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Measuring Quality Beyond Test Scores: The Impact of Regional Context on Curriculum Implementation (in Northern Uganda)

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Abstract

Although global initiatives have brought attention to the lack of quality in education systems worldwide; the question remains, how do we implement quality education? Teachers, a vital component of the education process, are not usually included in these global conversations; this results in government initiatives missing key obstacles faced by teachers daily. In this article, we used a rights-based approach to examine the Quality Educators Initiative, specifically its curricular component, as it tries to assist teachers in northern Uganda, an area whose schools and communities are vastly under-resourced and dealing with post-conflict effects. Using a mixed-methods approach, we highlight teachers' experiences with the National Thematic Curriculum and reveal through our findings that regional contextual factors, and teachers' voices and changing roles due to these factors, must be taken into consideration when rolling out new education policies.

MEASURING QUALITY BEYOND TEST SCORES: THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL CONTEXT ON CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN NORTHERN UGANDA

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Introduction

In Uganda, the changing political, social, and economic context over the last decade has had a significant impact on the education system, particularly teachers in the post-conflict northern region. During this time, new measures and indicators of education quality have altered the curriculum, and teachers' roles and responsibilities have evolved in response to newly created global targets (Millennium Development Goals, and now the Sustainable Development Goals). Responding to these new demands the Quality-Educators for All project (QEA), was created. QEA is joint venture between Oxfam Novib (ON), Education International (EI) and local teacher unions, designed to address major and chronic problems of access and quality in two target countries (Uganda and Mali). Ultimately, QEA would assist both countries meet global targets for education.

This article is drawn from a larger evaluation study of QEA and particularly examines its rollout in Uganda. But, rather than reporting on evaluation findings and describing the implementation process and outcomes of QEA, we use a rights-based framework to examine how context and resources differentially impact the implementation of this national large-scale, teacher-driven curriculum reform initiative to improve education quality. This rights-based approach seeks to address the broader question—despite the government's policy priorities and financial investment to improve education quality, how and why does Uganda continue to have low learning outcomes, particularly in the predominantly under-resourced, post-conflict, and rural northern region?

The answer, we believe, lies in defining what quality education means and redefining who is responsible for ensuring quality. A rights-based approach offers a critique of traditional input/output learning outcome measures of education quality and instead questions: *What is the point of administering a standardized test to measure "quality" when the teacher has 200 students, 5*

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textbooks, few learner-support materials, and substandard working and living conditions? It considers *quality* public education a fundamental human right and the context of education (e.g. adequate resources, qualified teachers, decent learning conditions) as central to ensuring that right. Founding QEA documents also refer to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Convent on the Right of the Child, insisting that each child has the right to *quality education* and *quality teachers*, whether in formal or in non-formal education (Education International/Oxfam Novib, 2011). In applying rights-based approach to our study we sought to understand and examine *education quality* beyond measuring learning outcomes, and instead look at how teacher-based initiatives to improve education quality must also address the conditions of teaching and learning.

In the particular context of northern Uganda, the potential challenges faced by primary school teachers are many and sometimes unique. The problem lies in several wide-ranging factors, varying from scarcity of resources to lack of professional development opportunity, all entrenched in a legacy of conflict surrounding the northern region. It is in this context of marginalized, conflicted-affected, rural communities, that efforts to improve education quality should first ensure adequate support and resources, but also fundamentally consider *quality* as measures that help teachers shape and transform their school community. Importantly, a rights-based theoretical framework lays out a moral principle that challenges the lack of adequate resources and investment by governments in education, while also raising the question, how and whether we can ethically measure quality without first considering how these resources are differentially allocated across communities, thus placing an additional burden on poor, marginalized or rural schools.

This study sets out first to investigate and describe the contextual factors faced by primary school teachers in Uganda. It reveals teachers' opinions about their work environment and how these factors are addressed, or not addressed, through the implementation of QEA and its corresponding curriculum. In doing so we also examine and summarize the key components of the QEA's National Thematic Curriculum, which was designed to help teachers provide quality education by emphasizing a respectful and non-discriminatory curriculum (e.g. through gender-sensitive, and culturally responsive approaches and attending to life skills). We then illustrate how despite the richness and appropriateness of the National Thematic Curriculum, both regional contextual factors and testing accountability demands hinder the curriculum's application in classrooms.

Our overall research objectives include:
- Identifying the specific contextual factors faced by primary school teachers in the four northern regions of Mbarara, Mbale, Gulu and Kampala in Uganda
- Revealing how these contextual factors affect education in the northern regions
- Discovering how teachers' view the QEA's curricular component as an effective means to providing "quality" education and/or if the curricular competent is undermined by contextual and accountability factors

Our findings show that rather than reducing inequality by improving teaching and learning conditions and more equitably allocating teachers, the potential solutions of improving quality through the QEA has been greatly undermined by continuing gross disparities between schools and districts, specifically the curricular reform is hindered by the many contextual factors teachers face in the northern region. The complete findings of the study are presented in full elsewhere (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

Theoretical Framework: Why Use a Rights-Based Framework When Measuring Quality?

The dominant global framework for improving education quality (e.g. Education For All, the Global Monitoring Report, the Learning Metrics Framework) has primarily been through emphasizing and measuring student outcomes. Within this framework, the purpose and outcomes of schooling and the claims of its universality have created an assumption that it is both desirable and feasible for all students, regardless of resources and support, to perform at the same levels of basic skills and knowledge. Proponents of this approach (through convened groups such as the Learning Metrics Task Force, comprised of Brookings Institution, Research Triangle Institute, Global Partners for Education, the World Bank and others who have greatly influenced the discussion on accountability and quality of late) are content to measure primarily education quality based on student achievement indicators and standardized tests regardless of inequities in access and opportunities to learn (Brookings and UNESCO, 2014) .

Yet at a time when competing vested interests would like to recast rights in terms of emphasizing quality that is measured by learning outcomes, some international agencies and those in academia are increasingly turning to human rights based (e.g. rights-based) approaches to anchor their mission and vision of education quality (Actionaid, 2012; Actionaid, 2008; Rand and Watson, 2008, Lewin, 2000,). In 1997, the United Nations began a process calling on organizations to "bring human rights into the mainstream of their activities and programs," because it further supported governmental obligations to respect and protect the previously defined international human rights standards. More importantly, infusing rights would "support and empower individuals and communities to claim their rights…[requiring] an equal commitment to both process and outcomes" (UNICEF/UNESCO, 2007, p. 2).

A rights-based approach embraces the UN human rights principles by attempting to redefine how we understand and measure education quality, particularly underscoring that the role of the teacher is not just about imparting knowledge and skills for testing, but rather about shaping and transforming society through educating students. In this way, we loosely base our examination of school conditions and teaching contexts with reference to former UN Rapporteur on the Right to Education Katarina Tomaševski's '4As', which refer to the essential features of the right to education as defined in General Comment No. 13, which identifies four essential features to realizing the right to education (Tomaševski, 2001):

- **Availability** – education must be free, and there must be a sufficient number of educational institutions and trained teachers, as well as education materials, so that education is available to all;
- **Accessibility** – the institutions and programmes must be: - Accessible to all, without discrimination, including marginalised groups; - Physically accessible within a safe and reasonable distance and accessible to those with disabilities; and - Accessible in terms of cost: primary education must be free for all, whereas secondary and higher education must be affordable and progressively made free;
- **Acceptability** – the content of education and the way it is delivered, must be relevant, acceptable for all, including minorities, and of good quality; and
- **Adaptability** – education must be flexible and able to respond to the needs of students in different social and cultural settings. This includes those with learning difficulties as well as gifted children.

By viewing quality through the 4As and a rights-based approach, the rights of both students and teachers are considered. We argue that a rights-based framework will be increasingly important in understanding and measuring quality as additional layers of unequal resource allocation and dwindling funding for schools, as well as, economic inequality, become more apparent across countries and even globally.

For our purposes then, a rights-based approach also differs from an assessment or accountability-based approach, in that it makes any prerequisite for measuring quality also consider issues of funding, level of support and professional development for teachers, level and type of curriculum/learning materials and/or class sizes, as well as other factors that may contribute to disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged schools. To address these and other concerns we employ a rights-based framework for investigating education quality in order to focus on the inequality across the Ugandan system with specific regard to differential resources in schools and unacceptable working conditions which effect both the rights of teachers and students, and its implications for undermining the delivery of quality public education. In this view, education rights include access to a quality education and the right to be taught by professionally trained teachers, while also considering that teachers have rights to a living wage and decent working conditions. Therefore, the "problem" of producing professionally trained and highly motivated teachers should not be limited to providing roll-out cascade training for some teachers and then measuring learning impacts, but should also include attending to material and other inequalities facing students and teachers first and foremost.

