A story of matafors and smiles: reflections on school improvement

By Stephen Baines

“Explain the difference between a matafor and a smile”.

This instruction, barely legible on a chalk-covered blackboard, was to occupy a class for much of the morning. The classroom was relatively new, but there was very little furniture and no books for the eighty-five children, who mostly sat on the floor. Their teacher was absent and the classroom unsupervised, although other teachers sat chatting outside. As this was a ‘project school’, the head teacher was away undergoing management training.

The reason this otherwise unremarkable primary school in a corner of Sub-Saharan Africa has stuck in my memory could be because of the eccentricity of the instruction on the blackboard. It could also be because of the absurdity of the task in the context in which few of the children could communicate in English, let alone distinguish misspelt grammatical concepts. However, this single fragment of a school visit seems to typify many of the elements that make school improvement a major challenge.

This Think Piece examines the general challenges exemplified in this single instance. It acknowledges the fundamental problem of raising school standards at scale in resource-poor environments, and recognizes the need to establish consensus on what school improvement means and how this affects the direction of effort and the allocation of resources. Some of the remedies that have been tried in the past have only scratched the surface; they have been too short-term, too diffuse in their objectives, and too aspirational in relation to the resources available to sustain any changes made.

The Think Piece concludes in the hope that integrated approaches to school improvement will be adopted, as much through public pressure as through endogenous government actions, and that these approaches will avoid repeating the ineffective efforts of the past.
A sea of troubles

The scene just described illustrates a number of issues:

- The school was facing rapid enrolment expansion due to migration from rural areas and the successful education-for-all policies of the government. Government funding was erratic and did not keep up with enrolments. Most of the available funds were devoted to the payment of salaries and simply maintained an under-performing system.
- Even though the classroom was new, it was overcrowded, lacked furniture and there was no meaningful activity going on. However, the head of the School Management Committee (SMC) was proud of the physical appearance of the school. His view of quality was associated with bricks and mortar.
- The unsupervised classroom was a consequence of teacher absenteeism, linked to low levels of motivation, ineffective management, and a general lack of accountability. As the instruction on the blackboard suggested there were also issues with the teachers’ levels of education. Successive programmes of in-service teacher upgrading had not yet succeeded in compensating for years of under-investment in the teachers’ own education.
- The head teacher’s management training did not appear to have had any practical impact on the daily organisation of the teachers. Nothing in his experience or prior training had prepared him for a leadership role. His promotion had come through length of service. He had very little autonomy, no say in decisions relating to the deployment of teachers, and had a very restricted school budget, over which he had little discretion.
- The school supervisor who accompanied my visit made no comment on the class. Tasked with the role of supporting the school, he saw this role primarily as ensuring administrative compliance on behalf of the local education authority. He visited schools infrequently. He was only able to join me because the agency that funded my visit paid him a transport allowance.
- The school lacked a sense of purpose. Despite participating in a school improvement project, it was difficult to see in what ways the school was getting any better. The tragedy for the children was not only that none of the adults I encountered seemed to recognize what a good school should be, they also failed to appreciate just how bad their school was. Low contact time, lack of stimulation, and low expectations were accepted as the norm.

Identifying ‘good’

School improvement is the process by which schools become more effective, not just in terms of academic outcomes, but in terms of developing the social and cultural wellbeing of the children and adults within the school. It describes conscious efforts to raise school achievements by modifying classroom practices and adapting management arrangements to improve teaching and learning. School improvement is important because schools are a major investment in any country and matter for children’s learning and life chances.

The specific challenges faced by the school in my example are not unusual. Although the particular nature and degree of intensity of the problems may vary, they are indicative of more general challenges that inhibit school improvement everywhere. Much of what we know about school improvement leans heavily on research into school effectiveness in economically developed countries. However, to some degree, schools everywhere face similar challenges. As David Hopkins put it, “raising levels of achievement, enhancing the learning repertoires of students and the creation of powerful learning experiences are educational challenges that are independent of gross domestic product (GDP).”

