Report

The technical is political

Understanding the political implications of sector characteristics for education service delivery

Dan Harris, Richard Batley, Claire Mcloughlin and Joseph Wales

Key messages

- The education sector has characteristics that have political as well as technical implications. They affect the ways in which individuals and groups interact in relation to the delivery of education services. Achieving improvements in sector outcomes demands strategies that are politically feasible and effective as well as technically sufficient.

- In practice, this means that achieving education for all will require confronting and working with the political dynamics that are generated with respect to access and quality, and across levels of education.

- Using a structured approach to understanding the relationship between technical and political features can help to make sense of key sector debates (such as the role of access to information), reconcile apparent contradictions (for example, between political commitments and outcomes), and strengthen understanding of why education might either outpace or lag behind other sectors in a given context.

1 Introduction

It is now generally accepted that governance and political economy factors are key to the effective delivery of public goods and services in specific sectors. However, efforts to capitalise on this received wisdom are, in practice, hampered by the fact that governance and sector specialists tend to approach the key issue of mutual interest – the widespread failure of public services – from different starting points. While there is no doubt that different specialisms have the potential to provide complementary insights, capitalising on this has, in many cases, been hampered by the different terminology, language and analytical approaches used.

This brief, the first in a series, attempts to help bridge the gap between governance and sector specialists by examining the politics and governance of education through a technical, 'sector characteristics' lens. The characteristics of specific sectors have largely been considered as technicalities, but new research illustrates that they also have political implications. Mcloughlin with Batley (2012) identify an initial set of four types of technical characteristic that influence the politics of service delivery within and across sectors.

- **Nature of the good being produced:** Can a service be delivered by the market or does it require public intervention?
- **Market failure characteristics:** What is the rationale for public intervention?
- **Task-related characteristics:** How does the way a service is produced and delivered affect relationships of control and accountability?
- **Demand characteristics:** How does the nature of the service provided affect the form of user demand and provider control?

A complete analysis of the implications of sector characteristics for the full range of issues currently under debate is beyond the scope of this brief. However, drawing on the findings from a series of consultations with education specialists[1] and recent illustrative literature, we explore how such an approach could help us to understand and interpret some of the persistent problems undermining the achievement of Education for All.[2]

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[1] Consultations were held at the offices of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London in May and June 2012. Participants were drawn from a variety of backgrounds, including academia, NGOs, and other practitioner organisations.

[2] The current debate regarding the focus for the international education agenda in the post-MDG era has raised a number of key priorities, including (i) continued expansion of access to the most marginalised groups; (ii) improvements in the quality of education services; and (iii) the expansion of 'beyond basic' services (see, for example, UNESCO, 2012). While explicitly not addressed in turn, these themes are explored in the remainder of the paper.

2 What do the technical characteristics of education suggest about the political challenges of inclusive delivery?

2.1 The right to access education services continues to be contested because excludability benefits some actors

Concerns over the exclusion of potential learners feature strongly in discussions of education, not least with respect to the persistent challenge of ensuring access for marginalised groups. Many describe education as a right, meaning in principle that no individual should be excluded from its benefits – a principle enshrined in numerous international agreements, including Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948).[3] Yet in developed as well as developing country contexts, educational services are often subjected to procedures that control access and exclude potential service users. It is technically possible and frequently the case that both administrative procedures (e.g. testing) and market factors (e.g. the housing prices in a particular neighbourhood) limit access – whether to particular schools, a particular subset of the education system (such as higher education) or the system as a whole. In most cases, then, education might best be seen as an imperfect public good – in principle a universal benefit, but in practice not available to all.

This potential for **excludability** affects power relationships between those who want to access education (such as students, parents or guardians) and those who control access (usually but not exclusively government bureaucrats and head teachers). One important feature of this relationship is the leverage that is created due to the private value (economic, social or otherwise) of achieving a certain level of education. This relationship is likely to be affected by the level of education (because the size of individual private returns matters) and the extent to which there is a monopoly on control of access. This combination of private value accruing to individuals, the potential for excludability and the exercise of administrative discretion provides ample opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour (Box 1).

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[3] Examples include the alliance of NGOs working on mobilisation and legal empowerment through the Right to Education Project (www.right-to-education.org/).

