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The Voice of Youth in Improving the Quality of Basic Education in Mali

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Young People's Views on and Actions towards Achieving a Quality Education

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Date:	June 25, 2015

Preface

In cooperation with Oxfam Novib I did a research on Malian youth's views on and actions towards a quality education. This was part of the Master Education, Socialisation, and Youth Policy at Utrecht University and part of my internship at Oxfam Novib. There are some people I would like to thank. First I would like to thank Robbert, my supervisor at Oxfam Novib. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do an internship on the very interesting theme of youth. Thank you for the time you gave me through our weekly meetings, thank you for your support and encouraging words during the stressful days of finishing my thesis. I would also like to thank Chris, my supervisor at university. There were moments that I got stuck in my research and did not know how to proceed. On such moments I planned an appointment and that was always very illuminating. You also helped me to look at my research with a distant view sometimes. Then I want to thank my Malian colleagues. Rose, thank you for receiving me and bringing me in contact with the persons that helped me arranging the interviews. Ousmane, I am very grateful for all that you have done for me. You gave me a lot of your time and I do not know what I would have done without you. Thank you for arranging all the interviews with young people! And last, but not least, I thank Magnina. Thank you for receiving me and arranging the interviews with the teachers!

Abstract

This study investigated Malian young people's views on and efforts towards achieving quality basic education. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews 28 young people who are organised in youth organisations were asked (1) what they think of the quality of education, (2) how it can be improved, (3) what their own efforts are to achieve quality education and (4) what factors hinder or enhance them. Furthermore five teachers and two staff members from two different NGOs were asked about the role of young people in improving the quality of basic education. Results show that in general the quality of education is of poor quality according to young people. They came up with many issues regarding the quality. To improve this quality is especially the responsibility of the government, according to young people. The government needs to invest financially and technically and some other responsibilities of the government were mentioned. Also parents need to be involved in education and teachers need to follow teacher trainings to improve the quality of education. The actions of young people themselves are classified into four strategies (i.e. socialisation, influence, power, and partnership) on three different impact scales (i.e. individual, community/inter-organisational, and national/international). The results show that most of the efforts of young people are on the community scale and on the national scale. On community level the major strategy that is employed by young people is socialisation, that is, awareness-raising. On national scale the only strategy that young people use is influence.

Introduction

Education is of economic, social, cultural, and political benefit for individuals, families, communities, and societies (Ansell, 2005). It is also positively related to health (Kickbusch, 2001) and it is seen as crucial in fighting poverty (Rose & Dyer, 2008). But in order to be of real benefit, education must be of good quality (Michaelowa, 2001). Education has played an important role in the global development agenda since the 1990s (Tarabini, 2010), but this was previously focused on increasing access to education (UNESCO, 1990; United Nations, 2000). However, not only access to education is important, but the quality of education as well. The quality of education has more recently received attention on development agendas (UNESCO, 2004). But in practice, in many developing countries the quality of education still remains poor (O'Sullivan, 2006).

There has been given more attention from a range of development organisations, under which Oxfam Novib, to the engagement of youth in achieving quality education (Dunne, Durrani, Fincham, & Humphreys, 2012). Youth are energetic and creative, willing to change and they are citizens with rights, which makes them a powerful force for change (Oxfam Novib, 2014). The purpose of this study is to get insight in young people's ideas on how the quality of education can be improved and what actions they undertake to improve educational quality. Therefore young people who are active in youth organisations will be involved in this study.

Mali is taken as a case for this study. In this country several educational reforms and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) campaign succeeded in expanding access to education, but they failed to achieve quality education. Numerous Malian youth organisations are active to improve the quality of education. It would be interesting to get to know what young people in some of these organisations think about the quality of education and what actions they undertake to improve this quality. This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the quality of basic education according to organised young people in Mali?
2. How do young people in Mali think the quality of basic education can be improved?
3. What are young people's efforts in improving the quality of basic education in Mali?
4. Which factors hinder or enhance these efforts?

This paper will start with a theoretical background, to define the core concepts that are used and to provide an overview of what is already known within this subject. The section after that will describe the methods that are used in this study, followed by a section with an overview of the results. In the final section the results will be summarized and discussed.

Theoretical background

Defining quality education

An extensive amount of literature has been written about the quality of education. Many have tried to define quality education, resulting in a plethora of definitions. For instance, Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel and Ukpok (2006) developed a framework for quality education on the basis of international literature, which includes five elements: effectiveness, efficiency, equality, relevance, and sustainability. Another definition is based on a competency approach and states that quality education means achieving certain levels of competence or effectively meeting objectives (Adams, 1993).

