



Title Registration for a Systematic Review:

The Effects of School-Based Decision Making on Educational Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Contexts: A Systematic Review

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TITLE OF THE REVIEW

The Effects of School-Based Decision Making on Educational Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Contexts: A Systematic Review

BACKGROUND

Education is internationally understood to be a fundamental human right that offers individuals the opportunity to live healthy and meaningful lives. Evidence from around the world also indicates that education is vital for economic and social development, as it contributes to economic growth and poverty reduction, sustains health and well-being, and lays the foundations for open and cohesive societies (UNESCO, 2014). In recognition of the vital importance of education, governments across the globe have made a substantial effort to expand and improve their education systems, as they strive to meet the Education for All goals, adopted by the international community in 1990. These efforts have borne remarkable results; it is estimated that the number of out-of-school children has halved over the last decade (ibid, p. 53). However, there are still serious barriers to overcome, particularly in terms of access, completion and learning (Krishnaratne, White, & Carpenter, 2013). Access to education - particularly for girls, poor children and children in conflict-affected areas - remains a crucial issue. The 2013 Global Monitoring Report claims that an estimated 57 million children are still out of school, over half of whom are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2014, p.53). Furthermore, despite increases in enrolment numbers, there has been almost no change since 1999 in the percentage of students dropping out before the end of the primary cycle. The evidence also indicates that many children enrolled in school are not learning. Recent estimates suggest that around 130 million children who have completed at least four years of school still cannot read, write or perform basic calculations (UNESCO, 2014, p. 191).

Many governments have attempted to address this worrying situation, while also improving efficiency and reducing costs within the education sector, by decentralising decision-making processes. Decisions about curricula, finance, management, and teachers can all be taken at one or more of several administrative levels: centrally at the national or federal state level, by provinces/regions within a country, by districts or by schools. The devolution of decision-making authority to schools has been widely adopted as the preferred model by many international agencies, including the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), as it is assumed that locating decision-making authority within schools will increase accountability, efficiency and responsiveness to local needs (Gertler et al., 2008). Often described as 'school-based' or 'community based' management, the devolution of decision-making authority to schools includes a wide variety of models and mechanisms. These differ in terms of which decisions are devolved (and how many), to whom decision-making authority is given, and how the decentralisation process is implemented (that is, through

'top-down' or 'bottom-up' processes). School-based decision-making can be used to describe models in which decisions are taken by an individual principal or head teacher, by a professional management committee within a school, or by a management committee involving local community members. This last model may simply imply an increased role for parents in the management and activities of the school or it may result in more active provision of training and materials to empower broader community involvement (Krishnaratne et al., 2013). The devolved decisions can be financial (for example, how resources should be allocated), managerial (for example, monitoring of teacher performance, including the power to hire and fire teachers) or pedagogical in nature (for example involvement in the articulation of the school curriculum). In order to support the process of decision-making, many models involve some means of providing information to community members on the performance of an individual school (or school district) relative to other schools (Barrera-Osorio & Linden, 2009). All of these models and mechanisms are considered to potentially increase accountability and responsiveness to local needs by bringing local community members into more direct contact with schools, and to increase efficiency by making financial decisions more transparent to communities, thereby reducing corruption and incentivising investment in high quality teachers and materials.

Although the rhetoric around decentralisation tends to suggest that such strategies have generally positive effects on educational outcomes, the evidence supporting such a general relationship is quite weak. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that decentralisation reforms may actually have *negative* effects in certain political and economic circumstances (Banerjee et al., 2008; Bardhan & Mookherjee 2000, 2005; Carr-Hill et al., 1999; Condy, 1998; Glassman et al., 2007; Pherali et al., 2011; Rocha Menocal & Sharma, 2008; Rose, 2003; Unterhalter, 2012). This body of evidence highlights that the effects of decentralisation are conditioned by the interactions between formal structures of decision-making and informal structures of power and authority within bureaucracies, communities and schools.

We anticipate that the outcomes of this review will be useful for a wide range of stakeholders. In particular, policy-makers at both national and supranational levels will benefit from the evidence linking decentralised decision-making processes to a wide range of potential outcomes and the analysis of underlying conditions that affect impact.

