

Nurturing accountability mechanisms at school level: Lessons from a partnership between Uganda government's Directorate of Education Standards and a non-state sector actor

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The Government of Uganda has set an ambitious goal to 'strengthen the current inspection system and approaches by increasing the frequency of inspection of schools and institutions', with a focus 'on the quality of leadership and management, teaching and learning process and learner achievement' (MoES, 2017).

To support this, Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS), a non-state school operator, is working with the Ugandan Directorate of Education Standards (DES) to adapt a well-functioning accountability system from their schools for application in government-run schools. This innovative partnership, titled the Inspect and Improve Programme (I&I), combines the newly improved DES school inspections framework with PEAS' model of school management and improvement support.

This partnership builds on previous research that found that a foundational aspect of PEAS' success has been the strong internal accountability system that encourages school leaders to work towards set performance targets and take data-based decisions (EPRC, 2018) and that PEAS schools are substantially better managed than other school types in Uganda and perform correspondingly better in student learning progress (Crawford, 2017).

The pilot for I&I was launched in 2019 in ten schools and concluded in early 2021. The independent evaluation of the pilot, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), confirmed that I&I was successful in improving the quality of leadership and management in all participating schools across all areas of management as measured by the World Management Survey (NFER, 2021). Based on these results, PEAS and DES are scaling up I&I to reach an additional 40 secondary schools across all regions in Uganda, with plans for further roll out to reach a further 150 schools.

This paper is based on experiential reflections from PEAS and DES as practitioners, and evidence from mixed-methods approaches in the ongoing collaboration with NFER as the Learning Partner for I&I scale up. This documents the ways in which I&I has successfully built a culture of accountability at the school level, through support to improve school leaders' core capacity for school management and to therefore drive school improvements. While the link between school management and learning outcomes has been evidenced (Leaver et al, 2019), we provide key qualitative insights that help shed light into the ways in which strong school management links to improved school performance and learning outcomes, as well as the mechanisms by which an intervention, such as I&I, can improve school management.

I&I focuses on supporting school leaders to not only have greater knowledge and awareness of management practices and techniques, but incentivise structures for school leaders to shift mind

sets on the role of management practice in supporting school improvements. I&I supports school leaders to understand and clarify roles and responsibilities for holding schools to account for performance, while the use of School Improvement Planning emerged as a crucial tool to support this, in which school leaders are supported to develop a tailored plan and track progress over time.

We furthermore explore what PEAS and DES have learned thus far about adapting an accountability system from the non-state sector for the state system. The level of autonomy for school leaders and the decentralisation of decision-making plays a crucial role in translating management practices into decisions relating to school improvement. Furthermore, our findings indicate that nurturing strong working relationships is essential to operationalising accountability across various levels of the education system. This includes displacing a culture of 'punitive' inspections with a culture of constructive feedback and support, through which "teachers started wanting to be seen". Finally, we believe that credible partnerships between non-state sector actors and the state system reinforce capacities for change. The comparative advantage of DES and PEAS' respective expertise has been crucial to generating ownership and commitment to implementing changes in individual practice, demonstrating that I&I has the potential to contribute to Uganda government's cross-sectoral efforts to raise accountability for quality public service delivery.

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