Contrary to the accountability and measurement movements around promoting quality, we specifically look to the QEA Thematic Curriculum because it *also* rests on the loftier goals of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) and embodies the notions laid out in Article 129 which urges states to:

> "reinforce anti-discrimination and antiracism components in human rights programs in school curricula, to develop and improve relevant educational material, including history and other textbooks, **and to ensure that all teachers are effectively trained and adequately motivated to shape attitudes and behavioural patterns, based on the principles of non-discrimination, mutual respect and tolerance** (emphasis added)" (UN Gen, 2001).

What is significant for our purposes is that QEA is specifically designed to help teachers to provide a *quality education through respectful and non-discriminatory curriculum* (e.g. through gender-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches and attending to life skills), while also addressing teachers needs to have adequate resources and ongoing support in their preparation, everyday work and in their classrooms.

However, we also recognize that applying a rights-based approach to education quality is not a panacea. It does not avoid some central challenges – for example, the need to balance the claims of different rights holders (e.g. teachers) and address potential tensions between different rights and responsibilities (e.g. teachers providing education quality and having to do that each day facing deplorable working conditions). That balance between stakeholders and different rights/responsibilities is at the heart of this study; central in our critique of understanding rights "in, to and through" education and balancing these with the fundamental rights of teachers to decent working conditions and adequate support within the classroom. Acknowledging this fact and making them central to any analysis of "quality" not only empowers teachers, school communities and other stakeholders to claim their rights, but gives a counter-narrative for them to insist that these be fully implemented and, when necessary, seek their enforcement in national or international courts. It is for this reason, we use a rights-based approach to interrogate the popular discourse on education quality, understanding that although teachers, students and government officials are both rights holders and duty bearers,

international conventions squarely place the responsibility on the State to provide children with an adequate education and ensure that quality education is given out equitably.

Measuring Quality beyond Test Scores: The "Quality" Conversation in Educational Reform

The level and focus on initiatives to improve the quality of education globally has grown significantly over the last two decades, changing the demands on teaching and learning throughout the world. Beginning with Education for All (EFA) in 1990 with a goal of universal primary access (UPE), and its expansion in 2000 to focus on under-represented and out-of-school youth, to the current global focus on improving education quality. Even though considerable progress has been made with schools reaching more children and better serving marginalized youth, the number of out of school children and adolescents is still on the rise (UNESCO, 2015c). Additionally, the EFA Global Monitoring Report, released in April 2015, noted there are still 58 million children out of school globally and nearly 100 million children in primary schools that will not complete their education. The inequality gap has also widened, with "the poorest and most disadvantaged shouldering the heaviest burden" (UNESCO, 2015a, p.i). More specifically, the world's poorest children are four times less likely to attend school than the world's richest children. Even those most vulnerable children who attend obtain a "poor quality of learning" at the primary level, leaving millions of children without basic skills (UNESCO, 2015a).

The global community has responded and for the next fifteen years, countries' will now be focused on newly developed targets set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs expand the scope of earlier education policy priorities beyond enrollment and include goals and targets for inclusive *"quality education for all"*, and are also aimed at addressing gender disparities and improving teaching and learning (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). Specifically SDGs GOAL 4.c. sets out to increase the number of qualified teachers, especially through teacher development and support (ibid). This signifies a change in focus by the international community, a shift from viewing teachers as nothing more than a 'factor' that increases the 'performance' of the educational system to viewing teachers as an important "educational professional" (Biesta, 2015), whose knowledge of the environment and students themselves make teachers a vital component for any successful reform. This move is supported by substantial research which indicates that the 'quality' of teachers is one of the most important factors in improving student outcomes (Education International, 2012; Buchanan, 2012; Spreen & Ngundi, 2012; OECD, 2012; OECD, 2011; Mourshed et al., 2010). And follows on Elmore's notion that teachers can only be held accountable to the extent that they are provided with the tools and resources that enable them to carry out their functions and achieve the targets/outcomes set for them (Elmore, 2003).

The education and training of teachers, both initially during teacher preparation and with ongoing professional development, are essential for the success of schools under the SDGs. Globally recognized reports, like the OECD, have also supported this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of teacher qualifications and skill levels as an indicator of quality in schools (OECD, 2012; OECD, 2011). The McKinsey Report (Mourshed et al., 2010), one of the most well known reports studying the important impact of teachers, states clearly that teacher effectiveness is the strongest contributor to student performance within schools. The report also suggested teachers should have a positive, active role in education reform, on both the national and community level. Another report also noted that countries that improved the quality of their teachers by increasing professional standards, raising salaries to make the profession more attractive for new entrants and offering incentives for teachers to engage in in-

service training programs significantly improved their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance between 2002 and 2012 (Education International, 2013). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), an OECD longitudinal study for teachers and school leaders (CITE, 2016), also contributes to this conversation about teachers important role in education quality; more specifically, the report emphasizes the importance of professional development of teachers and increasing teacher professionalism to increase quality of education. Findings show that teachers who contribute to school decisions are more likely to report that teaching is valued in a society. As well as, teachers who participate in at least five professional learning experiences report having notable greater self-efficacy.

Quality teachers are not merely policy-implementers with a number of years of education and training, but must also be a voice in the movement to address quality education and made decisions about how to improve schools, because they work in alignment with and better understand local and contextual environments. In the case of northern Uganda this is with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of professional support, and isolation from urban areas where policy decisions are made.   The QEA initiative is an attempt by teachers, teachers unions, government and NGOs to work together to improve education quality. This approach is based on social dialogue, recognizing that the social partners— teachers and their unions—are essential stakeholders and have a vested interest in improving education quality through the QEA initiative.

So, what's the problem with measuring quality? Unfortunately, promoting education quality for some policy-makers and stakeholders is still narrowly defined as measuring student learning (e.g. standardized numeracy and literacy scores). While measuring and monitoring gains in student achievement through standardized testing provides immediate results for policymakers, understanding and measuring what a *quality education* looks like is far more complex. Vast differences across schools and systems, different contextual factors (e.g. political, social, cultural, geographical) also affect success.

Improving education quality is influenced not only through rolling out government polices, but also by historical or current events (colonization or war) and economic or cultural factors that shape school contexts. This is also true for measuring *teacher quality*. Teacher quality is used interchangeably in research and policy papers with "highly qualified teacher," "good teacher," and "effective teacher" (Rajic, Hoşgörü, & Drvodelic, 2015). Is the definition of a "good teacher" if students can pass a test, or is it assisting students with needs outside of basic numeracy and literacy? Without a clear understanding of what constitutes good teaching and learning, and how teacher knowledge, skills and agency help to enact it, the term "quality" remains meaningless (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015).

Recognizing that both the varied definitions and indicators of quality are constantly evolving, we underscore that it must not solely be looked at as student achievement. Education is good in itself, laying "the foundation for change and at the same time to maintain the best qualities of the present" (Cumberbatch, 2005). Values, such as democracy and human rights, are essential in understanding quality education from this perspective. In this, the majority of teachers are looked at as role models and interactions between teacher and student allow for "personal development and confidence" to flourish inside and outside the classroom (Fredriksson, 2004), permitting students to learn more than numeracy and literacy and instead help students learn beyond the textbook. Additionally, quality education cannot be one dimensional, but instead needs to be understood through: "inputs"(student background, teacher qualifications, working conditions, class sizes and investment in education); the education process (teaching, parents and investment in education); and by project outcomes (individual,

social, cultural, economic and environmental needs)" (Education International/Oxfam Novib, 2011, p.3).

Understanding the Context: Ugandan Education Policy Changes

The transformation in the education system in Uganda began in 1997 with the push for Universal Primary Education (UPE), which called for free education (for up to four children from each household in Uganda). During the implementation of the UPE plan, the Ugandan government placed emphasis on recruiting teachers and constructing schools. The share of the education sector in the nation budget increased from 13.7 percent in 1990 to 24.7 percent in 1998 (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006). Teacher numbers in government primary schools nationally substantially increased from 82,148 in 2000 to 131,552 in 2012, with an estimated 95.2 percent of these teachers meeting minimum qualifications necessary and 40 percent being women (Spreen & Topher, 2013). Additionally, there was an increase in the number of primary schools from 13,576 in 2005 to an estimated 14,179 in 2008 (Yiga and Wandega, 2010). This jumped drastically in 2011 with an estimated 16,684 primary schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011).

