ADDRESSING THE QUALITY CHALLENGE
REFLECTIONS ON THE POST-2015 UNESCO EDUCATION AGENDA
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Introduction

Quality education. Is that not what we all want for our children? For the past 15 years, the focus has been on access to basic education with an emphasis on equity as the second millennium development goal.

Now, as we head towards 2015, many countries have successfully raised student enrolment levels. And while some countries still have a way to go, the focus is now moving towards improving the quality of education: UNESCO made quality the main topic of the post-2015 education agenda, shifting the focus from quantity (enrolment) to quality (relevant learning).

The British National Commission for UNESCO has published a very clear examination of the proposed overarching goal of Ensuring equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030, and of its consequences for UNESCO.

Addressing the quality challenge is intended to support the discussion within National Commissions, UNESCO and its member states by clarifying the concept of educational quality. Policymakers and other education professionals around the globe are invited to use this paper to shape their thinking on the concept of quality in the post-2015 education agenda. Quality is important and part of a bigger picture: it starts with accessibility to education, but educational relevance with a view to the future is also important. In the end, education should prepare people for life and work.

The exploration is based on the education quality framework of the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO). This framework is used in this paper to interpret the needs and wishes arising from the post-2015 education agenda.

Each following section will start with a definition of the problem, followed by an exploration of the relevant conceptual and more substantive principles. The resulting methodological and strategic suggestions should be addressed at the national and local level. Each exploration wraps up with a set of pointers for future action at the national level.

We hope to offer National Commissions and policymakers worldwide a tool that can be used to achieve the new education goal.
Further information
For more information, please visit our websites:
Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO: www.unesco.nl/english
The Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO): international.slo.nl

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1. What we are talking about: education quality and the spider’s web

An exploration of the UN post-2015 education agenda priority areas points up the need for education quality to be conceptualised. There is agreement that quality of education is essential, but what exactly are we talking about and how do we measure that quality?

The concept of education quality involves a number of issues covered by the post-2015 agenda: content, learning activities, assessment and teacher behaviour can all be encompassed in the concept of quality. But quality also covers facets such as relevance, consistency, practicality and sustainability. These facets could be applied broadly to the whole of education, or to individual components such as example content, assessments and teacher roles.

The difficulty of delineating quality is shown by the definitions used in the excellent EfA Global Monitoring Report. The current indicators used to measure education quality are limited to pupil/teacher ratio, male/female teacher ratio, sufficiency of textbooks, infrastructure, and assessments for monitoring and policymaking. With the shift from quantity (getting children into school) to quality (improving the relevance of what they learn and their learning outcomes), more appropriate indicators have become necessary. Let us look at quality of education from a broader perspective, but with a focus on relevance, coherence and effectiveness.

The education quality framework of the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) consists of the curricular spider’s web and a set of four quality criteria (Figure 1). The curricular spider’s web at the centre consists of ten components that are all interrelated. Each component is accompanied by a guiding question. The metaphor of the spider’s web shows the vulnerability of a curriculum: if components are not addressed in coherence, tension accumulates until the web ruptures and the curriculum loses its integrity.
The four quality criteria revolve around the spider’s web and focus on relevance, consistency, practicality and sustainability. Each criterion could be applied to each component of the spider’s web in the middle, or to the web as a whole. The criteria are more or less successive in nature, meaning that they build on one another: the effectiveness of a curriculum or a component will also depend on its relevance and consistency. Each criterion could be operationalised in greater detail in order to fit local or national contexts. The criteria are depicted in Table 1.
Table 1 Quality criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>The decisions and plans depend on state-of-the-art (scientific) knowledge and approval of key stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>The decisions, policies and materials are aligned and logical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicality</td>
<td>The decisions, policies and materials can be used by teachers and fit the setting for which they are designed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>The decisions, policies and materials are constructed with a view to the future, and are likely to remain successful when support and budget fade over time</td>
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The education quality framework could be used in two ways:
1. To explore the quality of each component of the curricular spider’s web in detail according to the quality criteria. Possible questions could be: To what extent are teachers teaching relevant content? How consistent and practical are the teaching, the learning materials and the learning environment? How relevant are the tests?
2. To explore the quality of education as a whole, i.e. to apply the quality criteria to the curricular spider’s web as a whole.

