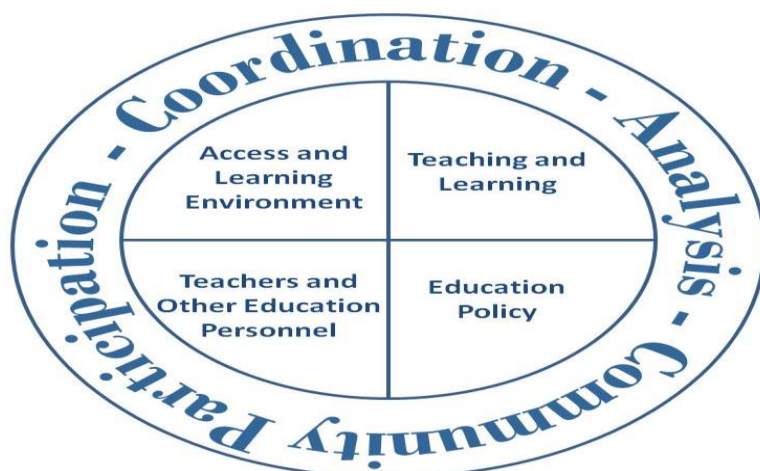
There are other international frameworks that conceptualise quality education such as the quality imperative framework generated by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) and UNICEF's framework of school effectiveness. The UNICEF framework has five dimensions: (i) what learners bring to learning; (ii) learning environments; (iii) content; (iv) processes and (v) outcomes (Barret, 2009). What learners bring is viewed in relation to their home and broader social and cultural contexts. The next three dimensions of learning environments, content and processes relate to what children experience within schools and are viewed as being within the control of education systems (Barrett, 2009, 2011)

UNESCO's General Education System Quality Analysis/Diagnostics (GEQAF) provides and draws four strands for analysing quality basic education. This include:

- the analysis of the supporting mechanisms such as governance, finance and general system efficiency
- core resources such as curricular, learners, teachers and learning environment
- core processes such as teaching, learning and assessment
- desired outcomes such as competencies and lifelong learning
- development goals such as relevance, equity, inclusivity (UNESCO, 2012).

In most fragile education contexts such as South Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Iraq simplified and contextualised versions of the INEE minimum standards of quality basic education framework is used. The INEE MS framework was established to promote a minimum level of access to quality education for all persons including those affected by emergencies (INEE 2010). The standards are based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), Education for All (EFA) and Humanitarian Charter to represent universal goals for helping children achieve the right to life with dignity (INEE, 2010). There are five domains in this framework and each domain has its own specific standards. This include foundational; access and learning environment; teaching and learning; teachers and other education personnel; education policy. Each of these domains has its own standards that cover the various sub-areas within the main domain.

Figure 2: INEE minimum standards of basic education



Source: www.ineesite.org

Save the children and other leading education in Emergencies (EIE) organisations such as Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), IRC, Plan International also have their own minimum standards for basic quality education.

National standards

This review observed that most countries develop their own specific minimum quality standards for basic education. A sample of the country cases examined included Vietnam, Indonesia, Pakistan, Uganda and Rwanda. The individual country cases indicate that the following areas are covered though the language used to describe the focus areas might be different:

- School governance and management
- Teachers and teaching quality
- School infrastructure and learning environment
- Teaching learning resources and equipment's
- Curriculum
- Assessment and evaluation
- Certification
- Learning outcomes

Some countries such as Pakistan uses other categories such as input standards, process standards and output standards, with a standard relating to each of the above area of education and schooling (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2016)

The number of minimum standards and indicators vary between countries. For example, in Vietnam there are 35 standards while Rwanda has five broad standards (MINEDUC, 2009). Review of the observed countries compliance with the prescribed minimum standards indicates the following common aims:

- Produce an environment that is child-friendly and conducive to teaching and learning and produce better learning outcomes;
- Lead to standardisation so that minimum levels of education are achieved through consistent education management practices;
- support education service delivery frameworks;
- Promote education equity. When standards are applied to all category of schools both government and non-government schools and alternative education provisions they ensure quality across the board;
- facilitate policies and procedures for opening and legally closing schools if they fail to meet minimum quality standards.

The similarity of the countries minimum standards of quality basic education frameworks/tools indicates that the above described frameworks are the basis of constructing most of the national frameworks or that at least policy learning is happening between countries.

Often minimum quality standards for primary education are linked to countries' school inspection and quality assurance tools and frameworks, thus promoting accountability in education. This make all the actors accountable for their roles, responsibilities and mandates. The quality assurance tools that are linked to minimum standards of basic education include: school improvement plans and quality assurance frameworks such and school inspection tools including teaching practice tools.

The evidence from international tests such as PISA, EGRA, EGA, MLA can also be used as an indicator of the quality of basic education provisions. These instruments purely focus on students' learning outcomes, however, not all countries participate in the development and the implementation of the tools.

Evidence from country case studies and reports

Findings from DFID Education Policy (2018) *Get children learning* highlights that learning in low income countries is inadequate. The report estimates that the number of children who are attending schools but are not learning is as high as 387 million. This translates to over 90 percent of children in low-income countries and 75 percent in lower-middle income countries. Most of these affected children live in Africa and Asia. Of the 387 million children 138 million of them are in sub-Saharan Africa, 152 million are in Central and South Asia and the rest of the 97 million live in other regions. The 2013/2014 global education monitoring report estimated the cost of children not learning the basics as equivalent to US\$129 billion (UNESCO 2014, p: 19)

The above observed low students' proficiencies indicate that despite the existence of minimum standards of basic education in many countries, policy practices do not translate to effective implementation to ensure quality education for all. In many of these countries technical, physical and financial resources are factors contributing to the insufficient implementation of the minimum quality standards guidelines. Other factors such as prioritisation of resources, and effective use of the available resources could be factors undermining the desired impact of the investment inputs.

