

University of Groningen

The normative practitioner

Blaak, Marit

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.192062455](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.192062455)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Blaak, M. (2021). *The normative practitioner: adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.
<https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.192062455>

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4. Normative practitioners in action: a portrait of organisational learning in seven education NGOs

At the beginning of this PAR, participants of the orientation dialogue asked: What is currently happening in our organisations in terms of organisational learning? Where are the pitfalls and shortcomings? They felt this question had to be answered before we could design a research together. Through a multiple-case study with seven education NGOs we discovered a rich organisational learning practice. In this chapter I portray how education practitioners enact normative professionalism despite persistent barriers of fragmentation, power imbalances and funding constraints. Using the field theoretical lenses of space, positionality, relative autonomy and power I analyse how practitioners shape organisational learning as a force that creates, reproduces and transforms lifelong learning for development paradigms.

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, I proposed that an epistemological shift is required in development organisations to re-shape organisational learning to deal with the complex problems our society is facing. This involves deconstructing the technical rationality paradigm and accountability wave that fragmented development work. Episteme, knowledge gathered through systematic processes of deduction, could still play an important role to solve technical problems found on the high grounds. However, to navigate the swampy lowlands of the lifelong learning practice, phronesis should be gathered through processes of deliberation about what is right. I explored how a more critical approach of organisational learning could be supported through conceptual frameworks of field theory. Critical organisational learning is focused on identifying what is the right thing to do – rooted in an awareness of the power relations, but also a level of reflexivity about how practitioners internalise the rules of the game, positions, relations and meanings

characterising a field. Looking at the practice of education NGOs from a relational world view, we can distil what barriers to critical organisational learning exist, as well as how practitioners act as agents in translating and transforming the present epistemologies of practice. Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, and Edwards-Groves (2014) for example, present a definition of practice that emphasises this agency: “a form of socially established cooperative human activity that involves characteristic forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world (relatings), that ‘hang together’ in a distinctive project” (p.155). This chapter presents a turn to practice to analyse how field dynamics shape organisational learning practices and how practitioners navigate the spaces available to articulate and strengthen their phronesis.

This diagnostic study, however, was not purely driven by an abstract model that suggests there is something interesting to learn from practitioners. As described in chapter 3, I intentionally shaped a communicative space to ascertain whether the feeling of ‘learning is not leading to the necessary adaptations’ was a shared feeling among practitioners in education NGOs. From the start, participants expressed themselves as agents; they saw several gaps and barriers, but they also shared about various innovations that they have been able to introduce. In the orientation dialogue, for example, they confirmed the observations of various authors that NGOs tend to act risk-averse and put local knowledges at the periphery – learning was particularly associated with accountability (Chambers, 2010; Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). Peter, for example, problematised that risk is often perceived as something negative and something to avoid; a perception that hinders experimentation and learning.

I think in organisations [are] really, really scared to make mistakes. I think when, when we look at our donor reports, some, we talk a lot about the potential risks, and how we are going to mitigate these risks and what not. So, we are really, really, scared to make mistakes and I think if we're so scared of that then we're not really gonna learn.

Peter, NGO practitioner support unit, orientation dialogue

On the other hand, several examples were mentioned of creative learning methods that helped the organisations align their programming to the needs and preferences of their learners. For example, consulting children on how their playground should be designed or a manager allowing a team member to experiment with a new approach on a small

scale despite doubts about the effects. The participants felt, however, that they were not in position to pinpoint where the research should focus so that organisational learning would become more meaningful. They felt it would be important to hear from practitioners in a variety of education NGOs what is already happening and where challenges exist.

This chapter presents the outcomes of this multiple-case study. The aim of this chapter is two-fold: 1) draw insights from the current practice in education NGOs and 2) explain the focus of the next research stages. The findings presented in this chapter are derived from three main data sources: the orientation dialogue, semi-structured interviews in seven education NGOs and a collaborative co-analysis workshop. The methodology has been discussed in more detail in chapter 3. The mapping exercise focused particularly on the Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs). As discussed in chapter 2, this is not only a pragmatic method to locate organisational learning in the context of particular problems, but they also form an interesting unit of analysis given they are fields in their own right. After introducing the seven case study organisations briefly, I present an overview of the OLMs we discovered. Other facets such as leadership, cultural norms or the external environment that influence organisational learning are addressed more implicitly in section 4.4 – not just as aspects that are external, but integrated with the agency of organisational members. Finally, I highlight a few selected OLMs that illustrate more critical forms of organisational learning.

4.2 The seven education NGOs

The participants of the orientation dialogue suspected that organisational learning looks differently in various organisations depending on the organisational background, size and type of education and learning programming it offers. Therefore, they suggested that we should study a variety of education NGOs on the following criteria: nationality of their founders, education service, size, age and type of funding. Through snowball sampling based on these criteria, we identified seven organisations presented in table 11.

Table 11 Participating NGOs

#	Nationality of founders	Years of operation ⁹	# staff & volunteers	Type of education programme	Region	Funding source	# interviews
1	International	3	7	Access to formal education	North	Private	3
2	National	15	10	Non-formal skills training & adult literacy	East	Fees, private	2
3	International	2	18	Teacher development	All	Foundations	4
4	International	3	27	Non-formal skills training	East	Foundations	5
5	International	20	381	Civic & sexuality education	All	Multi- and bi-laterals, Foundations	4
6	National	6	13	Entrepreneurship education	Central & East	Service contracts	4
7	International	5	6	Non-formal skills training	CentralNorth, East	Private, Foundations	2

To illustrate the fields emerging around organisational learning in these organisations I briefly characterise these organisations in terms of their programming, mission and unique organisational learning habits or characteristics. All organisations are kept anonymous; therefore, I exclude details that may reveal the organisational identity and used more general terminology, rather than organisational jargon. Please note that all these portraits are based on experiences and perceptions shared in 2016 by one to four representatives per organisation (management and implementation representatives). The situation in these organisations has very likely changed and may have been coloured by the persons participating in this research.

⁹ As of 2016

4.2.1 Organisation 1 – Mentor-driven and organic learning

Organisation 1 is a young and small-scale organisation that operates in Northern Uganda, supporting children and youth who face multi-dimensional barriers to education. The organisation provides financial support as well as mentoring services to ensure the learners start and stay in school. Organisational learning in this organisation happens mostly organically, triggered by the urgent and emergent needs of learners. In the spirit of mentoring, a safe space between staff and learners is created to investigate their experiences and needs. Besides this, different actors are involved to develop a better understanding of the child's home and school situation – for example, teachers, parents or guardians. Given the limited budget, staff and senior management are continuously trying to balance priorities. A few formalised learning mechanisms are in place, such as a needs assessment that happens when a child joins the programme or school, and home visits. During these visits, forms are filled and reviewed periodically to ensure the right care and assistance is provided. For staff, too, a few formal mechanisms are in place to ensure coordination of efforts and review of their performance.

4.2.2 Organisation 2 – Permeable lines between organisational learning and education practice

Organisation 2 is a small and long-standing community-based NGO delivering several training programmes for youth and adults at their training centre in Central-Eastern Uganda. Sporadically, education programmes take place in the community as well. Typical for Organisation 2's learning practices are short lines between staff and senior management and between learners and staff. There seems to be a strong parallel between their vision on good education and organisational learning; the learner's knowledge and ideas are central in the informal organisational learning practices. Learners are considered equal to staff and organisational learning is an extension of this relationship. For example, student representatives and a lesson feedback book are structural mechanisms that allow for continuous adaptations based on learners' feedback. Most organisational learning seems to take place informally, and is only supported by loose reporting and follow up systems. Within this organisation, there seems to be nothing more but a permeable membrane between learners and staff allowing for quick and easy information sharing.