OBJECTIVES

This review aims to answer the following overarching review question: *What is the evidence around how decentralising decision-making to the school level affects educational outcomes in low and middle income contexts (LMICs)?*

This broad question has been broken down into two discrete sub-questions:

- (1) What is the impact of school-based decision-making on educational outcomes in LMICs?
- (2) Under what conditions and circumstances does school-based decision-making have a positive (or negative) impact on educational outcomes?

The primary objective of the study, therefore, is to gather, assess and synthesise the existing evidence around how the decentralisation of decision-making to schools affects a broad range of educational outcomes in LMICs (question 1 above). This objective will be accomplished by examining the results of experimental and/or quasi-experimental studies that consider the impact of at least one model of school-based decision-making on any of the proximal or final outcomes depicted in the conceptual framework above. We also aim to draw conclusions about why particular models of school-based management work in some low-income country contexts (and not in others), in order to make determinations about the particular characteristics and contextual factors which lead to positive (or negative) impact (question 2 above). This objective will be accomplished by examining evidence collected through a broader range of studies, including but not limited to that obtained from the included studies referenced in response to question 1.

In addition to examining the overall (positive and negative) effects of decentralisation processes on the outcomes of interest, we aim to examine how changes in decision-making processes might impact differentially on diverse groups within societies. We are particularly concerned with groups which have historically experienced poor service delivery and/or demonstrated poor educational outcomes (for example, marginalised or low-performing students).

EXISTING REVIEWS

Existing reviews on school-based decision-making have tended to focus on proximal, rather than final, outcomes (for example, Guerrero et al., 2012, on teacher absenteeism; Petrosino et al., 2012, on student enrolment). Those that do consider final outcomes, such as measures of student learning, have tended to focus exclusively on one particular mechanism (for example, Bruns et al., 2012, on accountability reforms), rather than considering the full range of school-based decision-making models. Furthermore, the comprehensive reviews that do exist (Santibanez, 2007; World Bank, 2007) need updating, as they (a) rely on literature that is now nearly ten years out of date, and (b) focus almost exclusively on Central America, referencing almost no evidence from other low- or middle-income countries.

Existing reviews on this topic also tell us almost nothing about *why* school-based decision-making has positive or negative effects in different circumstances. The exclusive focus on evidence collected through impact evaluations and quasi-experimental designs has significantly limited the policy relevance of these reviews as this approach has: (a) resulted in

a very small number of studies (less than 60); and (b) prevented any analysis of the conditions and circumstances under which school-based decision-making models can have a positive impact.

INTERVENTION

We have defined ‘school-based decision-making’ quite broadly for the purposes of this review. There were two reasons for this decision: Firstly, impact evaluation has been used only sparingly in this literature and thus we felt it important to use a broad definition in order to capture adequate breadth of literature to respond to the review questions. Second, by constraining our search to only particular models of school-based decision-making, we thought it likely that we would miss potentially common features across models which may be found to have a significant impact on particular outcomes.

In this review, ‘school-based decision-making’ refers to any model in which at least some of the responsibility for making decisions about planning, management and/or the raising or allocation of resources is located within schools and their proximal institutions (for example, community organisations), as opposed to government authorities at the central, regional or district level. The ‘intervention’ considered within this review, therefore, is *any reform in which decision-making authority is devolved to the level of the school*. Within this broad definition, we anticipate that the available evidence will relate to three main mechanisms: (1) devolving decision-making around *management* to the school level; (2) devolving decision-making around *funding* to the school level; and (3) devolving decision-making around *curriculum, pedagogy and other aspects of the classroom environment* to the school level.

In reference to the first review question, we are likely to find studies that make comparisons between groups in which *no* school-based decision-making reform has been attempted and groups in which *some* form of school-based decision-making reform has been attempted. We may also find studies that make comparisons between groups in which *different* school-based decision-making reforms have been attempted (for example, funding reforms versus school management reforms). Both will be included, although they will be distinguished from one another during synthesis. Use of comparison groups is not a prerequisite for inclusion in relation to the second review question.

Studies exclusively considering other forms of decentralisation (for example, from the central government to the district level) will not be included.

POPULATION

We will look exclusively at evidence related to primary and secondary schools in LMICS. Studies of both public and private sector provision will be included. In order to be included, studies must be based in at least one context classified (at the start of a given intervention) as either ‘low’ or ‘middle’ income, according to the World Bank country classifications. We will

exclude evidence collected in LMICs located within Central and Eastern Europe or the former USSR.

