

Rapid Evidence Review: Education

What is a Rapid Evidence Review?

With over one hundred projects commissioned and implemented, UK Aid Match has access to a vast array of experiential information, data, knowledge, and evidence about international development and programmatic success, challenges, innovations, and promising practices. This is a valuable source and UK Aid Match is committed to learning to improve the performance of individual projects, the fund as a whole and to contribute to wider sector learning about development.

Asking questions and generating and testing hypotheses are important ways to foster learning. To make good use of the evidence available, the UK Aid Match team is carrying out project-level analyses using a rapid evidence review (RER) approach to learn from the UK Aid Match portfolio. The rapid evidence approach includes formulating questions or hypotheses about policy or practice and answering them using only the evidence available from a subset of relevant UK Aid Match project documents.

The RERs are intended to produce fast, actionable results and timely information for decision making. They are not intended to be scientific or in-depth systematic research, and the reviews do not include literature reviews, document searches, summaries of research papers and other external sources.

Why focus on Education?

Thirty years ago, government officials and development partners met to affirm the importance of education for national economic and social development and together declared 'Education for All' as a goal. Access and enrolments rose in a very promising fashion around the world but learning levels remained disappointing and many children were left behind.

As it is the knowledge and skills that children and youth acquire today—not simply their school attendance—that drives employability, productivity, health, and well-being, the call to action is now 'Learning for All' with a focus on improving quality and the outcomes of education. This is reflected in sustainable development goal four (SDG 4) 'equitable and inclusive education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' and in the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) aim of working to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all.'

The main purpose of this rapid evidence review is to extract lessons learned about what works and what does not from UK Aid Match I education projects working towards inclusive and quality education. It seeks to provide insights on promising practices to inform and benefit future programme design and implementation.

Evidence used in this review

For this rapid evidence review, evidence from five UK Aid Match projects was used. All of the projects contributed to SDG 4 and had direct educational outcomes.

Findings

Adopt a whole school approach

One of the key lessons learned from UK Aid Match I education projects is the importance of adopting a whole school approach¹.

All four projects which included a teacher training component, only trained a few teachers within each school they worked with. The assumption was that the teachers trained by the project would then roll out the training to the untrained teachers. However, only one project set up a system to ensure that this cascade training happened. They established 'lead teachers' in each school and gave training and materials to these lead teachers to induct and provide basic training for their colleagues. This approach seemed to work, as all teachers in the school were trained, but as the evaluation noted, the quality of training was subject to the 'well-known quality issues around cascade training' which tends to see a diminishing level of quality with each stage of the training in the cascade.

The other three projects seemed to assume that the cascading of the teacher training would automatically happen within the schools, but it did not. Evaluations noted that attempts were made to share the training with non-trained colleagues but to varying degrees of success. As a result, none of the projects seemed to achieve the critical mass within a school necessary to ensure improvements are self-sustaining.

The lack of a whole school approach was also found to cause resentment between teachers within schools, as the project benefitted some teachers and students and not others. Trained teachers not only gained from the training but also the materials provided through the workshops.

¹ A whole school approach is one that develops the school in all its aspects. This will help form a context that supports and encourages the provision of quality and innovative education. It involves training and support for all staff in the school and creating a collaborative environment.

Teacher improvement interventions must include regular on-going mentoring activities

Four of the projects included an (in-service) teacher improvement programme, noting that it was the most important variable in improving educational quality and learning outcomes. The teacher training component in all four projects included both face-to-face training workshops and a school-based mentoring/coaching component. Without exception, grant holders agreed that the mentoring was the most important component to bringing about change.

Projects must measure all key objectives no matter how difficult or costly

Projects that carried out teacher training claimed that the training was successful and resulted in positive and observable changes to classroom practice. However, only one project directly measured this and found that it was 70% successful. The other three projects measured it as an input and assumed it worked. Although independent project evaluators observed positive elements in classroom practice, without a baseline to work from, it was not possible to know the extent of change or to attribute it to the project interventions.

Promote the value of education and learning for all

All evaluations commented of the importance of working on ‘parent’s mindsets’ as it is the parents who determine whether children go to and stay in school or not. Often, it was found necessary to convince them of the value of an education.

One project did this through supporting the schools to set up open days, joint school community work projects and other school events. These seemed to work well, and they had consistent parental support throughout the project cycle and recorded notably improved enrolment and attendance.

Sustained engagement with the community is essential for success

All five projects recognised the importance of working with and building trust with the local community so that they could create and manage their own school structures. However, some noted that in doing so, it is important to manage expectations and not to give ‘fake promises.’ Two evaluations recommended hosting community engagement meetings to share the aims, activities and timescale of the project. These should happen at the start and continue at several strategic points throughout the project’s lifetime. This would prevent misunderstandings about funds that are and are not available, what can be expected in terms of support and what the parameters of the project are.

Whilst acknowledging the importance, some projects noted the challenge of working continually with parents and communities, especially in poor, rural communities. It proved to be particularly difficult at specific points of the year when people were busy with other work. The lesson is to understand and work with local priorities and the local calendar was strongly emphasized.

A holistic approach to addressing barriers to education will achieve the best results

Most of the projects attempted to address as many barriers to marginalised children participating in education as they feasibly could. This included barriers related to direct (fees) or indirect costs (uniforms, books, materials).