Each education component will be explored in greater detail below.
2. The quality challenge: it all starts with a vision

What is the problem?
A shared, common vision is important to ensure successful education reform. The first question that should be answered is, Why do people need to learn? In other words, For what purposes do people need to participate in education? These purposes can roughly be categorised according to the following three main perspectives: pedagogical (personal talent and character development), content (knowledge and metacognition development), and societal preparation (citizenship and social skills development). Applying these perspectives while engaging in a dialogue on a vision on education will help ensure that all aspects receive attention.

What can be done?
With an overarching UN vision on education at the core of the post-2015 education agenda, member states can work on improving their national vision on education. Creating a national vision on learning could be done top-down from, for example a ministry of education, or based on a wide consultation of stakeholders. Collaboration does not mean that all needs and wishes need to be incorporated, but it will help to create a balanced and shared vision on education.

A shared, common vision on education inspires all levels and aspects of education. Vision needs to be developed on all education levels. Each level has its own responsibility in clarifying and supporting the implementation of the vision. The vision on the supra level paints broad general education horizons, while national visions on the macro level tend to provide more guidance. More localised (meso and micro) visions will be more detailed and express the will of individual schools or groups of schools. The vision – from general horizons to local expressions of needs – grows increasingly more detailed, addressing a range of issues. What do children need to learn? How do they need to learn? How do they need to be taught? What materials should be used? How much time is needed and in what settings or environments should learning take place? How should learning be assessed? Usually, only one or a few of the above questions are tackled, often in a rather inconsistent manner. Such inconsistency makes it difficult to move towards improvement. Consequently, reforms tend to be short lived.
What does that mean for the national and local context?

If a nation wishes to revisit or improve its vision on education, or its entire curriculum, it is important to get the right people on board. A wide representation of stakeholders will help balance the different opinions of what the vision should be. Although curricula tend to become more detailed from the macro to micro level, this does not mean that the curriculum development process should be organised top-down. Teachers, school principals and others working at the grassroots level should be involved in the development endeavour. Such a collaborative strategy would ensure that the implemented reform is relevant to the nation, consistent with international and local policies, but also incorporates important local needs and wishes.

Once a vision is established, it should be presentable to a wider audience. Some countries that have developed a solid vision have also established easy-to-understand and even eye-catching presentations of the core values of their reforms. The New Zealand curriculum, for example, uses the metaphor of the nautilus shell to show the holistic approach towards learning. The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence shows how the four main pillars focus on their key competencies and how these are dependent on each other. The Surinamese framework depicts how the pedagogical approach and student support systems evolve around the learner, connecting the key competencies with the learning areas.

The vision, and especially one that is depicted well, will help to keep all subsequent reform activities on track. With the vision as a framework, choices on education content can be made, teacher professional competences established, learning activities developed and evaluative activities decided on. The following sections will elaborate on these topics.

What can be policy pointers for quality?

Important criteria could be:

1. Relevance: The education vision is based on contemporary insights and is relevant for the local context and its future needs and wishes. A well-considered plan for implementing the education vision, or adapting the vision based on the post-2015 education agenda, would help to keep the vision on track.
2. Consistency: The vision is based on the UN post-2015 education agenda, and national policy documents extend and support the agenda at the national and local levels.
3. Practicality: The vision fits the local context, is univocal and can be applied by education professionals.
4. Sustainability: The vision is designed with a view to the near and attainable future.
3. The quality challenge: accessibility

What is the problem?
Education is a fundamental universal human right. Nevertheless, about 60 million children around the world are deprived of education. Children should have access to education, regardless of their ethnicity, socio-economic status or gender. The accessibility of education depends on multiple aspects, from the physical (is it possible to reach a school) and the financial (is the education affordable) to the cultural (is the programme socially acceptable). To fulfil their legal and political obligation to provide education for all, governments must work to ensure these aspects do not block access.

Accessibility, i.e. education for all, remains an important part of the post-2015 education agenda. It is vital that policies provide opportunities for all people to learn in formal and informal settings.