4.2.3 Organisation 3 – Practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice

Organisation 3 is a young, fast-growing organisation putting teachers first in their programme model but also in their organisational learning practices. A multitude of structured OLMs, as well as informal learning channels, are geared towards understanding the reality of the teachers and how they and other stakeholders experience the programme. It should be noted that Organisation 3's delivery model works through a variety of implementing government and non-governmental partners. The M&E department is keen on capturing practice-based evidence and blending it with evidence-based practices – always aiming to put the teachers' knowledge first. They are in the process of introducing several new OLMs that aim at in-depth inquiry and quicker learning loops. A further unique element for Organisation 3 is that the team takes time for informal learning. For example, by shadowing/observing partners for a day, or by organising strategy drinks to discuss important themes in an informal setting. The implementing, M&E and design teams work closely together and a culture of inquiry and positivism connects the team.

4.2.4 Organisation 4 – Collective organisational learning

Organisation 4 is situated in Central-Eastern Uganda and is transitioning out of its start-up phase, building systems and establishing its mission and vision. During this transition period, several organisational learning initiatives have been introduced by individual staff. Structural learning mechanisms, however, have also started taking shape. A monitoring and evaluation team, for example, supports implementing staff in the participatory development of tools and analysis of results, and strengthens research skills of team members. Besides this, weekly staff training is provided. A unique structure in their education programme is the youth advisory council. In this council, youth representatives elected by youth in the community analyse the needs of youth in the community and identify solutions that the organisation could consider implementing.

4.2.5 Organisation 5 – Youth-centred organisational learning

Though not a traditional education NGO, a large component of Organisation 5's programming aims at facilitating learning and education of youth and community members. Organisation 5 is a rapidly growing organisation covering almost the entire country through several district offices. To facilitate organisational learning at this large scale, multiple formal platforms are built in to re-think programme implementation and design frequently. Organisational learning is monitored by the M&E department.

Organisation 5 aims at a strong youth and community-centred approach to development and this is certainly reflected in OLMs which continuously engage youth and other stakeholders. Moreover, the organisation positions youth as researchers to investigate the realities of fellow youth across the country and to inform programming. Their large pool of young volunteers also offers a great source of knowledge and insight, and these members are consulted through various channels such as reflection meetings and regular field visits. The organisation regularly brings all staff to one location to ensure cross-programme learning, for example, through annual planning or quarterly staff development retreats.

4.2.6 Organisation 6 – Learning-oriented leadership

Organisation 6 offers various non-formal education services to youth, particularly focusing on entrepreneurship development. Organisation 6's leadership is ambitious in terms of organisational learning. An environment for learning is set up by involving staff in decision-making and problem solving, setting targets for networking with potential partners and maintaining a flexible programme design that is modified between cohorts based on lessons learned. Staff's professional development is supported through distributing leadership practices. For example, rotationally chairing meetings and leading professional development sessions. Apart from internal learning, community members are engaged through a local advisory committee and feedback is sought from learners and community members on several occasions. Like Organisation 2, this organisation adopts a flexible delivery style allowing facilitators to adjust the delivery methods on the go.

4.2.7 Organisation 7 – Identifying local solutions through organisational learning

Characterising Organisation 7's organisational learning practice is the strong team spirit. Knowledge, information and ideas flow freely through the organisation as different departments continuously work together on project implementation and meet every morning to celebrate and review progress. Organisation 7 believes the solution for poverty lies in the community. Their practical skills workshops, learning videos and annual public events are all geared towards providing large scale access to locally created solutions to people living in extreme poverty. Organisation 7 actively seeks local solutions that exist in communities to inform their organisational processes, giving beneficiaries and local leaders a voice through surveys and videos. They located their office on the

edge of three slum communities in Kampala to increase accessibility and interaction. Before staff interact with community members, they intentionally prepare how the conversational space could be set up to create a safe space for community members.

4.2.8 The topography of lifelong learning for development

Though the profiles described here are short, hopefully they illustrate the diversity of approaches NGOs adopt to serve the lifelong learning for development agenda. It has become clear how, over time, influenced by their mission, founders' mentality, funding opportunities and partnerships, these organisations formed unique fields. Members interact and relate differently in each organisation – sometimes organically as they meet in the learning site, other times through intentionally shaped meetings. Managers and founders have left a dent in this field, and each organisation showed how leadership styles fuelled unique innovations. The participants of the orientation dialogue were right: organisational learning is a situated practice and it looks different depending on the organisational context. However, linking it back to the topography of lifelong learning for development we could see that all the organisations operated in swampy, messy regions of the wider field. Organisation 5, for example, seeks to strengthen youths' sexual reproductive health and rights amidst a conservative context. Organisation 3 offers entrepreneurship training to a heterogeneous group of out-of-school youth with varying levels of literacy and learning preferences. Even Organisation 1, whose mission is seemingly simple - increasing access to education by providing school fees - in reality, deals with various barriers to educational inclusion. As I share in section 4.4, there was friction at times between the nature of the problems these NGOs sought to solve and the way organisational learning was shaped. But, as the interviews and workshops illustrated, practitioners in all organisations found meaningful ways to enact their agency to act towards more desirable futures. Before presenting these insights, I first explain how practitioners defined organisational learning.

4.3 What does organisational learning mean to the practitioners

Organisational learning literature presents a variety of definitions of organisational learning or the learning organisation (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). Therefore, the semi-structured interviews started off with the question what organisational learning meant to the participants. Practitioners – like organisational learning scholars - offered diverse answers. For example, they emphasised staff development, learning from

experience and mistakes, unlearning, generating knowledge systematically or learning from trends and other organisations.

What I understand with organisational learning is probably improve the way we work based on experiences, [...] from the word go. Which requires a lot of documentation, follow up on probably actions since they are being implemented, making sure everyone has an input in everything we do, and their input is documented and shared across the different implementers across the entire structure. So, it is basically experience sharing follow up on what works well, what doesn't work well probably analyse it, interpret it.

Joanna, M&E manager, Organisation 5

Most commonly, practitioners did not limit organisational learning to one purpose. A recurring rationale of organisational learning was that it should help the organisation to understand the realities of their learners and align their education programmes to address emerging needs.

Organisational learning to me it's like an intervention, where you systematically look at the needs in the community, and then you come up with an appropriate way of addressing such needs. So, that as time goes by, you can be able to see that there is interconnectivity between what you wish to provide and what [you] actually provide.

Jacob, manager implementation, Organisation 4

The emphasis on the impact on learners and communities was further underlined during the second workshop, when participants formulated their vision for success in the upcoming PAR. Their vision was to facilitate a holistic change in communities and learners being able to achieve their goals. Associating organisational learning particularly with the desire to serve the greater good is not just something that 'made sense' at the organisational level. It connected to the professional identity of the practitioners as well. Kenneth, for example, shares how his genuine interest in his learners sparks a drive to learn as an individual and to prompt organisational learning.

If I talk to a child, and a child narrates to me their problems, sometimes it breaks me down. It makes me feel like how is this really happening to a human being? [...] So, if you see the smile in the child's face as she or he

narrates the story, I ask myself how are you still smiling? [...] And so that has really also helped me develop my emotional strength [...] And these are experiences that we bring back to the office and we try to make it a goal for us to also try to learn and try to adjust to our flaws. Sometimes it is within the office level, sometimes it is on the personal level.