Even though the UPE provided an increase in the number of teachers and schools, it did not account for the parallel drastic upsurge of the primary school student population, rising from merely 3.1 million 1996 to 8.1 million 2011 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011) and 8.4 million in 2013 (UNESCO, 2015b). Over the last two decades, this placed a considerable shock on the education system, raising pupil to teacher ratios (PTR) and straining the amount of resources available. In 2011, there was an estimated 169,503 teachers in Uganda with the PTR estimated at 48:1 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011).

In order to address this crisis, the Ugandan government continued to increase education funding, between 2005 and 2009, raising the expenditure on education as percent of GDP from 6.06 percent to 7.31 percent, respectively. However, due to decreasing aid and budget shortfalls, the funding began to reduce after 2010, dropping back down to 6.15 percent in 2011 (UNESCO, 2015b). More importantly, the distribution of funding was not equal among regions, with the majority of government-funded schools located in central and east regions (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011).

Despite increased attention to enrollment and adding more schools and teachers, student proficiency outcomes nationally remain well below average. In 2011 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011), only 47.3 percent of male students had achieved the desired rating of proficiency in P3, along with 48.5 percent of females. In P6 the same years, student scores reflected 42 percent of boys reaching proficiency as compared to 40.6 percent of girls. The total repetition rate in primary schools P4 was 10.7 percent, with P6 reaching as high as 11.1 percent of all students repeating the grade level. The low student proficiency rates show that quality remains central to improving student outcomes, and just increasing the budget and adding the number of teachers or school buildings was not enough to improve student learning, especially when considering a wide-range of contexts and uneven distribution of resources.

This uneven distribution of resources is even more troubling in Uganda's northern regions, where the overall primary school repetition rates of both male and female students is as high as 15.9 percent. This is further affected by the highest percentage of students with special needs of any region of Uganda, at 3.1 percent of the total student enrollment of both male and female students (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011). Additionally, rural teachers in the north are much more likely to face substantially larger class sizes than their urban counterparts; with class sizes almost double the official ratio (1:50). Despite this relatively high ratio, the majority of primary classes in the northern regions in our site visits contained over

100 pupils, resulting in a more stressful and less productive classroom atmosphere (Spreen & Topher, 2013). This skewed distribution of qualified teachers across regions combined with the heavy burden of large class sizes has greatly affected learning achievement in northern primary schools, where teachers are more likely to lack support, additional training and incentives than in urban areas.

A Look at the Northern Region of Uganda

Rural regions in the north are faced with extreme isolation and post-insurgency effects. During the early 1980s, the beginnings of the Lord's Resistance Army were brought to life in the northern most regions of Uganda. Over two decades of war, the Lord's Resistance Army recruited tens of thousands of civilians, primarily between the ages of 12 and 23. Some abductees were forced to kill soldiers, civilians, "or even family members in order to bind them to the group" (Blattman & Annan, 2010). At the height of the conflict, nearly two million people in northern Uganda were displaced (US Dept. of State, 2012). Even though the Lord Resistance Army does not currently reside in northern Uganda any longer, member of the communities affected by the conflict are still rebuilding trust. Communities are also working to integrate young men and women abducted by the rebel group back into normal society, this even includes some older children who were recruited and participated in the atrocities that affected in the area (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

In regards to schooling, teachers throughout the country, but especially in the northern regions, are not provided adequate living conditions (including school and school infrastructure, electricity and water, and housing for teachers). Furthermore, schools lack teaching and learning materials (including textbooks, visual aids, teacher guides, learner support materials). Teachers in the rural north also are not given adequate opportunities to attend professional development, normally citing the distance is too far and/or they did they not funding to attend (Spreen & Topher, 2013); in addition, teacher deployment (e.g. mandatory movement school to school every three to five years) makes it difficult for teachers to build relationships in any given area. The lack of basic resources, lack of learning opportunities for teachers, and constant movement from school to school, highlights the need for well-targeted school-based interventions that also involve teachers from the local community in their design and planning. In doing this, lessons become purposeful in their themes, directly affecting and encouraging the skills and attributes necessary in these areas. This would simultaneously provide teachers the opportunity to become part of the curricular process, furthering their investment in the overall process and outcome.

Furthermore, gendered dimensions of teacher qualifications and placement, and in opportunities for ongoing professional development and training reflect the gender inequalities prevalent in the whole of Uganda society, with the majority of head teachers and teacher attending professional development opportunities being men (Spreen & Topher, 2013). As of 2013, less than half of all teachers in Uganda (41.7 percent) were female, and this was a significant jump from ten years prior when female teachers made up only 36 percent of total teachers in Uganda (UNESCO, 2015b). The north, especially, faces gender inequality. An area with a strong fidelity to traditional practices can interfere with implementation of educational initiatives looking to create gender balance as seen in the findings of this study (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

Quality Educators for All (QEA): Uganda

In 2007, the Quality Educators for All Initiative (QEA) in Uganda was developed in partnership with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWEU) Uganda Chapter,

Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) and Uganda National Teachers' Union (UNATU), which worked in close collaboration with the existing structures of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and Teacher Training institutes. The working committee included representatives from the MoES – Department of Teacher Education, National Curriculum Development Centre, Kyambogo University, and the Directorate of Education Standards. The project also involved a multi-stakeholder partnership, both nationally and internationally. This study was designed and funded to conduct baseline research on the QEA initiative with specific attention to the effects of contextual factors (political, social, economic, and geographical) on its implementation and effectiveness.

In order to specifically work on improving teacher quality, the QEA formed a partnership with the MoES to adopt and promote a Teacher Competence Profile, which defines the basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for primary school teachers to be effective. Various aspects of the TCP are discussed and evaluated elsewhere, but are not part of this article (Spreen & Topher, 2013). The profile focuses on competencies in four categories: knowledge competencies, skills competences, values and attitudes and professional ethics (Education International, 2012). It is worth noting that QEA sought to ensure that teachers were fully competent and could effectively use their skills to teach students how to help themselves out of poverty. The major thrust of the project was to strengthen the Ugandan teaching force through an improved teacher professional development and support system for implementing the new National Thematic Curriculum, which would contribute to the improvement of the quality of learning outcomes (broadly viewed) at the primary school level (Spreen & Topher, 2013). The dimensions and approaches to incorporating the new National Thematic Curriculum will be the focus of this study and the details of its rollout and teacher perceptions are discussed below.

In 2011-12 the National Thematic Curriculum was created as key component of QEA to address the broader dimensions of ensuring school quality (gender parity, social development, and culturally responsive language learning) into the classrooms. For this reason, we chose to focus on the aspects and understandings of curricular reform in relation to creating and implementing quality education. The National Thematic Curriculum (designed to address broad critical socio-cultural learning areas that would ensure the right to education – developing life skills, gender sensitivity and recognition of local languages), featured three separate curricula, including:

Life Skills (LS): A curriculum project that places great emphasis on how life skills assist facilitating pupils' transition into stable, healthy, and positive communities. This specific curriculum was created with the hope that students would be better able to engage in regular activities within society and develop positive relationships with their peers. In the case of northern regions, the curriculum ideally helps in socializing children taken from their families during the insurgency or were faced with violent situations, and who are now returning to the public school system. The QEA project favored a direct method approach that includes pupils learning the vocabulary as they also learn the skills. Given this, LS was developed to focus on areas, such as: skills of knowing and living with oneself (self-awareness, self-esteem, assertiveness, coping with emotions, and coping with stress), skills of knowing and living with others, life skills for making effective decisions, application of life skills in the world of work, and life skills as a tool for making good leaders. Topics within these areas ranged from friendship formation to critical thinking.

Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP): Ideally, this curriculum would encourage educators to modify their own practices as well as the school environment overall to be more inclusive of female students, and prevent negative self-awareness from holding female students

back from achieving academically. The handbook not only describes the theory behind what teachers are expected to do, but also gives guidance on what to do to make sure that their school is gender responsive. Applying this gender responsiveness across the entire school requires being proactive. Schools would have to be able to provide an environment that facilitates learning for both boys and girls. In addition, teaching practices and parity in terms of access to activities. Some possible activities could include were gender-neutral access to sports, sweeping, fetching water, and even public speaking.

<u>Implementation Strategy for Advocacy of Local Languages, or Mother Tongue Language (MT):</u> This curriculum was introduced because of the significant linguistic differences in the languages used throughout Uganda. Ideally, the use of local language would be integrated in all P1-P3 classrooms, with P4 as the transition year familiarizing students to English-only education. The following years of schooling would be conducted solely in English, with local languages offered as subjects.

