MAKING PROGRESS ON EQUITABLE EDUCATION USING THE PERKINS QUALITY INDICATORS: A METRIC TO MEASURE QUALITY OF PROGRAMS SERVING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract: Children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and at risk of losing out on quality learning opportunities. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, many education systems remained inequitable and either excluded children with the most complex disabilities or lacked quality in implementation. The Perkins Quality Indicators (PQIs) provide a metric to measure and assess programs that serve children with complex disabilities by identifying current good practices and areas for improvement. Program staff may use the PQIs for self-reflection, evaluation and planning. The tool may also be used by program administrators and external evaluators, in collaboration with program staff. The PQIs address 9 program areas: building community/ inclusive culture, program planning and classroom organization, learning environment and materials, communication and social relationships, assessment and progress monitoring, curriculum and instruction, family support, administration and support, and governmental collaborations. We aim to present the PQIs as a practical tool that can be used to support and document growth of quality programs over time through the development of priorities for both teacher professional development and school-based development, at individual, local, district, division, regional, and national levels. The PQIs have been implemented in at least 17 countries across 4 continents, including in the Philippines; we will present a representative case study of implementation in the Philippines to demonstrate how the PQIs help to create a roadmap for programs to achieve excellence and accelerate progress. We conclude that the implementation of the PQIs in settings that serve children and youth with complex disabilities has great potential for making measurable improvements in the quality of these programs, accelerating progress toward the global goals of more equitable education, especially after learning setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: equity, best practice, disabilities, quality indicators

Introduction

Children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and at risk of losing out on quality learning opportunities. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, many education systems remained inequitable and either excluded children with disabilities or lacked quality in implementation. According to a UNICEF (2021) analysis that represents 84% of the world's population of children, those with one or more functional difficulty are more likely to be out of school in primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary school. Compared to children without disabilities, children with disabilities are 49% more likely to have never attended school. Among primary school-age children

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who have one or more functional difficulty, those with functional difficulties in communicating are most likely to be out of school (53%), demonstrating that children with difficulties in this area face heightened barriers to inclusion.

The situation is more drastic for those with more significant disabilities. According to the same UNICEF (2021) analysis, out-of-school rates are highest among children with the most severe functional difficulties-- those who reportedly cannot perform in a particular functional domain at all. The percentage of out-of-school children is almost as much as four times as high for those who reportedly cannot do a functional activity at all, compared to those who have 'a lot of functional difficulty'. By the time students reach upper-secondary-school age, nearly all children with the most severe disabilities across most functional domains are out of school. Even when students with severe disabilities are in school, they do not necessarily have quality learning experiences; only 21% of those who reportedly have more than one severe functional difficulty receive school-related support compared to 35% of children who experience no functional difficulties. This lack of support to children with multiple and the most severe functional difficulties highlights the inequity that these children face in attending school. These children often have the most complex learning needs due to their combined and significant functional difficulties and yet are among those who receive the least support.

The UNICEF (2021) analysis reports on disability in terms of the level of difficulty one faces to perform in certain functional domains. For the purposes of this paper, the authors consider those who have multiple and severe difficulties among children with complex disabilities, and will use this term throughout. Complex disabilities also encompass combined multiple disabilities and visual impairment (MDVI), deafblindness (DB), and sensorial disabilities – terms that have been used by Perkins School for the Blind (Perkins) and represent the specific populations for which we have developed specialized expertise.

Potential of children with complex disabilities to learn

In many schools and classrooms around the world, people might assume that children with complex disabilities cannot learn. They may be left to sit at home or in a classroom with no stimulation or opportunities to engage in activities. This is often because educators do not know how to include students who do not learn or communicate like their nondisabled peers. They are unaware of specialized teaching strategies that might help a child reach their full potential.

Perkins School for the Blind (Perkins) has been educating children with complex disabilities since 1847 when Laura Bridgeman became the first student with deafblindness to be formally educated (Perkins History Museum, 2004-2023). Since then, Perkins has demonstrated that children with multiple, complex disabilities can learn anywhere in the world through their work in over 96 countries (Perkins School for the Blind, n.d.). Perkins' child-centered approach to learning allows children with disabilities to participate and learn. While we can understand it is possible for any child to learn in the right environment, it is important to consider what factors make a quality learning environment, and how educational programs can progress in program quality to make education more equitable for those with complex disabilities.

