



Knowledge, evidence
and learning for
development

The effectiveness of school grants in low- and middle-income contexts

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Question

1. What is the evidence about the effectiveness of school grants for the improvement of:
 - (i) equitable access to quality education, and
 - (ii) student learning outcomes?

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1. Summary

The rationale for school grants has emerged as part of relatively recent policy-driven practices for educational decentralisation and, within that, school-based decision-making. The devolution of a range of decisions to the school-level is assumed to improve accountability, efficiency and responsiveness to local needs (Bruns et al. 2011; Carr-Hill et al. 2016; Slater 2013). These decisions may include concerns related to curricula, finance, management and teachers, and may be taken at one or more administrative level (Bruns et al. 2011; Slater 2013). Effective decentralisation in the education sector relies on a number of factors, including political agency, human resource capacity, organisational and communications infrastructure, and financial support (Slater 2013). In the absence of these factors, decentralisation reforms may bring about unintended and negative effects, for example elite capture at the local level (Bruns et al. 2011).

School grants are one possible component of a decentralisation agenda, often implemented to increase efficiency by improving the transparency of financial decisions at the local level, reducing corruption, and incentivising local investment in teachers and materials (Carr-Hill et al. 2016). Beyond efficiency objectives, school grants might be used to safeguard or increase school-level expenditure to improve the teaching and learning environment, as in the case of Zimbabwe (Smith et al. 2018: 89), and as a response to safeguard access and quality in times of economic crisis (Shafiq 2010; World Bank 2009). In most instances, the allocation of school grants is most strongly associated with the devolution of *financial* decision-making, whilst they may also include *managerial* or *educational* decisions (Carr-Hill et al. 2016). Typically, grants aim to improve educational access, quality and learning outcomes, but their success may depend on a number of contextual preconditions. These include that: (a) school-based educators and community members are supported to understand school grant processes; (b) school leaders are willing to share decision-making processes with parents and the community; and (c) parents and community members have sufficient capacity to make informed decisions to improve education quality (UNESCO 2017).

School grants may be implemented in a number of different ways. The literature identifies several key principles for effective implementation. This includes an acknowledgement of the range of challenges and barriers that are associated with the implementation of these type of models at the school level, including (i) the need for all actors to support the principles of decision-making reform; (ii) the need for local district support; and (iii) the reality that this type of reform places increased time and work demands on teachers and parents (Bruns et al. 2011). Policies such as school grants which involve significant high-level power transferal need to be carefully managed, to develop capabilities and to change attitudes at multiple levels of the system (Slater 2013). Several key considerations for implementation include: availability of relevant data; provision of training and guidance; the linking of budgets and resource allocation to educational outcomes; stakeholder engagement; and process documentation (Slater 2013). A number of synthesis reports have particularly emphasised the importance of training (Bruns et al. 2011; Carr-Hill et al. 2016).

School grant policies may aim to impact a number of different educational outcomes. This review is focused on evidence around their effectiveness for (i) equitable access to quality education, and (ii) learning outcomes.

The review found that evidence of the effectiveness of school grant policies for equitable access to quality education was limited. Few studies provided rigorous examinations of the impact of school grants on equity of access across a range of measures, for example between rural/ urban locations, gender, or socio-economic status. Nonetheless, there are a few examples of school grant policies which explicitly aim to improve equitable access, for example from Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Mongolia. In many of these examples, study authors identify a disconnect between policy objectives and policy implementation, inhibiting their effectiveness. Some examples included schools not being aware of or being unable to access, funding for disadvantaged students (for example in Mongolia (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016). Other examples included contexts where school grant budgets were too stretched, or capacity in disadvantaged communities too low to meet the equity-oriented priorities specified in policy (for example in Malawi (Nampota and Chiwaula 2014), Indonesia (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016) and Sri Lanka (Deffous et al. 2011). Meanwhile in Zimbabwe, changes to grant allocation criteria in the wake of crisis-linked funding cuts, have potentially limited the effectiveness of criteria aimed to ensure the school grant policy targets the poorest schools and benefits marginalised children (Smith et al, 2018). In synthesising available evidence, Carr-Hill et al. (2016) note that school grant policies have (i) tended to have a stronger positive impact on wealthier students with more educated parents, and (ii) that such reforms are less effective in disadvantaged communities with low levels of education and/ or capacity.

The evidence base is relatively stronger in relation to the effectiveness of school grant policies for student learning outcomes, being suggestive of small but positive impacts. However, according to a 2016 synthesis study, these positive results are concentrated in middle-income countries, and stronger impacts tend to be found for wealthier students with more educated parents, with smaller effects found in disadvantaged communities (Carr-Hill et al. 2016; see also Hanushek et al. 2011; UNESCO 2017). The evidence emphasises the importance of contextual factors in determining the effectiveness of school grant programs for improving student learning outcomes including: the level of local capacity; the extent to which parents and communities are effectively able to participate in decision-making; and the focus of school grant expenditure e.g. physical infrastructure versus human resource development (Beasley and Huillery 2016; Carneiro et al. 2015). Recent evidence from Tanzania also points to the potential importance of considering school resource policies such as school grants as part of a suite of education reforms (in this case in conjunction with a teacher incentive program) which, when rolled-out together, may have strong complementarity (Mbiti et al. 2018).

