

REPORT SUMMARY:
EVIDENCE BASED POLICY REVIEW WORKSHOP
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basic education

Department:
Basic Education
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1. Introduction

The **Strategic Planning, Research and Coordination Chief Directorate** hosted a workshop titled *Evidence Based Education Policy Reform* on 23 October 2012. The purpose of the workshop was to introduce impact evaluation methods such as Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) as a programme evaluation method to senior managers, managers, policy makers, and programme managers. The workshop was facilitated by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) an organisation consisting of a global network of 70 affiliated professors who specialise in the use of Randomized Evaluations (REs) to answer questions critical to poverty alleviation. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is based on scientific evidence. Discussion and capacity building based of policy lessons from J-PAL's international experience based on RCTs , namely, which interventions or policy measures have proven to be more successful than others in improving the quality of education as well as a guideline on the appropriateness of RCTs and technical application lesson's were furthermore provided.

Department of Basic Education (DBE), Provincial Education Department (PED) officials and selected external stakeholders attended the seminar.

2. Overview of presentations

Presentations were delivered on the following key areas:

a) Opening Address on the relevance of evidence based policy making in education by the Department of Education Director-General Mr Soobrayan

Since the transition out of apartheid, much has been achieved in the provision of education in South Africa. This includes the unification of a divided education system, the reversal of unequal education funding based on race to strongly pro-poor public education spending, the achievement of near universal access to primary school, the removal of financial barriers through the introduction of no-fee schools, and the daily feeding of the majority of school-going children. Overall investment in public education has equalised in a short space of time, with huge amounts of improvements in teacher qualification levels and school infrastructure.

However, it is also clear that insufficient progress has been made since 1994 when it comes to improving the quality of basic education. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has introduced numerous interventions with the best intentions and based on reasonable theory but these have had a limited effect on improving education quality. The concern is that the inequality in education outcomes translates into income inequality in broader society in future. Resultantly there is impatience for improvement from all quarters, considering almost two decades of activity, and investment and as we introduce new reforms and provide schools with new resources, the stubborn unresponsiveness of system performance to previous policies provides a strong imperative for testing the impacts of new reforms at the outset. It is important for us to be able to demonstrate that specific interventions are having measurable benefits and experimental research designs provide a means to do this in a way that is scientifically credible.

The introduction of the Annual National Assessments (ANAs), a first in the universal standardised assessments over and above the Grade 12 Senior National Certificate school leaving exam, has given rise to positive and negative reactions. This has been within an environment in which the discourse around accountability in the schooling sector has been raised. This is good in many respects as through the standardised assessments at Grade 1 to 6 and Grade 9, we now have the means to work out where to act, where the failures are in our schools, and what strengths there are. This opened the sector to accusations of low quality immediately after the results were released. What we know is that we have had a long history of low performance and the ANAs were introduced to quantify this performance so that improvement may be premised on the weaknesses identified through these assessments.

There is a need to identify why accountability measures are not working currently, in an effort to enable systemic accountability. In addition, what is required is enabling impact evaluations to answer the “WHY” of system performance challenges; policy discourse requires a maturing of the contribution of researchers in the pursuit of sector outcomes.

It is important to evaluate our system but we must be wary of studies concluding on a generic need for better accountability – with little sense of the form this would take or the lack of a relationship between the conclusion and the original intent of the study. Too frequently, calls

for accountability improvement did not add to the quality debate, and rather distracted from the business of quality improvement – asking more questions than providing proposals for solutions especially in schools which did not have a large demanding middle class parent body who would be more demanding of teachers, staff, districts and school support structures in terms of quality improvement.

For all these reasons we welcome J-PAL, eagerly anticipate advice on why and how to better evaluate the impact of our programmes, and appreciate the capacity-building which today's workshop is sure to provide.

b) Presentation: what can impact evaluations tell us about education policy by Ms Kamilla Gumede, Executive Director, J-PAL Africa, University of Cape Town

Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) are used by researchers to establish the causal effects of a programme on its targeted recipients. The method has been used in medicine for several decades, but is relatively new in social science research.

