

School Leadership Training in Malawi Podcast Transcript

Donna Harris

Welcome to the CSAE Research Podcasts, a series of conversations about projects taking place at the Centre for the Study of African Economies at University of Oxford. I'm Donna Harris, Director of Studies in Political Economy at the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford. And I've also been affiliated with CSAE for the last 12 years.

Today we will be discussing one of our papers, the question is 'Does effective school leadership improve student progression and test scores? Evidence from a field experiment in Malawi', a project funded by WellSpring Philanthropic Trust and run in partnership between the CSAE, the Ministry of Education in Malawi and the World Bank.

Can student progression and students test scores improve as a result of a custom designed multi-phase school leadership training programme? This is the question that we're trying to answer in this paper. Research shows that there's positive evidence from high income countries, but there is a lack of rigorous experimental evidence from sub-Saharan Africa. Malawi's primary schools struggle to provide students with quality education. Enrolment in primary schools rose rapidly after the introduction of free primary education in 1994. But these impressive gains in access haven't been matched by learning and quality of teaching. This project ran a training intervention to try to improve the capacity of school leaders to manage resources, support and oversee teachers, and build inclusive school cultures so all students can learn and achieve the results that they desire.

Joining me today to discuss the project, Salman Asim, Senior Economist at the World Bank, Ravinder Casley Gera, Education Specialist at the World Bank, and Grace Millner, Director for Basic Education at the Ministry of Education in Malawi.

Welcome.

Salman Asim

Hi, Donna.

Ravinder Casley Gera

Hi Donna, good to be here.

Grace Milner

Hi Donna

Donna Harris

Well. Welcome, everyone. So we're going to start by talking a little bit about the aims and the research questions. So what we would like, as I said before, what we would like to find out is whether school leadership, and an intervention that focuses on school leaders, can help improve student learning outcomes. And the three channels that we considered based on the literature. One is utilisation of resources. The second one is teaching practices. And the third one is school cultures. So our research and our paper focuses on looking at these three different channels with the aim to trying to see which channels actually work best to see if we can scale up interventions going forward. And, Grace will talk about that later on in this podcast.

First of all, I'd like to bring in Ravinder, if you can talk a little bit more about the intervention. Over to you.

Ravinder Casley Gera

Donna. Yes. Happy to. Yeah. So this was a multiyear training programme consisting of, ten days of training in the first year, followed by a series of supervision visits by trainers and subdistrict officials, followed by a refresher training in the second year. And it targeted head teachers, deputy head teachers and also primary education advisors who are subdistrict officials used in Malawi to provide supervision and support to schools. And the training had some really interesting aspects. It was very heavily custom designed for the context of Malawi. And the modules were developed to pick up particular areas of weakness, which were identified by head teachers and other stakeholders as areas of weakness in Malawi schools. And these were lined up in line with the three channels that you were mentioning earlier of impact. So when it comes to resource management, there was a module on how to manage limited resources in particular, and how to most efficiently allocate limited finance to different areas. When it came to teacher behaviour, there was a focus on teacher motivation and low cost ways to reward performance. And then when it came to school cultures, there was a dedicated module on how to build inclusive cultures, particularly for girls and for overage students who often faced discrimination in Malawi schools. Another interesting thing was that the programme is developed by, an innovative public private partnership. The government of Malawi partnered with the World Bank and also with the School of Education at the University of Malawi and the Asian Institute for Development Studies, a private sector organization. So we had a mixture of international expertise and local academic expertise, the World Bank's technical expertise, and the government's expertise and deep understanding of teachers and schools needs to produce this, this really nicely customized content.

And the refresher stage was really important because it meant that we had iterative adaptation built in to the design of the intervention. The refresher was actually focused on the areas which the follow up supervision visits had found had experienced the least change in participant behaviours since the original training. So we had built into the design, a sort of a midway evaluation which told us which areas the initial training hadn't made much of an impact on previous, and we were able to focus on those areas in the refresher training and ensure that they were adequately covered.

Donna Harris

Thank you, Ravinder. That sounds super interesting. So, Salman, could you talk us through a little bit more in terms of the data that we collected and analysed and the results, of our intervention, please?

Salman Asim

Thank you so much, Donna. And, Rav, thank you for setting the stage for the intervention. I think in the field of education, scaling interventions that deliver measurable results is both a challenge and an opportunity. So I've been working in this area as the task team lead and senior economist at the World Bank. And I've designed interventions in different countries. And it's very difficult to move the needle on test scores. The Malawi case is a very important and critical case, that we have studied here, and has wide range implications for other low capacity and low resource contexts.