However, quality education cannot be captured in a determined definition, as it is very complex and subject to local social, economic and cultural contexts (Colclough, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2006). Therefore in this study there will not be given a fixed definition of quality education. Nonetheless, it is desirable to mention some common elements that are important in quality education. The most common conceptualisation of quality education is the input-process-output conception (Dembélé & Oviawe, 2007). The input of education covers for example materials for teachers and children, characteristics of teachers (like their qualification) and learners (like their intellect), and also the relevance of textbooks. Process has to do with the way that the inputs are used to produce outputs and includes the way texts are used, the way lessons are organised and encouraging a child-centred learning. Finally, the output is the actual achievement of the learner (Dembélé & Oviawe, 2007). This model could be seen as a frame to structure all kinds of elements. In different contexts there could be different elements of the input, process and output in order to speak of quality education (Cheng & Tam, 1997).

With regard to input, the first domain, an important element concerns the content of education, or the curriculum. The content should be relevant to the context (Nickel & Lowe, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2006; Tikly, 2011), to needs and to humanity (Nickel & Lowe, 2010). Cultural traditions, social relations, and economic and political life form an important basis for quality education (O'Sullivan, 2006). That means that the content of education in Mali should be pertinent to the context of the country. It should meet the needs of children, families, communities, and society as a whole.

In the domain of process, the way of teaching is very important (O'Sullivan, 2006). The teaching should be child-centred (Dembélé & Lefoka, 2007). A child-centred approach views children as active learners and teachers as the ones who promote learning. Teachers

should aim to develop powerful learners who can respond well to task that are given to them of that they set themselves (Hopkins, 2002, as cited by Dembélé & Lefoka, 2007).

Finally, the output of education involves the knowledge and skills that children acquire at school. This involves the capacity to read, write and have basic numeric skills, but it goes further than that. It also involves knowledge and skills that are necessary to function in society, which means an understanding of the culture and abilities to make decisions in that culture. An example is that in a technological society one must learn read and use electronic texts (Kickbusch, 2001).

Factors that influence the quality of education

There are several factors that could improve or reduce the quality of education. First, expenditure on education is related to educational quality (Cheung & Chan, 2008). This is a positive relationship: adequate financial support from the government is an essential supporting element for an educational programme of a good quality (Tankard, 1971). It is often an indirect link. That is, financial support relates to other factors that influence educational quality (Cheung & Chan, 2008).

For instance, educational finance influences capital (Cheung & Chan, 2008), which refers to the physical assets of a school, such as buildings and school equipment (Jones & Zimmer, 2001). Capital is positively related to educational quality (Cheung & Chan, 2008; Jones & Zimmer, 2001). Modern, well equipped buildings are essential for providing an education of good quality (Tankard, 1971). A poorer capital reduces the quality of education. For example, older schools do not have the necessary infrastructure for modern technologies that teachers could use for their teaching (Cheung & Chan, 2008). Teachers also need to have access to instructional materials (Tankard, 1971; Willms & Somers, 2001).

Another factor is class size, or pupil-teacher ratio. Low teacher-pupil ratios are of benefit for educational quality (Cheung & Chan, 2008; Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003; Willms & Somers, 2001). It allows teachers to have more attention for their pupils, and pupils are less disruptive in class and less likely to drop out of school (Driscoll et al., 2003). Class size is also influenced by governmental expenditure on education: more educational finance is related to a smaller class size (Cheung & Chan, 2008).

Furthermore, teacher training is important in providing quality education. The better teachers are trained, the better the educational outcomes of the pupils (Willms & Somers, 2001), which is an aspect of quality education in the definition that is used in this study. Another element that influences the schooling outcomes of children is parental involvement.

Children will have better achievements if their parents are more involved in the school (Willms & Somers, 2001).

Finally, cultural elements could also influence the quality of education. Cheung & Chan (2008) found that countries with a high power distance between the authorities and the people, so where power is unequally distributed, have a lower expenditure on education and higher teacher-pupil ratios. Furthermore, countries who are more individualistic tend to have higher expenditure on education and lower teacher-pupil ratios than countries with a more collectivistic culture.

Improving educational quality

Improving the quality of education requires efforts on macro- and micro-level. First, resources are important in improving the quality of education. On a macro-level this involves resource policies from the government, such as reducing class size, increasing teacher salaries, spending more on schools, and providing text books to pupils. On micro-level schools should effectively use the resources that are put available by the government to have better educational quality (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007).

A second element in improving the quality of education is accountability. This means that service providers inform their users and that users have a say in the decisions being made (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007; Porter, 2014). On a macro-level this means that the government needs to implement an accountability system, which often goes together with a decentralization system (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007; Porter, 2014). On a micro-level this means that local schools inform parents about their decisions and give parents, communities and young people a voice (Porter, 2014).