This rapid review has drawn largely on synthesis studies, evaluative papers and some grey literature. The reviewed evidence was frequently produced as part of reports commissioned and published by international agencies, but undertaken by external researchers using mixed-method approaches. As discussed above, while the evidence reviewed was of good quality, there were also certain limitations to the evidence available. In keeping with the needs of the requester, the report focuses in particular on cases from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), whilst it expands the geographic scope where relevant examples from SSA are limited, or where examples from other contexts are potentially instructive.

2. The rationale for school grants and school-based decision-making

This section provides an overview of the principles and practices associated with educational decentralisation and school-based decision-making, with a view to placing school grants within this wider context.

2.1 Decentralisation and school-based decision-making

Over the last decade-and-a-half, many governments have attempted to improve school enrolment and learning outcomes, while also improving efficiency and reducing costs, by devolving decision-making authority to schools. It is assumed that locating decision-making authority within schools will increase accountability, efficiency and responsiveness to local needs (Gertler et al., 2008, cited in Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 7; Bruns et al. 2011: 88; Slater 2013: 4). Krishnaratne et al. (2013: 38-39) present the benefits of school-based management in terms of its impact on community and professional mobilisation, arguing for an improvement in the quality of education that comes about through an increase in parental knowledge and empowerment on educational matters, and an increase in personal and professional investment in the provision of quality education at school level. Bruns et al. (2011: 90) support these claims, whilst they also note the potential for school-based management to improve student performance in terms of lower repetition and dropout rates and higher test scores.

Under decentralisation, a range of 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 (Bruns et al. 2011: 89; Slater 2013: 2). 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 US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 11).

This process of devolution includes a wide variety of models and mechanisms, differing in terms of which decisions are devolved, to whom decision-making authority is given, and how the decentralisation process is implemented. In this context, '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 (Bruns et al. 2011: 89). This last model may 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). All models and mechanisms are presumed to increase responsiveness to local needs and accountability by bringing community members into direct contact with schools (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 7).

However, it is widely agreed that effective educational decentralisation relies on a range of appropriate contextual factors to support its implementation. These include, but are not limited to, political agency, human resource capacity, organisational and communications infrastructure, and financial support (Slater 2013: 8). There is also growing evidence that, without proper mechanisms for implementation, decentralisation reforms associated with school-based decision-making, including school grants, may have unintended and negative effects in certain political

and economic circumstances (Banerjee et al., 2008; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000, 2005; Carr-Hill et al. 1999; Condy, 1998; Glassman et al. 2007; Pherali et al. 2011; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008; Rose, 2003; Unterhalter, 2012, cited in Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 13). Most particularly, decentralising decision-making to the school level may lead to elite capture at the local level, further corruption within school systems, or may limit educational opportunity for marginalised ethnic groups (Bruns et al. 2011: 133).

Based on this, there is some consensus that measures associated with decentralisation are only likely to have a positive impact on educational outcomes when:

- (a) There is clear government policy and regulations about the powers and role played by different agencies and stakeholders;
- (b) There are sufficient financial resources available within the system;
- (c) There is some form of democratic culture in place to enable equal participation across intended beneficiary groups

(De Grauwe et al. 2005; Lugaz et al. 2010; Pherali et al. 2011, cited in Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 13).

This highlights the importance of interactions between formal structures of decision-making and informal structures of power and authority within state institutions, communities and schools (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 13).

2.2 Decentralisation and school grants

Within the broad context of educational reform, school grants are one possible component of the decentralisation process, often undertaken to increase efficiency by making financial decisions more transparent to communities, reducing corruption and incentivising localised investment in high quality teachers and materials (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 7). Alternatively, school grants might be used to safeguard or increase the level of school expenditure aimed at improving the teaching and learning environment, as in the case of Zimbabwe (Smith et al, 2018: 89), and to protect and/or improve access and quality in times of economic crisis (Shafiq, 2010: 10; World Bank 2009: 14). Krishnaratne et al. (2013: 37) present school grants and/or school-level autonomy over financial decision-making for school improvement as one of the primary tasks associated with the implementation of school-based management, alongside the mapping of school performance and the monitoring of teachers. This finding is supported by Snilstviet et al. (2016: 40), who found that, of the school-based management programmes covered in their synthesis study, all but two included giving schools some control over funds and resource allocation.

The decentralisation of both school management and finances has received a lot of attention in the education policy literature in recent years, understood to be linked to improved efficiency and accountability by giving communities and often previously disadvantaged groups opportunities to participate in decision making, and reducing the financial burden on central government (Prew et al, 2011: 5). A key principle underlying school grant programs is the idea that decision-makers at the local level have a better understanding of the needs of their schools and communities than those at the national level, and that they are therefore best placed to identify a school's deficiencies and to efficiently use school and educational resources to address them (Carneiro 2015; Hanushek et al. 2011).