Although enrolment has risen, too many children leave primary school before completing the primary education cycle. Girls and children living in rural areas are most at risk. Continuation into secondary education is unlikely for those who do not complete primary education. In many countries, equitable education is not yet established. In general, urban boys have the best chances, followed by urban girls. A greater gap exists between rural and urban populations, with rural girls lagging behind most. In many western societies, however, boys are more at risk than girls. Such regional differences call for differentiated policies and action. Having access to education is one thing; receiving quality education, however, is another.

With the focus on basic education for all over the last ten years, the demand for upper secondary and higher education has risen as well. The distribution of secondary and tertiary facilities, however, is rather limited in many countries. Policy measures should be developed to cope with expanding demand for equitable access to upper secondary and tertiary education. This is necessary not only to provide the required programmes, but also to ensure jobs for future graduates. Presently this is often not the case.

What can be done?
As the goals of improving enrolment and completion rates in basic education have not yet been met, a shift of focus from basic education to secondary and tertiary education is not imminent. Enrolment in basic education has improved, but it has not automatically led to improved graduation rates around the globe. Attention on improving basic education enrolment and completion rates remains necessary. However, students who finish
basic education should be offered possibilities for further upper secondary and tertiary education. Secondary and tertiary education facilities must be available nationwide in order to improve accessibility for all. Sanitary facilities and safe environments should be established as a lack thereof is known to hinder girls’ enrolment. Modern media applications might offer opportunities to extend access to education to people living in remote areas, or in places where it is difficult to find qualified teachers.

What does that mean for the local context?
The regional, national and local contexts are all important if a nation wants to set education accessibility targets. What capacity is needed at the regional, national, and local levels? What levels of education management are required? What sectors warrant investigation? What is achievable within existing budgetary constraints?

Nations can map the need for improved enrolment at the basic, upper secondary and tertiary education levels using multi-year projections. These projections could help estimate infrastructural and staff requirements for meeting the set goals.

What can be policy pointers for quality?
1. Relevance: Policy sets achievable goals for all education levels (global, regional, national, local, school), but is in line with international conventions.
2. Consistency: The set goals are interconnected for all levels.
3. Practicality: Policy helps to eliminate national and local constraints on accessibility as much as possible.
4. Sustainability: Sufficient budget and materials are provided to achieve results in the long term.
4. The quality challenge: aims and objectives

What is the problem?
Most contemporary high-quality curricula are based on the overarching, broader goals that education trendsetter nations like Scotland, New Zealand and Finland consider important. Many others, however, have formulated their own curricula along subject content lines. A lack of broad education goals makes it more difficult to make consistent specific content choices.

What can be done?
What students will learn depends on the developed vision. The aims and objectives of what students are to learn can be approached from different perspectives. The 3-S model shown in Figure 2 can help us decide what is most worthwhile learning from the perspectives of the student, society and the subject.

Figure 2 The 3-S model (inspired by Tyler, 1949)

It is vital to examine all three perspectives of the 3-S model. From the perspective of the student, for example, what is important is creating opportunities to continue studying or finding a job, but so too are competencies like building self-esteem and being a successful learner. From society’s perspective, it is important that students become contributing members and are at least aware of what society values. Such values, however, sometimes represent a thin line between ideology and manipulation, on the one hand, and freedom
of the individual, on the other. Subjects, and how these should be taught, are also of importance. This part of a curriculum reflects what society, the academic community or subject groups find important, although the typical canon of subjects is usually rather conservative and persistent.

**What does that mean for the national and local context?**

It is important for stakeholders to be widely involved during the decision-making process with respect to aims and objectives. Aside from government, ministries in charge of education, ministries of labour, economic affairs, finance, women affairs, etc. should be included, as well as labour associations, industrial associations, universities and vocational training institutions. A sound and inclusive context analysis should be carried out with these stakeholders: What is the current situation of services? How are access and enrolment organised? Who is left behind? What programmes are offered and what are the current costs and benefits of education programmes?

The next step could then be to investigate the needs and wishes of a region or country with regard to upper secondary and tertiary education, and the world of work. What higher education sectors are most important to develop education programmes for? How many students should be educated in which sectors? What should such programmes offer? Who should gain access in order to close the equity gap? Should boarding schools be built in rural areas, or will education services be based in larger urban areas? Can jobs be guaranteed for graduates? This analysis could culminate in an upper secondary and tertiary education plan, after which the necessary financing would be worked out and the results discussed among the stakeholders and with a wider audience. The output of such discussions could then be used to finalise plans for more equitable upper secondary and tertiary education policies.