The theory of change behind the QEA, and the corresponding National Thematic Curriculum, is that the skills learned will help students to be better equipped for participation in society and the workplace later in life. In a deeper sense, the baseline assumptions for this implementation study are that in order to teach students these skills, teachers themselves must possess them, making it necessary that they learn and live by these skills and values as well (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

The curriculum implementation was coordinated with National Curriculum Development Centre in Uganda and published in combination with the competency profile and six other teaching guides during 2011 and 2012. Workshops were held in the capital, Kampala and then through a series of regional workshops held in Mbarara, Mbale, Gulu and Kampala, to train, market and provide content for the curriculum. Approximately 323 participants attended the workshops, including teachers, tutors, district chairpersons, union and non-profit staff. The books distributed were documented by partner organizations as 8000 Teacher Competency Profiles, 8,500 copies of the MT, 4,200 copies of the GRP and 8,500 copies of the paired LS curriculum and teacher handbooks (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

Two teachers from each school in participating districts were selected to attend trainings on LS, GRP or MT. The teachers received training guides and limited teaching materials, and then returned to their schools to share what they learned. The model involved a roll-down cascade training process by which the teachers that attended the training were asked to teach their fellow primary school teachers the skills needed in order to implement the new curricula. Booklets when available were stored in the 'library' (or book storeroom) upon return to the school (Spreen & Topher, 2013).

Methodology

The study[2] drew extensively on a larger mixed-methods evaluation study, which consisted of surveys, interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and document reviews. Facts and figures were reported in the surveys data, and then interviews, focus group discussions, and observations allowed for triangulation to develop benchmarks. Evaluation report findings were then ultimately used to develop indicators that tracked teacher progress and measured the impact of professional development initiatives over the duration of the project. The lead researcher of this study was one of the authors of this article.

The baseline survey (Appendix A) was distributed to 40 QEA selected schools (out of 64

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[2] This was part of a commissioned evaluation study of QEA, funded by Educational International (EI). More information regarding EI and QEA may be found here: https://www.ei-ie.org/en/.

pilot schools) who were participating in the pilot program in four target districts of northern Uganda: Apac, Amolatar, Gulu and Pader. Purposive sampling was used for the survey and interviews because information rich respondents had a good sense of the purpose and status of the project. The 40 schools were chosen based on multiple criteria including: physically located in terms of suitably and accessibility, participation in the QEA training on the QEA National Thematic Curriculum, balanced gender leadership at school level, and no connection or participation in other projects controlled by other organizations. The survey helped describe areas such as: school environment, teacher knowledge, teacher professional development/training opportunities, and implementation of the National Thematic Curriculum. The research team distributed surveys to the head teacher of each school, and to between six and ten additional teachers who were available when surveys were distributed. Ultimately, 292 surveys were collected (252 teachers and 40 head teachers); those surveyed were teachers, head teachers, and deputy teachers. The majority of the teachers surveyed were males with only 29 percent being females (largely representative of the overall teaching population).

Of the forty schools selected to participate in the study, 14 schools were visited for in-depth on-site interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The 14 observation sites were located in the districts of Gulu and Pader (six and eight schools, respectively). Each visit was a minimum of a half-day long and permitted researchers to access the school grounds, classrooms, offices, and examine pupils' work and teachers' lessons. The grounds and amenities were mapped to determine accessibility. At some of the observation sites, researchers were able to interview both the head of school as well as the deputy head, while also conducting focus groups with teachers. However, at other sites visited, only administrators could be interviewed due to a conflict in school schedule that didn't allow teachers to participate in focus groups. A total of 36 individual interviews were conducted with 19 teachers, 13 head teachers and/or their deputies, two union officials, and two District Education Officers.

An interview protocol was followed (Appendix B) and the interviews helped provide detailed contextual realities and empowered individuals to comment on issues, concerns, and understanding of QEA and their own needs to implement it properly. The interviews tried to establish whether their was a disconnect between teachers' own perceptions of themselves, their work and their learners. More importantly, these interviews sought to study these teachers' unique learning environment and how it impacted their approaches to teaching. Teachers were asked to provide example lesson plans and scheme of their work. All interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to emerging themes and topical issues. For this article specifically, the coding focused primarily on contextual factors mentioned by teachers and head teachers, as well as comments regarding the National Thematic Curriculum in relation to contextual factors. While many themes emerged, some of consistent themes included: the need for life skills for children affected by the insurgency, coping with inadequate resources and infrastructure, and a clear disconnect between what national policy believes is essential in schooling versus what teachers in the rural northern regions believe is important for their pupils.

In regards to focus groups, in total, 12 teachers at two schools in Gulu participated in focus groups. The research team chose specific teachers with an interest in, or knowledge of, the QEA project and National Thematic Curriculum. A focus group interview protocol and checklist was used (Appendix C). Each focus group helped create a detailed narrative about the teachers' lives and working conditions, details of the school (in their own words), classroom and teaching experiences, and illuminate issues mentioned on the initial survey.

Furthermore, approximately 20 classroom observations were conducted between both Gulu and Pader. A classroom observation protocol and checklist was used (Appendix D).

Classroom observations examined curriculum implementation, teaching practices, support needs, availability of materials and textbooks, and general working conditions. Each observer mapped classroom layout, teacher position, flow of lecture, desk layout, and pupils' behavior. The number of desks, books, pupils, and visual aids were noted.

The concentration of the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations were on: 1) teacher characteristics, 2) teachers' professional development needs, 3) understanding of teacher competencies and use of the teacher competency profile, 4) promotion of life skills by teachers in line with the Life Skills Curriculum, knowledge and use of GRP as well as knowledge and attitudes around using local languages as a medium of instruction, 5) detailing the current teacher-deployment practices and working conditions, and 6) exploring teacher-support systems and continuing needs. For the sake of this article, we will be focusing on item number 1, 4, 5, and 6, as well as examining the knowledge and use of MT.

This mix-method approach allowed researchers, including the author, to fully understand the historical and contextual significance in this area of Uganda and how they both contribute to this idea of a "quality"; specifically, in regards to, knowledge and implement of the National Thematic Curriculum. It is for these reasons that the study set out to establish whether teachers and curriculum planners shared similar goals and understanding in regard to the need for building teaching competencies around life skills, gender and local languages in particular teaching contexts.

Findings

Overcoming hurdles of the past insurgency, coping with inadequate resources and materials, incorporating changes in curriculum reform, and the changing role and responsibilities of teachers has greatly effected how teachers experience and carry out their jobs and educate an ever-growing student population in northern Uganda. More specifically, the findings from this study show how context greatly impacts education quality, particularly teachers' ability, effectiveness, and willingness to implement QEA's National Thematic Curriculum. This finding reveals a stark and unfortunate disconnect between the needs and observations of the teachers versus what the government and policy-makers on the national level are obligated to provide to ensure quality education within the northern region. For example, teachers raised complaints common to under-resourced schools: lack of teacher accommodation, inadequate salary, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of resources—however, other complaints were unique to the context of northern Uganda, specifically the post-conflict environment created by the past insurgency and its general isolation. All teachers interviewed mentioned regional marginalization and post-conflict contextual factors that hinder their ability to provide quality education.

When asked about their ability to deliver and the effectiveness of each unit of the National Thematic Curriculum (LS, MT, or GRP), teachers responded with both positive and negative reactions. Within these negative reactions, our analysis demonstrated that regional contextual factors in northern Uganda greatly impact teachers' ability to implement the National Thematic Curriculum. Yet the same contextual factors also contributed to teachers' beliefs that providing a *respectful and non-discriminatory curriculum* (e.g. through gender-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches and attending to life skills) through use of the National Thematic Curriculum is vastly important given the under-resourced, post-insurgent context of northern Uganda (e.g. life skills for children affected by the insurgency).

General Knowledge of National Thematic Curriculum

According to survey respondents a significant number of teachers (66 percent) had

heard about the National Thematic Curriculum, with a fair proportion (58 percent) reportedly trained in the curriculum's use and implementation. However, only slightly more than half (52 percent) had actually seen the National Thematic Curriculum resources; in addition, only about a third (31 percent) had actually used the curriculum in their classrooms, notably due to lack of professional training or inadequate resources. Those who knew about the National Thematic Curriculum reported learning about it mainly in their respective schools and from trainings provided by their coordinating centre tutors (CCTs) and government bodies (MoES). However, the majority of those trained were head teachers, more susceptible to transferring out of rural schools, and male teachers who could afford to attend training in more urban areas. The survey results indicated that on average 76 percent of teachers who were able to attend training deemed it "adequate"; however, a worrying 24 percent found it "not adequate".

