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Schools Count: World Bank Project Designs and the Quality of African Primary Education

In the face of general economic stagnation and with significant donor support, there has been enormous growth in the provision of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past twenty-five years. However, the strains placed on educational quality by this rapid growth pose the question: What are the essential characteristics for an African primary school to be effective? To date, adequate answers to this question have not been found.

To respond to these issues of educational quality, a literature review on school effectiveness and school improvement was conducted to formulate a conceptual framework of the priority factors affecting the quality of primary education. Then, a sample of twenty-six Bank-supported project designs that included as a goal the improvement of the quality of primary education were analyzed to see how well they respond to the factors identified in the literature search. A new World Bank study, Schools Count: World Bank Project Designs and the Quality of Primary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, presents the conceptual framework and the analysis of the twenty-six projects. The report concludes that investment programs for primary education in Africa need to accelerate the trend towards a greater focus on what happens inside schools, towards an even richer package of considerations of what makes education successful at the school level, and towards sectoral policies that empower schools and communities to control better the education of their children.

Factors that Determine School Effectiveness
The conceptual framework developed for this study used the review of the literature to identify eighteen key factors that influence student outcomes. The factors are divided into four inter-related categories that are themselves influenced by the institutional, cultural, political, and economic context surrounding the school. Within this context, the supporting inputs flow into each school where interaction among the enabling conditions, school climate, and teaching/learning process combine to produce student outcomes. Definitions and indicators for each of the priority factors were drawn from the research and validated with African educators for use in the analysis of World Bank-supported projects.

**World Bank Lending and Factors Affecting the Quality of Primary Education**

World Bank lending for primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa is on the rise. Priorities for the 1990s include increasing children's learning and completion rates, expanding access to schooling, especially for girls, improving the mobilization and efficient utilization of additional resources for primary education, and committing to long-term development programs for primary education. However, concern that investments are not having the expected impact on student learning has led to this study's analysis of on-going Bank-supported projects. Each project was examined to see how well the design of projects which seek to improve the quality of primary education pay attention to the factors associated with the quality of education.

The analysis of the Bank-supported projects leads to two major conclusions. First, the project designs analyzed address an array of inputs that are known to affect educational outcomes: community support, supervision, teacher development, textbooks, and facilities. In this respect, the influence of research on design is encouraging. However, the focus is almost exclusively on these factors as inputs -- textbook supply, residential teacher training courses, national curriculum reform, national examination systems -- not on their integration within schools. Second, the project designs tend to ignore the process factors that characterize effective education within schools -- school-level autonomy, school climate, the teaching/learning process, and pupil evaluation and teacher feedback. The project designs also tend to treat inputs as discrete quantifiable instruments (numbers of textbooks and teacher's guides, weeks of in-service training, etc.) without taking into account how they will interact with other inputs, especially at the school level.
These conclusions are based on the findings for each of the main factors in the conceptual framework:

- The **community support** elements in twenty of the twenty-six projects are mostly designed to obtain community contributions for improving the physical facility. Little explicit attention is given to bringing the school staff and the community closer together, to involving community members as learning resources people, or to providing health and nutrition support.

- The twenty projects that seek to strengthen **teacher supervision** concentrate resources on equipping and upgrading personnel, almost always in academic residential courses away from teachers' own schools. Similarly, twenty-four of the projects have components for strengthening pre-service or in-service training, but only eight of the projects include in-school dimensions of the training.

- All but three of the projects contain **textbooks and materials** components, but most of the funding is for publishing, printing and distributing the books. Only eight projects include plans to train teachers in the use of the new books, and not one project includes a reference to the supervision of the books' pedagogical use in the schools.

- Nineteen projects included **facilities** construction components, almost all of them designed with an element of community participation.
• Fourteen of the projects include components to make school leadership more effective. The principal means for upgrading the skills of school heads is through residential training courses. There is very little planned follow-up in schools and almost no proposed changes in policy and administration to enhance the pedagogical status of school heads.

• Although the study found that fourteen projects proposed to increase local flexibility and autonomy, devolution of authority was always to local authorities, not to the schools, so the projects do not respond to the research finding that greater school autonomy can improve its academic results.

• While twelve projects include investments related to improving assessments and examinations, all of these are for reforms of the national evaluation system, not for helping teachers improve their classroom use of assessment.

• Finally, and most disappointingly, none of the twenty-six projects deals explicitly with issues related to school climate (high expectations of students, positive teacher attitudes, order and discipline, clear learning objectives, and rewards and incentives for students) or to teaching/learning processes (high learning time, variety in teaching strategies, frequent homework, and frequent student assessment and feedback).

Overall, the analysis supports the conclusions described above: even though governments and the World Bank have invested in inputs that contribute to the quality of primary education, they have been concentrating on policy decisions and large-scale programming that serve system needs more directly than school needs; and the closer the factor is to the life of the school and to what touches the children directly, the less likely it is to be explicitly planned for in Bank-supported projects.

Improving the Design of School-Based Reforms

While the analysis of the project designs was underway, field experience in the application of the conceptual framework to improve the quality of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa was accumulating. The combination of analysis and experience suggests how the materials produced in this study can be used to improve education. In order for investments in education to focus on the factors internal to schools, both governments and donors need to change the way they plan and implement education reform. Recommendations that arise from the analysis in this study and the experience to date include the following:

• Governments should operationally define the expected outcomes for students and the priority conditions in schools that need to be strengthened if these outcomes are to improve before a reform program is designed.

• Governments should establish a system for monitoring implementation and the impact of changes using indicators derived from the expected outcomes and priority conditions mentioned above.

• Donors should allow for more flexibility in the timetables for developing a loan or grant.

• Donors should make shorter but more frequent visits to the field, identifying planning problems and providing advice rather than doing the planning. This may imply a greater regional field presence.

• Donor staff should improve their skills and be given incentives for consulting and advising when in the field.
Governments and donors should improve staff knowledge and skills with respect to in-school factors. This requires spending more time in schools looking at and listening to what is going on.

Governments and donors should expect all planning documents to include a statement of expected learning outcomes and a selection of priority school characteristics, with indicators, that the investment is expected to improve.

Conclusion

Current practice in the development of education in Sub-Saharan Africa is tending to move in the direction of these recommendations. However, investment programs for primary education in Africa need to accelerate the trend towards a greater focus on what happens inside schools, towards an even richer package of considerations of what makes education successful at the school level, and towards sectoral policies that empower schools and communities to control better the education of their children. The governments' role is to take the initiative in deciding what education's objectives, priorities, and reform strategies should be. It should be the donors' role to facilitate the process of reflection, definition and planning, not to directly determine the substance of it. If World Bank staff and representatives of other donor agencies become better facilitators, helping themselves and African decision makers to develop a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of schools, they will contribute far more to bringing about these much needed changes.


*Note: The conceptual framework presenting the factors that determine school effectiveness was the subject of Findings No. 16. Findings No. 29 presents the results of its application in Madagascar.*