Kenneth, implementing educator, Organisation 1

Regardless of this intrinsic desire to do the right thing for learners, in their accounts, practitioners do not explicitly describe organisational learning as a transformative force. They also related organisational learning to fitting in, keeping up and getting ahead, and not necessarily transforming the status quo. But as I illustrate below, the aspiration to facilitate holistic change in line with what is meaningful to learners and communities did turn out to be a force that overrules dominating trends of fragmentation and target-based programming.

4.4 Organisational learning mechanisms in education NGOs

One of the sub-questions in this research was: Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently used in education NGOs in Uganda? After coding the interviews, 107 OLMs emerged as presented in tables 12 and 13 at the end of this chapter. Some OLMs were unique to a particular organisation, others were more common. On average the interviews revealed 33 OLMs per organisation, with Organisation 2 showing the lowest number of OLMs (9) and Organisation 6 showing the most (48).

Table 12 OLM count per education NGO

Org#	Total OLMs	Learning strategy	Reporting	Implementation	Staff dev't	Inter dep't	Research & dev't	Extern. learners	Extern. others
1	21	2	4	4	1	1	0	5	4
2	9	1	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
3	43	4	2	5	7	6	5	7	7
4	39	2	2	10	7	3	3	7	5
5	42	5	4	5	8	4	8	4	4
6	48	2	7	8	14	2	4	7	4
7	33	2	4	6	7	3	1	4	6

Though I am presenting this numerical overview, this multiple case study did not aim at detecting correlations between OLMs, organisation type or educational programme. Because of the semi-structured interview method used, it is possible that OLMs existed in organisations but that members did not bring them up during interviews. Therefore, I do not read too much into the frequencies of OLMs being mentioned. Rather, I briefly discuss what the 107 OLMs suggest about the organisational learning practice in education NGOs. In the next section, I discuss in more detail the challenges and considerations of practitioners, but here I focus on the types of OLMs in place. In table 13, one may notice that some OLMs are not traditionally considered learning mechanisms such as 'photography' or 'physical office located in the community'. It is important to note that we documented what practitioners considered as OLMs. For each of the OLMs listed in table 13, there was a clear narrative of how that activity, tool or space enabled the practitioners to gain new insights and/or capture and disseminate these insights for future reflection and action.

What the interviews revealed, first of all, is that the education NGOs are very intentional about organisational learning. Education NGOs actively raise questions to understand how their activities can be run more effectively, what the impact of their programme is on learners, what other services or activities they can run and how. In addition, a plethora of mechanisms aim at equipping NGO practitioners with the competencies required to implement the programme activities. In the reflection-in-action paradigm discussed in chapter 2, such professional development could promote a reflective practice wherein practitioners develop a critical awareness of the realities of their learners and identify alternative action strategies to facilitate the (social) change they aspire to. Looking at the OLMs under implementation it becomes clear that most organisations have frameworks in place that capture these pathways to change in targets, activities and standards. This hints at the same fragmentation that Van der Laan (2006) criticises in the social work sector or Van der Linden (2016) in the lifelong learning sector. Consequently, it could be that the professional development efforts will create tension by equipping practitioners to question and ignore these targets, or instead, the efforts induct the practitioners into this system and sets them up to perform well into this structure. It is possible that the two are aligned and practitioners – through their reflective practice – influence the way targets and standard practices are set. However, the respondents mentioned this was not sufficiently the case and felt it was particularly

the donor who influences what targets the teams strive for. I unpack this tension between professional discretion and rationalisation more in section 4.5.

This leads to a second observation: most external facing learning mechanisms aim at understanding the needs and lived realities of the learners and/or direct programme participants. These OLMs could be categorised as focused or widely oriented. The focused processes measure and observe specific changes according to targets (e.g., needs assessment or surveys) or feedback on specific activities (e.g., design interviews), whereas the widely oriented mechanisms focus on the life world of learners, for example shadowing or informal conversations. Moreover, a good number of OLMs that are research and development-oriented also seek to understand the realities of learners and what it takes to enable them to access new opportunities. However, only a few OLMs are aiming at the wider social systems at the local community level, but also at regional, national and international level. This poses a risk that complex problems are addressed based on partial knowledge. Moreover, there is only one organisation that identified an OLM specifically oriented towards collective learning with their funding partner. So, there is a chance that new insights are not integrated into grant agreements until the next cohort or programme cycle (also see Chambers, 2010).

Lastly, before I untangle how these OLMs were shaped through an interplay of agency and structure, I would like to underline the role that practitioners ascribe to M&E in regards to organisational learning. Most organisations (except organisations 1 and 2) had a person or team dedicated to M&E. This unit is associated with some OLMs that are listed in table 13; for example, the M&E presentations, learning briefs, wall of progress etcetera. While I have grouped M&E with implementation, the divide between M&E and implementation was commonly problematised both in the interviews and co-analysis workshop.

The more we look at M&E as a separate island, the more we make the learning process possibly more difficult eh, because people tend to detach themselves from that process. Because this is this unit, it has been set apart, there are people that are probably employed to do it, they are the experts in it. So we forget that it's actually a process that is part and parcel of us all as the people who are involved in the programme design, the implementation and the reporting [...] So maybe we need to integrate all these roles, so that

anyone within the organisation at any one time can actually be able to play this role and appreciate the real value that comes out of M&E.

Irene, M&E Manager, Organisation 5

The integration of M&E and programmes was experienced as an unresolved tension by most. Several organisations mentioned taking steps towards resolving this tension, for example by equipping non-M&E staff with the skills for data collection or analysis and through close collaboration between the M&E and implementation. These reflections suggest that where OLMs are located and which organisational members are assigned formal or specific roles to participate in these OLMs can have deep implications for the way organisational learning is perceived as part of the primary work processes or a separate process. So far, the OLMs have profiled the 'structural facet' of organisational learning Lipshitz et al. (2007). In the next section I zoom in on other facets and field dynamics that affect the shape these OLMs take, as well as the role they end up playing in the normative practice of education practitioners.

4.5 Field dynamics and agency shaping organisational learning

In view of a reflection-in-action paradigm, organisational learning is deeply situational. Therefore, table 13 is not intended as a menu of OLMs from which managers can pick and select mechanisms. OLMs are shaped by organisational members in response to contextual factors. The 'learning by design' model of Shani and Docherty (2003) offers a framework to operationalise this interplay between structure and agency. In this section, I zoom in on two components of this model: learning requirements and dimensions. We could view the learning requirements as an extension of field dynamics; the configuration of an organisation's field will have implications for which learning outcomes are required and desired and what conditions and barriers are in place for this learning to materialise. The design dimensions centre more around the agency side of field theory; what considerations (explicit or implicit) do practitioners apply in creating, shaping or ending OLMs?