According to those interviewed, teachers who received training also wished for more onsite support and ongoing training in the new curriculum units. For teachers in more remote locations, trainings usually occurred in the towns far away so very few could attend. Organizations hosting trainings on the National Thematic Curriculum frequently conducted them over holidays, and often they lasted more than a week. This posed a problem and additional challenges for female teachers, who are the primary caregivers in their families. Those with children or elderly parents could not travel to attend trainings for extended periods. When trainings were held during the school day, limited time and resources generally meant that schools could only send 2-5 teachers at a time and the students were left either without a teacher or with a substitute teacher, if available, for a partial portion of the time.

Trainings relied on the cascade model where teachers learned the content and returned to teach and share it with their fellow teachers in a roll-down or cascade fashion. Ideally, everyone would learn the concepts, but fairly frequently this was not the case. Newer teachers missed these roll-down trainings (due to being unable to attend trainings), and older ones often came from districts where the NTC trainings had not been held (due to constant teacher mobility school-to-school). While the QEA project trainings were the most frequently referenced type of trainings northern Ugandan teachers attended; a significant number of teachers had still never- attended trainings because they had not been in the four target districts during their prior district assignments (e.g. due to frequent deployment and school transfers).

Life Skills

The LS component of the National Thematic Curriculum was found to be the most known and positively enforced of all three areas. Almost all of the surveyed teachers (98.3 percent) reported that they believed it was important to promote life skills in learners, particularly in the northern regions, and the majority of teacher surveyed (63 percent) also noted training in some type of life skills through teacher training courses. However, only one in four teachers (25 percent) reported to have been oriented to the new LS Curriculum, instead relying on their own knowledge of what they consider "life skills" necessary for students. This statement was further supported by classroom observations of the LS Curriculum. In terms of lesson plans and schemes, it was uniform for teachers to include "Life Skills" yet the level of understanding of the key concepts in practice seemed lacking.

Teachers, almost unanimously, cited the LS Curriculum as vital for students in the northern region. This is because students still suffer from the militaristic socialization they received in the bush life during the insurgency, requiring special care both in-and-out of the classroom. These students require more than reintegration into society. Instead, the teachers believed that the community needed to work as a whole to overcome this damaging past and

work towards a different future. However, it also became apparent teachers didn't think that those outside the northern region (e.g. union members, policy makers, government officials) understood the challenges on-the-ground teachers faced. One teacher summed it to:

> "I blame their problems [the schools] on the 20-year insurgency. We all [this entire community] need support. We were all directly affected by the war. They don't see what we have been through. They don't know what we have and don't have…if the government wants results [from schools], they need to give us love and care." (Teacher, Gulu)

Teachers educate high numbers of orphaned children in the northern region; Gulu and Pader were especially affected by the fighting. Students and teachers remember the violence and destructiveness that came with the Lord's Resistance Army and its destruction. Some schools themselves were used as barracks during the heat of the fighting. At one of the Gulu schools, one in every five students was an orphan. These student orphans are at particular high risk for malnourishment, lack school supplies (and PTA fees) and uniforms, and spend less time focusing on their studies. As teachers in the study explained, the war affected all members of the community, orphaning students who now have higher levels of obligations at home. Many times this results in students not attending school and working instead, because they are responsible for the livelihood of themselves and their siblings at home.

Given this, multiple teachers expressed various ways that LS Curriculum can help with this high-risk population of students. One teacher mentions:

> "Because of the war and their experiences, children have to develop. Schools have to show how to behave, respond to situations and think." (Teacher, Gulu)

The teacher clearly believes that the skills and concepts taught through life skills will help students learn behaviors to positively succeed in society. Furthermore, another teacher mentioned LS Curriculum as a way to educate students on self-awareness:

> "Uses LS in the teaching of her classes, self-awareness happens when students are learning vocabulary and they decide if they exhibit those words, or for story-telling, they pick up on terms and themes." (Head Teacher, Pader)

While another mentioned LS Curriculum as a key way to specifically help those students who were militaristically socialized during the insurgency:

> "…make sense because skills in classroom help in being discipline because some are violent. Some have low self esteem. They get high self esteem. Counseling what happened in past helped quite a bit…they need help making decisions on how to live." (Head Teacher, Gulu)

Through the interviews, a strong connection between LS curriculum and its benefit on students in the northern regions is made clear. The curriculum serves as way to develop social skills, self-awareness, and self-discipline; principles found valuable by the teachers' interviewed. Teachers believed that the unit, when known and trained properly, could serve as a major positive influence on the children in the area.

Mother Tongue Language

Similarly to LS Curriculum, MT was created to help with the ethnic tensions among various groups due to the insurgency. The curriculum's goal was to give validation to all languages; however, as many teachers cited, it also created a system wherein each linguistic group would need its own curriculum for lower primary school. This was a problem for teachers' in the northern regions for three key reasons: resources, training, and motivation.

Firstly, the most frequent complaints by native speakers of the local languages were that materials for teaching the local languages as a medium of instruction were largely unavailable, and, if available, they are poorly translated and educators needed to re-write or edit many of the materials. Nearly 39 percent of respondents cited having inadequate or lack of reference books for the local language. One teacher remarked:

> "The problem with MT is that in town, there are too many different languages; you need to facilitate teachers using this curriculum if you expect them to use it, because it requires a lot of extra work from teachers since the curriculum is still in English." (Teacher, Pader)

More importantly than lacking resources, the survey found that more than half (54 percent) of the teachers were untrained in the use of local languages for teaching, and those who did obtain training found it inadequate for dealing with in-class circumstances. As this is a new policy, training for the local language has not been fully built into teacher preparation, making it a "on the ground" learning experience for the majority of teachers.

The last factor affecting the success of the MT curriculum was teacher motivation. Many teachers surveyed felt limited motivation to take on local languages, unlike their own primary language, due to frequent school transfers (about every two to three years). Between 2010 and 2012, a total of 142 teachers had left their schools. This was mainly attributed to normal transfers and retirements. However, there were also rare cases of disciplinary action against or dismissal of teachers, and others who merely decided to move elsewhere due to delayed and low salaries and poor working conditions. According to teachers in Amolatar, 49 percent surveyed answered that they do not use local languages in their teaching, followed by 48 percent in Apac, 45 percent in Pader, and 44 percent in Gulu.

Based on the interviews, this constant transitioning from school to school was seen as positive by some teachers wishing to move from their current school (normally because of poor conditions or salary), but for others this policy was challenging. Many teachers interviewed wished to remain in a school for a longer period of time in order to "become part of the school community", "buy land", or build and invest in a home. Part of becoming "part of the school community" is in part learning the local language; because teachers were transferred often they lacked motivation to learn the local language and instead mainly taught in their own given language.

Regardless of the hindering contextual factors listed above, half of all teachers interviewed and an even higher number of head teachers (82 percent) recommended that teachers be encouraged to teach in local languages, citing that it helped students "learn faster" and relate to it well. This directly conflicted with the cited use of the curriculum unit and general lack of enthusiasm to implement it.

Gender Responsive Pedagogy

It was ascertained by the interviews that more than a half of teachers (56 percent) and head teachers (54 percent) had not been trained on any GRP. This is in sharp contrast with MT

and LS, which were more recognizable to participants. It was also found that, as with the LS training, those who accessed gender-responsiveness training did so during their training in teaching college.

The general demographics of the northern regions of Uganda made GRP especially important. While in P1 and P2 there are more female students than male students, this number reverses in P6 and P7, with more male students than female students, approximately 1.22M:1F and 1.35M:1F, respectively. The reasons for this breakdown were cited as: lack of water at school, lack of sanitary equipment/materials, lack of female teachers, distance to school, cultural preferences and other duties at home. For example, young girls who lacked water for washing, sanitary pads, or a change of clothing were main obstacles contributing to missing school.

Nonetheless, teachers and head teachers believed GRP helped address issues of gender inequality, which in the northern regions of Uganda is essential given the traditional community gender roles. As one teacher stated during an interview:

> "For me, gender issues are difficult to handle, as we have a culture that talks of things that contradict the place of girls and women. For example, women should be submissive. If we talk of equality, leadership and doing things that make girls like boys, the parents ask, "What are you teaching my child? Why are you teaching them to be disrespectful? If I leave the culture and go by the curriculum, it is against the parents wishes and creates a conflict." (Teacher, Apac)

Since parents and adults in the community regard gender roles as set, the GRP has the possibility to break through these stereotypes and successfully encourage female leadership and confidence. However, to accomplish this, traditional gender roles need to be changed, which can be difficult given the current culture of the area.