The literature on school effectiveness has identified key ingredients in school improvement, which vary as successive research puts more emphasis on different elements of the mix. The conceptual framework developed by Heneveld and Craig in 1995 is included here, not because it is the last word on the subject, but because it encapsulates, in a convenient diagrammatic form, most of the aspects affecting the effectiveness of schools.

One of the merits of this model is that it distinguishes between those parts of the mix that are to do with the environment in which the school is situated and those that are within the capability of the school to change. The model recognizes that the nature of the school intake is significant; schools in affluent areas have more advantages over those in poor areas and there is little they can do about this.

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1 Although the terms school effectiveness, school improvement and higher quality have different meanings, they are used in this Think Piece interchangeably, as they commonly are in normal discourse and in some of the literature.


Resourcing also matters. Decent physical facilities and the availability of teaching and learning materials positively affect the attitudes and receptiveness of pupils, teachers and parents. Poorly resourced, run-down schools can have the opposite effect. However, the level of resourcing is only one amongst many interrelating factors determining school quality. School improvement, which leads to better student outcomes, is a product of both in-school changes and changes in the supporting environment.

In-school changes are to do with the school climate and the enabling framework in which teaching and learning takes place, as well as the process of teaching and learning itself. Becoming ‘better’ involves creating and maintaining an ethos of expectation and sense of purpose, exercising leadership, promoting teacher quality, and ensuring effective management.

Meanwhile, the supporting environment includes the quality of relations with parents and the community. It also includes the level of support provided by education management institutions and systems at national and sub-national levels, in terms of funding, data management, and administrative and pedagogical support. The idea of developing the ‘whole school’ and its environment of support networks is a familiar theme and one that informs most school improvement initiatives. UNICEF has encapsulated this in the Child Friendly Schools model.

Heneveld and Craig’s (1995) conceptual framework includes the various elements and their interconnections that contribute to school effectiveness. However, the problem with this framework – and other versions subsequently developed in the literature – is that while they can list the ingredients of school improvement, they cannot specify the precise quantities of ingredients necessary, nor identify the relative importance of each. They are lists of ingredients without a recipe. The fact that there are so many ineffective or failing schools suggests that ensuring all the ingredients are available and defining appropriate recipes is not as easy as it sounds.
The difficulty of replicating ‘good’

Although it might be difficult to find the right recipe that transforms poor schools to good schools, education authorities can often identify ‘model’ schools, which are exemplars of dynamic leadership, better financial management, close ties with the community and places where children learn measurably more, in more stimulating and enjoyable ways. Invariably, however, these successes are predicated on a concentration of resources and effort, where clear objectives and multiple coordinated inputs are applied. Much more elusive is the goal of improving schools generally, on a self-sustaining basis and on a scale necessary to cope with challenges of population growth, resource constraints, and the need for higher levels of knowledge and skills in a changing world.

Because school improvement is resource-intensive, requiring clarity of purpose and coordinated effort, it is often subject to diminishing returns. The wider its central messages are disseminated and the thinner available resources and capacity are spread, the weaker are the ensuing benefits. Governments in poor countries face this dilemma. They can accept that scarce resources and limited capacity mean that, to be effective, school improvement strategies have to be restricted in scope or geography and rolled out over a long timescale; or they can dilute the solution and hope for the best. However, by wanting to do something for everyone, they tend to under-estimate the depth of the problems they are addressing, imagine unrealistic rates of change, or assume unlikely levels of future funding. There are also capacity issues. Education ministries and local authorities are generally better geared to system maintenance, rather than reform. In addition to the difficulties of working at scale, over-ambitious government initiatives are often supported by donors, whose funding cycles are not well suited to the long timescales involved in transforming schools and driving learning outcomes on a sustained trajectory. Donors need to show results relatively quickly for the money and effort they expend. This encourages a focus on ‘quick wins’ and on outputs that can be easily counted. While these may contribute to longer-term goals, they may not be sufficient to bring about sustainable change.