Box 1: Rent-seeking behaviour in teacher training colleges

The power to control access to educational opportunities can create opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour, particularly where the benefits of education are perceived by users to be high. One consultation participant described what happened at a teacher training college where he worked in an African country: 'The head teacher used to allow people to access education, even above the level of enrolment, by paying him a certain amount of money, because it meant they could go get jobs as a teacher afterwards, so that gives him leverage over them. They would pay the money because of the job at the end.'

Source: Consultation participant, 2013

2.2 Market failures require intervention to maximise social returns to investments in education

Education is often described as having externalities in the form of the wider social benefits associated with an educated society. Returns to investments in education accrue not only to those individuals who are educated but to the rest of society as well, as education creates more productive workers, more competent and engaged citizens, and healthier populations.[4,5]

Debates about the returns to investments in education services are also complicated by the fact that decisions about service use are usually made by someone other than the consumer. The dynamic whereby parents make decisions about their children's education represents a particularly acute principal–agent challenge. In short, principals (children) must rely on agents (parents, teachers and governments) to make decisions to invest in education services. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that education is a long-term investment, and therefore subject to serious discounting relative to alternatives (e.g. child labour), and one from which neither principal nor agent will reap all the benefits.

As a result, education also displays strong merit qualities,[6] particularly at the primary level where the positive externalities tend to be greatest, leading to under-consumption relative to socially optimal levels. For this reason, primary education is often compulsory, which is not the case for most other services. While this might be intended to protect the interests of the child against short-sighted investment decisions, it could also reduce the ability of service users to hold providers to account. For example, compulsion (where enforced) may remove the option for households to leave an unsatisfactory school in contexts in which there is a local monopoly. This has the potential to significantly change the nature of the politics of provision by affecting the leverage service users have.

2.3 Certain features of the sector may facilitate or obstruct user accountability

For those with children of or nearing school age, use of education services is generally **highly predictable** and, during term time, **frequent**, with children attending school daily;

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[4] One participant noted that externalities may also include those related to the equity of provision, as equitable societies are often associated with a wide variety of social benefits (e.g. social cohesion, reduced crime, etc.). Additional evidence would be necessary to confirm this effect with respect to education.

[5] Education specialists have long noted the potentially perverse effects that can result from differences between individual returns and social returns at different levels (even where social benefits, which are hard to measure, are excluded). Strategies to address this sector characteristic are, however, also subject to political effects. For example, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos find that rather than improving access at the primary level where returns are greatest, 'the degree of public subsidization increases with the level of education, which has regressive income distribution implications' (2004:111).

[6] The concept of a 'merit good' refers to a good or service for which service users do not necessarily perceive the full value, in part because the value may accrue to the public rather than the service user.

this is in marked contrast to, for example, most services in the health sector. Education service use also tends to be **strongly territorial** because services are jointly consumed by users in a particular location (e.g. students in the classroom). Indeed, participants in our consultation noted that schools operate as a point of contact and mobilisation in the community, and the fact that they are used regularly and predictably means they can perform other community functions beyond the delivery of education:

> *'The school is... more than the point of service delivery, [it] is itself an institution within the community within which it exists. Now it's true that in many cases the school may be no more than kids going to school for a prescribed period of the day. But in many cases it is more than that – it does engage communities, it does perform other functions, it does bring a variety of people possibly into its management and into its guidance. And all those processes are usually highly political (with a small 'p') in a local area...'*

These characteristics allow users to unite around collective experiences, increasing the willingness of potential users to devote time and other resources, and facilitating opportunities for information exchange and collective action (e.g. parent–teacher associations, school management committees, informal meetings at the school gate, etc.). This should indicate significant potential for strong user accountability mechanisms, including via coordinated pressure on government or providers.

Yet there are a number of characteristics that complicate the relationships among service users. First, education is **rivalrous** in at least two senses: (1) where limited resources (whether financial or human) result in excess demand or insufficient places to meet demand; and (2) within the classroom, where pupils compete for the time and attention of teachers. In these cases, rivalry reduces either the availability or quality of educational services for existing pupils. Education specialists have, therefore, for some time explored issues of overcrowding by examining student–teacher ratios and their effect on teacher behaviour and student achievement (e.g. Duflo et al., 2007).