The Perkins Quality Indicators

Building on decades of experience in making education accessible for children with disabilities, Perkins created the Perkins Quality Indicators (PQIs). The PQIs are a metric to measure, document and support growth in the quality of classrooms, schools or other educational settings that serve children with complex disabilities. The PQIs are a tool designed to assess a program by identifying current good practices and areas for improvement, which can drive program growth.

Development of the Perkins Quality Indicators

The PQIs were first developed in 2010 as a result of extensive discussion between professional staff at Perkins and respected colleagues from around the world. The original version of the tool, Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Students who are Blind and Visually Impaired with Additional Disabilities or Deafblindness, used a qualitative, ordinal scale – ranging from 'not observed' to 'satisfactory' to 'excellent' – of 67 indicators across eight assessment categories (Riggio, 2010). In 2019, after collecting and assessing feedback on implementation of the tool, the PQIs were revised to incorporate a quantitative focus so they could produce numerical measurements and comparable results. The addition of the numerical measurement offers a means to make data-informed decisions when planning for program growth. Since then, there have been modifications to meet specific contextual needs and further refine the quantitative scoring for best results. Throughout this time, the PQIs have been implemented in at least 17 countries, including: Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Mexico, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nepal, the Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Thailand. The experience and feedback from the evaluators, educational experts, administrators, and program staff have contributed to the ongoing reflection and refinement of the tool.

Areas of Program Assessment

The PQIs cover up to nine program areas of program assessment. Gleason (2021) describes the areas of program assessment, which can be summarized as follows:

'Building community/ inclusive culture' is concerned with the overall culture of a school, which should exhibit and integrate shared values and beliefs about the inclusion of children with disabilities in all aspects that their peers are included in. This level of inclusion should extend throughout the remaining eight areas of program assessment.

'Program planning and classroom organization' reflects the diversity and individualized needs of each child, asserting that teaching should meet the learning needs of each child individually. Thus, teaching practices should be child-centered, flexible, and responsive to each child.

'Learning environment and materials' emphasizes the removal or adaptation of physical barriers and classroom learning materials to ensure that the physical environment and educational materials can be used effectively and safely by children with complex disabilities.

'Assessment and progress monitoring' underscores formal and informal assessments as the foundation to providing effective classroom instruction for children with complex disabilities, as it informs

educators about what to teach and how to teach each child. Effective planning for instruction can also be aided by regularly setting and monitoring goals of children through progress monitoring.

'Communication and social relationships' emphasizes communication as the foundation of all learning and therefore encourages development of communication and social skills for children with complex disabilities. This program area assesses whether educators understand the modes of communication that their students use in order to support meaningful communication in the learning environment and beyond.

'Curriculum and instruction' is concerned with establishing meaningful and accessible curriculum for children with complex disabilities, and is based on the principals of universal design for leaning and differentiated instruction. This assessment area considers the Expanded Core Curriculum, which extends learning areas outside of traditional academic concepts for children with complex disabilities that are deemed 'essential'. It also emphasizes the important of functional adaptations to curriculum so that children may acquire relevant and non-academic skills for living an independent life.

'Family support' highlights the important role of families and partnering with families in order to develop quality programs for children with complex disabilities. This assessment area recognizes family members as important actors in their child's life for their overall development and education, and therefor assesses efforts made to build trusting relationships with families, openly communicate with families, and offer trainings to families.

'Administration and support' assesses the role of management and administration in developing quality programs by building an inclusive culture in the educational environment. This assessment considers an administration's promotion and support of the right to education for a child with complex disabilities, and support for educators to continually develop and build their skills in teaching children with complex disabilities.

The final assessment area, 'governmental collaborations', is concerned with the level of supported given by school leaders, governmental authorities, and the community. It recognizes the role of government, and disability-related policies and legislation to 'turn the right to education into action' for children with disabilities

Just as Perkins take a whole-child approach to the children who attend our programs, combined these program areas of assessment take a holistic approach to assessing the quality of a program.

Implementation of Perkins Quality Indicators

An Excel worksheet allows for recording of ratings and comments for each indicator by evaluators. This supports documentation of the current level of each program, allows documented growth of a program over time, and supports development of evidence-based teacher and school development plans.

The PQIs are implemented as part of a continuous improvement cycle. The cycle starts, first, with a baseline assessment of the program and the first implementation of the PQIs in collaboration with a program. Results are then analyzed to prioritize program areas for growth and develop an action plan. For example, a program may have low scores in the areas of 'program planning and classroom

organization' and 'family support'; with consensus from the program administrators, Perkins and program staff would then collaborate to develop an action plan to improve in those categories and Perkins would provide targeted technical assistance in those prioritized program areas. After one year of focusing in the priority program areas, the PQIs are implemented again to assess progress and restart the continuous improvement cycle.

