

Education Quality – Chasing the Elusive Goal

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Abstract

This paper refers to the recurrent theme of elusiveness of education quality, both in terms of the concept and the practices to realise it in education systems. J.P. Naik's 'elusive triangle' is recalled and the slow advance in this respect in over four decades is noted. In discussing the discourse on quality concepts and components in the context of EFA and post-2015 SDG agenda, various theoretical perspectives are mentioned. Practical challenges which transcend the specific theories are briefly presented. The article concludes by posing the question whether, Target 7 of the single overarching education goal for SDG, particularly focusing on the purposes of education, does not add to the elusiveness of the quality objectives of education and complexities of realising them.

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1. The Elusive Triangle

About four decades ago, in 1979, the celebrated Indian educationist J.P. Naik wrote an article in the International Review of Education, titled “Equality, Quality and Quantity: the Elusive Triangle in Indian Education” (Naik, 1979).

Naik observed that anyone reading the history of Indian education would be struck by the fact that every generation lamented a deterioration in standards and it would appear that there has been a continuous fall in the quality of education over the last seventy or eighty years.

Naik argued that this was a partial truth:

- i. Indian education comprised a "dual" system with a core of high standard institutions, mostly private and fee-charging, with highly competitive admission, capable teachers and good management. But they combined quality with privilege and served the well-to-do. This small core of quality institutions was surrounded by “a large penumbra of institutions of medium or poor (or even very poor) quality which are mostly in the public sector and largely utilized by the common people” (Ibid.)
- ii. But then the definition of quality itself has been shifting. For example, Naik noted that for a long time the most prized thing in education in India was the command over the English language, which became almost synonymous with "quality" in education. (b.

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183) The Indian tradition emphasized verbal fluency, language proficiency and capacity to remember and reproduce. Other developments of personality, and especially manual skills, were under-estimated.

- iii. Quality was often defined, Naik wrote, in terms of inputs, such as, education and training of teachers, class-size, quality of buildings and equipment, curricula and text-books prescribed. Important as these are, by themselves these did not guarantee higher standards.
- iv. A legitimate indicator of quality, Naik noted, was educational output measured by examination results. Knowledge, skills and values acquired by students are better criteria than the others mentioned above, provided that examinations actually measured these attainments. The evidence in this respect, however, Naik observed, was mixed -- showing standards going up in some learning output areas and for some students and going down for others. Whether high stake public examinations actually measured appropriate competencies and skills of learners, i.e., the validity of the tests, has become more debatable than in the past.

On the whole it appears that not enough academic work was done to define what quality in education really meant and how it could be measured “in different areas at the same time or at different times in the same area,” concluded Naik. And the discussion of deterioration or improvement of standards over time continued to be very subjective.

Naik pointed out the reasons that hindered quality in education:

- i. The total resources made available were limited; and the claims of expansion had a higher priority over qualitative programmes.
- ii. It was far more difficult to develop qualitative programmes; educational administrators preferred more easily organised quantitative actions.
- iii. Qualitative improvement, especially at the secondary and university stages, demanded a concentration of resources in people, money and materials at a few selected centres or on a few programmes. On so-called grounds of democracy, in Naik’s view, a selective and phased approach to quality development could not be undertaken. For instance, the recommendation of the 1966 Education Commission to select 10 per cent of the institutions at all stages, in the first instance, for qualitative improvement was not accepted by decision-makers.
- iv. Programmes of quality improvement need money, which was scarce; but even more importantly, they needed careful planning and intensive human effort, which were scarcer.
- v. Promising qualitative changes achieved at great cost and effort often simply vanished when hit by such hazards as student unrest; strikes by teachers, students and employees; and political and communal disturbances. Conflicts and violence on a large scale affecting lives and educational prospects of millions, have become pandemic compared to Naik’s time.

In his summation of the Indian experience, Naik, commented:

The experience of free India ... is probably repeated in many developing countries in its essential features. It does highlight the contradictions and immense problems involved in

bringing about a transformation of the educational system on the principles of equality of educational opportunity, life-long education for all and the maintenance of standards, especially when resources are scarce and the over-all social situation is inequalitarian and hierarchical (p.184).

After forty years, quality of education is still an elusive goal because there is no widely accepted dominant concept or sufficient clarity about its parameters and key components, and no broad consensus on how it should be measured and how priorities are set to work on it.