Second, like many other services, education is not simply a product whereby a provider is accountable to a consumer. Rather, it is a process of transformation, the effectiveness of which depends to a large extent on the effort of the consumers of the good (i.e. on the behaviour and contributions of other children in the class). In other words, pupils participate in the production and delivery of education services. This idea of **'co-production'** (Ostrom, 1996) is crucial in understanding the politics of service delivery, as education is not delivered within a simple provider–user framework (whether teacher–pupil, school–pupil or state–pupil). Therefore, when considering accountability relationships in education, a dichotomous distinction between a 'supply side' and a 'demand side' is likely to be inappropriate. As Ostrom and Ostrom (1999) note, 'Unless educational services are delivered under conditions that treat students as essential co-producers, the quality of the product is likely to be of little value.'

The rise of new technologies may challenge these constraints in some contexts. For example, where educational services are delivered online (e.g. through massive open online courses (MOOCs)), the cost of delivery to an additional student is extremely small,[7] indicating that such services may be non-rival (or, in a context in which bandwidth or other factors are limited, involve less rivalry than traditional classroom instruction).

The territoriality of education is also being challenged by new technology and interconnectedness. As one education specialist who participated in our consultation noted, 'One of the key developments at the moment globally is the increased role of information technology as a form of service provision in education and, in some cases, that involves

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[7] Such forms of delivery may nevertheless require an initial investment on the part of the user, potentially generating a form of price-exclusion.

extraterritorial provision' (Box 2). These changes, which may relax resource constraints, would also seem to remove the territorially defined and interactive nature of education services, with important implications for the politics of service delivery and use.

Box 2: Territoriality and technology in education services

One example of the breakdown of territorially defined education service delivery is the development and expansion of firms like TutorVista, an online tutorial company founded by Indian entrepreneur Krishnan Ganesh.

TutorVista provides tutoring services across national boundaries in a number of subjects. The British publishing and education conglomerate Pearson, which acquired a minority stake in TutorVista in 2009 and a majority interest in 2011, recently completed its acquisition of full ownership, adding a further complication to the territorial picture. Students in one country may be interacting with a frontline provider in a second country, which is in turn responsible to management structures in a third country.

Source: Consultation participant, 2013

2.4 While more information might help to improve quality, other challenges will need to be addressed

Participants in our consultations noted a variety of forms of **information asymmetry** in education that can alter the balance of power and influence between actors. These asymmetries bedevil the provider–user relationship, particularly when it comes to quality, though their severity varies across different users. Participants noted that 'the more experience you've had with education yourself, the better you are able to judge the quality of the education that your children are receiving'. This has important implications for the types of incentives and accountability relationships that one might expect to function in the sector. Paradoxically, it is those parents who are least likely to have had significant access to and experience of quality education services (i.e. those from the poorest or most marginalised households) that most need to have influence the provision of services to their children. For example, they may need to exercise choice and exit options in seeking out better quality schools for their children, or exercise voice in holding providers to account by demanding improvements in provision.[8]

It is unsurprising, then, that in the case of the education sector, priority has been given to the development and provision of better information regarding the quality of service delivery. Yet issues of **measurability** arguably compound the existing information asymmetries. Experiences with the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda have revealed that a narrow focus on a limited number of indicators that measure access (such as enrolment and completion rates) is unlikely to produce the sorts of educational outcomes expressed in the original Education for All (EFA) declaration. Recent literature speaks of the 'recognition of the limits of traditional proxy indicators… in gauging the quality of learning and the contribution of education to inclusive and equitable development' (UNESCO, 2012: 8).

Part of the explanation for this dynamic lies in the politics of measurement. Educational outputs relating to access (such as school construction and individual enrolment) are far more easily measurable and comprehensible (particularly for someone who is illiterate) than those relating to outputs and outcomes, and therefore easier for political leaders to claim credit for. Just as it is difficult for international panels of experts to discern appropriate

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[8] Hirschman (1970) distinguishes between exit (opting out of a situation) and voice (advocating for improvements) as the two options for individuals faced with declining or unsatisfactory performance in a system (e.g. a firm, organisation or country).

indicators for education quality, so too it is difficult for many service users to assess the quality and relevance of the education they are offered.