A third and final point that will be mentioned here as a factor for educational improvement is teacher quality. This involves both a responsibility for the government on a macro-level, in providing teacher trainings and a responsibility for teachers themselves on a micro-level (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007).

Why focusing on youth?

Youth are often seen as trouble or victims (Checkoway et al., 2003), this has been the dominant view for over 150 years (Ansell, 2005) and there has long been no attention for the voice of youth (Mayo, 2001). However the starting point in this study will be an alternative view, as set by several authors: youth as resources (Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Ho, Clarke, & Dougherty, 2015). Various reasons can be

found for focusing on the voice of youth in social change, or more specifically, in improving educational quality. First, young people are in the unique position of being in transition from childhood to adulthood. On the one hand they are close to the experience of childhood. Although they are not in basic education anymore, they are still close to that experience, which makes that they know better than adults the needs and possibilities for change in basic education (Porter, 2014). On the other hand they are more and more moving into adult spaces. In contrast to children, youth are seen as political (Ansell, 2005).

Youth is also a time of trying to integrate in the existing order and at the same time serving as a force to transform this order (Ansell, 2005). Youth care about many issues, such as poverty, employment, discrimination, and health care, but they especially care about schools and education (Checkoway, 2011). They are energetic (Ansell, 2005) and they want to do things that have importance, they want to make a difference (Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Another reason for focusing on the voice of youth in improving the quality of education is that young people are citizens with rights and responsibilities (Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway et al., 2003; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child states that young people have the right to express their views on matters that affect them (UN General Assembly, 1989).

The role of youth in improving the quality of education

There are different types and degrees of youth participation with impact on different scales. Fletcher (2011) developed a ‘ladder of youth voice’ based on Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation. The bottom three rungs of the ladder of youth voice – manipulation, decoration and tokenism- represent non-participation. Participation begins at the fourth rung, where youth inform adult, followed by a rung where adults consult youth. At rung six youth are equal with adults: youth and adults share the same authority. This is followed by a rung where activities are fully youth-driven. At the highest rung youth have full equity with adults. Only the last two rungs are youth-led (Fletcher, 2011) and this study is focused on these highest levels of youth voice.

To make this youth-led participation more concrete, several strategies could be considered. Ho, Clarke, and Dougherty (2015) distinguish four strategies that youth use as social change tactics: socialisation, influence, power, and partnership. Socialisation refers to awareness-raising; influence refers to indirectly affecting social change, while power has to do with directly affecting social change. Partnership involves impact through cooperation with others.

These strategies can have impact on different scales. Like in the framework of Ho et al. (2015) in this study the distinction will be made between impact in individual level, on community or inter-organisational level, and impact on national or international level. The strategies and impacts could be applied to the current study on improving the quality of basic education and be put in a matrix (table 1).

Table 1

Matrix of the strategies and impacts of youth-led efforts to improve the quality of basic education

Strategies	Scale of impact			
	Individual	Community / inter-organisational	National / international	
Socialisation	Make individuals aware of the current quality of education and children's rights to quality education	Make communities or other organisations aware of the current quality of education and children's rights to quality education	Make decision-makers aware of the current quality of education and children's rights to quality education	
Influence	Influence other individuals to take action to improve the quality of education	Influence communities or other organisations to take action to improve the quality of education	Influence decision-makers to take action to improve the quality of education	
Power	Directly impact the quality of education through individual actions	Directly impact the quality of education through actions on an organisational or community scale	Directly impact the quality of education through actions on a national or international scale	

Table 1 (continued)

Matrix of the strategies and impacts of youth-led efforts to improve the quality of basic education

Strategies	Scale of impact		
	Individual	Community/inter-organisational	National/international
Partnership	Directly impact the quality of education through cooperation with other individuals	Directly impact the quality of education through cooperation on a community or organisational scale	Directly impact the quality of education through cooperation on a national or international scale

Adapted from Ho et al. (2015)

Factors that influence the role of youth

Different factors positively influence the role of youth in improving the quality of education. Most of these are already mentioned above, like the fact that young people have the right to participate (UN General Assembly, 1989), that they are young and energetic (Ansell, 2005) and that they want to make a change (Taft & Gordon, 2013). Another positive factor could be institutional resources for youth initiatives (Checkoway, 2011).

But in their efforts to bring about social change young people are also faced with several obstacles. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is how adults view young people. Youth experience marginalisation because of their age (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). They are often seen as deficits and not as resources (Checkoway, 2011) and they are excluded from decision making processes (Ho et al., 2015). Young people themselves could also be obstacles, for example when they do not view themselves as people who can make a change, or when they have ideas, but without knowing how to elaborate these ideas (Checkoway, 2011). Another obstacle could be a lack of resources to implement their ideas (Checkoway, 2011).