Vietnam

Vietnam represents a positive example where the use of minimum standards of quality basic education has contributed to a higher student learning outcomes. In the late 1990 the Ministry of Education developed the Fundamental School Quality Level (FSQL) as a minimum quality standard for all primary schools. However, it was not until 2003 that the frame was widely adapted across the country and schools. The national minimum standards comprise a set of requirements and expectations that schools are expected to meet and include: (i) input standards, such as required qualifications for school heads, teachers, infrastructure, playground areas, and teaching and learning resources; (ii) process standards, such as for annual school planning, the participation of parents in school activities, and the training and professional development of teaching staff; and (iii) output standards, including net enrollment, progression, drop out, and completion rates. Overall there are 35 standards relating to 4 components of school quality (WB, DFID and BE Report 2011)

The FSQL was developed through a participatory process involving key actors from different levels of the decentralised education system, including parents. It was envisaged as an objective basis for allocating resources to schools, with the aim of allocating educational funding to where it is most needed.

A study conducted on the use and the impact of the FSQL framework illustrated that schools scoring high on the framework were also likely to score high in students learning outcomes (WB, DFID & BE Report 2011)

Indonesia

In Indonesia local governments are mandated to provide basic education. However, there are set of legally binding Minimum Standards of Service (MSS) of education designed by the central government to ensure a minimum level of service quality throughout the country. Despite the commitment from both the central and local governments an empirical study on the use of the standards suggest a fiscal concern about implementing all the standards because of their broad areas of obligatory functions, and recommends limiting the number of the standards (DSF2011)

The empirical investigation also illustrates that “the achievement of school input standards does not necessarily guarantee the realisation of output standards, thus raising the question of fixing input standards at all. The analysis shows that the additional variable costs of meeting basic enrollment and stay-in-school rate (output) targets might amount to less than five percent of current primary school budgets. However, even these relatively minor supplementary costs would be unnecessary if schools could improve their operational efficiency. Results obtained from estimating stochastic production and cost frontier models indicate that the average technical efficiency of primary schools is less than 65 percent of optimal levels and mean cost efficiency exceeds the optimum by more than 20 percent” (Lewis 2008).

The Indonesian case illustrates the need for countries to prioritise resources in relation to investing in inputs that have the greatest impact on quality education. For example, there is wide consensus that teacher quality and effective school leadership are key areas that contribute most to raising students’ achievements.

Central Asia

A comparative study of strategies employed by five central Asian countries- Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to raise educational quality indicates that their top strategy to raise the quality of primary education was the development and the introduction of new minimum standards of quality education. This standardisation was to help teachers and school administrators understand what levels of student achievement they should be striving to develop. The content of the minimum standards frameworks was informed by international best practices through the engagement of consultants. The expected quality standards were aimed to produce graduates that were able to compete in emerging global labour markets. Standard setting as a strategy to improve education quality appeared to be particularly successful in Uzbekistan (Chapman et al 2015).

Nigeria

Section 9, sub-section (c) of The Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education and Other Related Matters Act, 2004, otherwise known as the UBE Act of 2004 provided that the UBE Commission is to "prescribe the minimum standards for basic education throughout Nigeria in line with the National Policy on Education and the directive of the National Council on Education and ensure the effective monitoring of the standards".

The Nigerian minimum standards of primary education cover three broad areas of resource standards, process standards and performance standards. These standards are aimed to guide the quality assurance in the basic education programme, which includes monitoring, evaluation, supervision and inspection. Compliance with the prescribed minimum standards are aimed to result in producing an environment that is child-friendly and conducive to teaching and learning and produce better learning outcomes.

The national and sub-national institutions mandated to ensure the implementation of the minimum standards include the Nigerian Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs), Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs), School-Based Management Committees (SBMC), School/Community (e.g. Community Accountability and transparency Initiative (CATI).

Despite the existence of these standards the standard for most schools are dismal and donot lend themselves to fostering the overall growth and development of children and giving them the skills required to survive with dignity in this ever-changing global society (UBEC 2010).

Pakistan

The National Education Policy (2009) clearly articulated the need for a standards-based education system and recommends that, "the quality of education provided in government-owned institutions must be raised through setting standards for educational inputs, processes and outputs and institutionalising the process of monitoring and evaluation from the lowest to the highest levels".

Through the policy directives of 2009 and through initial support from German International Cooperation (GIZ) a comprehensive minimum quality education standard was finalised in 2016. These standards comprised of: (i) *Standards for Learners* (ii) *Standards for Curriculum* (iii) *Standards for Textbooks & Other Learning Materials* (iv) *Standards for Teachers* (v) *Standards*

for Assessment (vi) *Early Learning and Development Standards* and (vii) *Standards for School Environment*.

The standards serve both as a measure of ensuring uniformity in the standards for provision of access to quality basic education as well as a strategy for raising the quality of the provisions. However, there are concerns about establishing a well-coordinated mechanism for implementing these standards across Pakistan (Ministry of Federal education and Professional Training 2016)

Uganda

Quality improvement is the overall priority of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). The desired quality and priorities for achieving quality basic education are set out in various Ministry's policies and guidelines. In particular the Manual on Basic Education Requirement and Minimum Standards (BRMS) specifies the various standards and indicators to assess the achievements of the standards. The work of the school's quality assurance standard agencies is also based on the BRMS manual (Uganda MoE 2012). There was no literature indicating the effectiveness of the standards.

This review also examined the Rwandan, South Sudan, Nepal and Haiti education minimum standards which primarily based on the INEE model but there was no literature indicating the scope of the implementation and the level of effectiveness to contribute to quality education.

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