At the same time, there is a consensus that it is a central concern, that educational systems must not side-step it, that the objectives and outcomes of education must reflect the quality issues, and assessing education progress for individual learners and society must be based on quality measures.

2. A Recurrent Theme

Quality in a generic sense refers to the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind, the degree of excellence of something, or a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something. The connotation is that it is relative and context-specific, rather than absolute. (www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/quality).

From the beginning of the global education movement with the launching of EFA in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, quality has been a recurrent theme. An evolution in the expression of quality concerns can be noticed through the decades since the 1990s. A generic and philosophical expression in the 1990 EFA Declaration has given way to somewhat more specific constructs related to stages of education and participant groups in the Dakar Framework and MDGs.

A decade later, in the Dakar Framework for Action, recognising access to quality education as the right of every child, declared that quality was ‘at the heart of education’. It affirmed that enrolment, retention and cognitive learning could not be achieved without attention to quality in education programmes. An expanded view of quality was put forward which included learners ready to learn (healthy and motivated), teaching-learning process that worked (competent teachers using active learner-centred pedagogies), learning content (relevant curricula and learner-friendly textbooks and materials) and systems (effective and accountable management and adequate/equitable resource allocation). This formulation of education quality went considerably beyond abstract generalities and helped establish an agenda for working towards achieving education quality, (UNESCO-GMR, 2005, ch. 1, pp. 28-30)..

The broadening and a degree of sharpening of the concept of quality in the Dakar Framework were not accompanied by developing related quality indicators and applying them in designing and assessing educational programmes. So in assessing progress of the EFA 2015 agenda, we ended up using such process and input indicators as student’s staying in school up to certain grades, and teacher-student ratio, rather than actual learning outcomes.

The World Education Forum (WEF) 2015 in Incheon Korea, proclaimed the Education 2030 agenda (an integral part of SDG 2030). One of five key themes was quality education, along with right to education, equality in education, inclusive education and lifelong learning.

A broader perspective has now been attempted to be articulated without giving up specificity in the SDG2030 and the Education 2030 agenda. The choice of these five themes reflected a clear message that the definition and scope of each connected with others and each had to contribute to realising the objectives of others..(<http://en.unesco.org/world-education-forum-2015/>).

The theme statement of WEF 2015 affirmed that “Good quality education, provided by trained and supported teachers, is the right of all children, youth and adults, not the privilege of the few.”(Ibid.)

It elaborates further:

Not only teaching basic skills like reading and math, but encouraging critical thinking and fostering the desire and capacity for lifelong learning that adapts and shifts in local, national and global dynamics...(ibid.).

Recognising the importance of qualitative aspects of the targets and their adaptation to specific national contexts, an international Technical Advisory Group (TAG) has been at work in developing indicators for SDG4. Four levels of indicators are proposed:

- a. Global - a small set of globally comparable indicators for all SDGs, including SDG 4. These have been under development through a consultative process led by the United Nations Statistical Commission to monitor progress towards the associated targets;
- b. Thematic: a broader set of globally comparable indicators proposed by the education community to track the education targets more comprehensively across countries; they will include the global education indicators; 43 such indicators for all SDGs have been formulated and broad agreement has been reached.
- c. Regional: Additional indicators may be developed to take account of a specific regional context and relevant policy priorities.
- d. National: Indicators selected or developed by countries to take account of their national context and which will correspond to their education systems, plans and policy agendas.

The thematic indicators may be the take-off point for preparation of national indicators. The thematic as well as the national indicators are expected to be based on the criteria of relevance to the population to be served, alignment with the concepts in the target, feasibility for regular annual action. (UNESCO, 2015, Education 2030 Framework for Action)

3. Quality concepts and components – Making it less elusive

GMR 2005 presented a review of various theoretical and conceptual premises underlying the ideas and practices regarding educational quality. Different educational traditions and associated ideas about quality were examined. Among these were the following (UNESCO-GMR, 2005, ch.1).

The rights based perspective saw education, at least at the basic level, as a right which must be provided by the duty-bearers, principally, the state ensuring acceptable quality. The main quality elements emphasized are equity, inclusion, dignity and rights of individuals, and learning objectives derived from universally recognised democratic and human values. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are the main inspirations behind this perspective.