This study

In this study the views of young people on the quality of education in Mali will be investigated using the three elements of quality education that are mentioned in the theoretical background, namely content, way of teaching, and knowledge and skills. To be more concrete, the content of education should be contextualised, so it must be pertinent to the

culture of Mali. The way of teaching should be child-centred and the knowledge and skills that children acquire at school should provide them with basic literacy skills, but also with an understanding of the culture.

Then young people will be asked how they think the quality of education can be improved. The distinction will be made between macro- and micro-levels. Furthermore young people's actions towards achieving quality education will be explored using the framework of Ho et al. (2015). The activities of youth will be categorised in four strategies – socialisation, influence, power, and partnership – on different impact scales, namely individual, community/inter-organisational, and national/international. Finally, the factors that hinder or enhance young people's role in improving the quality of education will be explored.

Method

In April 2015 a qualitative research has been conducted in Bamako among 28 young people from four different youth organisations, five teachers from a basic education school, and two employees from two different NGOs. They were approached through the network of two partner organisations of Oxfam. Data were collected through three focus groups and 11 semi-structured interviews. The informants were asked about the current quality of education and the role of young people in improving basic education. All interviews were held in French.

Sample

Young people form the largest part of the sample. A total of 28 youth (13 boys and 15 girls) aged 16-30 participated in the research. First, three focus group discussions were conducted with members of three different youth organisations: *Association des Jeunes pour la Citoyenneté Active et la Démocratie* (AJCAD), *Oui Pour une Enfance Noble Mali* (OPEN MALI), and a Club from the My Rights, My Voice programme of Oxfam. The size of the groups ranged from five to twelve participants per group, with a total of 25 young people participating in focus groups. After conducting the focus groups, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people aged 16-17 from the *Parlement des Enfants*. All youth informants were approached through the general secretary of AJCAD, who is a young person himself and who has a large network of different youth organisations. The approached youth organisations were asked to recruit a group of 6-10 persons for the focus groups, both male and female.

The young people that participated in the research had different educational backgrounds. With regard to the girls, five had followed basic education on a public school, nine on a private school and one followed primary and secondary education in another country. With regard to the boys, eight followed basic education on a public school, four on a private school and one boy received no education.

Teachers were involved as well. After the interviews with young people semi-structured interviews were conducted with the director (male) and four teachers (two men and two women) from a basic education school in Bamako. Their ages range from 40 to 59. Finally, two interviews were administered with staff members from two different NGOs: one with the director of the Education for All (EFA) coalition and one with a staff member of the *Association Malienne pour la Protection et la Promotion de la Famille* (AMPPF). This last organisation was approached by the same person who also contacted the youth organisations. The other informants were recruited through a staff member of Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a partner organisation of Oxfam. The research was focused on Bamako because of the limited time for the data collection, so only urban people were engaged in the research. The focus of this study was on public schools, since the public sector is the largest provider of education in Mali (Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances & Institut National de la Statistique, 2012).

Response

In general there was a good response. Especially the young people were enthusiastic to participate. Although the approached youth organisations for the focus groups were asked to recruit 6-10 persons, one group consisted of five persons, but it turned out to be a good number for the discussions. On the other hand one focus group consisted of 12 young people. This was too large to have every member involved in the discussion. In one of the focus groups the girls left halfway the discussion because of other appointments, so in the second half of the discussion only boys were involved.

Data collection

In the focus groups and interviews with young people they were first asked about the current quality of basic education. Although the informants were free to mention all kinds of aspects of quality, they were specifically asked about three aspects: the content of education, the way of teaching, and the knowledge and skills that children acquire at school. Then they were asked how they think the quality of education can be improved. Finally they were asked

about their own efforts in improving the quality of education and which factors hinder or enhance their role. The same questionnaires were used in both the focus groups and the individual interviews with young people. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 52 to 83 minutes. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 16 to 43 minutes.

In the interviews with the teachers and staff members of NGOs the focus was on the role of young people in improving the quality of basic education. The informants were asked about how young people are involved in changes in education, what they think the role of young people should be in improving education, what obstacles hinder the role of young people in improving basic education and how this role could be strengthened. All interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. After conducting the interviews they were transcribed. The transcripts of the interviews were coded and analysed.

Reliability

Several problems with regard to reliability are possible in this study. The first is social desirability. The informants could for example have been more positive about the quality of education than is the case in reality. Another problem could be the cultural differences between the researcher and the informants. This could have led to misunderstandings. It is possible that questions of the researcher were misinterpreted by the informants or the other way around, that answers of the informants were misinterpreted by the researcher. Besides, a language barrier could have influenced the results of this study. The researcher spoke French, but not perfectly. The researcher could have missed or misunderstood information that was worth interrogating. A final point has to do with the realism of the views of young people. The question is to what extent these ideas correspond with the reality.

