

The impact of social accountability and transparency interventions to the delivery of educational services

Yiran Shi

The Perse School, Cambridge, UK

Keywords: Social accountability; transparency interventions; educational services.

Abstract: This essay addresses the relationship between the implementation of social accountability and transparency measures and the quality of educational services. Using various approaches to increase information transparency amongst the recipients of educational services, namely, parents and carers, we see the effectiveness of educational outcome in terms of scores and academic excellence to varying extents. It is a question of doubt whether adopting these measures on a widespread basis could generate and motivate change and steady improvement. As we examine the results of the several experimentations on this field, outcomes are highly context-dependent and the provision of information could never be irrelevant to other actors of the education system.

1. Introduction

Despite great successes in enrolment levels and the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the delivery of educational services is failing young individuals, affecting their future employability, health, and empowerment as strong adults which in turn reduces society's overall growth potential ("World Development Report 2018"). The alarming realities of such a crisis are exemplified in the report, in which problems such as poverty, inequity, and the low level of children's literacy and numeracy are mentioned. This report provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the factors and drivers that contribute to the current crisis as well as policy solutions to it. Part of the solution to this crisis is to have individuals and institutions more engaged in educational services by ensuring that they are provided with quality information and are able to be incentivised, surveilled, and supported in effective ways. The social accountability theory is based on the fact that increasing information transparency on the services delivered by educational institutions will generate actions in the form of pressurising service providers to act and undertake difficult reforms with improved outcome as a result (Lieberman, Posner, & Tsai, 2014). Over the past decade, there was an increasing trend of experimenting whether measures of accountability could effectively impact service quality, but the outcomes of this research were conflicting and highly context-dependent. Thus, this essay will compare the effectiveness of information provision and transparency interventions of several studies using four distinct kinds of social accountability measures: access to information, information campaign, report card, and scorecard. Some results received from interventions such as report cards proved to be highly impactful and were able to invoke powerful responses with subsequent improvements in the delivery of services (Hastings and Weinstein 2008) whilst others, contrarily, were unable to drive actions due to the lack of incentives, effective governance, campaign, and ability to administer social accountability interventions. Hence, simply providing information alone is insufficient to improve the quality of education (McMurren et al., 2016), a sufficient amount of government support, campaign assets and collective action is equally necessary.

2. Social accountability and transparency interventions providing high impacts

Through collaborative social accountability mechanisms and alignment in the incentives across all actors of the systems, transparency measures effectively paved the way for the exact purpose of an improved education service. This particular fact is indeed evident in two of the studies.

2.1 High impacts in the U.S. by Justine S. Hastings and Jeffery M. Weinstein (2008)

The first was conducted by Justine S. Hastings and Jeffery M. Weinstein (2008). Low-income families in the United States were provided with test scores from schools in their local area so that they were able to make comparisons. The positive outcomes of the study actively demonstrated the fact that better school choices can effectively increase academic achievement when parents have easy access to information and good alternatives to choose from. Parents who receive information are more likely to transfer their children to high-performing and more preferable school choices. Consequently, the change in parents' preferences significantly increased the portion of children studying at higher-performing schools. Those higher-performing schools that produce higher test scores are more likely to increase the overall academic achievement of disadvantaged students. Eventually, a higher transparency of information effectively produced a higher quality of the delivery of educational services in the form of the increase in academic attainment.

2.2 High impacts in the UK from the opposite approach by Burgess, Wilson and Worth (2010)

Likewise, Burgess, Wilson and Worth (2010) designed a study where the experiment was conducted from the opposite approach as they investigated the effect of taking away the transparency intervention. The results actively demonstrate that abolishing school league tables significantly reduced schooling effectiveness in Wales. The function of the league table is to identify the strongest and the weakest performing schools. The provision of this information helps parents to recognise the quality of their school's performance and to be aware of the academic differences between the listed schools. The knowledge of the best performing schools in their area helps them to navigate their decisions of choosing a suitable school for their child (ren). However, the lack of information in this case reduced people's ability to recognise the weakness of their services as there is no "name and shame" factor. In the cases of both studies, it is clearly shown that the provision of information by means of publicly displaying the academic performance of certain schools is able to generate parents' awareness and willingness to transfer their child (ren) to a higher-performing school. As this tendency develops, not only students as individuals could achieve higher academic excellence, but also high-performing schools generally. Therefore, the delivery of educational services could be improved when such interventions are implemented.

3. Social accountability and transparency interventions providing low impacts

Although the provision of information is shown to be effective in the improvement of the delivery of educational services in some cases, due to the context-based nature of such kind of interventions, some cases have shown that data transparency don't always generate responses from the general public. As a result, these interventions make no considerable difference to the situation.

3.1 Low impacts in Chile by Mizala and Urquiola (2007)

An example of this is shown in the study that Mizala and Urquiola (2007) have conducted. The researchers looked into the impact of the establishment of Chile's Sistema Nacional de Evaluación del Desempeño (SNED) programme in which high performing schools were distinguished as winners. They were widely publicised in newspapers to win recognition from citizens. Although expectations were high, they found that providing information about high-performing schools in the form of ranking them as winners in the programme made little change to enrolment levels, school fees or the social-economic status at school level. Moreover, awarding winning schools and publicising them did little to influence the parental judgment of their neighbouring schools, nor did it encourage them to intervene with the system. In such a case, the lack of information campaign might be a major reason for this phenomenon. Without the efforts to inform citizens about their rights to services, quality standards and performances, they are unaware of their ability to engage in the system together with the service providers. We can conclude that reinforcement about data transparency from the government is key to increase the participation of ordinary citizens which in turn increases the possibility to improve the delivery of educational services.