4.5.1 *Field dynamics and learning requirements*

In their multifaceted model of organisational learning, Lipshitz et al. (2007) present the 'external context' as one of the facets influencing whether organisational learning is productive or not. This is very similar to the learning requirements of Shani and Docherty (2003). The five components of the organisational context they present are:

environmental uncertainty, task uncertainty, task structure, proximity to the organisation's core mission, and organisational structure. These components are similar to the parameters I used to illustrate the topography of the field of lifelong learning for development. The logic remains the same; there are external forces that influence what is required of learning spaces. These could be positive drivers stimulating learning (such as error criticality) or barriers (such as a fragmented organisational structure). Whereas there were more barriers and challenges to learning than I could include in the scope of this chapter (around 100 codes), I highlight four forces that stood out across the organisational profiles that seem to particularly affect the more critical or transformative forms of learning.

a. Positionality – In chapter 2 I highlighted that part of the reason to look at organisational learning in education NGOs is that they take up a unique position in the field of lifelong learning for development. In the interviews, the practitioners illustrated how this position – in between communities and donors – caused dilemmas, especially where programme targets do not correspond with realities. Practitioners felt constraints to expanding their services to meet the needs of their learners. For example, Mildred explained they cannot work with all interested youth because of an age restriction.

We always have more youth who are interested in our programme, but they exit the age bracket we want, because we deal with 15-25 [years old] [...] So, the donors or the funding also limits us.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

Several authors have problematised that aid organisations reduce complex processes to linear models of change, which, due to their powerful position, limits the discretionary space of implementing practitioners (Ramalingam, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Local communities exert agency too in their relationship with NGOs. Research participants expressed the challenge of receiving 'socially desirable' answers – which could be a strategy of 'dependent agency' to secure future programming (Anderson & Patterson, 2017). Knowing the right thing to say offers communities access to valuable capital.

So, when I go into community [...] one thing I hear most is, 'thank you, thank you for the programme' [...] I can't get anything else out from them.

Joseph, senior manager, Organisation 6

Local communities in which NGOs operate are themselves fields too – at times creating forces against change. Organisation 5, for example, advocated for youth participation in local decision-making processes, but local leaders pushed back on this.

So where decision makers, or any other institution, has got a negative perception about our target group.[...] If you are saying this is what young people want [...] For instance, [...] government should support young people and a, b, c, d... but the decision maker is saying we can't work with young people.

Bernard, implementing educator, Organisation 5

In the web of power relations, NGOs have to be critical about who determines what is at stake and how to derive a solid understanding of authentic learner needs.

b. Value contradictions – Balancing various voices becomes particularly complex when they present tensions at the level of values. NGOs and funders may advance 'progressive' development goals such as women empowerment or family planning, which are not always accepted in local communities.

[Our funding director] was like 'where is family planning, where is maternal and child health?' And, sometimes... is a challenge for us because culturally it is not accepted here. [...] Funders think it's just a problem of access, but it goes much beyond access to just the way people perceive family planning, and family in general.

Priscilla, manager support, Organisation 4

Confronted with these tensions, practitioners need to decide whether to transform local value systems or to advocate for programming in line with them.

c. Accountability paradox – All profiled NGOs rely heavily on external funding, which comes with terms and conditions aimed at resource effectiveness. However, these expectations can be counterproductive in terms of meaningful organisational learning (Blaak & Zeelen, 2013; Guijt, 2010).

"Where there is [...] so much pressure coming from the people bringing in the money [...] Me personally I find it hard to [...] create another way because

if you don't do it... you immediately exclude yourself from different opportunities.”

Alexandra, participant analysis workshop

Alexandra is referring to Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) requirements accompanying grants. To secure funding, progress must be demonstrated along with pre-defined theories of change, which does not necessarily match the information needs of practitioners (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). During the analysis workshop, I posed to participants that most changes reported during the interviews were at the single-loop level. They agreed that double-loop learning occurred less – which was especially associated with the pre-set targets. Members added responses on their feedback forms during the presentation, such as: “Sometimes this is affected by the structure we have to work under, leaving no room for creativity.” And, “Few organisations seem willing to venture into the double-loop learning. Could be driven by donors? Only funding for specific goals and ways to reach them.” Besides inhibiting critical organisational learning, the narrow focus on quantifiable results hinders rich information about the realities on the ground from travelling up to donors – sustaining the accountability paradox. As mentioned in section 4.4, only one OLM was mentioned in which the donor and NGO staff met to discuss their progress. Others referred to reports with no mention of any form of conversation.

d. Structural fragmentation – Education NGOs are commonly divided into support and implementation units. Implementing teams include teachers, facilitators or mentors, as well as team leaders. Support units include human resource, M&E and finance. Practitioners who participated in this research note that this division obstructs the organisation from developing a full understanding of learners’ needs. M&E was mentioned frequently as a unit with insufficient understanding of the primary processes of the education NGOs, but participants also hinted at power dynamics that inhibited members lower in the organisational hierarchy from sharing.

People don't take initiative either to act or to like talk to someone because they are waiting for things to come from the top down.

Priscilla, manager support, Organisation 4

Other participants mentioned that after making recommendations repeatedly, they become hesitant to continue sharing if they don’t see decision-makers act on

recommendations. The distribution of work limits shared spaces for learning, leaving the support units at risk of being out of touch with realities in the community.

4.5.2 Learning design dimensions: Practitioners' considerations

Even though barriers to learning exist, practitioners proactively ensure that they learn at an individual and organisational level. Lipshitz et al. (2007) state: "The OLM concept should help managers focus on who needs to be learning, when it should take place, and how to get the people together for this to happen. OLMs provide managers with choices [...]" (p. 246). It is the type of considerations that (Shani & Docherty, 2003) call learning design dimensions. Though both these works are directed especially at managers, in this research I bring out the considerations of staff at any level. After all, a learning mechanism does not always have to be a formal OLM instituted by the manager. Indeed, as I illustrate below, practitioners shared a reflective account of what is important to them when gathering, processing and utilising knowledge in their work. The most common considerations that relate to critical forms of organisational learning can be grouped into four domains.

a. Facilitating conversational space to overcome power dynamics - Practitioners mentioned several techniques they use to facilitate a conversational space when seeking feedback from learners and others. For example, by using the local language flexibly, using open-ended questions or using a mentoring approach.

The best I do as a mentor is to let the kids know that I am not there to judge them, to let them realise that I am there cause I have seen the problem even worse than them, and I am there to learn.

Kenneth, educator, Organisation 1

Managers, too, utilised strategies to create a safe space for team members – sometimes choosing to stay away to allow a more open dialogue, or on the contrary, to be available in spaces staff are comfortable in. Reflexivity about one's positionality is vital – what power dynamics exist between actors in learning spaces? And how can you share power in these spaces? These considerations were quite explicit and therefore suggest that practitioners already enact what (Kunneman, 2016) calls normative professionalism. Several practitioners expressed an awareness of the ethical nature of their work and the power position they take up, and had tools and competences to create a safe space for

others to share their views. Suzanna, a manager in Organisation 7, mentioned preparing her team to do so effectively before they go out to meet external actors.

The team before they move out, they usually come to me and sit down. We're like: 'So what's the purpose of this meeting? What would you want to walk away with? And why would this person waste the whole hour or two seated with you?

Suzanna, senior manager, Organisation 7

b. Diversifying the knowledge base - In their work, practitioners underline the importance of tapping into multiple knowledge sources, including external research, anecdotal stories, M&E data and embodied knowledge. By widening the knowledge base, organisations seek to overcome bias and gain a richer understanding of needs and change processes.

Because when you go to them [learners] they will tell you good things [...]. So you may not really learn a lot from them. So we would go to the members of the community.

Musa, implementing educator, Organisation 2

In terms of the 'validity of knowledge, different views emerge. In some organisations, reference was made to external evaluators offering more objective insights, whereas others prioritise the knowledge of teachers.