In practical terms, the allocation of school grants is associated most strongly with the devolution of *financial* decision-making e.g. decisions about how resources should be allocated within a school; decisions about raising funds for particular activities within a school; etc. However, depending on the nature of the needs identified at school level, the allocation of school grants might also touch on *managerial* decision-making (e.g. human resource decisions, such as the recruitment and monitoring of teacher performance; decisions relating to the management of school buildings and other infrastructure; etc.) or *educational* decision-making (e.g. decisions related to improving the articulation of a school's curriculum; decisions about how elements of a national curriculum will be taught and assessed within a given school; etc.) (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 11). In either case, it is frequently assumed that the end goal of these processes is to improve educational quality and learning outcomes at school level.

However, when implemented in contexts with a lack of decision-making capacity and conflicting incentives, school grant programmes may in fact result in an inefficient and ineffective use of resources (Hanushek et al. 2011). In addressing this, evidence suggests that there are a small number of basic contextual preconditions for school grants to be effective. These include the following:

- a) School-based educators and community members must be supported to understand school-based management and school grant processes;
- b) School leaders must be willing to share responsibility with parents and community members in decision-making processes;
- c) Parents and community members require sufficient capacity to make informed investments likely to improve education quality

(Beasley and Huillery 2016,, Carr-Hill et al. 2015, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58)

In this context, the wider mechanisms of devolution to a school-based management system should take into account the need for systemic capacity development among relevant stakeholders at the school and community level (Krishnaratne et al. 2013: 38-39).

3. An overview of approaches to school grant implementation

Reforms for school-based decision-making, such as school grants and financial autonomy, can be implemented in a variety of ways. In simple terms, one common approach to school grants is to disburse grants to school management committees, placing control of the money in the hands of parents, with the aim being to both increase school resources and encourage parental participation (Beasley and Huillery 2017: 2). However, for approaches such as this to be effective, a significant number of commentators highlight the need for appropriate systemic measures to be in place.

Firstly, in theoretical terms, Bruns et al. (2011: 90) suggest that approaches to school-based management should consider four key principles of operation: 'increasing public choice and participation in education, giving citizens a stronger voice; making information about school performance widely available; and strengthening the rewards to schools for delivering effective services to the poor and penalizing those who fail to deliver'. While certain aspects of these principles are open to critique on ideological grounds, it can be argued that they provide the basis for a complex framework of accountability for school-based management, influenced in part by measures of internal authority and control (Bruns et al. 2011: 91-93).

Secondly, in practical terms, Bruns et al. (2011: 219) place an emphasis on a number of key components associated with effective school-based management. In relation to school grants and financial decision-making, the most relevant components include:

- autonomous school strategic planning;
- involvement of multiple groups in goal-setting;
- and stronger relations with parents and the surrounding community.

Thirdly, Bruns et al. (2011: 219) claim that many of these programmes in developing countries, including those designed to improve quality, emphasize the participatory aspects of school-based management rather than the management aspects, and state that, to be effective, programmes need to move beyond participation and involve empowerment of the actors to make decisions that affect core education functions such as teaching and learning. Within this, access to information is vital. When school-based management requires school councils to develop school development plans, those plans have a higher likelihood of success. When goals are related to student well-being and academic success and can be based on accurate and timely information on schooling outcomes, this helps channel efforts (Bruns et al. 2011: 222).

Finally, Bruns et al. (2011: 133-134) also highlight the need to acknowledge and address the range of challenges and barriers associated with the implementation of such models at school level. These include:

- the need for all relevant actors to accept and support the principles of decision-making reform;
- the need for local district support;
- and the fact that more time and work demands are put on teachers and parents.

For example, in political terms, teachers and their unions may resist reforms that give parents and community members more power, and how they will react to school-based management initiatives is a crucial factor in their eventual success or failure. At a systemic level, district or state-level administrators may try to limit the extent of school autonomy, especially those models that empower school councils or even just school principals. Finally, fully participatory models of school-based management demand from parents a great investment of time, which is costly to them, and a need to understand documents and approaches required for preparing school improvement plans, these requirements place the poorest and least educated at the greatest disadvantage and limit the potential of the programme to help the most deserving and neediest students (Bruns et al. 2011: 133-134).

In addressing this range of issues at high-level, Slater (2013: 3) highlights the value of careful management of the processes of decentralisation or power-transferal. Properly implemented over time, it will enable the development of capabilities and change in attitudes of those administering the system, and will also allow for the development of trust and skills by stakeholders. However, in practical terms, Slater (2013: 39) echoes Bruns et al. (2011), stating that using school-based decision-making to achieve effective and proper use of resources for education requires the following:

- Ensuring that the relevant information and data are available to all stakeholders as a basis for planning;
- Providing training, guidance and support to ensure that officials, school staff and other stakeholders know what is required of them in terms of processes, and are able to allocate, plan, and budget resources strategically;
- Ensuring that budgets and resource allocation is linked to educational outcomes, including taking account of value for money. There is a risk that support for budgeting and monitoring will focus on compliance with processes, rather than on effective resource management;
- Involving stakeholders in decisions about spending and the follow-up review of outcomes;
- Ensuring there are documented processes in place for carrying out decisions about expenditure and subsequently auditing what has been done to ensure compliance.