In terms of implementation of gender responsiveness in classrooms, most teachers (64 percent) who had been trained in this approach were attempting implementation. This was done by alternatively involving both boys and girls in the lesson, having both boys and girls share desks, and requiring both boys and girls to participate in gendered activities. Teachers expressed their support and understanding of gender-responsive practices in their classrooms. Some additional activities included gender-neutral access to sports, sweeping, fetching water, and even public speaking. Some teachers expanded GRP to involve class prefects of both genders in order to promote women in roles of leadership. A head teacher, who knew about GRP and had integrated it into the curriculum, stated:

> "When we talk about gender, it makes a different to their behavior. Girls' involvement in school activities makes them not be shy or feel they can't do something. Now, girls come to school and know they are important to the school and to society." (Head Teacher, Amolatar).

If done properly, those interviewed believed that the curriculum could assist with gender inequalities on the teacher-level as well. While schools in the cities or large towns have more of a 1:1 gender breakdown, those in rural areas have an average of approximately three male teachers for every female teacher. This is normally contributed to negative feelings about safety and security for women in the northern regions. The GRP, as stated by those interviewed, not only broke down barriers with students in the classroom, but also positively affected the self-

esteem of the female teachers, making them feel more comfortable to speak up during discussions and share responsibilities with male counterparts.

More Support of Rural Teachers

Another leading factor mentioned by both teachers and head teachers in the study that affected quality teaching and the implementation of the QEA National Thematic Curriculum was the poor/lack of accommodation for teachers within or near schools. Lack of accommodations forces teachers to travel long distances, normally on bicycles on unfinished roads (three to 12km) to work, and in many cases caused incidents of teachers' absenteeism. The survey in the study found that about 58 percent of teachers and 81 percent of head teachers were provided accommodation within the school (albeit much of it substandard clay housing with thatched roof and no water or electricity); however, this also meant that a large proportion of teachers (42 percent) were currently not accommodated. Furthermore, a fairly high proportion (74 percent) of teachers were not entitled to any type of hardship allowance/incentive apart from base salary, which in Uganda is already relatively low (at about UGX200,000/month or USD$57.14/month). One teacher commented:

> "I hate being a teacher. Despite qualifying as Grade III, I'm the poorest person I know. I became a teacher because I like young children and I want them to become better, but the challenges I face in life everyday make me hate teaching. Our salary is low, our working conditions are very poor, our classrooms are hectic with too many learners. All the time, your mind is worrying about these things!" (Teacher, Gulu)

Teachers would prefer to be focused on providing quality education to their students, but as this teacher notes, attention is normally focused on challenges faced by teachers such as poor working conditions, low salaries, and overcrowding of classrooms. Some teachers mentioned possible solutions, including providing a "hard to reach allowance" for working in remote areas; these allowances would help with food, transportation, and funds to attend professional development in urban areas. Unfortunately, only a mere 26 percent of teachers in the study have access to these incentives, the rest are left without. This jockeying for position and remuneration leaves many teachers feeling like commodities of the government. They feel like the governments acts as a private business and is failing to provide "upgrades" to their teachers. This translates into a lack of respect and trust between teachers, communities and government. A teacher noted:

> "The government looks at this like it is business, like a private investment. It [the government] should help teachers go and study freely to upgrade to a diploma. Our salaries are too low to pay for our own education. (Teacher, Pader)

While another teacher called for respect and remuneration:

> "For us to admire our profession, others need to respect us. Why are teachers so poor when we work so hard?…If we are bringing up the children and…we need good conditions and respect. (Teacher, Gulu)

The northern regions more remote villages' lack of proximity to NGOs and their additional resources compound all the feelings of isolation. Most northern schools visited were well

outside the perimeter of help designated by the NGOs community (largely outside of the 20km perimeter around Gulu) with little access to government resources and professional development training possibilities. This general isolation also made it difficult to recruit seasoned and highly qualified teachers, and most specifically female teachers, to very rural and remote schools.

Discussion

The guiding focus of this study was to investigate how contextual factors faced by primary school teachers in Uganda impacted quality education. Using a rights-based framework the study reveals that teachers work environments, are important factors to be addressed through the implementation of initiatives focusing on education quality (such as QEA and its corresponding curriculum). Specifically we argue that the knowledge, training and attitudes of teachers in implementing the LS, GRP, and MT units profoundly influenced their beliefs about the roles and responsibilities (duties and obligations) of teachers in bringing about a quality education, yet, we found that many of the teachers' experiences with and opinions of the curriculum were compounded by regional contextual factors, specifically the impact of the recent insurgency and generally poor working conditions in northern region.

The findings showed that despite increased attention to quality education through a new and contextually relevant curriculum, improving primary schools in northern Uganda will not be possible without first tackling the major obstacles that are hindering rural teachers—local contextual factors, both in the community (e.g. post-insurgency) and those within schools (e.g. lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, etc.). We do, however, recognize that the ideas and interests promoted through the QEA and the National Thematic Curriculum are laudable and many of these concepts and approaches have begun to gain resonance with teachers, who believe once trained properly and with proper resources, could positively affect their pupils. Many felt these new policy priorities offer a relevant strategy for addressing many of the factors and challenges teachers in the north face (e.g. past insurgency, ethnic tensions).

However, regardless of relevancy and appropriateness, teachers in our study shared multiple obstacles and challenges to implementing the curriculum and promoting quality education, such as: lack of materials, inadequate training, frequent teacher transfers, traditional community ideals, and general isolation. Most significantly, despite efforts at cascade training and providing outreach materials to most schools, a large percentage of teachers still weren't aware of the curriculum, hadn't yet been trained, or even seen the materials; this is potentially due to the gender and power dynamics over who attends trainings and receives information, the distances within districts and regions to training sites, the general isolation of schools, and teachers' inability to access transportation. We suggest instead of using the cascade "if you build it they will come" approach, collaborative partnerships between unions and NGOs with government, regional and district officials could provide increased training opportunities, along with financial incentives and transportation to and from sites would better ensure reaching and supporting teachers.

This study also confirms that teachers, a key component for all quality education initiatives, must be given a voice in the policy process to raise concerns about the constraints and solutions to improving quality, along with the adequate resources, proper training and opportunity to successfully implement this programming. Such understanding offers those responsible for professional development and curriculum reform an opportunity to look at the on-the-ground needs of teachers to ensure that they are relevant, targeted and meaningful to teachers working in unique context of northern Ugandan schools.

Limitations

While our analysis provides an opportunity to view on the ground curricular reform, there are still limitations that must be mentioned. First and foremost, this study is part of a broader evaluation study commissioned and funded by one of the major creators of QEA. The research team, however, was independent of the organization. Additionally, the data within this article is limited to only northern Uganda and the rollout and implementation of QEA in this specific region. If more regions were observed, contextual factors would in all likelihood change and teachers' opinions of QEA could shift given this change in environment. Lastly, the project is currently still ongoing. So, while our findings provide a narrative of the qualitative information gathered as part of an evaluation study; conclusive data about the impact on students in classrooms is unknown at this time. Despite these limitations, we still believe this data provides insight to others regarding teachers' experience with curricular reform and allows for teachers to voice their concerns and opinions regarding how, or how not, the QEA curricular unit allows for quality education in this region of Uganda.

Conclusion

Research recognizes that it is the poorest and most disadvantaged communities that shoulder the heaviest burdens in getting access and opportunities to learn in a rich and relevant learning environments (UNESCO, 2015a). And in our study of the northern region of Uganda where communities are still recovering from the past violence of the insurgency, teachers have explained why learners are much less likely to receive this type of quality education.

The rights-based lens through which we understand education quality and the QEA initiative, underscores the point that education is a human right with the particular view of rights "in, to and through" education (Tomaševski, 2003). Narrowly defined educational productivity measures normally used to determine education quality are completely in opposition to defining a quality public education as a fundamental human right. We started this article arguing that creating the conditions for a quality education must go beyond measuring the narrow contents of learning – beyond rote memorization and testing of basic skills - to encourage the development of a respectful and non-discriminatory curriculum, critical and creative thinking skills, application of learning to real world situations, as well as, improving the well-being, personal development and social engagement of students. The guiding vision for QEA is to provide schooling experience where learners can demonstrate the breadth and depth of culturally relevant and gender-sensitive knowledge, skills, and understandings that critically necessary for success in society and the world. Learning how to improve the quality of their lives and preparing students through local languages and gender responsive curriculum should be first and foremost a classroom-based practice that is understood and driven by teachers and guided by the National Thematic Curriculum.

However when viewing quality through a "rights-based lens," the continued issues of poverty and inequality in Uganda draws our attention to the complex realities on the ground and in the classrooms. The problem with many of the global quality education measures and indicators is a reductionist view of education, wherein outcomes are based exclusively on limited standardized tests (reading performance and numeracy scores). These ignore important variables (as described throughout the article) that also impact learning. We recognize that measuring learning achievement in practice is extremely challenging, especially if there is an attempt to do justice to the full spectrum of skills and knowledge acquired through a quality education. However, in contrast to narrowly defined "global learning metrics" that tend to focus on standardized units of outcomes and measures, we instead emphasize the importance of

supporting teachers and recognizing their central role in understanding, implementing and improving quality education for all initiatives.