In addition to this, the problem with rolling out familiar donor-funded programmes, which have had some – but limited – success in the past, is that it encourages the perception amongst governments that school improvement is separate from, and additional to, the normal business of education management. It also encourages the view that school improvement is an expensive process, one that always requires additional budgetary provision and is therefore reliant on external funding.
**Back to basics**

The need for school improvement is self-evident. Few governments around the world would exclude school improvement in their list of policy objectives. What then, is the solution to improving schools? The unsurprising fact is that there is no magic solution that will work for all schools. Serious efforts to improve schools would however need to take into account some basic considerations.

1. **Context matters** and there is no universal checklist that can guide school improvement. Schools all differ for a raft of different historical, cultural, and financial reasons. They are not all at the same level of development, so it does not make sense to treat them as a homogenous mass. Programmes that aim to improve schools must be flexible and capable of adaption to individual schools’ circumstances.

2. There needs to be sufficient **political consensus** on the importance of improving education to raise the level of expectation, marshal public support, and allow hard economic choices to be made. Improving schools requires a long-term approach based on honest assessment, political commitment and leadership, realistic ambition and long-term commitment of resources.

3. **Public opinion behind a campaign for better schools could be a force for change.** Most education development projects look to ministries of education for political leadership and drive. This is not always forthcoming. Political economy analysis might reveal that the power to get things done resides elsewhere, in or beyond government. In many countries, public awareness of the inadequacies of state schools already exists. The growth of private schools and private tutoring are indicators of parental dissatisfaction in state schools. Bodies such as Uwezo in East Africa, that have an established ‘voice’ based on solid research, could help to orchestrate campaigns for better government provision. ‘No child left behind’ is a powerful message. ‘Every lesson counts’ might become a rallying cry for school improvement.

4. The focus of attention needs to be the **school as the unit of change.** This is not to say that individual components of a school improvement programme should not focus on teachers, school committees, or school supervisors, but that these sub-components should be developed and implemented in the context of the development of the school, and not allowed to become programmes operating in their own silos.

5. If schools are to improve, it is the **people within the schools themselves who have to do most of the hard work of changing.** This implies the need to integrate capacity development of school staff within the development of the school. This training should be school-based, or at least cluster-based, rather than off-site and should be inclusive, ensuring that as many as possible of the people involved in the school are included in training. Above all, it needs the people who have to change to be aware of what has to happen, why, and what role they are expected to play. This may seem obvious, but it would be interesting to research just how much of the big picture those most intimately involved in school improvement actually have. Any programme for school improvement should therefore include a communications component to inform and to inspire those most affected and to act as an upward channel for concerns.

6. Efforts to bring about school improvement should involve movement on **several fronts simultaneously**, working at different levels of the system. The internal management and governance of the school, relations with parents, and capacity building can be dealt with at the level of the individual school or community. Other aspects require system change at district and national levels.
7. The direction of change needs to be aimed towards greater school autonomy. With this goes the need for greater accountability. Making schools better implies making them better able to ‘stand on their own feet’, manage their own development, and at the same time take responsibility for their actions. This is not always acknowledged in school improvement programmes. Whilst this has implications for the role of education authorities, it should be embraced, not seen as a threat to the established order – greater school autonomy is a positive opportunity for government to concentrate efforts on setting frameworks of standards and accountability and monitoring results. Movement towards greater school autonomy has been made in many countries, with the introduction of grant funding and forms of school governance involving community representation and local talent. Setting standards, however, tends to be restricted to the laborious business of curriculum development, rather than school, teacher, headteacher, and school management committee standards, and few countries can boast an inspection regime that promotes school improvement or encourages self-discipline. Inspectors act ineffectively as external policemen and are currently more likely to get in the way of reform. A shift in government mindset from the business of system maintenance to one of setting and enforcing standards will not be easily achieved, but it could be a fortunate consequence of higher public expectations for better schools.