Most specifically, training appears to be an important element of any school-based management reform (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 84; Bruns et al. 2011: 102). Snilstviet et al. (2016: 40) report that most school-based management programmes include a capacity-building component targeted at different school stakeholders, e.g. orientation workshops and seminars on financial management, project planning and/or the development of school improvement plans.

Evidence suggests that training of this nature may be more effective when delivered directly to schools by NGOs, rather than via government authorities, at least in contexts with weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 84; Bruns et al. 2011: 223). In Ghana, for example, decentralisation required that districts and schools were able to evaluate performance in order to make decisions about resources in ways appropriate to their roles. Research had identified a need for specific types of training for headteachers as well as stakeholders, and the Ghana Education Service and Link Community Development (LCD) worked on a project to make a reality of School Performance Review. It involved intensive

training, collection of a range of quantitative and qualitative data, a cycle of review which built progressively from school to district level, and communication tailored to different audiences (Slater 2013: 25).

However, bearing in mind the potential limitations of local capacity, the uses to which school grants can be applied might be restricted to addressing certain identified priorities. Depending on the context, a degree of greater central direction over spending can ensure fairer access to education, help to avoid decisions that may exacerbate local divides, and help implement policies seen as important by the system leaders (Slater 2013: 32). In terms of managing the school grant process, the result may include the allocation of a general pot of money, possibly with some guidelines for use, or the ring-fencing of some budgets so that they are spent on particular groups of students or for particular purposes. For instance, indicators may be used to identify (and give extra resources for) special needs or deprivation. Alternatively, authorities may choose instead to channel some of these funds via targeted programmes (Slater 2013: 33).

Finally, in maintaining oversight of these activities, it is often appropriate to consider the accountability of such practices at school level. These can be 'assured' through a number of approaches, including by requiring a documented link between school budgets and school development plans; the presentation of financial records; and mechanisms for oversight by individual school committees (Slater 2013: 40).

4. Evidence of the effectiveness of school grants in improving equitable access to quality education

There are a number of examples of school grant policies which are explicitly framed in relation to the goal of improving equitable access to quality education. Indeed, many school grant policies emerged in response to the goal of reducing the cost of education to parents and households, and meeting the objective of fee-free education (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016: 19). School grant policies can explicitly aim to improve equitable access to quality education through a number of approaches, including (i) the targeting of disadvantaged schools; or (ii) the allocation of per pupil funding according to criteria which favours students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Unfortunately, this review found very limited rigorous evidence evaluating the extent to which school grant policies have successfully safeguarded and/ or improved equitable access to quality education. This includes a consideration of equitable access across a range of measures associated with educational exclusion in low-resource settings e.g. between rural/ urban locations, gender, disability, ethnicity and/or social or economic status.

This finding is consistent with the conclusions reported in relevant synthesis papers. When looking at decentralised reforms associated with school-based management, including school grants, Carr-Hill et al. (2016: 84) state that most studies on this topic do not conduct any sub-group analysis relating to individual characteristics, such as gender and student background. What evidence there is on this topic suggests that firstly, school-based decision-making reforms such as school grants have a stronger positive impact on wealthier students with more educated parents. Secondly, such reforms also appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low social status relative to school personnel (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 84). School-based decision-making reforms in highly disadvantaged communities are less likely to be successful, and parental participation seems to be the key to the success of such reforms (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 6, 10; Beasley and Huillery 2016: 2). However, in economic terms, poorer parents are less able to contribute either managerial skills or finance to assist their local schools (Krishnaratne et al. 2013: 38-39).

There is some evidence that devolving decision-making over financial resources to the level of the school can have negative consequences which may impact issues of equitable access to quality education, such as elite capture of education at local level, disharmony between ethnic groups, and the further limitation of educational opportunity for marginalised ethnic groups (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 85). In short, unless the mechanisms for school-based management are strong enough to ensure equity of participation among beneficiaries at community level, then it is feasible that school grants may have a negative impact on equitable access to quality education.

We include below some brief summaries of relevant school grant policies focused on improving equitable access to quality education. We include a discussion of any evidence of effectiveness, whilst it should be noted that in no instance do these studies draw on robust and rigorous analysis of data on enrolment and retention at the system-level, instead tending to be based on small-scale interviews and anecdotal observations. Nonetheless, the examples are potentially instructive in thinking about the challenges and barriers to school grant policies for improving equitable access to quality education.