The humanist and constructivist perspective looks upon education as a social process with strong agency of the learner herself/himself. The teacher and the education institutions are the facilitators to allow learners engage in discovery and construction of knowledge.

The behaviourist tradition saw the education system as a standardised, externally defined and controlled process. Examinations and testing played a critical role in directing and assessing the learning of defined skills and competencies. Teachers, curricula, textbooks and examinations are means of controlling and guiding the education process.

The critical education tradition looks at education prompting social change. Curriculum and teaching methods encourage critical analysis, and skills and capabilities that promote learner agency.

The adult education and andragogy tradition puts a premium on learner self-motivation, value of learner experience and critical reflection. This perspective is especially relevant to promote lifelong learning.

The premises underpinning the concept and practice of education quality reflected in the different traditions are not altogether mutually exclusive. They also vary regarding their value and comprehensiveness as guide to educational planning, setting aims and objectives of education, management, and monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

Consideration of the diverse perspectives and a sharper focus on quality have led to the emergence of a conceptual framework for discourse on quality as proposed in GMR 2005 (figure 1). This framework identifies key elements -- learners; the delivery system; schools and classrooms including pedagogy, teachers, learning content and assessment of learning; and outcome for learners and society – all these mediated by the social and political context that determines political commitment and resource provisions. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A framework for understanding education quality

<i>Learner</i>	<i>Enabling inputs</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>
characteristics	Teaching and learning materials	Literacy, numeracy
Aptitude	Physical infrastructure and facilities	and life skills
Perseverance	Human resources: teachers, principals	Creative and
School readiness	inspectors,	emotional skills
Prior knowledge	supervisors, administrators	Values
Barriers to learning	School governance	Social benefits
	Teaching and learning	
	Learning time	
	Teaching methods	
	Assessment, feedback, incentives	
	Class size	

Economic and labour market conditions in the community	Educational knowledge and support infrastructure	Philosophical standpoint of teacher and learner	National standards
Socio-cultural and religious factors	Public resources for education	Peer effects	Public expectations
Aid strategies	Competitiveness of the teaching profession on the labour market	Parental support	Labour market demands
	National governance and management strategies	Time for schooling and homework	Globalization

Source: Global Monitoring Report 2005, Ch. 1. p. 36

The unbundling of the conceptual framework for quality presented in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 and re-stated in GMR 2015 and the first GEM Report 2016 helps chart a roadmap for addressing quality concerns

The framework provides a broad structure that can be used for the purposes of monitoring education quality as well as analysing policy choices for quality improvement. These choices have to be made about the teaching and learning process nested within the support system of inputs and the contextual factors. Teaching and learning is the arena where the impact of curricula is felt, where teaching methods work well or not and learners are motivated to participate and learn how to learn. This is where the quality concepts and practices have to be applied and results produced, but this is where the desired outcomes often fail to materialise.

4. Making pedagogy work in the classroom

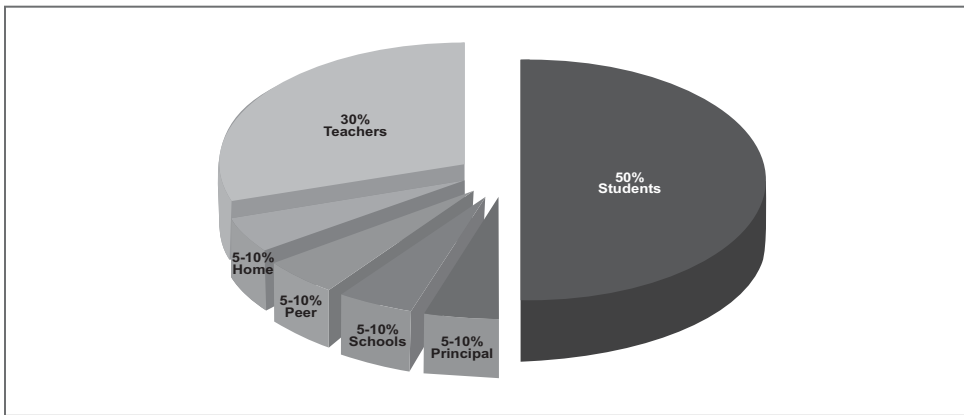
The theories and the heuristic about the concept of quality in education are important, but there is no substitute for effective teaching-learning in the classroom with engaged and active learner. John Hattie, a psycho-metrician who likes to look at size effects, undertook a monumental synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses representing 50,000 studies on learning achievement. Based on his studies, he pleaded for “visible teaching” and “visible learning” where learning can be made the explicit and common goal for learners, teachers and the learning system. Professor Hattie presents in his book, *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, a large collection of evidence-based research into what actually works in schools and classrooms to improve learning (Hattie, 2009).