8. Raising expectations prompts a question about what a school is for. Answering this requires a restatement of children’s learning as the central purpose. While most people would list learning as a function of schools, in practice, in too many cases, the prime function is childminding. It would be hard to argue that the eighty-five children tasked with distinguishing a “matafor” from a “smile” can have received any intellectual stimulation, acquired any social, cultural, and interpersonal skills or, indeed, learned anything from the experience. In the last decade, the focus of attention has been on literacy and numeracy as the foundation for life and further learning. This is a reflection of the concern that what and how children learn at school is woefully inadequate. Schools should be prepared to meet different learning needs and support different learning pathways. At the core of school improvement is the imperative that it is time to stop wasting children’s precious time.
Next steps

When considering, in practical terms, what will make schools better geared to children’s learning and development, three areas stand out:

• **More inspired school management.** Schools need competent managers, but they also need leaders who can energize pupils, teachers, and the community by creating a purposeful ethos and a shared set of values. Four essentials of school leadership – setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people, and developing the organisation – assume that head teachers have both the authority and the responsibility to influence the school.

• **Higher standards of teacher professionalism.** The interaction of teachers and students is key in determining the efficacy of learning. No efforts to circumvent poor teachers through structured lesson plans or highly prescriptive teachers’ guides will provide more than a temporary fix, unless there is additional, long-term support to help teachers master effective pedagogies on their own. For children’s learning to increase on a sustained basis, teachers – both existing teachers and those entering the profession – must get better. This requires more than gaining greater subject knowledge and proficiency in teaching methods, which are the traditional foci of teacher training. It involves teachers having motivation, pride in their work and earned recognition. Moreover, higher levels of professionalism require more competent teacher management. Teachers cannot be expected to perform better if their employers treat them unfairly, subject them to arbitrary redeployment, or fail to pay them regularly.

• **Higher expectations on schools, backed up by a more supportive supervisory function, and a more demanding inspection regime.** Setting standards at a national level, making better use of regional and local school supervisors, and developing an inspectorate capable of driving up school performance are often underdeveloped aspects of school improvement programmes. They are placed in the ‘too difficult’ basket.

- Standards are key to the business of setting schools objectives to which they can aspire and benchmarks against which they can rate their performance. Setting standards is a proper function of national ministries of education, but it rarely commands as much attention as setting policy or managing funds.

- The flip side of setting standards is quality assurance. Yet too often the inspectorate is under-funded and treated as a career backwater.

- Local authority school supervisors constitute a largely untapped resource. Invariably they exist in large numbers. Most have teaching experience, but have been promoted into administrative roles. With reorientation of their roles and capacity building, they have the potential to provide close-to-school support to teaching and learning and make a meaningful contribution to school improvement.
How will change come about?

The points above would provide a basis for a programme of school development. It is no coincidence that these outline points are recognizable as design components in any number of education development programmes around the world. Although no two schools are the same, the basic characteristics of schools throughout the world are remarkably similar. They may differ in appearance, but the basic infrastructure, personnel, organisation, and modes of operation are common. Consequently, there are not that many different ways to transform schools into more effective and purposeful entities.

However, it is not just what is done, but how it is done that makes the difference. It is my contention that school improvement initiatives have been insufficiently focused on children’s learning, too disparate in their objectives and approaches, too short-term, too dependent on government initiative, and too opaque to capture the public imagination.

The following figure aims to demonstrate how school improvement involves movement on several fronts simultaneously, working at different levels of the system. This means that change at the school level must be supported by system-level reforms, which would include setting, communicating and supporting a national set of standards to guide improvements that focus on children’s learning and development. These standards can provide concrete examples of what constitutes inspired school management and teacher professionalism.

Change at schools: The setting of standards (at minimum, moderate, high) would allow for school contextualisation and targets/progression for school actors. School-based training, inspections and career paths should be based on standards.

School improvement programmes tend to focus on change at school level without system-level reforms to support it. However, at a technical level, a national set of standards to guide school improvement could be developed relatively quickly.