Several efforts have been done to overcome these problems of reliability. First, before starting the interviews the informants were told that everything they said would remain anonymous to reduce the chance of social desirable answers. The researcher also tried to go in depth on the answers of the informants. The problem of cultural differences was overcome through the procedure of first conducting the focus groups and then conducting the semi-structured interviews. This way, what was said in the focus groups could be checked in the individual interviews. With regard to the issues of realism of youth's views, interviews with other informants (teachers and NGO staff members) were conducted to check whether the answers of the young people were realistic.

Results

Background

First some background information will be given about the educational system in Mali. In Mali there are four types of schools: public schools, private schools, community schools, and medersas (Koranic schools). Private schools are mostly concentrated in urban areas, while community schools are located in rural areas (Pearce, Fourmy, & Kovach, 2009). The public sector is the largest provider of education (Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances & Institut National de la Statistique, 2012).

Basic education consists of nine years of schooling, divided in two cycles. The first cycle is from the first to the sixth grade. The second cycle is from the seventh to the ninth grade. Pupils who pass the ninth grade get a diploma, the *Diplôme d'Etudes Fondamentales* (DEF), which permits them to go to high school.

Bleck and Guindo (2013) found that there is a difference between private and public schools with regard to educational quality. Problems with the quality of education mainly exist in public schools. These problems will be described first, and then the results of the current study will be shown.

Because of the massive growth of enrolment rates the classrooms have become overcrowded (Bleck & Guindo, 2013). Often three pupils have to share two seats, or pupils have to sit on the floor. There is a lack of schools and classrooms to accommodate the enlarged numbers of children going to school. Many schools do not have latrines. According to the Malian policy pupils should have to walk a maximum of 3 kilometres to school, but in reality almost 7% of all pupils have to travel more than 5 kilometres to school (Pearce et al., 2009).

There is also a lack of well-trained teachers (Pierce et al., 2009). Because of the raised numbers of children going to school there was a need for more teachers. Therefore the Malian government set up alternative tracks to recruit teachers, such as very short-term trainings of low quality (Bender, Diarra, Edoh, & Ziegler, 2007). Furthermore, because of the emphasis on expanding the access to education there was less progress in important curriculum and pedagogical issues (Bleck & Guindo, 2013). With regard to the knowledge and skills acquired at school Bleck and Guindo (2013) found that children do not learn to speak French fluently and the study of Thunnissen (2009) showed that only half of the children in grade six could read.

The quality of basic education

In order to give shape to the concept of quality education this study uses three elements, namely content, way of teaching and output. The current quality of basic education according to young people will be described using these three elements. Because young people were free to mention other issues with regard to the quality of education as well, some other issues will be presented as well.

Content

Young people were asked about the quality of the curriculum and the content of the subjects within the curriculum. Results from the interviews in this study show a difference between public and private schools with regard to the content, which is consistent with the previous findings of Black and Guindo (2013). Young people with a background of private education think the curriculum and the content of the subjects are of good quality. Youth with an educational background of public education came up with several concerns regarding the quality of the content of basic education.

According to several scholars the content of education should be relevant to the context of a country (Nikel & Lowe, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2006; Tikly, 2011). In two focus groups informants said that the content of the subjects is not adapted to the Malian culture. The content of what is being taught does not correspond with the reality of the Malian child. Several examples were given, such as: *"We do not teach the reality. For example, we talk about George, and not about Moussa and Ousmane."* Another example is that at children learn about boats, while in reality one speaks of 'pirogues'.

Language is also an issue that was mentioned as an issue of quality. The current educational programme starts in the local language (i.e. Bambara) and slowly integrates French into the curriculum. This results in a bad command of French at the end of basic education. However, two participants in one of the focus groups think it is better to begin with teaching in the local language, since that is the language that children speak at home. When lessons are in French children do not understand what is being taught.

Some other issues were mentioned once, for instance a lack of teaching life skills and a lack of interactive games and sports in the programme. But even without these subjects the child is already overburdened. There are too many subjects in the programme.

Way of teaching

The second element of quality education is the way of teaching, which should be child-centered (Dembélé & Lefoka, 2007). According to several interviewed young people the quality of the way of teaching is low. Teachers often dictate their lessons and their way of teaching is often aggressive. Many children are afraid of their teacher.