Hattie identified six factors and assessed their respective contributions to student achievement. These factors are: the child; the home; the school; the teacher; the curriculum and the approaches to teaching. Hattie argues that the child brings to school (from preschool, home, and genetics) factors that influence achievement, as well as a set of personal dispositions that can affect the outcomes of schooling. The home can either nurture and support achievement of students, or it can be harmful and destructive (Figure 2)

What teachers do matters, Hattie notes, particularly those who teach in the most “deliberate and visible way.” They also help students to create a range of learning strategies, including direction and re-direction and maximising the power of feedback from the student.

Overall, Hattie argues that teachers need to seek feedback on their practice from both students and colleagues. They also need to help students become their own teachers. Through more visible teaching and learning, there is a greater likelihood of students reaching higher levels of achievement.

Figure 2: Percentage of Achievement by Students Attributable to Various Factors



Source: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). “Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us?” John Hattie, 2003, ACER e-search.

Evidence-based policy making is the buzz-word today. Research evidence of course has to be taken seriously. At the same time, it is necessary not to forget that in human and social development, the imponderables – the unforeseen intervening variables – never fail to intervene. Caution has to be exercised in interpreting and applying the evidence-based inferences in specific contexts. The proportions shown of relative influences of the six factors cannot be taken as mathematical certainty, but they do point in a general way to relative significance of the factors. It suggests that students have to be placed at the centre of the teaching-learning process and the teacher has a critical role in doing precisely that.

Hattie himself seems to favour a more nuanced position, recognising the interaction of the factors, in his latter writings, including his later books on visible learning and visible teaching. (Dept. of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010)

5. Some Cross-cutting challenges beyond theories

An empirical and pragmatic approach has to be taken about addressing the multi-dimensional challenges of educational systems, in which the quality concerns are central, whatever particular formulation of these are favoured in a specific context. The theoretical perspectives of quality bring to the fore various dimensions of quality. The conceptual framework mentioned earlier offers a way of bringing together the different dimensions,

looking at their inter-connections, and move towards building a quality-oriented and quality enhancing educational system.

However, the reality in respect of the education system in many developing countries is daunting. The Centre for Universal Education of the Brookings Institution reports that education quality and levels in developing countries are approximately 100 years behind developed countries. This global gap in education shows that in the world's poorest nations the average levels of attainment are at levels achieved in developed countries in the early 20th century (Winthrop, 2015)

The recent Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 2016 projects that by current trends, universal primary completion will be achieved in 2042, universal lower secondary completion in 2059 and universal upper secondary completion in 2084. It mentions a 50-year overall gap in fulfilling the right to education between rich and poor countries. This is only about participation in education, the first step, before steps can be taken for acceptable quality (UNESCO-GEM, 2016)

Whether the gap is 100 years or 50 years in the quality and level of student learning between developed and developing countries, this cannot be acceptable – that is the premise of SDG4 and Education 2030.

In this regard, a number of empirical challenges, which is not getting sufficient attention, need to be highlighted. These are particularly germane to South Asia, the world's largest concentration of illiteracy, other educational deficits and poverty. The experience here is similar to that of Sub-Saharan Africa, where also a regional concentration of educational deprivation and poverty persist..

I would like to mention several concerns, which must be addressed irrespective of the theoretical perspective or definition of quality espoused. My list includes: literacy skills, teachers' role, assessment of learning, trends towards privatisation of education, leadership in education, and thinking about target 7 of SDG4. I do not propose to embark on a treatise on these issues, on each of which a book can be written. I will attempt to raise some key aspects of these topics which deserve serious attention of the education community and policy-makers.

5. a Literacy – a tool for learning

National governments publish literacy rates and the Unesco Institute of Statistics (UIS) does the same every year announcing the numbers and proportions of adults who are illiterate in the world. What do these numbers really mean? Let me illustrate the point by drawing on Bangladesh experience.