Zimbabwe: School Improvement Grant (SIG)

As part of an evaluation of UNICEF support to the Education sector in Zimbabwe, Smith et al. (2018) present a case study of Zimbabwe's SIG. Zimbabwe's education system faces a number of challenges to equitable access to quality education, including in relation to large rural-urban and wealth-related differences in access and poor attendance of children with disabilities (Smith et al. 2018: 16). Where 'the usual argument for SIGs is that funds are spent better at school level with local knowledge determining priorities... in Zimbabwe SIG provides an opportunity to increase the volume of expenditure on improving the environment for learners as opposed to ensuring greater efficiency' (Smith et al. 2018: 89). In the context of economic crisis, significant expenditure cut backs for schools, and the collapse of non-grant funding sources in recent years, the SIG has a particularly important role to play, especially for the poorest schools (Smith et al. 2018: 90). The SIG originally aimed to provide funding for all non-salary costs incurred by schools, with the ultimate aim of facilitating the abolition of school fees and improving enrolment rates, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Smith et al, 2018: 84). Originally, a differential scale was used to allocate grants to school, to enable the targeting of the poorest schools (Smith et al, 2018: 85). Grants could also be used to subsidise fee waivers for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs). However, changes to grant allocation criteria in 2016 have limited the potential effectiveness of this targeting. An additional school income-level criteria was introduced, such that the number of schools receiving grants fell significantly (Smith et al, 2018: 87). Secondly, fee waivers for OVCs were removed (Smith et al. 2018: 88-89). The authors note that 'at its height (in 2015) SIG data makes the claim that over a million OVCs were being supported with access to education through the grant. This total will have dropped significantly since the criteria have changed' (Smith et al. 2018: 92-93). However, these 2016 changes have also created opportunities for schools to use grants to expand income generating opportunities and support school feeding, with potentially positive effects for equity of access to quality education (Smith et al. 2018: 89). Limited evidence of the effectiveness of the grant for equitable access to quality education is available. The evaluation notes that grants seemed to have made an 'important contribution to improving the environment of learners' (Smith et al. 2018: 97), for example through purchasing teaching and learning materials, or through using SIG for income generating activities. However, the evaluation was not able to determine the full contribution of the SIG.

UNESCO-IIEP case studies: Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo and Uganda

As part of a review of the use and usefulness of school grants in sub-Saharan Africa, UNESCO-IIEP conducted a series of case studies concerning the design and implementation of school grant policies in Ethiopia (Kelil et al. 2014), Kenya (Njihia and Nderitu 2014), Lesotho (Lefoka and Deffous 2014), Madagascar (UNESCO 2018a), Malawi (Nampota and Chiwaula 2014), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (UNESCO 2018b), Togo (UNESCO 2018c) and Uganda (Kayabwe and Nabacwa 2014). These case studies focus on the design of school grant policies in each of these countries, and present interview evidence of attitudes towards implementation and some limited consideration of perspectives on effectiveness in relation to a subset of the contexts. In most instances there was insufficient data to examine the impact of these grants on access and equity, whilst school-level actors tended to report perceiving improved enrolment rates for disadvantaged groups (DRC, Madagascar, Togo). In Malawi Nampota and Chiwaula (2014) note that, whilst the school grant policy offered support for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and HIV-positive learners, in practice these students

were not benefiting from the grant since the overall amount was too limited to meet all of the needs. In both Ethiopia (Kelil et al. 2014) and Uganda (Kayabwe and Nabacwa 2014) the authors noted that there were disparities in the implementation of the grant policy between the regions in which the research was conducted, perhaps indicative of the way in which school grant policies interact with local priorities and capacity. Meanwhile, in the DRC, a key recommendation was to improve the fairness of grant allocation by including schools and pupils with special needs (such as those in remote areas or rural schools) (UNESCO 2018b: 4).

Mongolia

All primary and secondary public schools in Mongolia are eligible for grants from the state, in a policy dating from 1940 (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2016: 43). This school grant policy has as a key objective the achievement of equality of access to quality education, and accordingly the grants take account of both the presence of disabled students in schools, and key characteristics of differences between schools (for example, between rural and urban areas) (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2016: 45). Funds are disbursed to an intermediate level (the district), and schools have limited autonomy in the management of these funds (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2016: 58). Grants are used to improve teaching and learning environments, covering the costs of school equipment, teaching and learning materials, maintenance, for disabled students and can also be used to cover civil servant teacher salaries (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2016: 104). Where schools have disabled students, they are able to access an additional grant, which provides a 30 percent allowance in addition to the regular salaries of teachers working with these children. However, despite the strong equity-focus of the policy, Lugaz and De Grauwe (2016:116) draw on interview data with a subset of schools to suggest that in reality, the majority of school grant funds have been used to pay teachers' salaries, and very few schools have actually allocated school grant funding to the teachers' of disabled students.