Different issues were mentioned in the interviews that have a negative influence on the way of teaching. One serious problem that is mentioned in every interview is the lack of well-trained teachers. This is consistent with the findings of Pearce et al. (2009) and Bender et al. (2007). Because it is difficult to find a job, many unemployed persons become teacher, even without the necessary education. This affects the quality of the way of teaching. As one participant said: *"If you transmit something you do not know, it is a problem."* According to several young persons, teachers teach because of necessity, not with love.

Another issue mentioned by young people that is problematic for a good way of teaching is the teacher-pupil ratio. This corresponds with the findings of Bleck & Guindo (2013) and Pearce et al. (2009). It is possible to find classes with up to 150, with only one teacher. Sometimes teachers even have to teach in two classes at the same time.

Furthermore, young people confirmed the findings of Pearce et al. (2009) that schools are often not well equipped. There is a lack of teaching materials, a lack of books for children, and a lack of tables and chairs. Young people added to this that there are too few or no computers. They also mentioned a lack of modern facilities, like projections. Teachers still make use of blackboards and chalks. So the way of teaching is outdated.

Knowledge and skills

The third and last element of quality education that is used in this study is the output of education. That is, the knowledge and skills children acquire at school (Kickbusch, 2001). Many children do not have a good command of French when they leave basic education, which is consistent with the results of Bleck & Guindo (2013). Another issue that came up is that the knowledge acquired at school does not correspond with the (social) reality.

Other issues with regard to quality education

There are some issues regarding the quality of education that are not yet mentioned. One is that schools and teachers are not well monitored. According to Pearce et al. (2009) this is due to a lack of capacity, time and resources. Another issue that young people came up with is a lack of parental involvement in the education of their children. One participant explained:

“Parents do not have enough time to check their children at home. (...) When they come home, they are tired and they cannot check the homework of their children. So it is a bit difficult.”

Improving the quality of education

In showing young people's views on how the quality of education can be improved the distinction will be made between the macro- and the micro-level. The macro-level involves the role of the government, which is seen by young people as the biggest and most important role in improving educational quality. First of all the government needs to invest financially and technically in education. The budget for the education sector needs to be spent well. Furthermore the government is responsible for a good monitoring of schools and teachers. It needs to mobilise people to check schools if they recruit qualified teachers and to check teachers if they are doing their work well. The government is also responsible for providing teachers with good trainings, which is important in improving the quality education according to young people. Some other tasks of the government are mentioned, for instance creating employment and reducing the difference between private and public schools.

On a micro-level, parents and teachers play a role in improving the quality of education. Parents should be involved in their children's education. They should check if their children do their homework and behave well. Teachers should follow a good teacher training and they need to teach with love.

Young people's efforts in improving the quality of education

The model of Ho et al. (2015) will be used to describe the efforts of young people to improve the quality of basic education. For every level of impact – individual, community/inter-organisational and national/international – the efforts employed by youth will be classified according to the four strategies that are distinguished in the model of Ho et al. (2015), i.e. socialisation, influence, power and partnership.

Individual impact

On individual level two strategies are employed by youth, namely influence and power. Here influence means influencing other individuals to take action to improve the quality of education. Four young people said that improving education starts on individual level by following classes, working hard and encourage others to do so as well. Other

informants criticise education and tell school actors that the quality of education is bad, in order to influence them to take action to improve the quality of education.

Power on an individual impact scale refers to directly impacting the quality of education through individual actions. The results show that such actions include working hard at school and exercising at home as well and coaching brothers and sisters at home, by helping them with homework and doing revisions. This improves the knowledge and skills of their brothers and sisters, which is a characteristic of quality education.

Community/inter-organisational impact

No activities have been mentioned by youth on inter-organisational level, but three different strategies are employed by youth on community level: socialisation, influence and power. Socialisation on community level involves making communities aware of the current quality of education and children's and youth's rights to quality education. Awareness-raising is one main activity that is often mentioned by informants. They raise awareness among other youth through manifestations, sketches, awareness caravans, the celebration of international days, transmitting messages through sports television, and also by training other young people on their rights. One other example is that one of the participants is involved in a youth organisation in a village and this organisation raises awareness among parents.

Influence on community level means influencing communities to take action to improve the quality of education. One activity that is mentioned by young people is that they go on strikes and marches. Furthermore, the above-mentioned youth organisation in the village organises debates with teachers to influence them.

This same organisation uses power as a strategy to directly impact the quality of education through actions on a community scale. The youth of this organisation look for help in Bamako and then buy school supplies, which they take to the village to distribute them among the communal schools. Providing schools with materials could directly improve educational quality. Another youth organisation is doing comparable activities, such as supporting parents, educational authorities, school management teams and children with didactic materials. They also provide children with schooling.