This study of teachers understandings, knowledge and roles in developing the National Thematic Curriculum as it aims to promote "quality education for all" is useful in showing the way that regional contextual factors for these specific teachers can both encourage the implementation of policy reforms (e.g. "life-skills" due to the past insurgency, "mother-tongue approaches" due to ethnic tensions and lack of social cohesion, or "gender responsive classrooms" due to gender inequality), but also hinder teachers in successfully carrying out reforms (e.g. lack of proper resources, training, teacher transfer). This study highlights that not all school contexts are equal; the community around a school, the school's accessibility, visibility, and leadership all exert some subtle influence on the support to teachers and resourcing for schools. Issues that face rural and conflict-effected areas such as inadequate housing, lack of transportation for teachers, limited teaching and learning materials, and poor classroom and working conditions also served as barriers to promoting quality schooling in the northern region of Uganda.

While the literature has made clear that teacher ideologies and perceptions are important and ought to be taken into account in the formation of professional development programs, this is also not being done. This study identified clear gaps that must be addressed if the QEA initiative can improve the instructional practices, address the challenges teachers face, and understand how teachers' understandings and beliefs about these issues are playing out in northern Ugandan rural schools. It is also evident that despite consensus on the importance of professional development in improving instructional practices, the distance (real and metaphorical) from the government, teacher training colleges and unions to teachers in the northern region of Uganda, has meant that few structures are in place to ensure teachers, whose need is the most, have ready access. Particularly in northern Uganda, the need for on-site and ongoing professional development programs are acute since primary schools are not only remote but also are often characterized by poverty, under-resourcing, and have been conflict affected. Where greater fidelity to traditional practices (that may at times conflict with new curriculum and teaching methods such as life skills, gender responsiveness and use of mother-tongue languages) challenges in implementing "active" teaching and learning are confounded by a lack of material resources and poor and overcrowded working conditions. While the current study did not seek to evaluate the merits of active teaching and learning pedagogies, it however sought to understand the assumptions and challenges that teachers face when attempting to implementing QEA's National Thematic Curriculum.

Finally, this mixed methods study of school-based surveys, research and observations was aimed particularly at capturing the deeper social characteristics that frame education policy reform and implementation. Exploring the schooling context - the diversity of its composition, its history, language, culture, traditions, and teachers' own beliefs and experiences – very clearly frames how and whether quality for all can be achieved in rural and under-resourced communities. Through in-depth descriptive research we illuminated the critical importance of historical and contextual understanding of what counts and what matters for teachers and what is needed to develop "quality education for all".

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Author Bios

Carol Anne Spreen is an associate professor of International Education at New York University and a Visiting Professor at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. Her scholarship and policy work focus on issues of school quality and education reform. For the last 20 years she has worked on issues of poverty, inequality and human rights in education both domestically and internationally, and equity based reforms in the US, Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Her current research addresses three areas: (1) teachers lives and work, i.e. understanding how international policies and organizations impact teachers and classroom practice; (2) defining educational quality and school achievement through a rights-based framework, and; (3) the global impact of corporate privatization on educational equity. She is currently working on two book projects: teachers' lives and work in rural African schools and teachers' global mobilization and resistance to the privatization of education. Dr. Spreen's research has been published in a variety of leading peer-reviewed academic journals (*Comparative Education Review, Comparative Education* and the *International Journal of Education Development, Southern African Review of Education* and *Perspectives in Education*), in peer-reviewed book chapters, and in several monographs or as published proceedings from various consultative groups. She has taught courses with an international and policy studies foci. Dr. Spreen received her Ph.D. in Comparative and International Education/Policy Studies from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Jillian J. Knapczyk is a junior research scientist within New York University's Literacy, Technology, and Culture Lab. She is one of the primary qualitative researchers, working largely on projects that normally revolve around literacy and early childhood education in underresourced areas within the United States. Jillian graduated from New York University with a MA in International Education—her specialization split between education and international development, and the globalization of education. At graduation, she was awarded both the departmental leadership award and the school-wide Samuel Eshborn Service Award for superlative service and values of strong leadership within NYU Steinhardt. Prior to attending NYU, Jillian received a BA in English from Northern Illinois University, while also obtaining her 6-12th grade teacher certification. She transitioned to research and policy to further her knowledge of creating curriculum and educational reform that promotes teacher professionalism and equitable, quality education for all children.

Appendix 1: Sample Teacher Survey

SECTION A: BASIC INFORMATION
1. Name of school: ....
2. Government Aided: .... Private Owned: ....
Sub County: .... Parish: .... District: ....
3. Responsibility (tick what is appropriate):
□ Classroom Teacher □ Head Teacher o Deputy Head/Teacher □ Other (specify)
4. Gender of respondent: □ Male □ Female
5. Subjects that you teach: ....

SECTION B: TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL NEEDS
1. How many teachers are on your staff list according to gender?
2. What is your qualification?

Number Male	Number Female	Total	Expected Teacher Ceiling

Graduate Diploma in Primary School Teaching	Grade V	Grade IV	Grade III	Grade II	Licensed	Other

3. Have you attended any professional development training? Yes / No If yes, fill in the table below:

Type/s of Training	Duration of Training in Days	Training Provided by (indicate whether govt, NGO, or private sector)

4. If you have attended training, do you consider the training as beneficial or not? □ Yes □ No
5. How has the professional development training impacted on your professional growth?
....
....
....
6. What factors hinder/facilitate your participation in professional development activities?
....
....
7. What can be done to enhance teachers' participation in professional development activities?
....
....
....
8. Mention the various competencies that a teacher is required to exhibit?
a. ....
b...
9. Do you have knowledge of the existing Teacher Competence Profile of the Ministry of Education and Sports?

□ Yes □ No,   If yes, how did you get the information? Tick the appropriate

☐ Ministry ☐ DEO ☐ Head Teacher o NGO

10. What are the existing mechanisms for supervision and feedback on your performance as a teacher? ....
....
....

11. Have you undergone any form of supervision and been given feedback on your performance?

☐ Yes ☐ No

12. How often are you supervised and given feedback on your performance?

☐ Annually ☐ Every Term ☐ Monthly ☐ Not at all

13. Who supervises you? ....

14. How does the supervision impact on your professional needs as a teacher?
....
....
....

15. How can the supervision feedback mechanisms be improved?
....
....
....

16. A) Have you heard about or seen, used, been trained on the thematic curriculum? If you have more than one answer, tick the appropriate ☐ Seen ☐ Heard ☐ Used ☐ Trained

• If seen, from where? ....

• If trained, by whom? ....

• If trained, what was the duration of the training? ....

• What was the form of the training? ....

 • Who provided the training? ....

• How adequate was the training? Rank from 0-5 and tick the appropriate ☐0☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5

B) Do you teach life skills to the learners? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, mention some of the life skills that you have taught the learners. Have you seen, heard, used, been trained on the Life Skills' curriculum for Primary teachers in Uganda?

☐ Seen ☐ Heard ☐ Used ☐ Trained

• If seen, from where? ....

• If trained, by whom? ....

• If trained, what was the duration of the training? ....

• What was the form of the training? ....

• Who provided the training? ....

• How adequate was the training? Rank from 0-5 and tick the appropriate ☐0☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5

17. Have you trained on gender-based pedagogy? ☐Yes ☐No
If yes, where and by whom and for how long?

Where	Trained By	Duration of Training

18. Are you trained to teach using the mother tongue? o Yes o No If yes, where and by whom and for how long?

Where	Trained by	Duration of Training

19. Should teachers be encouraged to teach in the mother tongue? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, why?

....

....

....

If no, why not? ....

....

....

20. What are the challenges of teaching and learning using the mother tongue?

....

....

....

21. Rate your knowledge of learner-centred teaching methods (Rank from 0-5 and tick the appropriate) □0□1□2□3□4□5

Where	Trained by	Duration of training

22. Give examples of some of the learner-centred techniques/methods

....

....

....

23. Rate your capacity to produce own teaching materials (on a scale of 0-5 and tick the appropriate) □0□1□2□3□4□5

24. Do you have any challenges in developing your own teaching materials?

□ Yes □ No

If yes, what are the challenges?

....

....

....

SECTION C: TEACHER DEPLOYMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS

1.   What are your terms of employment? (tick the appropriate)   □ Permanent □ Contract □ Temporary □ Other

2. Do you have an appointment letter? □ Yes □ No

3. How many teachers have left the school in the last three years?

2010	2011	2012	Reasons for Leaving

4. What are the factors affecting teacher attendance?

....