RCTs are considered as the “gold standard” for testing the effectiveness of projects, policies, or strategies, RCTs allow a researcher to isolate the causal impact of a programme or policy from other confounding factors which are also changing over time and across regions. Over the last few years a wide range of tools have been developed to allow an element of randomisation to be incorporated into the programme of an implementing agency or group, in a way that both maintains scientific rigor and allows for the practical constraints of the implementing agency. This ability to blend RCTs into the everyday operations of development practitioners around the world has transformed the technique, from a rare and extremely expensive operation to a more flexible and therefore more commonly used approach to evaluation. As randomised impact studies test the effectiveness of practical programmes in real life settings, the evidence they produce is solution-oriented and helps inform policies on how to overcome barriers to employment, rather than just identifying them. This is important, as the most cost-effective ways to mitigate challenges are not always to tackle the biggest barrier, comparisons that identify the most cost-effective way of addressing a specific policy objective are therefore particularly useful for policymakers who work within limited budgets. RCTs assign treatment to a

group of learners, schools or communities based on random assignment and then follows treatment and control individuals over time. This method clearly demarcates the effects of the intervention on its targeted beneficiaries and the extent to which it had an impact, providing the opportunity to clearly record the results of the intervention. The control group, the part of the sample which did not receive the intervention, are particularly important as they offer a comparative population against which we may measure what would have happened in the absence of the programme and what difference the programme made.

RCTs are not always the most suitable evaluation method and therefore have to be used selectively. It is important to recognise that RCTs take time to complete as they follow beneficiaries over time and that the evaluation needs to be designed ex-ante programme rollout and implementation. RCTs are guided by ethical procedures that require researchers to prevent any harm to subjects or withhold services that have been proven to work from potential beneficiaries. The South African government has a tradition of pilot testing policy interventions, but not always in a rigorous way that can pinpoint the cost and effectiveness of an intervention. In this context, RCTs could play a more dominant role in South African policymaking.

J-PAL has partnered with numerous NGOs, government institutions and private firms in developing countries as well as developed countries through RCTs to generate evidence about what works and to identify general lessons about programme effectiveness that can be integrated into policies and inform policy reforms. Some of the lessons learnt from J-PAL's experience in the education sector were presented at the workshop and are as follows:

- Learner school attendance rates: Enrollment is not enough in the attempt to universalize education as many learners have high absenteeism rates. School attendance is influenced by a number of factors including good health. In poor communities, worm infections amongst learner can be an important reason behind absenteeism and is a relatively cheap problem to tackle. RCTs have proven that administering school-wide de-worming at the cost of \$3.50 per learner per year over the primary school phase can provide learners with an average of an entire school year of additional attendance. Similar results were found for iron supplements in

communities with detected iron deficiencies. The short term effects in addition to decreased absenteeism are improved health amongst learners. The long term effects are that de-worming improves school attendance which ultimately results in the individuals getting better jobs in the future. South Africa is doing many things right - including school meals, fortified food products, no-fee schools and low school input costs. In our coastal schools, within-school de-worming – where needed – could be a cheap added intervention to address children at risk.