**What can be policy pointers for quality?**

1. **Relevance:** The overarching goals and objectives make sense in the light of the post-2015 agenda and education ideas.
2. **Consistency:** The overarching goals and objectives expand the vision and form a logical link with the education content that is described in more detail.
3. **Practicality:** The overarching goals help professionals implement useful and worthwhile education.
4. **Sustainability:** The overarching goals are future-looking and make long-term sense.
5. The quality challenge: content

What is the problem?
By now, there is a broad consensus in education on the need to establish functional levels of literacy and numeracy for students. Basic competencies are also broadly accepted as being key to a person becoming a balanced individual, an adequate learner, a skilled worker and a participating member of society. The consensus is less clear on what other subjects should be part of the curriculum and to what extent. The content portfolio of subjects tends to be much more rigid and conservative than is desirable. Most countries still have similar subject canons, despite many attempts to reform curricula. A reconsideration of the subjects schedule and the individual subject canons seems essential.

Another important point of discussion is the level of ‘curricular fidelity’ nations would like to see in their schools. On one end of the spectrum, there is the curriculum that is centrally prescribed and followed to the letter. Such strict guidance tends to raise learning outcomes in the short term, but demotivates teachers and does not allow for individualised learning. The opposite approach provides less proscription and more freedom for schools to organise learning. Such freedom motivates teachers, enhances school team professionalism and raises learning outcomes in the long term. A consensus on the education goals and teachers who show curricular competence are both important conditions for the successful exploitation of this type of curricular freedom.

What can be done?
A well-considered vision and articulated education aims and objectives can guide decisions on the content of subjects, which need to consider the subject knowledge that is truly essential to the core of the subject while also taking contemporary developments in the subject area into account. A broad team of involved stakeholders deciding on the content of each subject will help to ensure the right content is chosen.

Education focused on skills, attitudes and values is usually described separately from subject content. Most countries have embraced 21st-century skills as the set of skills or competences important for students to acquire in basic education. Most of these descriptions are comparable, but as most countries differ culturally, it is advisable to base choices on a dialogue centred around local skills, competences, attitudes and values. Core sets usually revolve around being self-aware, communicative, creative, critical in thinking, socially and culturally reflective, media smart, and able to solve problems and collaborate. These skills require some form of description, as it is important to have a
common language for teaching them. All too often, what these skills actually encompass remains unclear.

Perhaps more important than the organisation of skills and attitudes is how they are imparted in the classroom: as a separate subject or integrated in every aspect of school and school life. Current consensus leans towards integration into subjects and learning areas, but also into school life in general. All too often, education in skills and attitudes is divorced from day-to-day experience. Teachers should however act as role models and work towards extending skills education to all aspects of school life.

What does that mean for the national and local context?
What students learn will depend on the adopted vision and aims and objectives as well as the local curricular freedom given to schools. Some parts of the curriculum will be common to all students, but local differences could call for content differentiation. Governments should decide how much freedom they would like to foster at the local level when it comes to decision-making on education content.

Most countries are currently trying to create more local curricular freedom. Furthermore, many countries are looking into possibilities for creating core curricula that can be extended at the local level. Transferring curricular responsibility to the local level will only be successful if the relevant local authorities are empowered and supported to assume such new roles. Not only will the role of teachers change, but so will those of school principals, school boards, local government departments, inspectorates and school support agencies. Professional development is needed for all of these actors.

What could be policy pointers for quality?
1. Relevance: The (core) curriculum covers all the important basic aspects of what is worth learning (at least in terms of literacy, numeracy and generic skills), while a possible extended curriculum prepares students for local life, continuous education and possibilities in the world of work.
2. Consistency: The curriculum is in line with the vision and overarching goals and objectives and itself (skills and knowledge objectives are interconnected).
3. Practicality: The curriculum is feasible for the local context, achievable for students and easy to work with for teachers. Policy supports possibilities for localising curriculum.
4. Sustainability: The curriculum is applicable in the current setting but is also future-oriented.
6. The quality challenge: learning activities, learning environment, time for learning and materials

What is the problem?
Learning should take place through interesting learning activities carried out in inspiring environments that provide adequate teaching and learning materials. The 2013/2014 EfA Global Monitoring Report shows that many children around the globe do not experience such inspiring learning environments, or have access to sufficient and adequate learning materials. Ample examples exist of learning activities seeming to promote the opposite of what is intended. For example, activities are over-prepared, allow only one strategy for problem-solving and accept only one specific answer. This is in sharp contrast to the 21st-century skills which promote critical thinking, creative problem solving and personal responsibility for learning.

