Quality and Education

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Abstract

The conceptual paper presented below highlights the growing importance of quality in school education. Quality refers to levels and standards while equality lies at the root and focuses on the distribution of benefits and power. Concern to improve the quality of education in schools has started receiving the highest priority in almost all countries throughout the world. . This concern has become universal in the developed as well as in the developing countries, in those that have achieved total access as well as in those still striving for access. In fact it has now been established that access and quality are not sequential elements, and a number of international organizations have visualized the role of quality as being instrumental in improving access. Quality schooling may often play a crucial role in governing parental choices for sending children to school and in determining their attendance patterns. Apart from influencing individual productivity and income, higher school quality also has a strong impact on economic growth of countries. Multiple meanings, definitions of and issues concerning school quality are also discussed below. The components of quality education are also discussed in this conceptual paper. To establish a contextualized understanding of quality means including relevant stakeholders. Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education's challenges.

New research — ranging from multinational research to action research at the classroom level — contributes to this redefinition. Key stakeholders often hold different views and meanings of educational quality. This paper also deals with the role and importance of School Management Committees in enhancing quality in education. It also explains the meaning of quality in education in the present day context. These committees can vary greatly in their composition and the type and extent of participation.

KEYWORDS: Quality, School education, Meaning of quality, Definitions, Issues, Components of quality education, Role of School Management Committees, Extent of participation

QUALITY

Concern to improve the quality of education in schools has started receiving the highest priority in almost all countries throughout the world. With the tremendous growth in school enrolments throughout the world, priority given earlier to educational expansion and access is now being replaced by plans and policies that are calling for a higher quality of schooling. This concern has become universal in the developed as well as in the developing countries, in those that have achieved total access as well as in those still

striving for access. In fact it has now been established that access and quality are not sequential elements, and a number of international organizations have visualized the role of quality as being instrumental in improving access (UNESCO 2003, UNESCO 2005). The Global Monitoring Report 2005 highlights the importance of the quality of education provided in schools, seen in terms of the teaching - learning processes and how much pupils are learning. Apart from influencing individual productivity and income, higher school quality also has a strong impact on economic growth of countries as some studies have shown (Hanushek and Kimko 2000; Lee and Barro 2001). Quality schooling may often play a crucial role in governing parental choices for sending children to school and in determining their attendance patterns. The status of educational quality across various countries can be gauged from internationally comparable data on academic performance and test scores which have often served as a proxy for educational quality. It is fairly evident that school quality differs widely within and between countries. Children in developing countries not only receive fewer years of education, but attain lower achievement levels compared to their western counterparts. This reflects the low school quality in developing countries. In developed countries too, the stagnation of student performance on test scores represents a puzzling phenomenon (UNECO 2005; Glewwe and Kremer 2005). 'Quality' in the context of education is an elusive term. It has been interpreted in a number of ways and hence a crystallized definition of the term has not yet evolved (Aspin and Chapman 1994, Williams 2001, UNICEF 2000). It needs to be clarified that in the works of some researchers educational quality and school quality have been used interchangeably. It is also evident that sometimes school quality may be subsumed under the term educational quality. The word 'Quality' has a variety of meanings. It has both descriptive and normative characteristics. In a descriptive sense, it refers to the 'defining essence of an entity'. The term quality assumes significance in the context of education when it is given a normative interpretation. Four different semantic usages of the word 'quality' can be identified –

i)   Attribute or defining essence;
ii)   Degree of excellence or relative worth;
iii) The good / excellent;
iv)   Non-quantified traits / judgments. (OECD 1989)

The Multiple Meanings of 'Educational Quality'

Adams identifies at least 6 common usages of quality that are given by educators. James Williams adds one more usage to this list.

 1. Quality as Reputation: This refers to a general consensus of high and low quality, commonly used with reference to institutions of higher education, and not infrequently to lower educational levels that are known for their quality or lack of it. The basis for reputation often includes information of inputs and outputs.

2. Quality as Inputs and Resources: This is the most common usage of quality. Here, high quality is seen in high levels of provision of resources such as buildings, facilities, instructional materials etc.

3. Quality as Process: This suggests that not only inputs / results, but also the nature of intra-institutional interaction of students, teachers, administrators, materials and

technology in educational activities or how 'quality of life' of the school is valued determines quality. It also refers to the way the educational inputs are used.

4. Quality as Content: This refers to the body of knowledge, attitude and skills intended to be transmitted through the school curriculum to which a particular country or institution may favour in such a way that some content may be of higher quality than another. A trend towards a common educational content is now being recognized in the curriculum of early schooling across most of the countries.

5. Quality as Outputs/Outcomes: This is the most popular definition with policy makers that refers to the consequences of education, which is the primary concern of virtually all stakeholders. Measures of this definition of quality as outputs are students' cognitive achievement, completion rates, entrance ratios to next level of education, certification, individual skills, attitudes etc. Outcomes, on the other hand, refer to long term consequences of education such as employment, earnings, and changes in social attitudes / behaviour.