Arguably, this challenge is more easily resolved at the national or local level than at the international level, where efforts to establish useful global metrics for measuring education quality have been hampered by the difficulties of setting up reliable and comparable national tests and incentivising politicians to create sufficient transparency in reporting performance data. At the level of individual delivery chains, the challenges in relying on service users to hold either providers or governments to account are compounded by the long delay between individuals attending school and those individuals reaping the benefits some years later; this means improvements in quality are often not **visible** to current users. For this reason, it is difficult for the electorate to reward or blame politicians for improving or worsening learning outcomes. Providing better information on the returns to education may help by strengthening the choices and the pressure that users can apply to improve learning outcomes (Box 3). However, the effect appears to be through changes in household behaviour (such as attendance at school) rather than increasing demand.

Box 3: Resolving imperfect information on returns to education

Nguyen (2008) documents the impact of two approaches to alleviating imperfect information about returns to education in rural Madagascar: providing statistics on the benefits of education, and sending a local role model to the school to provide a first-hand account of the benefits of schooling.

The author found that: 'results suggest that households update their perceived returns after receiving the statistics and change schooling decisions accordingly', leading to increased attendance and improved test scores for those who had initially 'underestimated' the returns, and reduced test scores for those who had 'overestimated' the returns. Jensen (2010) finds a similar effect in the Dominican Republic.

Source: Nguyen, 2008; Jensen, 2010

Better information may help, particularly with respect to user behaviour, but for highly **professionalised**[9] education services, more information – whether for users or for those with top-down performance oversight responsibilities – will probably not be enough to solve quality problems. Debates about teacher performance and absenteeism, for example, often centre on the challenges that school management structures (whether national education ministries or sub-national authorities) encounter when monitoring what takes place (or does not take place) in the classroom. The applicability of technocratic solutions focused on monitoring may be limited here given the political strength of a professionalised and organised provider workforce.[10] Work by Duflo et al. (2012) in Rajasthan, India, suggests that linking pay to improved attendance, verified by new monitoring mechanisms, proved effective in reducing absenteeism and improving student performance through improved organisational accountability. Yet these problems are likely to persist elsewhere. As the authors note, 'teachers are a powerful political force, able to resist attempts to enforce stricter attendance rules' (Duflo et al., 2012: 1241); and as a result, the programme in question could only be applied to politically weak contracted para-teachers and not to permanent staff.

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[9] The use of the term 'professionalisation' here refers to services displaying high technical content and where such knowledge is scarce. It is used to indicate not the positive attributes associated with professionalism, but rather a situation in which particular agents (e.g. professional groups, organised labour and contractors) may become dominant over principals (governments or service users attempting to motivate better behaviour), especially where the service is locally monopolistic.

[10] It is important to note that attendance is not necessarily the same thing as teaching or teaching as required, but it is a necessary pre-condition for the latter two.

The variability, transaction intensity and heterogeneity of demand that are involved in the delivery of quality education services also raise challenges for those attempting to bring about improvements in quality. As education services are often jointly consumed at the classroom level, the sector might be seen to demonstrate little **variability**. Yet education professionals have long recognised the principle of differentiated classroom instruction to meet the needs of children with varying levels of pre-existing skills, knowledge and capacity (particularly in contexts of significant inequality and linguistic or other diversity). The benefits of doing so are increasingly apparent in the evidence on student learning (Box 4).

The **transaction intensive** and discretionary nature of differentiated classroom instruction (e.g. frequent adaptive interactions between pupils and teachers) that is necessary to address these high levels of **heterogeneity** of user need makes education services difficult to standardise and therefore difficult to monitor, potentially weakening organisational accountability relationships. Given the demands that variation places on finite teaching resources, there would seem to be a trade-off between rivalry (see above) and differentiation: the more differentiation there is, the more rivalry there is for the time teachers can dedicate to individuals' requirements.

Box 4: Improving learning outcomes through differentiated instruction

Researchers working in India and Kenya have documented experiences with interventions that address issues of variation in an effort to improve learning outcomes. Approaches such as streaming (i.e. assigning students to classes by initial learning level), provision of additional targeted help for lower-level students within a class, and self-paced learning programmes are among the most cost-effective strategies evaluated.