There is usually no definition of when teaching and learning materials are considered adequate. We certainly cannot expect in all classrooms around the world full-colour printed textbooks, modern media access, fully tiled classrooms with tons of posters on the walls and cupboards of well stocked with materials around the globe. But if classes are taken outside to a nearby park to learn, the students are asked to bring local materials to use in the classroom, and their work is displayed in school, it may well be possible to consider the available materials adequate. Put another way, inspiring learning activities do not depend solely the appearance of the materials students have to work with, but on how inspiring the learning activities are in themselves and on how well teachers invite students to engage.

What could be done?
The content - defined as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values – culminates in learning activities that students experience in and outside school. The learning activities need to be tailored around the ideas of education referred to in the vision and should work towards meeting the aims and objectives. If, for instance, self-motivation and independent thinking are considered important, learning activities should fostering attitudes. This is yet another argument for integrating skills and competences in subjects.

Learning activities in inspiring learning environments
Formal time for learning is often still spent in school. Timetables are rather conservative, while many learning opportunities are ignored. More flexibility would be useful for ensuring
inclusion of learning opportunities outside the current regimen of school-based learning activities. Learning opportunities in motivating environments also exist outside school, and often are more natural than those inside the classroom. An example is a classroom in the south American Amazon, where a complete series of lessons was taught about the forest. The students never left the classroom because the school was situated in the heart of the tropical rainforest.

The case of vocational training and its curriculum deserves special attention. Learning for a vocation is often presented as a viable learning trajectory for students, but in reality preparation for vocational training is, at least in basic education, weak. This is often a financial issue. Vocational education is considered expensive, as groups of students are small and the machinery necessary for an adequate learning environment is expensive. Using existing facilities outside school, either in the professional field or in partnership with higher education training institutions might make pre-vocational training more affordable. Conducting part of pre-vocational training programmes in existing institutions and workplaces could also help students to make better-informed choices about their future careers.

Supportive materials for inspiring learning activities
Designing the most beautiful learning experiences is not extremely difficult. Many wonderful examples exist and can be found on the Internet. Whether these experiences are relevant to the type of learning intended, consistent with the desired vision, aims and objectives, and practical to use in a given setting is another thing. If these are not, they will probably not be very effective in supporting learning. Even if the materials and environment are effective in promoting learning, they might be too expensive to implement nationwide, or may be too expensive to use over extended periods of time. This issue here is most often a financial one. For example, full-colour textbooks that also serve as workbooks can only be used once and are too expensive for many nations. For example, schools in the Dutch Caribbean compel students to note their answers in exercise books instead of in the workbooks, in order that the workbooks can be reused in subsequent years.

Although the economic reasons may be understandable, the result is that many assignments offered in the books are not done, leading to flattened learning activities and experiences. Another issue is the size and quality of materials used. Teaching aids might be cheap to produce when using inferior materials, but these aids deteriorate fast in schools, especially when storage is problematic. In reality, the scalability and sustainability of materials are often neglected, and the lifetime of teaching and learning materials is short. Digital materials might solve these problems: applications are easily adapted, extended and made accessible for large groups of users throughout the country or around the globe. Development, however, can be more expensive at the start and hosting rights and issues need to be legally covered. Modern
media can play a complementary role in existing education or, alternatively, turned into the major tool of education.

Even if materials are of good quality, there is often no guarantee that materials offered are used as intended. Teachers need time to understand how to use the materials, and in many cases additional preparation time for applying the materials in the classroom is necessary. Many teachers lack this preparation time, or feel they do not have it. If additional materials are needed to effectively use the materials acquired, chances are that the materials will end up not being used.