6. Quality as Value Added: This refers to the extent to which a school / system has influenced the student i.e., how the student has changed because of the programmes / norms of the school. A value added focus considers the degree of change rather than the final state or the way in which change come about (Adams 1997).

7. Quality as Selectivity: This usage proposed by James Williams, refers to quality as a form of exclusiveness. In this view, the more exclusive or selective a school is, the higher its quality. (Williams 2001). Quality has multiple meanings. It may be assessed by qualitative or quantitative methods. It is dynamic i.e., it changes over time and by context. It is multi-dimensional; it may subsume equity and efficiency.

Definitions of School Quality

The quality of a school or educational programme is often defined as some combination of inputs, processes and outcomes. This is explicated in the following definitions each of which reflects the varying emphasis and interpretations of the term:

1. In Guatemala, educational quality has been defined as material inputs and non-material characteristics of schools which have been shown to improve student learning (quoted in Adams, 1997).

2. UNICEF has defined educational quality in terms of 5 dimensions: i) Learners who are healthy and well nourished; ii) Environments that are safe / protective / gender sensitive with adequate resources; iii) Content that is reflected in the relevant curriculum and materials for the acquisition of basic skills; iv) Processes through which trained teachers use child-centered teaching approaches in well managed classrooms; and v) Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes (UNICEF 2000).

3. Fuller in his study of School Quality in developing countries has defined the term in the following way – 'School Quality is defined here as (a) the level of material inputs allocated to schools per pupil (b) and the level of efficiency with which a fixed amount of material inputs are organized and managed to raise pupil achievement. (Fuller, 1986).

4. Aspin and Chapman define it thus – "When we talk about quality schooling, we often have in mind the best possible, most rounded and complete development for each child" (Aspin and Chapman, 1994).

5. Most people view quality of education as the learning outcomes of students, which is the primary concern of all stakeholders. But to achieve the desired quality, the antecedents, that is the inputs and process should also have quality in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, excellence and sound justice (UNESCO 2003).

The foregoing discussion brings to the fore that school quality is a complex issue as there are multiple ways in which it is understood and opinions about it are by no means unified.

Important issues concerning School Quality

A central issue in the debate on school quality concerns 'quality of what?' This refers to considering which aspects of educational performance should enter the overall specification of quality. The common sense argument runs that the quality of schools should be judged by the achievement of its students rather than from its resources - financial, physical or human. Parents too, regard the chief indicator of the quality of a school to be success in academic achievement which may guarantee some sort of employability. They, however, also look at growth in non-tangible qualities, such as respect for others, tolerance and discipline that lead to the enhancement of the individual. It needs to be stressed that the concern for quality should encompass not only cognitive achievement of students, but also non-cognitive outcomes such as attitudes and values, including moral values, preparation for citizenship and regard to such graces as neatness, politeness and punctuality etc., which are so critical for the all-round development of every child (OECD 1989). These outcomes are more complex, less tangible and difficult to measure. Quality education is also considered to include the inculcation of attitudes and values that will enable children to make a contribution to the enhancement of the community. Another crucial concern in the school quality debate refers to the question – Quality for whom? For some, the quality issue focuses on the low achievers. There are large number of young people receiving either too little education or education of the wrong sort. This may be resolved by enhancing the amount and type of learning. Another set of scholars are often concerned primarily with the high achievers, stating that the academically gifted are receiving mediocre education. In this regard, the policy makers and schools should not ignore the middle group of students with average abilities and hence, the challenge of schools must be to raise the attainment level of all pupils (OECD 1989). Another critical issue in the debate surrounding school quality revolves around the phrase "equity or excellence"? Thus, quality would incorporate the notion of equity and individual excellence where everyone would get the opportunity to develop to their fullest extent of their capacity. Recent analysis has confirmed that the reason why some children fail to attain cognitive skills may be partly due to deficiency in educational quality (UNESCO 2005). Hence, the approach stresses that quality and equity are inextricably linked. To conclude, the above discussion clearly reveals that educational quality is a multifaceted concept which has been viewed from different perspectives by different stakeholders in different parts of the world.

What does quality mean in the context of education? The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously (Adams, 1993).

New research — ranging from multinational research to action research at the classroom level — contributes to this redefinition. Systems that embrace change through data generation, use and self-assessment are more likely to offer quality education to students (Glasser, 1990).

Quality Concern in Education:

The aims of education reflect the current needs and aspirations of a society as well as its lasting values, and the immediate concerns of a community as well as broad human ideals. "Quality is somewhat problematic: like beauty, it lies in the eyes – or rather the mind of the beholder" (Cliff. et al. (1987). Quality has been extensively defined by Dewney et al. (1994) as, "meeting, exceeding and delighting customer's needs and expectations with the recognition that these needs and desires will change over time." The belief that quality goes with privilege is clearly irreconcilable with vision of participatory democracy that India upholds and practises in the political sphere. Its practice in the sphere of education demands that the education available to all children in different regions and sections of society has a comparable quality. J.P. Naik describes equality, quality and quantity as the elusive triangle of Indian education. Dealing with this metaphorical triangle requires are deeper theoretical understanding of quality in education than has been what available in schools today. Quality in education includes a concern for quality of life in all its dimensions. The roles and functions of school managers in school management committees to enhance quality education are:-

- **Policy-Making**

• **Personnel Management**

• **Financial Management**

• **Curriculum**

• Setting the direction for long-term development of the school, and giving teachers sufficient flexibility and authority to implement specific duties and plans involved in the day-to-day operation of the school

• Reviewing school plans and budgets to see if they are in line with the overall education goals and school policies, and making appropriate adjustment when necessary

• Building up relevant network with outside bodies and securing community resources to enhance teaching effectiveness

• Promoting education for the students of the school and leading the school to strive for excellence and continuous improvement.