Change in public opinion

Parental opinion and action regarding the standard of their school and what is needed for improvement

Public opinion on the inadequate standard of schools at a national level via initiatives like the UWEZO assessments, league tables and/or communications

Change in the education system

National set of standards for schools, leaders, teachers, SMCs, parents. If standards are met by all actors, schools in theory, should improve.

System reforms based on standards (i.e., inspections, teacher/HT career paths and promotions, pre-service training, curriculum, exams, data, etc.)

Change in political will

Political consensus on the inadequate standard of schools and what reforms should be prioritised to improve them

Changes in political will and policy level may be more challenging than developing a set of technical standards, but it is essential that these changes occur simultaneously.

They can also be used to guide quality assurance and support. Standards could be set at minimum, moderate and high levels, which would allow for contextualisation and the development of realistic targets and managed progression. A set of progressive standards for schools, head teachers, teachers and SMCs, which are systematically communicated and for which support is provided to the school is an essential prerequisite for school improvement. Schools, head teachers and teachers need support first to work out where they stand and then to move to higher levels through agreed “contracts” to raise standards. Such “contracts” would ensure that all those involved in schools understand what is expected of them. Their performance would then be accountable. Teacher and head teacher training and career paths should also be based on performance standards.

Such school and system-level reforms are predicated on political will and a galvanised public voice that can influence this. The usual assumption is that school improvement will come through top-down government initiatives. Political leadership and bureaucratic orientation towards a reform agenda certainly give impetus to the process of change. Without these drivers, no school improvement strategy would be possible. However, relying on government initiative alone to drive change in schools may not be the best course of action.
Governments, for all their good intentions, have a mixed track record when it comes to improving schools. Political direction from above needs to be complemented by bottom-up pressure for change. The mechanisms by which this dialectic operates vary from country to country. In those countries where there is insufficient government capability and a significant donor-agency presence, there are implications for donor policy. For donors to support ‘voice’ would mean they directly engage with non-government institutions and the public, highlight the inefficiency of the school system, channel public disquiet and celebrate good practices where they exist. Pressure from below would encourage responsive changes within government. School standards can, in addition to enable the system to promote school improvement, act to engage parents and the community in contributing to a virtuous circle of improvements: clear indicators about learning outcomes and the learning environment can be shared with parents/guardians/communities so that they can hold their schools to account and provide bottom-up pressure for change.

In summary, standards are key to the business of setting school improvement objectives to which schools can aspire and establishing benchmarks against which they can be held accountable to education authorities and the public. Setting standards is a proper function of national ministries of education, but it is rarely afforded sufficient priority. A shift in government mindset from the business of system maintenance to one of setting and enforcing standards would be a fortunate consequence of stronger public opinion and expectations for better schools, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement.

Conclusion

The theme of this Think Piece has been that school improvement is difficult and there are no instant solutions. This is hardly cutting-edge thinking. School improvement is a prolonged and continuous uphill struggle and is dependent on political will, funding, and human capacity. This makes it particularly difficult for poorer countries with growing populations and under-developed governmental capacity. In the absence of clear political leadership and reform-minded state institutions, pressure for change has to come through enhanced public consciousness of the parlous state of education and the consequences of not doing anything about it.

Gearing up public opinion is not easy for development agencies. It is not their natural territory, as they see their main role as supporting governments. Governments rarely welcome this sort of intervention, seeing it as destabilising interference. The prize for donor-assisted school improvement would come from successfully igniting public concern, while at the same time, coopting government to ride the wave of public support by actively engaging in reform. This would mean committing both internal and external funding to support integrated approaches, intelligently aimed at transforming schools.
Further reading


List of Acronyms

SMC  School Management Committee

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Contact: UNICEF ESARO, Basic Education and Gender Equality Section, UNON Gigiri, Nairobi, Kenya. This research in its latest edition, as well as all materials, are available online for free download at https://www.unicef.org/esaro/EducationThinkPieces_8_SchoolImprovement.pdf

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