Indonesia: Scholarship and Grants Programme (SGP) (1999)

Following the economic crisis in the late 1990s, Indonesia introduced a scholarship and block grant programme to help mitigate the effects of the economic crisis (SMERU 2003, cited in Bolton 2012: 16-17; Deffous et al. 2011; Shafiq, 2010). The programme was implemented in two phases which targeted both access and quality, with the first phase designed to maintain enrolment and quality, and the second phase aimed explicitly at poverty alleviation, through targeting the neediest schools in the poorest districts (Deffous et al. 2011: 8). The grants were provided to both rural and urban schools, and recipient schools were asked to 'waive primary levels fees' to prevent falls in attendance and quality (World Bank, 2009: 14). Grants were most likely to be allocated to religiously-oriented primary schools in Indonesia's rural areas, because it was these schools who had the least privileged children (Shafiq, 2010: 10). Evidence of effectiveness is mixed. A rapid assessment of the programme by the World Bank in 1999 found that on the whole, block grants had not been very effective, but that they were more successful in remote areas (Bolton, 2012: 17). Hartano and Ehrmann (2001: 31) writing shortly after this, found that a large number of schools benefited from the program, with some able to cover as much as 40 percent of non-salary expenditure, enabling them not to raise school fees. Shafiq (2010: 10, citing Frankenberg et al., 1999) states that a result of the policy was that teacher attendance and performance did not decline, whilst school principals were positive about the policy. Meanwhile, Deffous et al. (2011: 21) draw on interview data to suggest that whilst the anticipated increase in dropout from schools did not occur, the impact on equity is less evident. Bolton (2012: 17) summarises that some of the key issues influencing the successful implementation of the

programme included mechanisms to effectively identify and target eligible recipients; the level of funding; the use and disbursement of funding (including the level of transparency); and the effectiveness of school committees in monitoring and supervision.

Indonesia: School Operational Assistance Programme (2005)

Indonesia's more recent 'School Operational Assistance (BOS) Programme' began in 2005, with the aim of compensating for a reduced fuel subsidy and to limit the burden on communities through reducing the need to contribute to school fees, particularly for the poor (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016: 43). The grant was targeted to both public and private elementary schools, and it had at its core the objective of equality of access to quality education, with schools able to use the grants to assist poor students (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016: 45). In practice, school grants were found to mostly be used to pay temporary teachers, and to fund learning and extracurricular activities. Despite the objective of the policy to subsidise poor students and improve equity of access, research found that in practice very few schools were allocating funding to this. Where schools were allocating funds to this objective, they constituted an extremely small part of overall expenditure, suggestive of limited impact on equitable access (Lugaz and De Grauwe 2016).

Sri Lanka: Educational Quality Inputs (EQI)

The Sri Lankan Education Quality Inputs scheme was implemented in 2001 to improve the quality of education, with a focus on the least advantaged schools. The programme adopted a complex funding allocation approach which was 'theoretically pro-poor,' with student characteristics, school cycles and school site differences taken into account to ensure that the poorest schools received the most funds (Deffous et al. 2011: 21). Schools were given autonomy to spend funds on those inputs which they thought were most appropriate, in consultation with a set of MOE guidelines. However, in this model a significant portion of the grant funds were unspent (around 20 percent), especially in small and needy schools, who faced a large administrative burden in processing the grant, compared to larger schools (Deffous et al. 2011: 22). Deffous et al. (2011: 22) draw on interview data to suggest that 'this shows that allocating more funds to more disadvantaged schools alone is not sufficient; the funds need to be properly utilized,' with the complexity of the grant guidelines, and lack of capacity amongst teachers and principals constituting a key limiting factor in the effectiveness of the grant for addressing issues of equity of access and quality.

Nepal

In 2001, the Government of Nepal notionally transferred responsibility for managing schools from the state to the community. Community schools, working through the school management committee consisting of parents and influential local citizens, were given decision-making powers over various staffing and fiscal issues. In addition, community-managed schools were given more untied block grants so that the management committee had more control over discretionary spending. Short-run impact estimates suggest that the devolution of management responsibilities to communities had significant impacts on certain schooling outcomes related to access and equity. There is no evidence yet that these changes were associated with improvements in learning outcomes (Chaudhury and Parajuli 2010, cited in Bruns et al. 2011: 221-222).

5. Evidence of the effectiveness of school grants in improving student learning outcomes

When supported by effective school-based management, there is evidence that grants to schools can have a positive, but small, impact on student achievement and attendance in some countries. There is a moderate positive effect on average test scores, though the effects are smaller for subjects such as language and maths. The effects are not large, but are comparable to those found in many other effective interventions for improving learning outcomes (Carr-Hill et al. 2016: 6, 84). For example, three years after the Philippines introduced school-based management and provided grants to schools, mathematics scores on the national assessment test increased by about four percentage points, although schools with more experienced principals and teachers appeared better prepared to introduce school-based management (Yamauchi, 2014, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58).