The importance of literacy as the foundation and the first step for lifelong learning is well-recognised. It is a foundational skill also for children in formal education. It is expected this foundation would be built in the early grades of primary education. Yet there is a lack of clarity and consensus on how literacy should be assessed, measured, defined and what teaching-learning approach to be followed. The problem can be illustrated by citing the Bangladesh case.

A recent independent national sample survey applying a methodology that tested levels of literacy of the year 11+ population, 51.3% was found to be literate, whereas official figures based on self-reporting showed a rate of 63%. More interestingly, the test, that had four

elements (reading, writing, numeracy and application of 3Rs in everyday life), found literacy rate at an initial level was 25.3% and at an advanced level it was 26.0%. The test attempted to differentiate between four levels – non-literate, semi-literate, literate at initial level and literate at advanced level. Initial level of literacy meant that skills could be used in a limited way and needed to be sustained with further literacy skills development. Advanced level literacy indicated that skills could be used in daily functions and could be regarded as self-sustaining.

This result showing about half of those considered literate not reaching a self-sustaining and functional level was consistent with past survey result carried out in Bangladesh since 2002. The recent survey also showed that among young people who completed five years of primary education, one-third (32.2%) did not acquire literacy at the initial level. Even after eight years of schooling, 8.2% remained semi-literate – a telling commentary on quality by any definition. (CAMPE, 2016). Students who fail to build a foundation of learning tools are handicapped as far as further learning is concerned and suffer from cumulative deficits from which most cannot recuperate.

This is a situation not unique to Bangladesh. But unlike Bangladesh, many countries have not tried to apply tested literacy assessment or recognise and measure different levels of literacy.

Three conclusions are pertinent:

- i. Literacy assessments should take into account different levels of skills and a test-based assessment method should be used to determine sustainable skill level,
- ii. To derive the benefits of literacy and make it a first step in lifelong learning, sustainable skill level has to be achieved;
- iii. Primary education has to give more systematic attention to building the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy than burdening the curriculum with a half dozen different subjects – all given about similar weight.

5. b Teachers' role

It is often said that an education system can be no better than its teachers. Whatever perspective and definition of education quality are adopted, the teacher' role remain critical. A saying attributed to Rabindranath Tagore is, "a teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its flame".

Teaching is the largest single occupational category in which people with post-secondary education are employed in Bangladesh. At least a quarter of university and college graduates seek employment in teaching and related education jobs. Even a higher proportion should be in teaching if the demand in terms of expected student teacher-ratio and quality indicators are applied. in primary and secondary education. Despite the fact that a large share of the graduates enter the profession, there is no pre-service academic programme for preparing and orienting young people for teaching as part of the mainstream undergraduate tertiary education..

Teaching appears to be the last occupational choice for higher education graduates in Bangladesh. In contrast, teaching is one of the highest paid and coveted job in Finland, Germany, Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Singapore and most other OECD countries.

It is partly a matter of salaries offered to teachers. Although salaries of teachers employed in institutions in the public sector or those subsidised from public funds, have been raised

recently by up to 100%, these are not seen as quite comparable in remuneration or status with other public sector jobs with similar educational qualifications.

There is clearly the need for a comprehensive and coordinated human resource development and management policy for the teaching profession, that would help make teaching a top career choice for talented young people. This has been a matter of some public discussion. Four connected steps may be part of such a policy:

- Making education part of undergraduate general degree in selected degree colleges;
- Attracting best students to this programme with incentives, such as stipends;
- Taking the measures to ensure high academic standard for this course; and
- Introducing a National Teaching Service Corps with high salary and status to which the graduates of the new education programme can look forward as a career.

This way a nucleus of talented and qualified young teachers could be placed in every primary and secondary school. They can be catalysts for change in those schools. Thus, a transformation in teaching-learning in the school system can happen over a period of time

5.c. Educational Leadership

The typical pattern in the public school system in the region is that the head of the institution, the principal or headmaster, is one who is appointed to that position by virtue of acquiring seniority as a teacher. The result often is a good and experienced teacher is lost to teaching and the school gets as its manager someone who is mediocre or less in capability.

That the school as an enterprise has multiple and complex roles and functions cannot be denied. These relate to academic planning, managing teaching and other personnel, protecting and promoting wellbeing of students, looking after finances and physical plants and premises, dealing with multiple stakeholders with high stakes in the school, and leading a change process striving for excellence. How prepared, skilled and motivated is the school leader who is vested with all of these roles and responsibilities? How are the status, incentives, rewards and performance standards ensured for the school leader? These questions receive scant attention.