Adapting the Perkins Quality Indicators for the Philippines

In the Philippines 2020-2024 project, Gabay (Guide): Strengthening Inclusive Education for Blind, Deaf and Deafblind Children ('Gabay'), implemented by Resources for the Blind, Philippines and funded by USAID aims to improved educational services for children with sensorial disabilities. To reach this objective, the PQIs were selected to serve as the basis of a tool to be validated and used by the Philippines Department of Education. Leaders of the Department of Education sought to contextualize the PQI tool to match the country's culture, language, terminology, and needs of their school programs before adopting it. In 2020 a working group was formed to provide comprehensive review and feedback to adapt the PQIs. An initial development workshop, a subsequent validation session, and follow-up training included broad participation across the education sector, including Department of Education Regional Officials, Division Supervisors In-Charge of Special Education, Principals, personnel from the Department of Education Central Office, Regional Special Education Supervisors, and teachers of three 'Gabay' project sites. Perkins experts consulted with the selected participants to collectively revise and contextualize the PQIs. Through this process, the ninth program area, inclusive community/building inclusive community, was identified and incorporated as a means of reflecting key values and priorities of the country. A total of 100 indicators across the nine program areas are incorporated into the final version of the Philippines PQI Tool.

As a result of this comprehensive and inclusive development, review, revision and validation process, agreement was reached on a set of Quality Indicators for Educational Programs Serving Learners with Sensorial Disabilities to be implemented in educational programs in the Philippines, which was subsequently endorsed by the Department of Education. After the validation of Quality Indicators for Educational Programs Serving Learners with Sensorial Disabilities principals and teachers of 15 targeted schools were trained and implemented the tool (Perkins International, 2020).

The scoring results of the Philippines Tool generate an overall program score from zero to one hundred that places a program in one of three stages: Stage 1, Stage 2, or Stage 3. As a program approaches the third stage it gets closer to demonstrating best practices with potential to serve as a practicum sight where others can observe and learn. In addition to the overall score, a program also receives category scores, also from 0-100, in each of the program areas (see Figure 1).
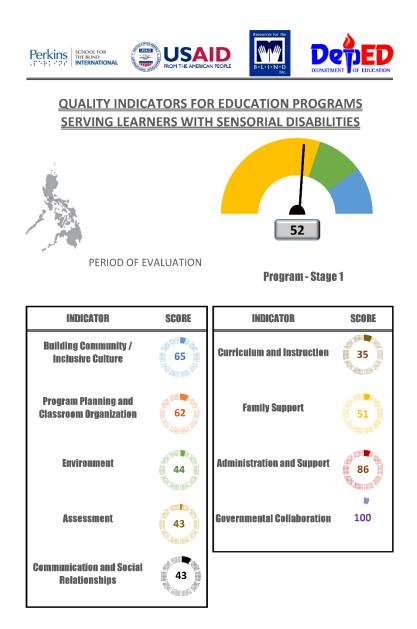
Figure 1: Illustrative score results page from the Philippines PQI Tool, which visualizes the final score within three stages and category scores for each of the nine assessment areas

The methods involved to implement the Philippines Tool include self-reflection of teachers, focus group discussions with leadership and parents, classroom observations, interviews, and documentation review. This ensures that every stakeholder is involved and contributes to the evaluation process to offer a comprehensive view of the program quality. It also allows key stakeholders to help guide the program team to understand and appreciate the strengths of their own program and their areas of growth so that together a plan can be developed towards improvement in their service for children with disabilities.

Conclusion

The Perkins Quality Indicators are a metric to measure, document and support growth in the quality of classrooms, schools or other educational settings that serve children with complex disabilities. When used as a tool in the cycle for continuous improvement, the PQIs can be used to identify current good

practices and areas for improvement, help create a roadmap for improvement and track measurable improvements within programs. The PQIs are most effective when results are thoughtfully analyzed, and accompanied by targeted technical assistance in the areas identified for growth. As demonstrated by its adaptation into a set of Quality Indicators for Educational Programs Serving Learners with Sensorial Disabilities for the Department of Education in the Philippines, the PQIs can be contextualized to match the needs and realities in local settings. While the PQIs are still undergoing revisions and modifications, there is great potential for the implementation of PQIs as a tool to accelerate progress toward equitable education for children with complex disabilities, particularly in how it can aid in setting clear, attainable goals for programs and contribute to data-informed decision making.

Acknowledgements

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