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

A school management committee is a group of representative members of a community who have more or less influence in a school. Teachers, head teachers, parents, children and other community members can be a part of such a committee. The way in which they

become a member of a school management committee varies from being selected by the head teacher to being elected by the community. These committees can vary greatly in their composition and the type and extent of participation. In some committees, the vast majority of the members is made up of parents, while in other committees the majority is formed by teachers. In one school a committee may have only a more advisory function, whereas a committee in another school is responsible for hiring and dismissing the head teacher and setting important school policies (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). According to Shatkin and Gershberg (2007) there are three factors which shape the extent of parent and community influence and which determine whether there is parent participation or a more passive involvement of parents. The first factor is the degree of authority decentralized to school level. This factor refers to the extent to which the committee is authorized to make important decisions at the school level, allocate the school budget, and the extent to which a board of education is limiting parents with their rules regarding salaries, school staff and the use of school buildings. The second factor is the degree of authority of committees relative to principals, which refers to the extent of their function and whether they are allowed by the principal to make policies. The last factor is the representation of parents or the community relative to other groups in decision making. The more parents or other community members there are in a committee relative to other groups, like teachers, the more likely they are to have greater influence, which can empower them to take a more active attitude upon them in leading and decision making. Shatkin and Gershberg (2007) distinguished four different models of parent participation in school management committees by using these three factors. When all of these three factors are low the management of the school is largely determined by bureaucratic oversight. If there is a high degree of decentralized authority to the school level but committees have low authority and there is a low representation of community members in those committees, the management is largely principal-centered. The third model is called school accountability. This model is found when there is a low representation of parents of other community members but the other two factors are high. The last model is found when all the three factors are high; this one is called parent participation. In this model parents and other community members are well represented, they play an active part and they are authorized to make important decisions and policies (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Shatkin and Gershberg (2007) state that revitalization and improvement of schools is most likely to occur within the parent participation model, because in this model parents, teachers and head teachers are working together towards a common vision of school and community improvement.

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Decision areas that are commonly decentralized to school management committees are school finances, school curriculum, human resources and decisions about the school organization. These areas include decisions about the school budget, fundraising, teaching and learning, parent-teacher meetings, examinations, employment of school personnel, administrative structures, class sizes and learner discipline (Chikoko, 2008). Literature about the effects of the decentralization and school development in the developing world are however still limited (Prew, 2009). Research in the western world concerning parental participation in governance also shows only little positive impact on student learning. There are furthermore some conditions needed to achieve this. Research

in California and Chicago suggests an impact on school improvement and the delivery of instruction if the parent committees and councils are active, have clearly defined tasks, are able to gather necessary information and if the committees function effectively as a group (Braatz & Putnam, 1996). The evidence in Chicago is somewhat stronger than in California. In California educators hold the majority of votes in the school management committees, while in Chicago the local school management committees fit in the 'parent participation model' of Shatkin and Gershberg (2007). These committees are solely comprised of parents and have a broad authority of decision-making, which includes the responsibility to hire and dismiss head teachers. The results found however are still small (Braatz & Putnam, 1996). Prew (2009) argues that in developing countries there should be a greater and deeper role for community involvement than in western countries when it comes to school development. In his research he found that while schools in western countries can develop independently in an individualistic frame, development in schools in South African townships comes with broader community alliances and partnerships which are built on trust and shared interests. In a significant number of schools these community alliances and partnerships improved the relation with the community which in turn benefitted the school in terms of human and monetary resources. In light of these finding he notes that the school development program itself may not be essential for development but instead the involvement of the community is. This is underpinned by the findings that schools without parental and community participation even failed to effectively develop and implement the school development program. He also found that schools with low rates of community involvement indicated lower pass rates on the exit exams, failure to develop comprehensive plans and had challenges with crime against the school. Prew (2009) concludes that deep relationships between communities and schools in developing countries can have huge benefits. Chikoko (2008) however points out that members of school management committees in rural areas can be limited by having only basic literacy skills, which makes it unable for them to cope with the demands of school governance. Furthermore Pryor (2005) stresses the importance of a basic understanding of committee members about education and the importance of schools as a necessary precondition for participation. In his study Pryor (2005) found that the recognition of the importance of education was not always there. Farah (1997) advises therefore close monitoring and support of school management committees (Fullan & Watson, 2000).

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