One thing that will never change is that we believe that teachers are the ones who come up with the solutions. So, no matter like how many experts come up to us where that a, b and c... if we hear from teachers that that just doesn't work then we're not gonna do it I think.

Peter, manager support, Organisation 3

Though most practitioners were not explicit about their interpretation of rigour, they implicitly made decisions as to what knowledges to value and include. The inclusion of traditional knowledge, for example, did not appear on the learning agenda of any of the NGOs.

c. Balancing formal and informal learning spaces - A dimension that was discussed at length during the analysis workshop was the delicate balance between formal and

informal learning. Participants highlighted that informal spaces, such as lunch conversations, allow members to share more freely but a disadvantage is that these insights remain undocumented without structural follow up. The balance is difficult to strike, and formalising learning has a risk too:

I'm just wondering if it [organisational learning] is going to become another technical thing like the way M&E has kind of gone. Where then the learning becomes inaccessible to actually the people [...] that are accumulating most of the learning through the actual work.

Nancy, participant, orientation dialogue

These reflections hint at the difficulty to 'plan' new learning norms in OLMs; to truly create a space to share freely a level of spontaneity is needed without hierarchies or agendas.

d. Negotiating terms and conditions for learning with funders - Whereas NGOs rely on external funders, they are not powerless in this relationship. Some organisations expressed having become critical in selecting funding partners or re-negotiating programme activities. An important subject of negotiation is the educational targets. Mildred, for example, proposes that frontline practitioners take lead in programme design.

I think that donors shouldn't be part of the programme design... they should source out for funding yes, but the organisation as the organisation should plan.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

Also, the role of targets in programme design and implementation can be the subject of discussion. Does the organisation maintain space for unexpected insights and emerging needs? Or do pre-set targets shape the day-to-day practice? What is at stake is determined through social interaction, not just by NGO practitioners, but in dialogue with funders, learners and other stakeholders.

4.6 Critical forms of organisational learning

As illustrated above, the seven education NGOs illustrated a large number of OLMs, though many of these seem to reproduce the technical rationality paradigm rather than

reflection-in-action. In section 4.5, however, it became clear that despite the system pressures practitioners experienced, they kept the learners in mind when shaping their OLMs. Below, I present several OLMs that I consider examples of critical organisational learning and that show signs of alternative paradigms such as the reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) and adaptive pluralism approach (Chambers, 2010). In a way these could be seen as small enclaves, with their own unique power relations and value systems (Friedman, 2011).

4.6.1 OLMs that put learners (and communities) in the driver's seat

Practitioners suggested that an increasingly deep understanding of learners' realities does not necessarily translate into well-aligned education programmes. In a bid to improve this, majority of the organisations introduced mechanisms that give learners and community members influence over learning and action planning. Organisation 5 used action research for this purpose:

We are doing action research [...] we get to see young people interact directly with various people in the field [...] It has shaped our programming [...] research that is informing, probably holding decision makers accountable, or trying to address the gaps that actually exist in the field.

Phiona, manager support, Organisation 5

In other instances, tools such as community scorecards are utilised to let community members articulate programme goals. Organisations 2, 4 and 6 as well constituted organisational structures for learners and communities to have a say – for example in community councils or through learner representatives.

[...] We are looking forward to initiating the [learner led club], and then we shall be having that top most structure called youth advisory council. So it will help us to really incorporate in the issues or views of most of the youth of the community who [we] may not reach out to.

Jacob, manager implementation, Organisation 4

4.6.2 OLMs that interrupt daily routines

Several organisational learning practices interrupted daily routines to allow practitioners to take a step back and reflect. For example, Organisation 3 organises 'strategic drinks' for all staff to discuss strategy in an informal setting. Organisation 5 runs quarterly

retreats to involve staff in reviewing progress and recommending changes in programmes or operations. In addition, managers in organisations 1, 3 and 5 ensure that office staff frequently spend time in the field observing or participating in educational activities. Stepping into each other's shoes sometimes applied to actors outside the organisation as well such as students, teachers or even inspectors. Allowing yourself to see social reality from a different perspective – stepping into someone's shoes and removing yourself from the order of the day - can lead to radically new perceptions.

I was talking to one of my girls [...] from school, and she has not been doing so good in class. [...] She [the student] gave me the task to maybe sit in her class and do the same test with her. And I sat in the same class with her, it was an English paper, and I got 68 per cent, she is in P6, and she got 73. [...] So, I also learn.

Kenneth, educator, Organisation 1

4.6.3 OLMs that are small and powerful

Critical organisational learning does not always require big investments or formal structures, rather this can be organically embedded in primary work processes. Organisations 1 and 6 invest in personal mentoring relationships with learners to enable collective learning – allowing learners to untangle their problems and identify solutions.

When you're working with youth, when you're mentoring them, don't give them advice first. First ask them what they think they can do and then you work [...] with that solution.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

For managers too, a small gesture can go a long way in encouraging a reflective practice amongst educators. By relating differently, new spaces open up with unique norms, allowing for new meaning and opportunities to act. For example, manager Joseph made a habit of posing spontaneous learning questions to team members:

Joseph is notorious with this, [he] can give you like two questions, like there was a time he told us I want you to go and come up with a report [...] on the importance of brainstorming.

Amos, coordinator support, Organisation 6

What these OLMs illustrate is that OLMs can model a new structural order, not playing by dominant rules of the game – new people get a seat on the table and are given an opportunity to articulate goals (Lipshitz et al., 2007).

4.7 Enclaves and tempered normative professionalism

This chapter set out to explore what barriers and challenges practitioners face in their organisational learning practices in education NGOs, but also to find out what we might learn from these practices. Based on a multiple-case study this chapter illustrated the structural facet of organisational learning as well as the agency of practitioners to rethink and reshape organisational learning as a practice that helps them serve their target groups better. This resulted in three main insights:

i. Learners at the centre - Practitioners centre their practice around the well-being of their learners, but are often hindered in prioritising this due to the configuration of the field. They position the purpose of organisational learning primarily as a process to align their work to the needs of learners, but also as a means to fit in and keep up with the field as-is.

ii. Fragmentation leads to single-loop learning - As a result of fragmentation and the overall structure of positions in the wider field of lifelong learning for development, practitioners continuously face conflicting priorities, leading to predominantly single-loop learning and incomplete knowledge about the realities of learner needs, programme implementation and outcomes. Learning tends to focus on specific target populations and communities – with the risk of developing blind spots for complex underlying dynamics.

iii. Normative professionalism is enacted - However tight the corners that they manoeuvre on a day-to-day basis may be, education practitioners masterfully use any wiggle room to advocate for their learners' needs. As illustrated through various examples, OLMs are not just critical by virtue of the subject of reflection but also by modelling alternative norms. Practitioners shape small, often temporary enclaves through OLMs, in which alternative power dynamics and governing rules enable new meaning giving processes leading to new action scripts rooted in alternative paradigms. Remarkably, such enclaves rarely sit neatly in a department or team, rather they are shaped across team and organisational boundaries.

I would not claim that this study offers a complete overview of organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda. For example, though we covered a variety of NGOs, we did not study larger international NGOs and we did not cover all geographical areas of Uganda. However, in a relatively short period of time, we did manage to unearth important pain points and rich examples of how practitioners shape their organisational learning practice. Unlike many studies on organisational learning, this study documented the voices from practitioners in various positions of the organisation and not only managers. This illustrated that all members are agents influencing the way organisational learning is shaped, though I cannot deny the important role management has in upholding a learning culture and dedicating resources, as is also emphasised in other works (Lipshitz et al., 2007). Using the field theoretical perspective – operationalised through the model of learning by design and multifaceted models of organisational learning – we were able to zoom in on acts of agency and see ways in which this interplayed with the trends in the wider field. We observed that regardless of dominant paradigms practitioners are not powerless in shaping their own normative practice. Practitioners act like tempered radicals to advocate for the interests of their learners (Meyerson, 2001). This chapter provides a first sketch of the normative practitioner in action – a portrait that receives more colour and detail in the next chapters.