Another issue is that users of materials are not always involved in their design and development. This often leads to materials that are impractical for the contexts they are designed for. Teachers feel materials are often inadequate or difficult to use, do not address their students at the appropriate levels, or lack additional required materials. Examples of such unused materials can be found in all schools, hidden away in cupboards or in the principal’s office. Involving teachers and learners in the design and development process and developing such teaching and learning materials in an iterative way is crucial and would diminish the risk of well-intended materials not fulfilling their purpose. Asking and observing how users apply the materials on a small scale allows for adaptations and improvements before producing expensive materials on a large scale.

Digital learning materials might solve many of the aforementioned problems. The emergence of new media, however, brought a new dimension to the practicality issue: electricity, storage, maintenance and knowledge of how to work with new media all now need to be taken into account. Many computers, printers and video players exist neglected and unused on the top of bookshelves in the back of classrooms. Thinking about the consequences of introducing new media over periods longer than just the first year and factoring in the associated costs at the beginning of a project could help to prevent such failures. New media also demand a different pedagogy and teacher involvement.

What does that mean for the national and local context?
The principal level where learning activities are carried out is the grassroots level, whether in the classroom or in a more informal setting. Although teaching and learning materials are used in these settings, they are often developed centrally. Decisions on providing finance for creating inspiring learning environments and procuring learning materials are also often taken centrally. One could thus conclude that, although executive responsibility lies with teachers, their scope for creating inspiring learning opportunities is defined by regulations and budgets imposed from above. Policymakers are thus responsible for providing enough scope, time and budget for teachers to take on their responsibility for creating inspiring learning activities, in challenging learning environments using adequate materials. In some cases, rules limit
out-of-classroom learning and stifle the acknowledgement of informal learning opportunities. Such policies need revision to allow schools to recognise these learning opportunities as well.

**What could be policy pointers for quality?**

1. **Relevance:** The learning activities and materials are constructed using state-of-the-art insights into learning. The learning environment is well considered and fits contemporary convictions, also the local context. Policies allow acknowledgement of informal learning opportunities – in and outside school.

2. **Consistency:** The learning activities are in line with the vision on education and the overarching goals and objectives. The learning activities have clear learning goals, take place in adequate learning environments and make use of adequate materials. National and local policies provide professional scope, sufficient funding and enough time for teachers to develop and provide inspiring learning activities.

3. **Practicality:** The learning activities are feasible for the local context, or could be adapted by teachers to apply them in their own settings. Learning materials are also adaptable. Policies and rules foster the use of the local environment for learning.

4. **Sustainability:** Learning activities and teaching and learning materials can be used for extended periods of time. Materials chosen for the production of textbooks, posters, models etc. should be solid and durable. Modern media equipment should be low maintenance, and affordable to keep operable.
7. The quality challenge: Teachers and teachers’ professionalism

What is the problem?
Having enough teachers is only one prerequisite for achieving the post-2015 education agenda. Having professional teachers is another. In some countries, teacher training institutions have over the years been neglected as important institutions in the education chain. In many others, teacher training is under pressure. As the explorations above indicate, it is the teachers who are the linchpin in implementing the intended curriculum in practice. They are the ones that provide interesting, challenging, motivating and inspiring education. This calls for a commitment to hire the best people. Only a few nations achieve in attracting the best students into teacher training, while in many others teacher training is the next-best and, in some cases, even the last alternative students apply for. This has serious consequences for the level of teachers educated by these institutions. In general, large investments are necessary if high ambitions are to be achieved. The best students should be selected for teacher training, teacher trainers should be viewed as top professionals and job prospects – including salaries – should be good.

In-service teacher quality is yet another issue. The education levels of teachers, however, differ widely, both between countries and within countries themselves. Especially in countries with large rural settings, having well-educated teachers in isolated schools is a problem. Sometimes, having an unqualified or partially qualified teacher is the best that can be achieved. This has consequences for the success of students in school and in continuous education or for their transition to the world of work.

Teacher gender is off balance in many countries. The issue differs from country to country. In many western European countries, male teachers are poorly represented, while in other countries males are overrepresented. In still other nations, the gender scales are more balanced in numbers, but females remain underrepresented in higher staff positions.