- Learning at school: In many developing countries, school curricula are not targeted at the many new learners who entered school systems in the past decade. These learners tend to come from poorer communities and their parents may be illiterate or have received limited education themselves. Several RCTs have shown that more school inputs – including smaller classes, textbooks or flipcharts have limited benefits – if any – when they are not appropriately chosen to be at the level of the learners we have in our schools today rather than the type of learners desired by the government.
- Effective Learning: Basic literacy and numeracy are not being taught well in developing countries and many learners get promoted from grade to grade without having mastered basic skills. These learners are ill-equipped for the grades they are in and learn very little. RCTs have shown that children in poor-performing schools can learn basic reading and numeracy skills if provided with a sound programme that focuses on basics and affords extra learning time. Such programmes need not be longer than a holiday or 3 months of intensive training and can be fairly cheap. It has been proven that every year of additional education improves the possibilities and ultimately the outcomes of learners in their adult life. Therefore substantial efforts to focus education on quality learning for the entire population is important to reduce exposure to poverty.
- Teacher absenteeism: Across the world, teacher absenteeism is a major policy challenge. When teachers don't come to work, learners miss out. In Uganda, Peru and Ecuador, teachers are absent for a day a week on average. There is no consensus on effective methods to reduce teacher absenteeism. Community involvement or economic incentives have had mixed results. When they do work, they can be very cost-effective but factors such as an accountability process matter a lot.

c) Time to Read: Western Cape Remedial Holiday Reading Programme Evaluation by Dr Ursula Hoadley, Senior Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Cape Town

Evidence from RCTs indicates that grade repetition without the incorporation of remedial learning is an ineffective method of teaching learners what they failed to learn in their initial attendance of the grade they are repeating. In order to scientifically prove the positive effect of remedial reading in the South African context, J-PAL with a group of researchers at the University of Cape Town plan to run an RCT on a remedial reading holiday literacy programme for Grade 4 learners in the Western Cape. Remedial reading support programmes are important in the South African context due to the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) transition from mother tongue to English at Grade 4, as well as functioning as an intervention to improve the poor literacy results of primary school learners in general the standard of which is indicated by the Annual National Assessments (ANAs).

The programme is designed to maximize exposure to literacy, at a low cost. It takes advantage of school holiday periods to reduce interference with normal schooling and works with small class sizes of 8-14 learners per instructor.

The programme is facilitated by trained but otherwise unskilled youth through a highly scripted English reading programme with learners streamed, based on abilities in order to better teach them at their level.

A comprehensive report will be provided once the trial is concluded.

d) Getting parents involved, field experiment in deprived schools by Marc Gurgand, J-PAL Affiliate and Professor of Economics, Paris School of Economics

How can evidence inform policy? An RCT on the effect of parental involvement in learning and assessment outcomes for early-teens was conducted in France and showed highly positive results and has as a result been nationalized as policy in France.

Briefly, the results of the trial indicated that parental interaction with other parents, teachers and the school principle - in an informal meeting where general concerns, explanation of interpretation of report cards and the school vision were discussed – dramatically changed learner behavioural outcomes like time spent on homework and school absenteeism.

The RCT was conducted in poor neighborhoods in Paris and involved schools with a large segment of learners from second-generation immigrant households. Students from these relatively poorer household (blue collar workers) tend to be harder to reach with policy and have lower behavioural and academic outcomes compared to their peers from better off households (white collar workers). While takeup of the programme was low, it had strong positive spillover effects and even students of parents who did not attend the meeting also benefitted. The simple parental involvement eradicated any difference in behaviour outcomes on average across students from blue and white collar worker households.

3. Implications

- RCTs are a good quality method which could be utilized by the DBE to measure and verify the expected effects of policies, programmes and interventions prior to their national implementation. This would ensure that funds are allocated to the most effective programmes, policy is based on scientific evidence and the impact of interventions may be monitored and measured accurately.
- Lessons learnt from other states, particularly developing states with similar demographics such as India, Ghana and Kenya where RCTs have been successfully conducted should be considered with regards policy, programmes and interventions in the South African context. These will assist in providing evidence of successful interventions at reasonable costs which the DBE could sample.
- A general evidence based approach to evaluation should be adopted in the DBE to foster a culture of accountability and responsible well-informed decision making.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the workshop clearly demonstrated the importance of impact evaluation and their ability to positively influence the direction of policy, programme and interventions. Extensive knowledge on the usefulness of RCTs, the challenges and benefits of this approach were provided, therefore enabling the DBE to expand its approach to programme management and future planning in education.

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