Though it was a rapid mapping exercise, the dialogue and co-analysis workshop provided a platform for practitioners to give meaning to their lived realities and to make explicit those processes and considerations that often remain implicit. Concepts such as habitus, positionality, structure and symbolic order illustrate how actions in micro-situations are influenced by forces in a bigger field. Power in this view is not just a macro-dynamic that is out of control of practitioners – all actors exert power to some extent and can share this power. In several cases, practitioners were able to open spaces where power was shared with learners and communities to define what is important. Indeed, OLMs helped: “explain how organisational learning is possible despite apparent conflicts between the dominant cultures of most organisations and the values and norms required for productive learning” (Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 247). We did see that the web of power relations made it difficult for such efforts to influence decision makers – which to an extent was also influenced by the symbolic order that prioritises short-term, measurable targets, biasing reports that were shared with donors and managers. Conceptually, field theory effectively solves the common omission of power relations in organisational

learning literature. Not only does it provide a vocabulary to grasp these intricate power dynamics between individuals and fields, it also helps connect power and normative complexity in work situations, acknowledging that what is defined as valuable and the norm is determined through processes of power.

The profiles of seven education NGOs illustrated interesting OLMs and action strategies that practitioners in other contexts may consider too. However, since practice is contextual and relational, OLMs may not yield the same effects in every organisational field. Rather than copying exact OLMs, practitioners could experiment with the overall approaches to shaping critical OLMs presented by these education practitioners. For example, shifting position, incentivising new questions or interrupting daily routine. In order to do this meaningfully, practitioners in any field would benefit from reflexive capabilities – becoming aware that the configuration of the field in which they operate is first of all cognitive, and based on this understanding identify opportunities beyond initially observed limitations (Friedman, 2011). Field theoretical concepts, therefore, are not only conceptually valuable, but they can also offer tools for a reflexive practice as I demonstrate in the upcoming chapters. This first stage of the research set up a community of inquiry and participants expressed a keen interest in becoming more critical in their organisational learning practice. They felt constrained and expressed that their efforts to advocate for change on behalf of their learners did not always yield the desired changes and results. On the side of learning from their learners too, dynamics are at play that make it difficult to gain an authentic understanding of learning needs, and those organisational members who have these insights are not always heard. In this sense, this rapid analysis speaks to themes highlighted in the organisational learning literature too; clashing paradigms are causing intricate dilemmas that practitioners do navigate quite skilfully but more is needed (Van der Laan, 2006; Van der Linden, 2016). The suggested focus on double-loop learning with external actors was determined collaboratively based on this diagnostic study, and formed a thread through the remainder of the PAR.

4.8 Conclusion

This mapping exercise formed merely the first step of this PAR and yet it provided a rich account of the life world of practitioners in education NGOs. Their normative professionalism enables them to navigate dilemmas and create spaces to 'do things

differently'. The seven NGOs present a hopeful picture – new paradigms are already emerging, albeit a work in progress. By including such accounts in the organisational learning discourse, we can leverage current practices to advance more sustainable and just futures. This first stage of the research presents cause for optimism; there are OLMs in place that simulate a different order – a different way of relating. Lipshitz et al. (2007) and Friedman (2011) invite scholars to investigate the connection between enclaves and the field, can these temporary and local spaces with a different culture lead to long-term and paradigmatic change? In chapter 5 I explore this question further using an outsider perspective and establish what fields surround the organisation and how these enclaves or OLMs can take shape where the NGO meets the community. Before this, intermezzo 2 illustrates the ecosystem of actors that exists surrounding the NGOs.

Table 13 Overview of OLMs identified by practitioners in seven education NGOs

Category	OLM	Definition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Learning strategy	Learning agenda	A document that explicitly spells out learning needs and timelines.			x				
	Manager M&E/Learning	Learning is made intentional by dedicating a function at the manager level to this process.					x		
	Informal strategy drinks	A platform where team members meet over drinks while discussing new strategic ideas.			x				
	Flexible budget	Resources are set aside to act on ideas & recommendations emerging from other OLMs.	X						
	Drawing board/visioning	A platform in which members come together to concretise the organisational vision.							x
	Bottom line accountabilities	These are defined goals or targets for organisational departments to assess their contribution to the broader mission of the organisation.					x		
	Management meeting	A platform in which senior managers meet to discuss a variety of matters.				x	x		
	Staff retreats	A platform in which organisational members meet for a longer duration (1-5 days usually) to solve problems, share ideas, etc.			x	x	x	x	
	Periodical reviews	A platform wherein organisational members discuss progress so far and come up with recommendations. Information from various reports, etc. is injected.	X	x	x		x	x	x
Reporting and information sharing	Verbal reports	After an activity, a colleague shares what happened with other colleagues verbally.						x	
	Written report	A written document capturing key findings/insights.	X	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Hard copy files	A filing system that captures hard copy information about learners or programme activities, accessible to team members.	X					x	

	Database	A digital database that stores data over time/across projects.		x				x	x
	Shared drive	An online platform where members store and retrieve information/documents etc.	X		x		x	x	
	Recommendations tracker	An instrument to track action steps emerging in OLMs to ensure ideas are implemented.				x	x		
	E-mail	A platform used to disseminate information within the organisation.	X				x	x	x
	Library	A physical or online space where resources and literature are accessed by staff for professional development or problem-solving.						x	x
Programme implementation	Photos	A media used to document activities and outcomes of the programme.				x			x
	Videos	A media used to capture stories of learners/beneficiaries or educational content (e.g. skills videos). Used by both internal and external audience.						x	x
	Suggestion box	A physical box in which learners, community members or staff can provide suggestions or feedback on the services.				x	x	x	
	Wall of progress	Findings and recommendations from research or M&E are displayed on a visible space/wall in the office for easy consumption by team members.				x			
	M&E presentations	A platform in which the M&E team presents a report with other team members - often including a discussion analysing the results and ways forward.				x			
	Post training reflection/evaluation	A platform created after a training or education activity to gather feedback and ideas from participants either on a form or verbally.				x		x	
	Being in the field/field visits	These include activities in which staff and managers visit learners and communities to gather further information about their situation.	X			x		x	x
	Activity tracker	Information/data on key activities are documented to monitor progress over time.				x			
	Quality framework	A guide is created based on an underlying theory of quality to optimise information gathering and learning during field visits or events.				x			x