What can be done?
Professional teachers are high-quality teachers. They are the centre point for the transition of what is intended and what is enacted in the classroom. They should not only be well equipped for their important task, but also well trained as educators. They are the ones who translate the vision and aims into education, using the materials, creating the inspiring learning environments and endorsing engaging learning activities. If a nation has high education ambitions, it also needs to assure high-quality teacher training, and
that the best students enrol in teacher training institutions. Raising the status of teachers is one of many ways to achieve this, as is a selective procedure for ensuring good-quality teachers teach in teacher-training institutions.

The professional development of teachers, both pre-service and in-service, should be well organised. Almost all countries have some sort of continuous teacher professional development programme, but programmes differ in time from eight hours to a couple of weeks per year. Some offer elaborate facultative programmes, while others have set programmes in which all in-service teachers have to participate. In some countries have scholarships to raise teachers’ professional levels towards Master’s or PhD levels. Teacher training should take place according to the best practices in professional development. Joyce and Showers’ model for professional development stresses the importance of a combination of theory, guided practice and coaching in real practice. This final support, i.e. coaching when teachers try to apply newly learned theory and skills, is often neglected. The effect of such neglect is weak implementation of what was intended.

Making use of modern media and open resources for teacher training offers and will continue to offer more possibilities for online learning. Especially for teachers working in remote areas, such possibilities allow for continued learning and certification.

Ensuring that all students have equal access and feel attracted to teacher training calls for measures to ensure the teaching profession is a valid alternative. Remuneration and status should be comparable to those of jobs of similar levels. Equal opportunities for management positions also deserve attention.

What does that mean for the national and local context?
Teacher training policy should reflect the need for professional teachers, describing the criteria used to define professional teachers. One of the most important things is that teacher training programmes are in line with the education vision and the overarching goals and objectives. Such consistency will help to shape teacher training goals and objectives and the way teachers are prepared for their jobs, both in pre-service and in in-service trajectories.

Aside from consistency of teacher training with the educational vision and selected content of education, it is important to develop or revise the strategy to improve teacher training. Most of the measures that need to be taken to improve education quality are at the teacher and school levels. All these measures cannot be implemented at the same time. A long-term approach for professional development is necessary to establish the first focus for the coming years in teacher training, the second focus for the following period of time, and so on. Otherwise the burden on teachers will be too heavy, with negative consequences for successful implementation.
Teacher training policy should also provide teachers with enough time to continue their learning. Important questions to answer are, What professional development trajectories should be addressed in order to prepare teachers for the key changes of education reform? How much time should be allocated? and How can in-service education could be organised in order to reach the required results?

To address gender balance in the teaching workforce, policy depends on the local context. Aside from terms of employment, safety is often an issue in remote areas.

**What could be policy pointers for quality?**

1. **Relevance:** Teacher training is organised according to contemporary knowledge of teaching and learning, acknowledging local characteristics.
2. **Consistency:** Teacher training (both pre-service and in-service) is in line with the education vision, overarching goals and objectives, curriculum and pedagogy of the reform.
3. **Practicality:** What is learned in teacher training is applicable in practice and supported in the field when teachers apply what they have learned in practice. Modern digital possibilities should be offered to teachers to promote continuous learning and certification, especially in remote areas.
4. **Sustainability:** Policy supports the introduction of what is learned during teacher training in practice. Teachers that do apply their newly acquired skills and knowledge are supported to continue application in practice. Policy contains a long-term professional development plan in order to prevent overstretched teachers, and promotes successful implementation.
8. The quality challenge: assessment and national standards

What is the problem?
Assessment of education and its outcomes is necessary. What should be assessed and what not is a question of debate. The current excessive national and international attention for evaluation of education and the wish to measure all progress has created a system that has narrowed quality to questionable indicators that might be easy to measure but fail to reflect important aspects of education. As a result of the focus on measurability, education has - in many cases - not been considered in the light of what was intended, i.e. ‘what is important for students to learn?’ but mainly from the perspective of what they need to master to pass exams and tests. The result of such effectiveness-based thinking is questionable: the outcomes are often used to rank countries or schools, but the purpose of this ranking is unclear and unlikely to really influence education quality for the better.