However, the same evidence also suggests there are strong contextual limitations to these findings. Carr-Hill et al. (2016: 6) conclude that, firstly, the positive impact is found in middle-income countries, with no significant effect in low-income countries, and secondly, school-based decision-making reforms appear to have a stronger impact on wealthier students with more educated parents, and for children in younger grade levels. Finally, the impact of school-based decision-making over resourcing on learning outcomes appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel.

Such findings are also supported by Snilstviet et al. (2016: 42), and elsewhere. In a comparative study of the impact of decentralisation of decision-making in 42 countries that participated in the PISA assessments between 2000-2009, Hanushek et al. (2011) suggest that reforms oriented around the promotion of local autonomy may improve student achievement in well-developed education systems with strong institutions, whilst being detrimental in low-performing systems. The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2017: 58), which also concludes that the most marginalized groups tend to be less involved in school-based management and school grant decision-making, as they often have the least time to participate in meetings.

As evidence of this, in Gambia, the national Whole School Development programme provided block grants and comprehensive school-based management training to principals, teachers and community representatives. After three to four years, student absenteeism had declined by 21% and teacher absenteeism by 23%. However, in terms of learning outcomes, the programme had a positive impact only in communities with pre-existing higher local capacity, e.g. adult literacy of at least 45% (Blimpo et al. 2015, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58). In Indonesia, an analysis of information dissemination strategies for parents found that the grant planning process was frequently dominated by school principals who excluded parental representatives from decision-making (Cerdan-Infantes and Filmer, 2015, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58). Parents and teachers in Mexico had insufficient information to make informed decisions about using the grant (Santibanez et al. 2014, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58).

In other cases, school-based management committees may also neglect spending on those resources associated with the improvement of learning outcomes, opting instead for more 'higher visibility' uses for the grant. In Mexico and Niger, where grants were focused on construction and other material inputs, rather than books, learning materials or teacher training (Skoufias and

Shapiro 2006; Beasley and Huillery 2014; Bando 2010, cited in Snilstviet et al. 2016: 42), there was no evidence of impact on learning outcomes. However, in Senegal, there was a larger positive effect on learning outcomes for schools in the south of the country, where projects tended to focus on training for teaching and management, when compared to those in the north, where priority was placed on the acquisition of school materials such as textbooks and manuals (Snilstviet et al. 2016: 42).

Thus, in conclusion, where school-based management initiatives to support the dispersal of school grants prove ineffective in improving learning outcomes, one explanation is that parents and others responsible, most of whom did not go to school, may lack sufficient capacity to make investments likely to improve education quality (Beasley and Huillery, 2016, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58). In addition, the extent to which the decentralisation of education resources to the school level translates into improvements in the quality of schooling may depend on the extent to which those resources are targeted efficiently (Carneiro et al. 2015: 1).

With this in mind, if school grant policies are to succeed in improving learning outcomes, school-based educators and community members must (i) be supported to understand the application of school-based management principles and (ii) be willing to share education decision-making with parents and community members (Carr-Hill et al. 2015, cited in UNESCO 2017: 58).

Overall though, when looking at learning outcomes, Snilstviet et al. (2016: 48) point to a large amount of variability in effects across contexts, indicating that broader cross-cutting factors have a strong influence on learning outcomes at school level. We include below a selection of further findings on the effectiveness of specific school grant programmes for improving learning outcomes, drawn from studies undertaken in a range of specific contexts from across sub-Saharan Africa.

Senegal: Projets d'école

Carneiro et al. (2015: 2) examine a school grant programme in Senegal which was designed to decentralise part of the country's education budget to improve education quality. The programme allowed every elementary school in Senegal to apply for funding to support a specific project designed to address problems identified by the school as a major obstacle to quality, focused on pedagogical issues (rather than the physical environment). The funding was then awarded by a government evaluation committee based on district and system-wide priorities (Carneiro et al. 2015: 4). The maximum amount that a school could receive corresponded to 7 percent of the total annual school budget of a typical school, including teacher salaries.

One year after the start of the intervention, Carneiro et al. (2015) find large and significant effects on student learning outcomes for children benefiting from grants in grade two, especially girls with high ability at baseline. However, no impacts were found for children in other grades. Also, these positive effects on student learning outcomes were larger in the south of the country where the winning projects tended to focus on the training of teachers and administrators, compared to the north of the country where projects tended to focus on acquiring educational materials such as textbooks.

This suggests that school grants can positively impact student learning outcomes, but contextual factors such as teacher quality may enhance or negate these impacts (Carneiro et al. 2015: 3). Carneiro et al (2015: 3) also note that a key influencing factor in programmes which decentralise

decision making about school resources is that 'principals in public schools (or other local decision makers) may not be incentivised to use resources optimally to serve students,' and argue that the use of decentralisation funds for the training of human resources, whilst less visible to the local community, may be more effective than using the funds to provide educational materials (Carneiro et al. 2015: 33).

Tanzania: Capitation Grant (Grants) Programme

A recent programme in Tanzania combined the provision of unconditional school grants with bonus payments to teachers based on student performance¹. An analysis of this policy found that the provision of unconditional school grants alone made no impact on student test scores. However, when the grants were combined with performance-linked bonuses to teachers, they generated significant positive effects (Mbiti et al. 2018).