	After action review	A space in which staff, volunteers and sometimes learners/stakeholders review an event or cycle of activities usually to discuss successes and areas for improvement.					x		x
	Support supervision	A management method to provide constructive feedback and support field activities.			x	x	x		
	M&E reports	A document presenting M&E results on pre-determined indicators for a period of time.			x	x	x	x	
	Activity forms	A tool used to gather and store information about pre-determined indicators. Comes in many forms - usually specific to an activity, sometimes to gather intake information.	X			x		x	x
	Team/programme goals	A method to formulate goals for teams or individuals against which progress can be reviewed - based on an underlying logic/theory of change.	X		x	x	x	x	x
	Budget monitoring	A process through which resource allocation and expenditure is tracked and reviewed.	X						
Staff development	Question task	A manager gives members a learning question to research a topic or framework.						x	
	Staff retention and mobilisation strategies	The intent to promote staff over time to retain institutional knowledge and allow higher-level staff to understand the realities of implementation.							x
	Unstructured time	In this case, staff's job descriptions are only structured for 90% the remaining 10% of their time can be used for personal interests and innovation.			x				
	Informal staff orientation	New staff are oriented by their new manager without there being a fixed pathway for orientation; the manager uses their ideas to orient the new colleague.				x			
	Staff personal stories	Stories about staff and their experiences and growth are captured for other staff to learn from/pick inspiration from.						x	x

Task force	A team is set up with representatives from different departments to investigate and make recommendations about internal staff issues (e.g. culture, roles).			x					
Handbooks/standard operating procedures	A piece of documentation that captures standards, procedures, guidelines etcetera to guide staff in their roles and activities.				x	x			
Online research and learning	External resources and courses that are set up by other organisations are used by members to advance their skills/knowledge or find solutions to problems faced.							x	x
360/performance review	Staff receive feedback about their performance from colleagues and in some cases external actors.	X						x	
Training by an external expert	An initiative to invite external experts to train staff.						x	x	
Identifying and planning for staff dev't needs	A system through which the organisation identifies skills and knowledge staff need across the organisation.				x	x	x		
Skills sessions/ professional development	Skills sessions are specific forms of professional development activities in which staff prepare a short skill-building activity for their peers.		x	x	x	x	x		
Session preparation/ role-play/mock	A platform created before an education activity or training in which team members prepare, plan and play out the activity and give each other feedback and ideas.							x	x
Buddy system	A colleague is assigned to assist another colleague to fulfil a task that requires a new set of skills or knowledge.			x			x	x	
Orientation period & guidelines	A document detailing steps and activities used to orient new members to key aspects of their roles.			x	x			x	x

	Champion title & awards	An intentional effort to recognize members who have excelled on values to promote a conducive learning culture.				x	x	x	
	On-the-job training	Facilitating professional development through on-the-job training; a staff practically works on a project/task and is guided by a peer or manager during the process.			x			x	x
	Staff re-induction/ refresher training	A platform created to induct or refresh staff on organisational ways of working.					x	x	
	Check-in/one-on-one	A colleague (usually manager) checks in briefly (sometimes informally) with another colleague about an activity/progress and discuss insights to feed into on-going work.			x	x	x	x	x
Cross-department learning	Team dinners	Teams meet over dinner to connect for informal learning and exchange.				x			
	Department presentations	A platform in which each department presents key learnings to other departments.			x				
	Shared team calendar	A team sets up a shared calendar which informs members about what others are working on and when.							x
	Internal audit	An activity in which internal members of the organisation audit other parts of the organisation (sometimes across countries).					x		
	WhatsApp group	A platform for a team of colleagues to share experiences, insights, praises etcetera.			x				
	International staff retreat	A platform in which colleagues from different country offices come together to exchange experiences and learn from each other.			x				
	Coordinated planning	Colleagues from different departments come together to plan for an upcoming activity sharing insights from their different disciplines.					x		x
	Extended leadership teams/matrices	A structure that allows collaboration and learning across programmes by instituting a cross-cutting leadership team with recurring meetings etc.					x		
	Collegial feedback	Colleagues give each other feedback on activities or ways of working.			x	x			

	Learning meeting	A platform specifically created for members to learn collectively - often structured around a question or highs/lows.			x			x	
	Meetings	A platform created for staff to meet and discuss ideas/ways of working. A variety of participants and frequencies - from all-staff to specific teams and from daily to monthly.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Research and development	Market research	Information is gathered and analysed about other players in the education segment to inform positioning and programming.						x	
	Learning brief/paper	A document in which research findings or key learnings are captured for easy consumption by staff or external audience.					x		
	Youth-led research	An activity that positions youth as researchers to set a learning question, gather and analyse data and formulate recommendations to improve the situation of youth.					x		
	Analysis frameworks like SWOT, problem tree, community score card	Various frameworks and tools are used to facilitate and deepen the analysis of problems, situations and dynamics. Sometimes with a team of members, sometimes involving community members.				x	x		
	Pilot	An activity through which innovations are tested on a small scale to inform future programming.					x	x	
	Action research	A research method in which people affected by the problem are involved in identifying and implementing solutions.					x		
	Validation and dissemination	A platform bringing together various actors to discuss and validate research findings as well as identifying recommendations or action steps.			x		x		
	Deep dives & sprints	A team is set up to investigate a learning question of importance, usually across departments and even across countries.			x				
	Baseline, midline, end line	Activities through which data is collected about learners and/or the overall situation before during and after the programme to observe and analyse change over time.					x	x	

	Specific studies	Research activities geared towards specific learning questions (e.g. around learner motivation) - these fall outside of the regular M&E activities.			x					
	Tracer study	An activity through which the organisation follows up with learners after they completed the programme to gather information on learning outcomes etc.		x		x			x	x
	Rapid studies	Research aimed at quickly gathering information to inform programming decisions.			x					
	Evaluation study	A research activity designed to gather data and assess the outcomes of an education project/programme.			x	x	x			
External: Learners/ programme participants	Complaints channel	Learners/clients of the organisation have a platform to air complaints about the intervention (either 'over the counter' or through other means.					x			
	Alumni sharing testimonies during events	Bringing in a former learner to share their experiences and knowledge with staff and (potential) new learners.		x						
	Design interviews	Specific interactions with learners/participants to inform emerging design questions.			x					
	Recap	Recapitulate previous training/learning sessions to check on learners' understand and re-align further teaching/training.							x	
	Student/learner representatives	A position is created for a learner/participant to give feedback on activities and communicate back other information from the organisation to other learners.		x		x				
	Teacher portfolios and/or learner reports	An activity through which learning outcomes are analysed based on artefacts such as report cards or portfolios.	x		x					
	Advisory committee with	A structure created to position representatives from the community to inform decision making regarding the programme. Varying levels of decision-making authority - from advice to decision making.					x		x	

	learner/community representatives									
	Shadowing	An activity in which an organisational member steps in the shoes of a learner or other community actor to get a better understanding of their situation and needs.	x		x		x			
	Phone follow up	A platform used to easily gather information from learners or former learners.			x					x
	Informal talks/hanging around	A spontaneous and unstructured platform in which members interact with learners or colleagues to gather new information.	x		x	x			x	
	Mentoring	A relationship that provides a platform to get a deeper understanding of the needs of learners and collaboratively identify solutions.	x					x	x	
	Needs assessment	An activity designed to gather information and insights into the current situation and needs of learners and/or secondary beneficiaries.	x			x	x	x	x	x
	Surveys	A method used to gather information from external parties/learners about activities/their experiences.			x	x			x	x
	Case studies/success stories	Stories about/from learners and/or community members are captured to understand the (usually positive) outcomes and impact of the educational activities on their lives.			x	x	x	x	x	x
External: community members	Parent meeting	A platform in which parents of learners are gathered to either share information about the programme or receive their input on programming.	x							
	Stakeholder meeting	A conversational space for community actors to share information and insights.						x		
	Physical office in the community	An intentional positioning of the office in or near the target community to ease relationship building, exposure to the situation and needs etc.								x
External: government	Government support supervision	The organisation facilitates government officials to visit their programme activities during which they share ideas for improvement.				x				