....

....

5. Are you accommodated at school? □ Yes □ No

6. Are you entitled to any type of incentive or allowance apart from salary? □ Yes □ No

If yes, what is the form of incentive or allowance?

....

....

....

7. Are there enough female teachers in the school? o Yes o No If no, what are the reasons?

....

....

....
SECTION D: TEACHER SUPPORT MECHANISMS
1. Do you receive any administrative and pedagogical support? o Yes o No
If yes, who provides this support?
....
....
....
2. Do you receive any kind of support from the head teacher, inspectors and CCT?
☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, what type of support and how many times last year?

Source of Support	Type of Support	Number of Times
Head Teacher		
CCT		
Inspector		

3. How do you rate the support on a scale of 1-5? Tick the appropriate ☐0☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5
4. Where else do you receive administrative and pedagogical support from?
....
....
....
5. Is there a SMC for the school? ☐Yes ☐ No
6. What is their role in relation to teacher support?
....
....
....
7. What teacher support interventions have they undertaken over the last year?
....
....
....
8. What challenges do they have in planning, organising and implementing school-based
teacher support interventions?
....
....
....
Appendix 2: Sample Teacher Interview
I. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
Name: .... Gender: ....
Grade levels taught: .... Years teaching: .... Training/Qualification
levels: ....
1. Where did you train for your teaching certificate?
2. Where are you originally from? And what is your home language?
3. Where do you live now in relation to the school? (Is housing provided?)
4. What languages do you speak? (What languages are you expected to use in class? Do you
      strictly go by this language policy, or do you use other languages in class?)
II. TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND WORKING CONDITIONS
5. Why did you become a teacher?

6. How long have you been teaching? What is your area of specialisation?
7. How would you rate yourself (on a scale of 1-5) on the following:

    content knowledge (relationship of curriculum with learning needs)

    pedagogical knowledge (child-friendly approaches, phasing methods, use of teaching aids, etc.)

    professional knowledge (laws, rights and responsibilities of teachers)   •contemporary knowledge (current issues, trends, debates in education 4. How did you end up teaching in this school? How long have you been at this school?

5. Do you plan to continue teaching in this school? For how long?
6. What classes and other subject areas do you teach and have you taught before?
7. Briefly, describe your experience teaching in this school.   • What do you like most about teaching in this particular school and context?   • What are the greatest challenges about teaching and working in this environment
8. What social services, amenities, etc. are available to you and the school community around the school (clinics, post, transportation, public service offices)?
9. Do you consider poverty or the war to have had an effect on your learners today? If so, how?

III. CLASSROOM RESOURCES

1. Do you have enough textbooks and/or learning materials for use in your class?
2. Do you have chalk, pens/pencils, paper, notebooks, textbooks (dates), other materials (tape, glue, scissors, rulers, protractors)?
3. Do you produce your own teaching materials? If so, please describe (get a copy if possible).
4. Do you use any visual aids in your classrooms? Is pupils' work visible in the classroom?

5. How often do you use other materials outside your primary manual for teaching?
6. Do you use lesson plans/class notes? Do you write plans on the board? How often (if possible, get examples)?
7. How many books are present in the school library? What type of technology exists in the school (computers, phones, typewriters, radios)? Does the school have a photocopying machine? If so, how old is it? Who can use the machine? What type of technology exists in each classroom?

IV. CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

1. Have you heard about or seen, used, and/or been trained on the new thematic curriculum?
2. Ask about each: Life-long learning, gender parity, mother-tongue language instruction (Circle each list that applies).

Seen	Heard	Used	Trained
Life Skills	Life Skills	Life Skills	Life Skills
Gender	Gender	Gender	Gender
Mother-tongue	Mother-tongue	Mother-tongue	Mother-tongue
All	All	All	All

3. Who conducted your training above?
  4. What, if any, materials were you given about these curriculums?

	Curriculum	Teacher Handbook	Other
Life Skills			
Gender			
Mother-Tongue			

5. Who provided the materials above?
6. Do all of your peers have these materials, too?
7. What do you think of learner-centred and interactive approaches suggested in this curriculum?
8. What do you consider the greatest challenge(s) to your use of interactive (learner- centred strategies) in your class?

V. ON LIFE SKILLS

1. What does life-skills learning mean to you? Do you think teaching Life Skills is important? How to interact?

2. Life Skills is not a stand-alone curriculum. Give examples of how you incorporate/ integrate the five Life Skills' themes across the curriculum: • Knowing and living with oneself: • Knowing and living with others: • Making effective decisions: • World of work: • Becoming good leaders:Describe or give examples of how you teach any of the following life skills: *Self-esteem, Assertiveness, Coping with emotion/stress, Empathy, Friendship formation, Managing peer relationships, Negotiation, Non-violent conflict resolution, Effective communication, Cooperation, Decision-making/problem solving, Critical/Creative thinking, Application*

   3. What skills do learners most easily grasp (which are they most engaged in/performing best)? Which are the most challenging for learners?

4. Is it easy for you to teach in this way? Why or why not? Which theme is the hardest to teach? Why? (For instance, how do learners engage with concepts such as self- esteem, self-awareness, or issues like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – do they find it difficult to discuss, silly, or irrelevant? How do they react? Do you find that a challenge?)

5. Do you use the Teachers' Handbook? Does it help you to understand the content better? Y/N Do you use all/most/some/none of the suggested activities in the handbook (e.g. role play, debate, hot seat, drama)? Have these activities been "successful"? How/how not?

6. How do you know learners understand the material? (What kids of assessment do you use?) What does learner success look like in this curriculum?

7. Are you grading learners in life skills? If so, how?

8. What is needed to teach these themes around life skills better?

VI. ON MOTHER TONGUE

1. Should teachers be encouraged to teach in the mother tongue? Why/why not?

2. Which do you use? All/most/some of the time?

3. Do you feel adequately trained to teach in the mother tongue to all pupils? What other support would you need?

VII. ON GENDER

   1. What is the gender curriculum's purpose to you?
   2. Do you feel gender parity can be taught in school? If so, can you give examples of whether or how you have tried to do this?

3. What is hard to teach about this? In discussing gender, do you often have to touch on difficult issues such as gender-based violence, PTSD, sexual abuse, HIV, sexuality? (For example, do you ever link "assertiveness" and "saying no" to issues girls face with sexual harassment or Gender-Based Violence?) Are these things considered "taboo" in your community?
4. Are there any unintended consequences of teaching about gender?

VIII. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/TRAINING

1. When was the last time you attended a workshop, in-service training, or course to improve your teaching work? Who provided the course?
2. How satisfied were you with what you learned?
3. Was it relevant to the issues you deal with on a daily basis?
4. Do you continue to use any strategies you learned there?
5. What else would help make teaching in this way more effective?
6. What do you do to prepare for class? When/do you develop assessments? Do you ever evaluate what you taught (how the lesson went)?
7. How common is it for you to consult your colleagues over using these new teaching strategies?
8. Have you ever sat in on another teacher's lesson? Has any teacher or your head teacher ever sat in on your class lesson? What was the purpose - to give you feedback or monitoring? Explain.
9. What (if any) support does your head teacher, administrator, or DEO offer to you, your colleagues, or school?
10. What areas, if any, of your daily work do you feel you need the greatest assistance with?
11. Where would you go to get this assistance?
12. Is there a local teacher advisory centre/station? What does the centre do?
13. If so, how many times have you been to the teacher advisory centre? Why? Was the experience positive/beneficial?

IX. TEACHER SUPPORT

1. Describe any training and support you've had from: ☐ Government   ☐Private ☐NGOs ☐ Teachers' Union
2. Are there any curriculum or policy changes that you are aware of in the last few years?

3. What are they?
4. Has your teaching changed since these changes have been put in place? And how?
5. How do you get to know when there are new curriculum or policy changes? Have any of the teachers/union delegates whom you know been involved in policy making or decisions about the new curriculum?
6. Do you feel valued and your views, opinions, and expertise appreciated by Ministry officials who make policy about your work? How and why?
7. Do you feel there is a place to ask for changes in this policy once it has been implemented? (For example, if something isn't working, what do you do?) If you don't have the skills (for example, in the local mother tongue language where you teach), then where do you turn?

X. CONCLUSION

1. Why do you think learners are performing poorly in the northern region of Uganda?

Why are they performing poorly at this school (same/different reasons)?
2. What attention/support/initiatives (are you aware of) that are designed to improve learner performance? Have any of these been helpful? Why/why not? What has been most/least helpful?
3. Do you have any additional questions or comments for the Quality Educators' project staff or policymakers?