So first of all, I would like to start by saying that this is a government led initiative showcasing its potential for uptake and sustainability. It's not a small pilot project. So as Rav emphasised, we tested the intervention across schools in all districts of Malawi using implementation arrangements that mirrored those planned for national scale. So the results that the government is seeing can easily be then translated into national scale and absorbed into other schools, which didn't benefit during the intervention phase, during the measurement phase. The second thing is on the robust measurement. So most of the time, we have to rely on noisy data in order to look at the outcomes of these interventions. And the case in point differs as we are looking at a nationally representative, longitudinal school survey administered in Malawi, allowing us to track individual student learning trajectories over time. This level of rigor ensures the reliability and scalability of the results.

So just moving to the impact. So we find over the two years of the intervention, the average treatment effects of about point one standard deviations on student learning in mathematics, equivalent to about eight additional weeks of learning. And all of this is coming at a very reasonable cost of about dollar five per student. We also observed a significant reduction in repetition rates in lower primary grades by about 2.2 percentage points. So the reduction in grade repetition directly supports student progression and retention, critical factors for long term educational success. So when we place this study among the literature, so we find that the impact is about three times the average of similar interventions in low- and middle-income countries, as reported in the recent meta-analysis by Anand et al. In comparable to other transformative interventions such as the use of contract teachers in India and teaching in the right level. The impacts are in line with those high level estimates that are coming out from these studies.

What does it all mean for policy? I think that's a very important question that we take forward. First of all, the study highlights a critical pathway for educational reform in low income settings, leveraging school leadership as a multiplier for existing resources. The one thing that I really liked about this intervention is that it was solving a real problem based on solid diagnostics in Malawi. That head teachers or the deputy head teachers were not utilizing the resources efficient within the school. So you have a low resource environment, and then there is inefficiency in using those resources at the school level. So you have a gap that can be filled by providing strong training to the

people in charge of the school. As Malawi moves to scale this programme nationally, it sets a powerful example for other countries seeking to tackle similar challenges. Let us serve as a reminder that with the right measurement tools, we can drive meaningful, measurable improvement and even short term gains in learning and education systems worldwide.

Donna Harris

Thank you so much, Salman. One of the things that we did. The main impact that you talked about was quite powerful and significant. But we did an additional intervention, didn't we, on school culture. We were really honing that in. With that intervention, we had only one day and we tried to do quite a lot. We did two animations trying to give a picture of the psychological impact on the students of the type of punishment that the teachers were implementing in that school. So using some sort of physical punishment, but also bullying that students were doing to each other. And we also did a documentary or movie of headteachers and what they could do differently trying to draw on the psychological aspect of school culture and the impact that school cultures can have on the students and what the teachers can do differently to make a positive change. But with that intervention, because we didn't have a lot of time, we didn't see additional results. It was all absorbed within the ones that you've mentioned. We thought that was one thing that we could add and maybe increase the dosage for future interventions.

But let's now turn to Grace on further implementation of the results in other schools and the thinking behind the scale up and the policy of the Ministry of Education. So, Grace, could you tell us more about how those results actually have been used and implemented more widely?

Grace Milner

Thank you very much, Donna. As the others have already said, this was a very good programme, really encouraged the Ministry to roll out because it was emphasising on school culture. There were a lot of things that the Ministry learned or a lot of lessons learned that we are currently utilising in schools and some of the activities or some of the cultures that we learned. And we are rolling out the issues of remedial classes. So currently, most schools are implementing remedial classes this has been scaled up to ensure that we still improve in terms of learning outcomes. Maybe I can also just add that this remedial issue has taken a different angle in the sense that now we have seen some partners coming in to support this intervention. Maybe I can just mention the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office it will be a very big programme now. We have big support accruing from the leadership programme and other issues that have improved, issues to do with did data, or I can say improving the recordkeeping, which the Ministry has taken seriously. Especially at that school level where we are putting a lot of resources in terms of record keeping, because this also comes in with the Education Management Information System at National level, where it's devolved to district level, from school level. This level was only within school level. So you can see that this line has also improved the quality of data that the ministry is now collecting because now teachers are able, at the school level, they are able to produce or to claim or to provide better data, than before. These are some of the good lessons that are happening and are now institutionalised in the education system.