Wherever a school is known for its good performance and acquires a reputation for its accomplishments, it can be found that behind this success there is a leader, who is most likely to be the school-head and who can inspire and get the support of others, such as some of the school managing committee members, parents and teachers. Even in a centralised management structure, and without formal recognition of the special role of the school leader, these good results can be observed sometimes, because of the idealism and dedication of individuals, who manage to become outstanding leaders. These examples can point to what changes are needed and what can happen in the school system, when the need for change is recognised and actively promoted.

5.d ICT in education and for education

The contribution of education technology has often been cited as the means of salvaging schools from poor quality. But it has generally not lived up to the hype. Digital technology, in its scope and reach into all aspects of life and society is qualitatively different from traditional instructional technology.

We can look at Khan Academy as an illustration of the potential. It is non-profit educational organization created in 2006 by Salman Khan with the audacious goal of providing a "free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere". (khan Academy, website) It produces short lecture videos which are posted on YouTube – some 9,000 have been posted on school curriculum-related topics. Its website has practice exercises and tools for educators. All resources are available free to anyone around the world. The main language of the website is English, but increasingly the content is being made available in other languages. The content is licensed under a Creative Commons license.

But how much use is being made of these resources and how can their potential be fully harnessed? These are not substitutes for school, classroom activities and teachers. The point is that everything that can help overcome the many limitations of the school system should be fully used. Much more need to be done to expand the access infrastructure such as laptops/tablets, affordable and reliable Internet connection for schools, students and teachers; and many more teachers or specially recruited teaching aides to support and guide students and other teachers to make use of the IT resources. Otherwise the new technology would continue to widen the rich poor- gap among countries and within countries – with the better off taking full advantage of the best technology, infrastructure and the tech-savvy teachers guiding their children.

5.e. Assessment of learning

The critically important characteristic of a forward-looking middle income country aiming for prosperity and wellbeing of all its citizens is its global competitiveness in terms of skills and capabilities of its human resources. I think all the developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region fall in this category.

The competitive edge for the work force has to be promoted and supported through the performance of the educational system. The great divide in educational performance that separates developed and the poorer developing countries must be bridged by ensuring effective performance of students, schools and teachers. In addition to quality enhancing measures in schools and in the teaching learning process, assessment of learning will have to provide the metrics to monitor progress in quality and performance of students. One way is to participate in international assessments such as Programme on International student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). These provide a comparative view of how the school system performs and help build capacity in assessment in the country for critical review of teaching-learning. (CIEA, website).

Two states of India participated in PISA in 2009–10 and were placed in 72nd position out of 73 countries that participated in student assessments in mathematics, reading and science. Whether participation of students in the international assessments served any useful purpose data table when it was known that the schools, teachers and the system were at a great disadvantage compared to other countries. But is it not the point that the disadvantages must be highlighted and ways found to overcome them? A preparatory process and technical capacity development for participation in international assessment on a trial basis could be the first important steps to this end, before formal participation.

Within the framework of SDG 2030 and Education 2030, basic competencies in language, math, science and computer skills of primary and secondary education students need to

match or compare favourably with those of other higher middle income countries as judged by international assessment.

At the same time, home-grown assessment as those of Pratham in India and ASER measuring basic education competencies of children, both in school and outside school, draws attention to the poor performance and wastage of efforts and resources in the education system. These efforts help identify the points where the system breaks down. A culture of denial of problems among decision-makers backed up by a political culture to encourage such denial prevent action to deal with the problems.

5.f. Private Profit, Public Loss – Privatising schools

‘Low-fee’ private schools are being advanced as the solution to the failings of public education systems, at least as complement and supplement to the public system. There are powerful champions of this point of view including the publishing giant Pearson PLC, billionaires Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, the World Bank Group, and the UK’s Department for International Development. The claim is being made that these private schools deliver a quality education to children from poor families at a low cost.

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE), a coalition of civil society education stakeholders, find these claims about private schools and evidence in their support seriously flawed. “In reality, such schools worsen social inequality by creating an unfair system where the quality of a child’s education is determined by how much their family can afford to pay” (GCE, 2016).