National/international impact

The interviewed young people only mentioned influence as a strategy on national level. This means influencing decision-makers to take action to improve the quality of education. From all activities, the most often mentioned by youth is advocacy. Young people

advocate through interpellation, that is, to talk to and challenge authorities on educational problems. This is done in different ways. In two focus groups, participating in debates with opinion leaders is mentioned as an interpellation activity. Exchanging with authorities and propose solutions is important according to different participants. Also giving manifests to ministers is named as an activity.

The views of teachers and NGO staff members

Teachers and two staff members of NGOs were asked about the role of youth in improving the education to see if young people's views are realistic and what could be the impact of their actions. When asked the informants from the two NGOs about the role of youth in improving the quality of education they came up with some of the same activities as those mentioned by young people. Both mentioned awareness-raising as part of the role of youth in improving the quality of education. Some concrete awareness-raising activities that are mentioned are animation activities to transmit messages about youth issues by poems, karaoke or sketches. Besides, interpellation is mentioned by both NGO informants. Especially during elections young people can interpellate electoral candidates. One more aspect of the role of youth is that young people have leadership positions. There are for example ministers of about 30 years of age.

Teachers and the director of a primary school in Bamako were also asked about the role of young people in improving the quality of basic education. Only the director acknowledged that young people have a role in improving education. He said that young people organise themselves in youth organisations to raise awareness and to advocate for quality education. The teachers however all said that youth do not have a role in improving education. One female teacher said that she is not aware of what young people are doing to improve education. Youth do not take decisions, it is the parents who decide. According to the male teachers not youth, but parents need to criticise the educational system on a higher level and it is parents who need to raise awareness among their children.

Factors that enhance or hinder the role of young people

Young people mentioned different factors that enhance their role to improve the quality of education. First, the rights they have to quality education and to participation enhance their role. A second enhancing factors that was mentioned several times is support from NGOs. Furthermore, consciousness among the population that education is of poor

quality also enhances their role. Also, youth are dynamic and the conviction that they can make a change and they constitute 75% of the Malian population.

Young people also face obstacles. Authorities form the biggest obstacle for youth. Young people often do not have access to authorities and their message does not arrive at its destination. Authorities do not take into account the demands of the young people. Other factors that hinder youth are a lack of resources, a lack of capacity building and a lack of will among young people themselves to change education.

Conclusion and discussion

This study investigated Malian young people's views on and efforts towards achieving quality basic education. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews young people who are organised in youth organisations were asked (1) what they think of the quality of education, (2) how it can be improved, (3) what their own efforts are to achieve quality education and (4) what factors hinder or enhance them. Three common elements of quality education were used in this study, namely the content of education, the way of teaching and the acquired knowledge and skills. Ways to improve the quality of education are classified into two scales: macro and micro. To structure young people's activities the model of Ho et al. (2015) is used, which distinguishes four strategies (i.e. socialisation, influence, power, and partnership) on three different impact scales (i.e. individual, community/inter-organisational and national/international). To find out if young people's ideas are realistic, teachers and staff members from NGOs were interviewed as well. Finally young people were asked about the factors that hinder or enhance their role.

When asking about the quality of basic education, young people came up with several issues. The content of what is being taught does not correspond with the Malian culture and starting education in the local language often results in a bad command of French. The way of teaching is not child-centred and is influenced by a lack of well-trained teachers, high teacher-pupil ratios and a lack of school equipment. With regard to the output of education, many children have difficulties with French and their acquired knowledge and skills do not correspond with the (social) reality. Some other issues were mentioned, such as a lack of monitoring of schools and a lack of parental involvement.

According to young people improvement of the quality of education is first of all a task of the government, so it should especially be done on a macro level. Financial and technical investment is most needed and the government is also responsible for the monitoring

of schools and teachers and for teacher trainings. On a micro level parental involvement is needed and teachers need to follow a training.

Young people use different strategies with different impact scales to improve the quality of basic education. On the individual impact scale youth use influence and power to improve educational quality. Individual-scale activities are the least mentioned. On the community level they use socialisation as main strategy to make communities aware of the current quality of education and the right to a quality education. Other strategies that are used on community level are influence and power. On national level the only strategy employed by young people is influence. Youth advocate through interpellation, that is, to talk to and challenge authorities on educational problems. The most enhancing factors in the role of youth are their rights, and support from NGOs. Other enhancing factors are the dynamism and conviction of young people to be able to bring about change and the consciousness of the population that the education is of poor quality. The biggest hindering factor is the government, who often does not take into account the demands of the young people. Other blockades are a lack of resources, a lack of capacity building and a lack of will among young people.

Young people's views on the current quality of education largely correspond with what was already known about the quality of basic education in Mali. This implies a realistic view of young people on the quality of education. Some new issues came up that were not yet described in previous studies, such as that the content of education is not adapted to the Malian culture, that the way of teaching is not child-centred and that there is a lack of parental involvement in education.