3.2 Low impacts in Tanzania by McMurren et al. (2016)

Similarly, the case study done by McMurren et al. (2016) has also shown highly context-based results. This case study focused on the impact of general information provision and the greatly increased data transparency for ordinary Tanzanian citizens in which they were given the access to detailed information on school examination data and other school input data on websites. The implementation of the data transparency initiative made little difference to the Tanzanian citizens' abilities to access them or even to take on action. This was largely due to the fact that the provision of information is done by introducing websites that contain information on school examination data. A great proportion of Tanzanian citizens were unable to access data on the websites as internet access was very limited.

As a result, ordinary Tanzanian families failed to be held into account as their economic level is insufficient to supply them with access to the internet and digital devices such as a computer. In this context, the supply of facilities had been the major stumbling block to the improvement of educational services. Therefore, this form of social accountability intervention failed to lead to a successful outcome.

4. Unclear impact but highly dependent on the accountability of the community members

This emerging evidence provides a clear and precise evaluation of the effectiveness of certain accountability interventions and transparency measures. The studies either distinctly appeared to be in favour of the fact that accountability interventions indeed contributed to the improved educational outcome, or clearly demonstrate that these accountability interventions failed to produce an expected outcome in other circumstances. However, there are also certain cases in which the outcome was unclear or that the same accountability approach produced conflicting results under different circumstances.

For instance, (Barr, Mugisha, Serneels and Seitlin 2012) conducted an investigation in which they looked into the impacts on two distinct ways of school scorecard interventions in Ugandan primary schools. The first intervention involved school management committee members being taught to use a scorecard facility developed and managed by the Ministry of Education and NGO partners. The other intervention involved the School Management Committee (SMCs) developing and operating their own scorecards. The conduction of the two approaches produced two distinctive sets of outcomes. The authors found convincing evidences for the impact of participatory scorecard approach that is operated by themselves. The outcome saw “student and teacher absenteeism reduce by 8.9 and 13.2% respectively”. However, the standard scorecard approach did little change to these conditions mentioned above. This actively demonstrates the fact that the scorecards managed by members of the SMCs themselves, the engagement rate increases which further helps the participation to increase. This explains the fact that improvement of the quality of services is highly dependent on the accountability of the community members. On the contrary, the standard scorecard provides community members with little information and participation, and hence made no difference to the delivery of educational services.

The argument of whether accountability interventions and transparency truly improve the delivery of education services has increasingly been talked about and has won recognition globally. There has been a growing interest in how actors such as parents and students can use information to improve the quality of education through collective action, to counteract the lack of action from the top.

As a possible solution proposed to the “learning crisis” mentioned in *The World Development Report* (2018), transparency of information can build and maintain public dialogue and increase public awareness about education services and missions. It facilitates public oversight of certain operations conducted by the education sector, which not only assists in exposing potential wrongdoing and corruption, but also enhances the possibility that problems will be identified and potentially be solved. In this context, The World Bank has also played a role in promoting social accountability. It introduced “The World Bank Disclosure Policy” (2009). The World Bank

recognises that transparency and accountability are fundamentally important to the development process. It states that “openness promotes engagement with stakeholders, which, in turn, improves the design and implementation of projects and policies, strengthening development outcomes.”

5. Conclusion

This essay demonstrated the different extents of effectiveness of transparency measures in the need to improve the delivery of educational services. These several studies looked into the impact of providing citizens with high level information on the performance of services. Positive outcomes are indeed apparent, but ineffective outcomes of some studies show that these measures can easily fail due to a lack of incentives, of effective governance, of campaigns, and ability to administer social accountability interventions.

Hence, simply providing information alone is insufficient to improve the quality of education. Nevertheless, with the addition of sufficient amount of government support, campaign assets and collective action, social accountability is almost certainly effective, a higher level of information transparency will certainly increase the possibility to yield a higher return with improved education services.

References

- [1] Abigail Barr, Lawrence Bategeka, Marina Guloba, Ibrahim Kasirye, Frederick Mugisha, Pieter Serneels, Andrew Zeitlin. “Management and Motivation in Ugandan Primary Schools: An impact evaluation report.” *Working Papers PIERI* (2012-2014)
- [2] Alejandra Mizala, Pilar Romaguera, Miguel Urquiola. “Socioeconomic status or noise? Trade offs in the generation of school quality information.” *Journal of Development Economics* 84 (2007), pp. 61-75.
- [3] Burgess, S. M., Wilson, D. J., & Worth, J. “A natural experiment in school accountability: The impact of school performance information on pupil progress”. *Journal of Public Economics*, (2013), 106 (C), pp. 57-67.
- [4] Justine S. Hastings, Jeffery M. Weinstein. “Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (November 2008), Vol. 123, No. 4, pp. 1373–1414.
- [5] Lieberman, ES, Posner, DN, & Tsai, LL. “Does information lead to more active citizenship? Evidence from an education intervention in rural Kenya.” *World Development* (2014), C60, pp. 69-83.
- [6] McMurren, J., Verhulst, S., Young, A., & Sangokoya, D. “Open education information in Tanzania: A tale of two dashboards.” *Open Data’s Impact* (2016).
- [7] Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. “Toward greater transparency through access to information: The World Bank’s disclosure policy”.