There was also another culture that we have institutionalised and which is also in our education sector, the national education sector investment plan. That's the issue of teacher motivation. So now we have a system whereby teachers that are doing well or schools that are doing well, they are being motivated by giving them rewards. For example, teachers are getting letters of recognition or certificate of recognition, schools getting certificates of recognition in as a way of motivating them. So you can say that there isn't any money involved. It's just a very low cost type of reward where a teacher will just get a letter. And we've seen that this is really increasing motivation in teachers and every teacher is looking forward to these events. And now that has just become part of the culture. Every council, every district council, is holding these types of events where teachers are being awarded or schools are being awarded rewards to motivate them.

Another issue or area that the ministry is now emphasizing on school based Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which is targeting a low performing teachers, so teachers that are not doing well are being supported by these school based CPDs and this has even made the ministry develop what we call a CPD Framework, which we are now operationalising. So you can see that this intervention has brought a lot, in terms of policy, a lot of changes and a lot of impact in various areas. So, the Department of Education, which is now championing the CPD framework is now championing the operationalising of the CPD framework, which has a lot of strategies on how to initially incentivise teachers at all levels. That's in primary, even secondary, and all other levels of education.

Another area which the Ministry has also improved out of this is the issue of monitoring and also supervising and streamlining girls' issues or girls' performance. So now with data or everything that we are doing, we are making sure that we should streamline gender, in terms of girls and boys, we no longer treat boys and girls as one, but we are always focusing on girls and boys separately. Just to appreciate the challenges that girls are facing. I think these are the issues that I can see, now, in terms of policy impact and other areas.

Donna Harris

Thank you. That's sounds amazing. And actually, it's really nice to see research when it turns into real impact.

I just want to also ask Salman, from the World Bank's perspective, is there anything else in terms of next steps in addition to what Grace has already mentioned, which is a lot already, but is there anything else?

Salman Asim

Thank you. Donna, from the World Bank's perspective, the education investment since the Malawi Education Sector Improvement Project, which the school leadership intervention was part of, was about 45 million dollars. And since then, the investment in the education sector has tripled. And the government are now implementing one of the largest education reform programmes of 150 million dollar in support. Building on the results and the evidences that have come in through these interventions. I also want to circle back on some of the points that Grace has mentioned, I think those are very critical for the audience, the mechanics of this change. We talk about the impact on

the student test scores through the reputation journal and through improvements in learning. But how did it take place? So the head teacher was able to elicit more effort from the teachers using the remedial mode, remedial education, remedial classes that were introduced in Malawi schools. And they have played a very critical role post Covid because Malawi is also a story of very large learning losses during Covid school closures. So the remedial education was a binding constraint that the head teachers saw an opportunity in terms of utilising their teachers more effectively and then bringing back learning to the pre Covid levels.

Secondly, on the gender issue, I think that's also a very important point to consider because some of the interventions, Donna as you talked about on the school culture side, that the attempt was to improve, beyond what is possible through the physical resources, to discourage negative attitudes towards girls from both the peers and the teachers, and to encourage girls to be equal participants in the classroom. So most of the head teachers that we talked to while visiting the schools said that they were not even aware that there was a divergence between outcomes between boys and girls. So now that you tell us that there is divergence in the outcomes, we are going to work with the teachers in order to support meaningful reforms in the school. So I think that's the nature of this work that the team also learned while doing this work how to tacitly improve the education frontier in Malawi while implementing this intervention. And kudos to the government for spearheading and leading this effort. It's very challenging exercise not only to implement something innovative and new, as is the case with the school leadership programme, but also to have a rigorous evaluation tied to it, a randomised control trial, which gives us a lens in terms of the impact on the actual outcomes. So thank you, Grace, for your leadership and taking this initiative and now scaling it up at the levels that that we are seeing.

Donna Harris

Thank you so much, Salman for that additional discussion and information. Actually, it was news to me as well that the head teachers received this information directly from us, that there was divergence between boys and girls, and their taking action which is, again, really, really encouraging, putting research results into real life policy actions.

Just point out to the audience as well when you're listening, the working paper is on the CSAE website and we look forward to publishing this soon. But thank you so much, Grace, Salman and Ravinder for joining me for this really interesting discussion. Thank you everyone for listening to this CSAE Research Podcast. We hope you would join us again next time. To listen to more episodes of the series, you can visit the CSA website. Thank you

Ravinder Casley Gera

Thanks so much, Donna.

Grace Milner

Thank you. Goodbye.