OUTCOMES

School-based decision-making is widely promoted by donors in low- and middle-income countries as a means for improving educational quality. As a result, the ultimate outcome of school-based decision-making models is usually a change in student outcomes, most obviously learning outcomes. Although learning outcomes are most often measured through standardised tests of cognitive skills, there are also many other possible student learning outcomes which may be valued by schools, such as improved student ability to demonstrate psychosocial and ‘non-cognitive’ skills. Changes in student aspirations, attitudes (such as increased appreciation of diverse perspectives) and behaviours (such as the adoption of safe sex practices) could also be considered important educational outcomes.

However, it is clear that devolving decision-making to the level of the school does not lead *directly* to such outcomes. Rather, school-based decision-making mechanisms result in a number of proximal (or intermediate) outcomes, in addition to the final outcomes mentioned above. These proximal outcomes include increased enrolment, improved equality of access, improved attendance, improved retention, improved progression, and higher quality educational provision.

Evidence relating to the full range of proximal and ultimate outcomes will be included in this review.

STUDY DESIGNS

In order to be included for synthesis in relation to the first review question, studies must rely on an explicit comparison. Eligible study designs for inclusion in this phase of the review include:

1. Experimental designs using randomised or quasi-randomised assignment to the reform/intervention (for example, randomised control trials)
2. Quasi-experimental designs, including studies in which:
 - a. Assignment is based on known allocation rules including a cut-off rule on a continuous or ordinal policy variable (for example, regression discontinuity design)
 - b. Assignment is due to a natural experiment (for example, exogenous geographical/political variation)
 - c. Assignment is based on other selection mechanisms (for example, self-selection by participating schools)

3. Before-and-after studies which collect longitudinal data at baseline and endline, as well as those using cross-sectional endline data only, provided data are collected from a comparison group where an appropriate method of analysis has been used to:
 - a. Match/create equivalent groups (for example, statistical matching methods, such as propensity score matching and covariate matching); or
 - b. Control for confounding in multivariate analysis (for example, difference-in-differences and fixed effects regression, instrumental variables approaches, and regression analysis).

Studies will be excluded in relation to this question if they do not present any quantitative information on proximal or final outcomes.

Other sorts of studies (that is, those without an explicit comparator) are likely to be of use in responding to the second review question, so we will include a broader range of empirical study designs for synthesis in relation to the second question. Eligible study designs for this component of the review include:

1. Process evaluations and/or project completion reports of any of the school-based decision-making mechanisms evaluated in reference to the first review question
2. Empirical studies (employing quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods of analysis) which report evidence of change, as a result of a school-based decision-making reform, on at least one educational outcome (either proximal or final) and which offer primary data on either: (1) factors which have been found to affect the implementation of the school-based decision-making mechanism, or (2) conditions/circumstances which have been found to affect the impact of the mechanism on the outcome(s).

REVIEW AUTHORS

Lead review author: The lead author is the person who develops and co-ordinates the review team, discusses and assigns roles for individual members of the review team, liaises with the editorial base and takes responsibility for the on-going updates of the review.

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ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Content:

Professor Roy Carr-Hill, Team Leader for this review, brings thirty years of experience in social policy analysis to the team, having worked with a wide range of international agencies to evaluate the implementation of education programmes in a number of low- and middle-

income countries. Prof. Carr-Hill has widespread knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and brings particular expertise regarding resource allocation and problems of implementing policies in a decentralised system. He will provide the overall leadership for the project, spearheading the development of the theoretical framework and directing the synthesis process. He will also be responsible for reviewing, appraising and synthesising evidence related to his area of expertise and contributing to all review reports.