Overall, the evidence provided by the projects seems to suggest that giving ‘things’ directly to students to allow them to go and stay in school were effective. Even small items such as uniforms, books and hygiene kits were seen to have a positive impact. Evaluations found that children really appreciated them, particularly the things that made them feel ‘less ashamed’ of their appearance.

One project did not take a holistic approach addressing only one barrier to participation in school. This led to limited results and it was highlighted in the evaluation that focus on one barrier meant that children impacted by other barriers were still unable to attend.

It is not always possible for grant holders with limited budgets, capacity and short periods of time to address all barriers to participation in education. The evaluation from one project recognised this and suggested that interventions need to be prioritized. To do that, the project should listen to ‘children’s voices’ through conducting initial exploratory research and using that to design and rank interventions.

Improving family incomes has the potential to support education outcomes but it needs to be enough

Some projects included an intervention to support families to increase their income. This was so they were better able to cover the costs of schooling. Evidence from these projects on whether these income-generating initiative improved access to and persistence in school was mixed. None of the projects monitored how much money was being made through these activities or whether the additional income was used for educational purposes. This would seem to be critical to assess its value as an educational strategy.

One project evaluation noted that, although the family-based income generating activities seem to have been largely successful, none of the families were really making a lot of money and profits and savings were regularly threatened by shocks and emergencies. This made it

difficult to effectively maintain a budget or ensure money was available for educational expenses. Many parents had concerns about their businesses collapsing and, in general, wanted more support and training.

The conclusion is that unless the income generating activity supports families to make enough to cover living costs, have an emergency fund to cover shocks and cover the costs of school then it would not be considered enough. Understandably, the emergency fund would always come first. Although economic returns on education have been proven, they are in the long term and many families exist on a day-to-day basis.

Improving the psycho-social environment is as important than the physical environment

Most of the projects aimed to improve the physical learning environment in schools (classroom rehabilitation, furniture, WASH facilities, provision of materials, play areas). Although anecdotal evidence suggests that WASH facilities were really appreciated by students and improved attendance and the construction of playgrounds increased enrolment, there was little concrete evidence available on the impact of these on access and quality of these strategies. Measurements were related to the inputs – for example, how many classrooms were rehabilitated - and not the effect of this on children’s attendance, retention and learning. So, it is difficult to say from this sample whether this is an effective strategy.

Only one project seemed to directly address the psychosocial environment in schools and in particular, the challenge of school-based violence, which is known to have negative effects on learners. This project aimed to address this issue through their teacher improvement programme and trained teachers to use alternative methods of behaviour management. Although the evaluation found that this had been effective in raising awareness and reducing incidents of harassment and violence, none of the project schools developed systems or policies to address teacher to student or peer to peer violence or harassment.

Other projects, which did not attempt to address school-based violence found that progress in enrolment and retention were not as good as they could have been. The evaluation from one project found that children’s most common and on-going concern about going to school was corporal punishment and bullying.

Focusing on a small number of communities and schools within a small geographic area.

In terms of geographic spread, projects need to be focussed and manageable. For two of the projects, the evaluations found that, although the fundamental project design was sound, the geographic reach of the programme was enormous, and it created additional challenges

which ultimately affected the overall performance of the project. Staff had to spend more time and money travelling and this took away from time spent in schools and with communities.

You must employ credible and capable project staff and trainers

It is not only about how and how often the training and mentoring activities are delivered but who delivers them. Three evaluations commented on the importance of having both project staff and trainers, who are capable and credible in the eyes of the teachers they are working with. They also noted the challenge of identifying, recruiting and retaining teacher trainers with good levels of local knowledge and credibility, in addition to the more generic professional capabilities, in the areas where they are working.

Planning for the future

A well - known risk to sustainability in education interventions is the changing of key trained personnel. One project addressed this by training more community members than needed. This not only lowered workload for each of the members but ensured they could continue to operate even if people moved or dropped out.

Summary

Here are the main recommendations emerging from the review:

- Work directly with all or as many teachers in a school together with the school manager as possible. This will ensure critical mass and that the school can operate as a unit.
- If it is not possible to work with all teachers, don't assume that ongoing training will happen automatically. Put plans in place to make sure it happens, and that quality is maintained if using a cascade training approach.
- Promote the value of education with parents and the community in general. Children will not go to school if it is not seen to be important.
- Engage with the wider community. This is essential to achieving positive, sustainable results, especially at primary education level. Engagement should be an on-going activity and not a one off. Don't raise false expectations.
- Keep in mind the local context. Work according to the local calendar, and plan the project around predictable local patterns.
- Training workshops alone is enough to change practice. School-based coaching helps contextualise the training and embed new practice.
- Just because people have been to school does not make them an expert on teaching. Appoint and use staff and trainers who are education experts and credible trainers.

- Address as many barriers to education as possible in the project without compromising on quality. Don't try to do everything yourself
- Holistic approaches achieve better results. As it is not possible to do everything, make interventions contextually relevant and prioritized through listening to the voices of children.
- Work on the psychosocial learning environment. Children need to feel safe to go, stay and learn in school.
- Work holistically and in-depth with a few schools and communities as it is likely to bring about stronger, more embedded, sustainable results than working with a lot of schools on a few issues.
- Projects should try and train more people than necessary and engage in succession planning. The sustainability of education interventions largely depends on training of key personnel.