Many nations have developed reference systems for progressive language and numeracy development. In at least some cases, these have been transformed into evaluative standards. Some conceptualisation is necessary here. Frames of reference are systems that were developed as goals to strive for. Standards are sets of goals to attain. Standards follow the agenda of measurability and accountability, and are often - if not always - accompanied with excessive testing and fierce inspection. Standards are found to have a negative impact on inclusiveness and progressive learning of many and sometimes achieve the opposite of what was intended: the exclusion of students rather than their inclusion. A reconsideration of why standards are needed and what their role should be in quality assurance is necessary.

What can be done?
As stated above, what should be assessed in education is a matter of debate. A complicating fact is that many learning outcomes are measurable, but many others are not. What and how learning outcomes should be assessed depends on the vision on education. Countries that have made these transitions struggle how to make certain learning outcomes visible. In general, countries distinguish between the assessment of goals to strive for and goals to achieve. The dialogue on what to assess should revolve around what is the minimum level students should have for certain continuous education: what aspects of language, numeracy and generic skills should students possess when transferring from basic to secondary education, from secondary education to tertiary education, or from school to the world of work? And what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values do we consider important for students learn in school, but which are more important to teach than to assess?
Continuous measuring of learning puts a rather high pressure on students, parents and teachers. Assessment should be used wisely, with a clear purpose and should support learning instead of disrupting it. Assessment of learning could either be summative or formative. More and more countries try to find a combination of the two, but there is often a force at work that wants to use formative outcomes for summative use. The reasons for assessment should be clear and transparent to all: teachers, students and their parents.

Standards for overarching skills or competences, like the 21st-century skills, need to be thoroughly considered. On the one hand, it would be good if teachers have at least an idea on what these skills and competences encompass, but, on the other, these skills grow when space for development is offered. In addition, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, etc., should not be limited to narrow performance descriptions. Versatility and diversity of approach is needed. This should be fostered by education.

Whether learning should be assessed nationally, or learning outcomes evaluated in international comparative tests, is a matter of national choice. What can be concluded is that the more scope created for local dynamics in education, the more cautious governments are with national testing. Also of importance is that students are not likely to be able to perform well in all learning areas and on all competencies. It is more likely that populations of students show diversity in abilities, but also in how they perform in competencies. Such diversity should be fostered. Standards often try to describe competencies using fixed criteria in order to make progress measurable, while at the same time eradicating much needed diversity. Standards are often too strict in other learning areas as well, like the basics, while standards should promote progress in all students instead of excluding them.

**What does that mean for the local context?**

Although the post-2015 agenda implies working towards more universality in education, many aspects of education will – and should – remain locally influenced. National standards and evaluation seem to be the favoured tools for arriving at more universality. But countries or regions could have rather different needs, aids and claims for education, and local student populations could have different learning needs and opportunities. Therefore, the curricular spider’s web should foster education dialogue at different levels: internationally, nationally, regionally and locally, in schools, in order to decide what is worth learning for all students, and what should remain open for contextualisation.

**What could be policy pointers for quality?**

1. **Relevance:** Standards and testing are based on contemporary insights into evaluation of learning. Formative assessment is applied to promote learning.
2. **Consistency:** Standards are consistent and testing is in line with the education vision, goals and objectives and learning activities. Policies ensure that testing and
examination are aligned with vision and goals and objectives.

3. Practicality: Policy ensures that standards are easy to use and tests are univocal and contextualised to the world of the students.

4. Sustainability: Standards and tests are applicable to current education but also in the near future.

A final word

This paper addressed the concept of education quality. As raising quality is one of the main targets of the post-2015 education agenda, having a shared concept and understanding of quality is key for achieving this important goal. We invite UNESCO’s member states and local governments to explore the concept of quality education and define how they would like to operationalise quality efforts in the light of what is important to teach and learn and how this could be assessed in practice, while at the same time honouring the quality principles presented in this paper. In the end, raising the quality of education is not making education outcomes measurable, but ensuring that education is relevant to learners, consistent in structure, practical to teach and affordable to sustain. Making these goals measurable is a huge challenge, but at the same time a highly necessary endeavour in order to improve education for learners worldwide.

With Addressing the quality challenge we have tried to provide input for valuable discussions in the context of the work towards quality education for all, and we hope that it has provided input for these dialogues. Please share with us how you have used this paper, and what we could do to improve our thinking on education quality in order to continue on our path towards quality education for all.
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