The strategies employed by youth partly correspond with the findings of Ho et al. (2015). For example, Ho et al. (2015) found that on national level the primary strategy of youth is influence. In this study it was even the only mentioned strategy on national scale. A difference however is that in the study of Ho et al. (2015) influence is the primary strategy on community-scale, while the results from this study show that young people in Mali use socialisation as primary strategy on community scale. A striking finding is that partnership is never mentioned by youth in this study. According to Ho et al. (2015) this could be a real and potentially successful strategy next to the other strategies.

Another striking finding is the difference between young people's views and those of teachers. The role of youth is not acknowledged by teachers, which could be a blockade for young people in realising their expectations. The interviewed teachers maybe see youth as

deficits rather than resources. This is consistent with previous findings that youth are marginalised by adults (Checkoway, 2011; Nygreen et al., 2006).

Limitations of this study

One limitation of this study is that there were some problems with the reliability. First, informants could have given social desirable answers. Although this is tried to be minimised by telling that everything being said remained anonymous and go in depth with the answers of informants, this problem could not have been totally ruled out. Another point is the culture differences between the researcher and the informants, which could have led to misinterpretations on both sides. Close to this issue, French was not the mother tongue of the researcher, which could have led to misinterpretations or missing information.

Another limitation is that this study was only focused on Bamako and among mostly educated urban youth who were all active in youth organisations. Therefore conclusions must be drawn carefully, since they cannot be generalised to all youth in Mali.

Yield of this study

The yield of this study for Oxfam Novib is that it confirms the work that Oxfam Novib is already doing with youth. With the My Rights My Voice programme for example young people advocate for their rights and they raise awareness in communities on issues such as quality education and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The results of this study show that these are strategies that are employed by youth organisations as well. This study also shows young people's enthusiasm, energy, and will to change, which is encouraging and might inspire Oxfam Novib's future work with youth.

Opportunities for future research

The current study offers several opportunities for future research. First, more extensive research could be done on how the role of youth is perceived by adults. This research showed that the way adults view young people is an obstacle for young people to bring about social change. It would be interesting to explore why adults view young people this way.

Another opportunity for future research could be gender roles in education. Although this was not mentioned in this study, in several interviews there was some discussion about this theme. There were different opinions about the roles and status of boys and girls at school. This theme was too big to include in the current study, but it could therefore be an opportunity for future research.

A final opportunity could be to specifically investigate to what extent youth organisations are working in partnerships and what the possibilities are to strengthen this strategy. It could perhaps be a force when youth organisations work together or when youth organisations work in partnership with ‘adult’ organisations.

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Annex 1

Interviews with young people

Male / Female

Age

Profession

Locality

Educational background

Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Thank the informant(s) for participating in the (focus group) interview
- Goal of the interview
- Explanation of anonymity
- There are no wrong answers, it is about your own experiences and thought
- Duration of the interview
- Explanation of the structure of the interview
- Ask for permission to record the interview
- Questions?

A. Questions regarding the quality of education:

1. What do you think of the current quality of education with regard to:
 - Curriculum (subjects + content subjects)
 - Relevant?
 - Way of teaching
 - Child-centered?
 - Literacy (knowledge and skills)

B. How do you think the quality of education can be improved?

- And who should be involved in improving education?

C. Questions regarding the role of youth in improving education:

1. What are you doing to change the things you mentioned?

- How are you doing that?
 - Strategies (awareness-raising, influence, power or partnership)
 - On what scale (individual, community/inter-organization, national/international)
 - What makes you an actor of change?
 - Do you know other (groups of) young people who are active in improving the quality of education?
2. What factors enhance your role?
- What do you need to further enhance your role?
3. What barriers do you experience?
- What do you need to overcome these barriers?

Interviews with other informants

Male / Female

Age

Profession

Locality

Introduction:

- Introduce myself
- Thank the informant(s) for participating in the (focus group) interview
- Goal of the interview
- Explanation of anonymity
- There are no wrong answers, it is about your own experiences and thought
- Duration of the interview
- Explanation of the structure of the interview
- Ask for permission to record the interview
- Questions?

A. What changes in basic education are currently occurring?

- B. What is the role of young people in these changes?
1. Who (which young people) are involved in these changes?
 2. What do young people exactly do? (Examples)
 3. How? (Examples)
 - Strategies (for example awareness-raising, influence, power or partnership)
 - On what scale (individual, community/inter-organization, national/international)
- C. What *should* be the role of young people in improving educational quality?
- Why?
- D. What is needed to enhance young people's role in improving education?
- E. What suggestions do you have to enhance the role of young people in improving education?