In terms of how the grant was divided, grant schools spent, on average, 65% of the grant on textbooks and classroom teaching aids, and 27% on administrative costs such as wages of non-teaching staff. It was stipulated that the grants could not be spent on teacher salaries. The grant programme significantly increased per-student expenditure in schools, but this increase in spending did not have an impact on student learning outcomes in math, Kiswahili or English after either one or two years (Mbiti et al. 2018: 2). However, when combined with the teacher performance pay intervention, students had significantly higher test scores in all subjects (Mbiti et al. 2018: 2), suggesting 'strong evidence of complementarities between inputs and incentives.'

At the end of two years, test score gains in these 'combination' schools were significantly greater than the sum of the gains in 'grant' and 'incentives' schools in each of the three subjects (Mbiti et al. 2018:3). These results are consistent with other studies that have suggested that just increasing school resources alone (for example via school grants) rarely improves student learning outcomes in developing countries (Mbiti et al. 2018: 16).

The Gambia: The Whole School Development programme

The 'Whole School Development' (WSD) programme focussed on school-based management and capacity building. It offered a grant and a comprehensive school management-training programme to principals, teachers, and representatives of the community (Blimpo and Evans 2011: 1).

In WSD schools, school, staff and communities received training in school leadership and management, community participation, curriculum management, teacher professional development, teaching and learning resources, and the school environment (Blimpo and Evans 2011: 2). Based on this training, school stakeholders then developed a school management plan guided by staff from the Ministry of Education, and were given grants of 500 USD to help implement the plan through spending on teaching and learning activities.

After 3-4 years of the programme, the WSD programme had reduced student absenteeism by 21 percent, reduced teacher absenteeism by 23 percent, but had no impact on student learning outcomes (Blimpo and Evans 2011: 3).

¹ The two interventions were implemented by Twaweza, a civil society organisation.

The authors suggest that the effect of the WSD programme on learning outcomes was mediated by the level of local capacity, as measured by adult literacy. In villages with high levels of adult literacy, the WSD programme may have improved student learning outcomes, whilst it may have had negative effects in villages with low levels of adult literacy (Blimpo and Evans 2011: 4). The study notes that whilst local decision-makers may have more information about local needs and constraints, they may lack competency to design and implement programmes to tackle these problems, relative to centralised decision-makers (Blimpo and Evans, 2011: 2). They conclude that they 'find little to no evidence that a comprehensive intervention such as WSD can help improve learning outcomes, except when baseline capacity is sufficiently high' (Blimpo and Evans 2011: 4).

Niger

Beasley and Huillery (2017) evaluated the short-term impacts of a pilot programme to improve school quality, which gave grants to school committees, aimed at encouraging parental participation in school management in a context of low parent authority and capacity. They found an overall positive impact of the grant programme on parents' involvement and responsibility, but mixed results in relation to school management outcomes, with improvements to cooperation between school stakeholders but limited change to overall accountability. They found no improvements to school quality, at least in the short term (Beasley and Huillery 2017: 3).

The authors suggest that parental participation was unable to improve quality because the participants lacked the relevant information about which investments would have been likely to have improved quality. Most investments were focused on the construction of new buildings rather than on extra lessons or materials (Beasley and Huillery 2017: 30). Additional findings also suggested that, in response to the grant and the increased parental participation, on average, teachers were found to decrease their professional effort, suggestive of negative teacher reactions to this kind of participatory programme (Beasley and Huillery 2017: 30).

Zambia: Basic Education Sub-Sector Investment Programme (BESSIP)

In practical terms related to the implementation of school grant programmes, there is some evidence of differences in learning outcomes resulting from either anticipated or unanticipated school grants.

Evidence from the BESSIP programme in Zambia suggests that, when school grants are anticipated by the stakeholder community, the grant is accompanied by a reduction in household spending on education, such that for each dollar spent on schools via an anticipated grant, household spending on education reduced by a similar amount (Das et al. 2011: 2), with the result that no variation in student test scores occurred. In contrast, unanticipated school grants were found to have no impact on household spending (Das et al. 2011: 2) and thus positively impacted on student test scores in English and mathematics.

In support of this, Das et al. (2011) present similar findings from a similar school grant initiative (the Andhra Pradesh School Block Grant experiment) in India. In the first year, when the grant was unanticipated, household spending remained at the same pre-grant levels, and students performed significantly better in assessments of mathematics and language. When the grant was anticipated in the second year, household education spending in programme schools reduced and there was no significant effect on test scores.

Das et al. (2011: 3) conclude that 'the impact of anticipated school grants in both settings is low or zero, not because the money did not reach the schools (it did) or because it was not spent well (there is no evidence to support this), but because households realigned their own spending patterns optimally,' such that 'the impact of school grant programmes is likely to be highly attenuated by household responses.'

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