Caine Rolleston and Tejendra Pherali will act as secondary reviewers, contributing to all aspects of the review process. Dr. Rolleston is a Lecturer in Education and International Development at the Institute of Education (IOE). Having previously worked with both CREATE (the Consortium for Research on Educational Access Transitions and Equity) and Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty based at the University of Oxford, he brings extensive experience with quantitative methods of analysis, as well as research on different administrative systems, to the team. His work has particularly focused on issues of educational access in sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Pherali is a Senior Lecturer in Education and International Development at IOE and a Visiting Academic at the UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster. His work focuses primarily on education in conflict and post-conflict settings, particularly in South and South-east Asia. Dr. Pherali has substantial experience assessing qualitative evidence and brings a unique perspective on the challenges of collecting and analysing data in conflict settings. Both Dr. Rolleston and Dr. Pherali will participate in the development of the conceptual framework and search methodology, review and synthesise material in their areas of expertise, and comment on all review reports.

- Systematic review methods:

Rebecca Schendel will act as the team's Review Manager, drawing on her recent experience as lead Research Officer on a DFID-commissioned rigorous review to provide day-to-day management of the review process.

We have also recruited four part-time Research Officers to assist with the screening and coding of studies. Dr. Schendel will manage these positions and work directly with the EPPI Centre at IOE during information retrieval. She will also coordinate each stage of the review process, ensuring consistency across team members, help to develop the conceptual framework and to review, appraise and synthesise evidence, and support Prof. Carr-Hill in the writing of review reports. In addition to her experience managing rigorous reviews, Dr. Schendel has used both quantitative and qualitative methods in her own work on student learning outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Sandy Oliver (of the EPPI Centre) will also advise the team on methodology and synthesis techniques, drawing on her extensive experience with a diverse range of theoretical frameworks, review methodologies and analytical techniques.

- Statistical analysis:

Where possible we will use statistical meta-analysis to synthesise findings. Both Prof. Carr-Hill and Dr. Rolleston have considerable background in quantitative methods, which will allow the team to successfully complete such analysis.

- Information retrieval:

Two Information Scientists from the EPPI Centre will work with the team to clarify search terms, identify relevant literature and retrieve abstracts for initial screening. Full text retrieval will be managed by the Research Officers, who will benefit from both the IOE's extensive library holdings and our close geographic proximity to the Senate House and British Libraries.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None of the team members have any financial interests in the review, nor have any team members been involved in any other systematic review focused on this topic. No team member has been involved in the development of any interventions likely to be included in the review scope, although Prof. Carr-Hill has been involved in evaluations of some interventions that might be included (for example, a recent mid-term evaluation of the Fast Track Initiative, which included detailed discussion of the locus of decision-making).

As some of the individual team members have completed primary research into questions of decentralisation, we will structure the review process so that no reviewer screens, codes or appraises his or her own work.

FUNDING

This review is supported by the Department for International Development (DFID), as part of their Systematic Review Programme. The deadline for submission of our protocol is 11 April 2014. The scheduled date for submission of a first draft of the review findings is 1 August 2014, with a final deadline scheduled for 15 October 2014.

PRELIMINARY TIMEFRAME

- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: 11 April 2014
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: 1 August 2014

DECLARATION

Authors' responsibilities

By completing this form, you accept responsibility for preparing, maintaining, and updating the review in accordance with Campbell Collaboration policy. The Coordinating Group will provide as much support as possible to assist with the preparation of the review.

A draft protocol must be submitted to the Coordinating Group within one year of title acceptance. If drafts are not submitted before the agreed deadlines, or if we are unable to contact you for an extended period, the Coordinating Group has the right to de-register the title or transfer the title to alternative authors. The Coordinating Group also has the right to de-register or transfer the title if it does not meet the standards of the Coordinating Group and/or the Campbell Collaboration.

You accept responsibility for maintaining the review in light of new evidence, comments and criticisms, and other developments, and updating the review every five years, when substantial new evidence becomes available, or, if requested, transferring responsibility for maintaining the review to others as agreed with the Coordinating Group.

Publication in the Campbell Library

The support of the Coordinating Group in preparing your review is conditional upon your agreement to publish the protocol, finished review and subsequent updates in the Campbell Library. Concurrent publication in other journals is encouraged. However, a Campbell systematic review should be published either before, or at the same time as, its publication in other journals. Authors should not publish Campbell reviews in journals before they are ready for publication in the Campbell Library. Authors should remember to include a statement mentioning the published Campbell review in any non-Campbell publications of the review.

I understand the commitment required to undertake a Campbell review, and agree to publish in the Campbell Library. Signed on behalf of the authors:

Form completed by: Rebecca Schendel

Date: April 7, 2014