The report finds that these schools: a) stay low-fee by providing low quality with substandard and low-paid teachers, often performing poorly; b) price families in poverty out of school, when a significant proportion of the population is still living below poverty line; c) create barriers for girls’ education, when parents, not able to pay the fees, picked boys over girls to send to school; and d) fail to serve children with disabilities, since these children may raise school’s cost.

The report argues that governments must stop, what it considers, dangerous experiment with for-profit, private schools and instead commit to improving their public education systems. With proper funding, strong policies, and political will, governments can provide a free, quality education that’s accessible to everyone, GCE proposes.

Private education is growing in many countries in the region. A third of the children in Pakistan as a whole and over 40% in Punjab are attending private schools at the primary and secondary levels. India appears to be approaching a similar proportion. In spite of the right to education law and the efforts to improve the quality and attractiveness of the public system, the perception of poor quality of the public system and a “better value for money” in the private sector is widespread, though not always supported by objective assessments. (UNESCO Asia Pacific Regional Office, 2017)

There is a basic contradiction in offering as a product for sale a public good that is basic general education and recognized so by national constitutions and legislation. On the other hand, the resource and capacity limitations in the public sector may make it necessary for the private sector, including profit-making institutions, to take the load off the public sector. Moreover, the diversity and different qualitative features demanded in education services by some of the clientele cannot be offered by the public sector at public cost. (Ibid.)

Yet, there appears to be no mechanism for taking an aggregate view of the total education system that includes public, semi-public and private resources for education. There is also the household sector, in which parents pay for their children in private as well as public institutions. They pay the extra direct costs for their children to attend a public school and off-budget charges, which a public school often demands from parents. There are also the costs of private tutors either in private or public schools, which have become common and require substantial amounts to be paid by parents (Ibid).

6. SDG4 Target 7– Working to be less elusive?

What is the purpose of education? What kind of human beings we would like to see the education system to produce? These are questions on the minds of educationists and citizens. It is simple and which adds to the elusiveness of the education quality goal.

Target 7 of SDG 4 includes a range of items which relate to the philosophical question about the purpose of education and the attributes of the human beings who will grow up as individuals and members of society and how the educational process can influence the desired outcome.

Target 7 attempts to list the outcomes under the broad purpose of “acquiring knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.” Then it goes on to indicate the content and objectives of a range of educational activities under this umbrella. More specifically, the target mentions education activities for:

- sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles,
- human rights,
- gender equality,
- promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence,
- global citizenship
- appreciation of cultural diversity ,and
- culture’s contribution to sustainable development

These components of the target confront the technical advisory group working on indicators for monitoring progress on the targets with formidable challenge. Ultimately, for the components of this target, the objectives, content, teaching-learning approach and assessing progress in learning, and more importantly, in behaviour and values have to be elaborated at the country level within the themes mentioned under the target. Each of the themes is still a broad category under which specific elements have to be identified in countries – the listing and their relative prominence would vary somewhat from country to country..

Two points can be made on the themes under this target. First, they clearly relate to some of the paramount challenges humankind face and students must grow up with awareness and preparedness for these issues.

For example, conflict and violence, across borders and within borders of countries, raging in several parts of the world, have produced a horrendous humanitarian crisis. A high level of violent conflict has become the new norm.

Another example is about the effects of climate change. Scientists warn of catastrophe of proportions that human civilisation have not known so far, if green house gas emissions cannot be held back and the increase in global average temperature below 2 °C or 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels cannot be achieved. Time is running out and the global community, nations, societies and every individual has a role to play in capping the rise.

The second point is a question. Is too much being expected of the education system in solving the problems of humanity and the planet, such as the ones just mentioned? Curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, examinations and co-curricular activities seem to be rather inadequate responses to the huge existential challenges. Schools, teachers, and the education system have a role and we have to work on defining and practicing these roles. But it cannot be just the school's job. Society as a whole has to be mobilised and schools can be a part of this mobilisation. We have not quite figured out how schools, and society and each community work together to deal with the common challenges. I would say, this is not enough of a priority yet of either the education community or society at large.

We have now the opportunity and the challenge provided by SDG 2030 and the Education 2030 agenda to refocus on sharpening concepts and identifying effective practices to enhance quality of education, making the quality goal relevant, pragmatic and less elusive in institutions and the system. Some key elements of this re-focusing has been attempted to be outlined in this paper.

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