and regulator	District meetings and working groups	Meetings organised by the district government in which NGOs and/or other actors come together to exchange experiences or be updated on new regulations, etc.								
	Local government reports	Documentation about programme progress shared with local government actors.	x							
External: funders	In-depth funder review meeting	A platform is created in which organisational members meet with funding partners to find solutions.			x					
External: other NGOs/CBOs	Material pair-and-share session	A platform in which various organisations working in the same education segments review each other's curriculum materials and distil lessons for their programming.				x				
	Partner feedback	After an event or activity that involved other partners, a platform is created to get their feedback.								x
	Technical assistance from partners	An initiative to invite an expert from another organisation to get advice/recommendations on the ways of working or for a particular problem.			x				x	
	Partner meetings	A platform created by the organisation to invite various partners and facilitate exchange and collective learning.			x					
	Networking	Intentionally making new contacts with organisations or actors to learn and collaborate.							x	x
	Partner events	Occasions where organisational members attend activities organized by partners.		x	x	x			x	x
	Partner material review	Occasions where organisational members review and utilize resources or reports produced by other organisations/individuals.	x		x	x	x			
	Working groups	Structures set up to connect partners/actors in the same (education) segment - commonly schedule regular meetings to exchange ideas and learn together. Some are formal others informal.	x		x			x	x	

External: mass audience	Website	A platform for the organisation to share information and reports usually with an external audience.			x				x
	Social media accounts	Platforms such as Facebook are used to interact with learners/other community members to share information and receive their ideas/outcomes etc.				x	x		x

Intermezzo 2 | Who are the external actors

In the research question we make reference to external actors, but who are we referring to? In 2017, we conducted a workshop with the case study organisation to conduct a self-assessment of their engagement and collective learning efforts with each of these actors. This intermezzo presents the method used as well as the typology of external actors that emerged.

The metaphor of six blindfolded men and an elephant

In a parable, six blindfolded men were challenged to describe an elephant accurately. To add to the challenge, each man was taken to the elephant alone and allowed to touch only one area of the animal. When they were asked to describe the elephant, they each have a completely different perspective:

- One blind man grabs the tusk and says, "An elephant is like a spear!"
- Another feels the trunk and concludes, "An elephant is like a snake!"
- The third blind man hugging the leg thinks, "An elephant is like a tree!"
- The one holding the tail claims, "An elephant is like a rope!"
- Another feeling the ear believes, "An elephant is like a fan!"
- The last blind man leaning on the elephant's side exclaims, "An elephant is like a wall!"

Because each man was trapped in his own limited perception, none of the six were able to form a clear mental picture of the elephant. If instead they combined their individual knowledge and openly shared their understanding, the blind men would arrive at a more accurate conclusion. What the six blind men need is a learning community - a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding (Iverson, 2013).

Based on this metaphor I developed an elephant stakeholder map which the members of nine programme teams used to conduct a self-assessment of their collective learning platforms. We used three steps:

1. Note down all the actors that influence the change you want to see. Write down keywords for each actor describing what they bring to the table towards understanding the problem.
2. List existing spaces in which insights of these actors are currently brought together to cause change.
3. Rank to which extent learning is leading to change.

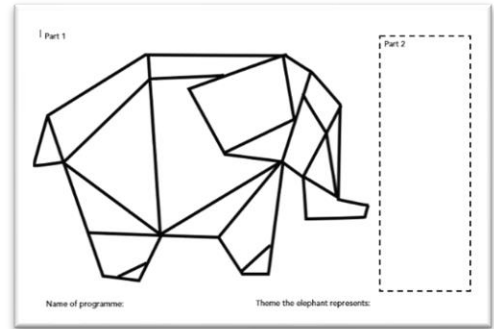


Figure 5 External actor mapping template

Besides the notes documented by teams, participants discussed their experience using the method which was recorded and transcribed. These data were coded using ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel. The analysis revealed who the actors within the ecosystem of the case study organisation are and whose knowledge and which knowledge is mobilised or not.

Whose knowledge is mobilised

First, actors mapped by programme teams were organised in the following categories: the case study NGO itself, community actors, government actors, private sector, youth, development partners and social systems. Figure 6 depicts an overall picture across programmes illustrating by size how often actors were mentioned by programme teams and by colour.

These colours represent how teams assessed the extent to which they were learning with these actors. Green (or G) in this case refers to successful learning experiences that lead to positive and sustainable change. Orange (or O) refers to partially successful learning experiences, inconsistently leading to change. And lastly, red (or R) refers to the lack of learning with actors or learning not informing change.



Figure 6 Wheel representing the self-assessment of collective learning

Not surprisingly in the context of this case study NGO, young people take up the biggest share of this wheel. It should be noted that all sub-groups of youth are clustered because different programme teams used dissimilar categorisations of young people. Learning with and from young people is considered to successfully lead to change. A second group that was mentioned frequently is local government. However, like other government actors, collective learning with them is only somewhat successfully leading to change.

Other actor groups that pose challenges are community actors such as parents, religious and cultural leaders, and other groups in the community who are not part of the programme per se. Within the social systems, teachers seem to be a difficult group to engage in learning efforts. Finally, learning efforts are lagging with CBOs and coalitions. It is interesting to note that programme teams referred to colleagues within their own organisation as external actors as well. This is in line with the conceptualisation of environment by Marsick and Watkins (2003), who include mobilising views from across the organisation as scanning the external environment.

On average, programme teams mentioned just over ten external actors influencing the change they want to see, illustrating an ecosystem approach to programming. Two programmes that are coalition-based presented the highest number of actors influencing the change they want to see. Overall, the findings of this mapping exercise suggest there is room for improvement in terms of learning with external actors, given only 47 per cent of actors are being assessed as 'green'. The learning self-assessment did not seem to improve with time, since those programmes that had almost run their course did not assess their learning situation more positively than others. We also did not see a more positive picture for programmes that had more learning platforms than those with fewer platforms.

What knowledge is not mobilised?

Following the self-assessment of programme teams, it seems especially challenging to mobilise knowledge of government and community actors. Failing to facilitate learning with these actors poses the risk of losing out on vital knowledge. Local government actors, for example, are tasked by programme teams with monitoring and coordinating efforts in the locality but these roles are not taken up actively. The national government is ascribed knowledge on policies and regulations and potentially plays a role as a knowledge partner in advocacy efforts. The complicated relationship with the government could be explained by the regulatory structures focused on control rather than coordination and quality assurance (ICNL, 2017). The programme teams acknowledged that their change model is influenced by several community members such as parents or elders, yet their experiences, beliefs and practices are not commonly considered. Forces creating tension with programme objectives can be cultural beliefs and moral practices held by cultural leaders, elders, spouses and parents. This particularly

affects programmes dealing with SRHR and girls' economic opportunities. From a systems perspective, these sources of dissent are vital to solving complex problems. Moreover, community members could possess practical wisdom (or *phronesis*) about how development problems may be addressed in the locality (see for example Flyvbjerg, 2001). Communities are also considered testing grounds for new ideas and innovation – a function that is at risk of being underutilised given the weaker connections with community members beyond youth. Reviewing the platforms for collective learning listed by the teams, it is noticeable that most platforms were uni-directional and that most were organised by separate programme units. All in all, this typology suggests there are numerous parts of the elephant that remain unknown or ambiguous through the current efforts of collective learning with external actors – especially those actors that seem to have divergent views.