Some of these approaches (such as streaming) appear, at first glance, to work with the political as well as technical effects of sector characteristics, whereas others (such as individually paced computer-based learning) might have unexpected impacts on relationships of control and accountability if they erode the positive accountability impacts of collective consumption.

Source: Poverty Action Lab: www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-lessons/education/student-learning

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2.5 Education often has political salience, but not necessarily for reasons that would lead to improvements in outcomes

One of the distinguishing features of the education sector (in contrast to services in many other sectors) is the highly political nature of the content of the service provided, and not just the allocation of that service. Participants in our consultation noted two features that exemplify this: the nature of the curriculum and the language of instruction. Neither issue is unique to developing countries, but the sensitivities may be particularly acute in conflict and post-conflict contexts (where historical interpretation and future directions are often highly contested) and in post-colonial contexts such as East Timor (Box 5), where periods of occupation have left challenging linguistic legacies. These features are often bound up with the externalities described above, and while they can be positive (for example, nation-building and social cohesion), they can also be negative, where control over content takes on an exclusionary or divisive function.

Participants also noted the way in which key actors in the provision of education services can take on political roles, which can give the sector additional **political salience**. One example highlighted in the consultations comes from Nepal, where the recent absence of

local government elections has created a political vacuum at the community level, putting teachers (who in many communities are the only individuals with post-primary education) in de facto positions of authority. At the national level, teachers are the largest single group of state employees, giving them (and their unions) significant political power, as agents capable of acting independently of schools or government.

Taking these features into consideration, commitment of political elites to the education sector might well reflect a diverse set of political motives. Therefore, political salience should not necessarily be seen as implying greater effectiveness of political accountability relationships in producing better sector outcomes.

Box 5: Language, politics and nation-building in East Timor

Language of instruction remains a strongly contested issue in East Timor. The country has been subject to Portuguese and Indonesian rule during different eras, which has left its citizens with different linguistic capacities. In this context, recent proposals for mother tongue-based multilingual education have raised issues of power and exclusion across generational groups, both in the classroom and in the development of education policy more broadly.

Source: Consultation participant, 2013; Simonsen, 2006; Taylor-Leech, 2013

3 Conclusion

Understanding the political implications of the education sector's technical characteristics offers a number of insights into the challenges faced in the pursuit of Education for All. This approach has highlighted the different political dynamics that exist across sub-sectors, particularly between basic and secondary or tertiary education but also between academic and vocational paths. It has provided some insights into key debates in the sector, from how to improve quality to the role of access to information. It has also helped to answer some persistent questions, such as why political interest in education might not lead to improved outcomes, and to identify the possible sources of opposition to realising agreed goals like the fulfilment of the right to education.

Despite the benefits of using the sector characteristics approach, it will not provide a comprehensive explanation of the politics of service delivery in any given context. Our understanding of sector politics as a whole requires more information about the broader institutional context within which services are delivered (such as the rules of political competition, the influence of cultural norms, etc.). The value added from this work is its ability to shed light on observed differentiation within a particular context (i.e. why you might see progress in one sector while performance in another lags behind), and to strengthen understanding of the political dynamics that underpin outcomes in a particular sector.

We also hope this approach offers a language and set of concepts to break down professional silos and bring sector and governance specialists together to work on issues of mutual concern. Utilising the skills and insights from multiple disciplines can help us to better understand complex realities and capitalise on opportunities to improve service delivery. As we proceed to look at the dynamics of different sectors, we expect that there will also be useful lessons to be learned across sectors – not simply by transferring what has worked elsewhere, but by understanding the dynamics that make an intervention capable of addressing, both technically and politically, key constraints to performance.

Finally, we note that not all the characteristics identified in the original paper by Mcloughlin with Batley are covered in the analysis above, while new ones (such as the propensity for co-production) have emerged from the process of consultation with education sector specialists. This process of development and adaption is inevitable as specialists in different disciplines engage with this material and as these ideas are applied in new contexts. Feedback on the utility of these ideas and how they can be refined will be crucial, and is most welcome.

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