

A twist on performance theory: How rewarding individual teachers may promote whole school improvement.

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Context & Background

Evidence from around the world shows that teacher effort has an impact on learning outcomes; one of the most basic measures of teacher effort is teacher presence. In Tanzania, teacher absence from classrooms is a non-trivial problem. The Service Delivery Indicators study (2014) found that 14.4% of teachers absent from school, but moreover, that 46.7% of teachers were absent from classrooms¹. A set of surprise school visits conducted in 2016 suggested the trends are not changing².

Recognizing the central role teachers play in learning achievements of pupils and the magnitude of the problem of teacher absenteeism in Tanzanian classrooms, Twaweza Tanzania has for the past four years (2013-2016) implemented a teacher motivation intervention based on a cash-on-delivery model (COD). The initiative, termed KiuFunza, aims to measure the impact on student learning of COD incentives for teachers in Standards I-II-III of public primary schools. KiuFunza measures student skills, pays teachers for improved performance based on these skills, and provides feedback to teachers about their performance. It does not train teacher on what or how to teach, nor does it provide any additional teaching resources or inputs into school management. It basically trusts that teachers are able to impart basic skills and competencies (through Standard III), as long as they are motivated to do so.

The narrative around this design has been contested from the start. At Twaweza, we encounter this every time we present KiuFunza publicly: there is much discomfort with the individualized nature of the COD design, and concerns are raised that such an approach is detrimental to the group cohesion and morale at school-level. Indeed, in exploratory studies conducted by Twaweza on the topic of management of education at district-level, and specifically around teacher absenteeism in schools, the dominant narrative that emerges is one of collectivism, not individual action and individual rewards. There is strong preference for sharing of responsibility for under-performance (e.g. there are valid reasons why teachers are absent; parents are as much to blame as teachers for poor learning outcomes, etc.); one could almost term this a form of “collective paralysis” where no actor is willing to be at the forefront of demonstrating change in behavior, partly perhaps because doing so would expose others and therefore potentially threaten the wellbeing of the entire group³.

But KiuFunza works. It has been implemented in 180 government-run, primary schools across 10 districts in Tanzania. Districts and schools were sampled randomly so that results are nationally representative. The first phase (2013 & 2014) trialed the direct delivery of capitation grants to schools (which was subsequently adopted by the government as policy in January 2016) and cash on delivery for teachers – separately and in combination. This phase found a significant positive impact on learning outcomes from a combination of teacher incentives and direct delivery of capitation funds. The second

¹ <http://www.sdindicators.org/countries/tanzania>

² <http://www.twaweza.org/go/teacher-incentive-program>

³ <http://www.twaweza.org/go/pa-insights-three-countries>

phase built on this to trial different models of incentive systems since the capitation grant delivery model has already been adopted by the government. After two years of treatment (2015 and 2016), findings show that the impact is equal to one-third of a year of schooling, added to the business as usual learning progress (without incentives). For more details on the two phases see [here](#)⁴.

For an initiative to be adopted throughout the system, we need to know not only whether it works, but also *how* and *why* it works. To understand better the mechanisms of how an individual-performance based initiative KiuFunza interacted with the school's collective, we conducted in-depth qualitative research in the 10 schools participating in KiuFunza in the Mbozi district in Tanzania.

Methods

Mbozi district was purposefully chosen from among the districts implementing KiuFunza, because it ranked as “middle-performing” in terms of overall COD bonuses earned in 2017 (Kindondoni was the district with highest amount of bonuses earned, while Mbinga earned the least), and because KF schools within Mbozi presented a range of performance (i.e., it has teachers with low achievement of COD bonuses, as well as some of the highest-earning COD teachers). The methodology was narrative interviews with teachers and head teachers. A grounded theory method was used to analyse the data. Grounded theory is a process that generates ideas that are grounded in data about participants' problems. The intention is to build abstract theoretical understanding of latent patterns of behaviour. Data is collected, coded, and analysed in an iterative process. As the researcher codes, categories and their properties begin to emerge, and the researcher begins to generate hypotheses about the relations among the categories and the key variable starts to become clear. Grounded theory allows the researcher to go beyond verifying facts and describing experience to generating an explanation of them. In total 30 interviews were coded, generating 633 references.

Results

What do teachers say about KiuFunza? Teachers are unequivocal that KiuFunza is positive. At an individual level they have more financial security which reduces their stress and positions them to be a better teacher. KiuFunza focuses everyone in the school on the child and creates a positive feedback loop of whole school improvement.

What reasons do teachers give for KiuFunza being effective? Teachers explain that the financial security that they receive from the bonus enables them to think about tomorrow, to spend more time teaching, and to focus on their students as individuals. A few teachers explicitly stated that as a result of the bonus, they stopped taking work outside of the school. Moreover, KiuFunza was trusted because it was seen as not biased (rewards based on observable outcomes), and because it delivered (the bonuses were paid out).

What did teachers do differently as a result of KiuFunza? Teachers speak of adopting different ways to assess students' learning by giving them regular tests to gauge their abilities. The results of these assessments provide teachers with data to differentiate their teaching between students depending upon their individual needs and capacities. In the face of limited teaching resources teachers are improvising and adapting material from their environment, so that they can vary their teaching stimuli and techniques.

⁴ <http://www.twaweza.org/go/teacher-incentive-program>

A positive feedback loop of whole school improvement has been established. Teachers speak of developing solutions and performance-oriented culture. The school uses limited resources more effectively, and students focus, study and achieve.

Teachers reinforce student performance with their families; and as teachers spend more time and attention on the child they find that they are bonding with students.

How did the teachers use the bonuses received? More than half the teachers used the bonus to reward the teachers' collective. A number used it to incentivize and reward students. For others it added to their family financial security, and to purchase "treats" for them and their family.

KiuFunza builds on an underlying self identity that teachers possess where they think of themselves as purposeful educators. They call the bonus they are paid "*Bakshishi*". This word derives from Persian and Arabic, but, often when used in Kiswahili it means a tip or a bribe; something that is sweet like candy. In KiuFunza the Bakshishi has proved to be a quick motivator that is sweeter than a salary rise. This is because it is a public undertaking with the potential for social affirmation and makes explicit the relationship between effort, results, and payment.

Emerging theoretical proposition

In the challenging conditions of a resource poor educational setting teachers have lost sight of their significance as educators. Society claims to value and respect good teachers, but our actual behaviours undermine claims that we are committed to educational attainment.

KiuFunza's goal is to improve students' learning outcomes. It does so by demonstrating a concern with teachers' interests, by trusting teachers to deliver, and by rewarding unbiased outcomes.

It has demonstrated a virtuous cycle of effects

1. Teachers feel more secure and less stressed; and so are able to focus teaching time, attention and reward on individual children.
2. A school environment has emerged that focuses on learning, solutions and performance.
3. Teachers, students and parents become bonded in their joint pursuit of performance.
4. Teachers self-image recovers as they identify as purposeful professionals, irrespective of their motivation to join the teaching profession.

These effects are conditioned on the catalyst for motivation being unbiased and reliable, and tangibly demonstrating to teachers that hard work pays, and can generate social affirmation.

Advocacy and program design within the education sector could further focus on rewarding (unbiased) performance, rather than blanket measures of resource increases.