

UNESCO's conceptualization of quality: a framework for understanding, monitoring and improving education quality

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http://www.unesco.org/education/gmr_download/chapter1.pdf

One of UNESCO's first position statements on quality in education appeared in *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education chaired by the former French minister Edgar Faure. The commission identified the fundamental goal of social change as the eradication of inequality and the establishment of an equitable democracy. Consequently, it reported, 'the aim and content of education must be recreated, to allow both for the new features of society and the new features of democracy' (Faure et al., 1972: xxvi). The notions of 'lifelong learning' and 'relevance', it noted, were particularly important. The Report strongly emphasised science and technology as well. Improving the quality of education, it stated, would require systems in which the principles of scientific development and modernisation could be learned in ways that respected learners' socio-cultural contexts.

More than two decades later came *Learning: The Treasure Within, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, chaired by another French statesman, Jacques Delors. This commission saw education throughout life as based upon four pillars:

- *Learning to know* acknowledges that learners build their own knowledge daily, combining indigenous and 'external' elements.
- *Learning to do* focuses on the practical application of what is learned.
- *Learning to live together* addresses the critical skills for a life free from discrimination, where all have equal opportunity to develop themselves, their families and their communities.
- *Learning to be* emphasises the skills needed for individuals to develop their full potential.

This conceptualisation of education provided an integrated and comprehensive view of learning and, therefore, of what constitutes education quality (Delors et al., 1996).

The importance of good quality education was resolutely reaffirmed as a priority for UNESCO at a Ministerial Round Table on Quality of Education, held in Paris in 2003.

UNESCO promotes access to good-quality education as a human right and supports a rights-based approach to all educational activities (Pigozzi, 2004). Within this approach, learning is perceived to be affected at two levels. At the level of the *learner*, education needs to seek out and acknowledge learners' prior knowledge, to recognise formal and informal modes, to practise non-discrimination and to provide a safe and supportive learning environment. At the level of the *learning system*, a support structure is needed to implement policies, enact legislation, distribute resources and measure learning outcomes, so as to have the best possible impact on learning for all.

A framework for understanding, monitoring and improving education quality

Given the diversity of understanding and interpretation of quality evident in the different traditions, defining quality and developing approaches to monitoring and improving it requires dialogue designed to achieve:

- broad agreement about the aims and objectives of education;
- a framework for the analysis of quality that enables its various dimensions to be specified;
- an approach to measurement that enables the important variables to be identified and assessed;
- a framework for improvement that comprehensively covers the interrelated components of the education system and allows opportunities for change and reform to be identified.

As earlier sections of this chapter have indicated, cognitive development and the accumulation of particular values, attitudes and skills are important objectives of education systems in most societies. Their content may differ but their broad structure is similar throughout the world. This may suggest that in one sense the key to improving the quality of education – to helping education systems better achieve these objectives – could be equally universal. Considerable research has been directed towards this question in recent years. As Chapter 2 shows, however, the number of factors that can affect educational outcomes is so vast that straightforward relationships between the conditions of education and its products are not easy to determine.

Nevertheless, it helps to begin by thinking about the main elements of education systems and how they interact. To this end, we might characterise the central dimensions influencing the core processes of teaching and learning as follows:

- learner characteristics dimension;
- contextual dimension;
- enabling inputs dimension;
- teaching and learning dimension.
- outcomes dimension.

Figure 1.1 illustrates these dimensions and their relationships, and the following subsections discuss their characteristics and interactions (see below).

Learner characteristics

How people learn – and how quickly – is strongly influenced by their capacities and experience. Assessments of the quality of education outputs that ignore initial differences among learners are likely to be misleading. Important determining characteristics can include socio-economic background, health, place of residence, cultural and religious background and the amount and nature of prior learning. It is therefore important that potential inequalities among students, deriving from gender, disability, race and ethnicity, HIV/AIDS status and situations of emergency are recognised. These differences in learner characteristics often require special responses if quality is to be improved.

Context

Links between education and society are strong, and each influences the other. Education can help change society by improving and strengthening skills, values, communications, mobility (link with personal opportunity and prosperity), personal prosperity and freedom. In the short term, however, education usually reflects society rather strongly: the values and attitudes that inform it are those of society at large. Equally important is whether education takes place in the context of an affluent society or one where poverty is widespread. In the latter case, opportunities to increase resources for education are likely to be constrained.

More directly, national policies for education also provide an influential context. For example, goals and standards, curricula and teacher policies set the enabling conditions within which educational practice occurs. These contextual circumstances have an important potential influence upon education quality. International aid strategies are also influential in most developing countries.

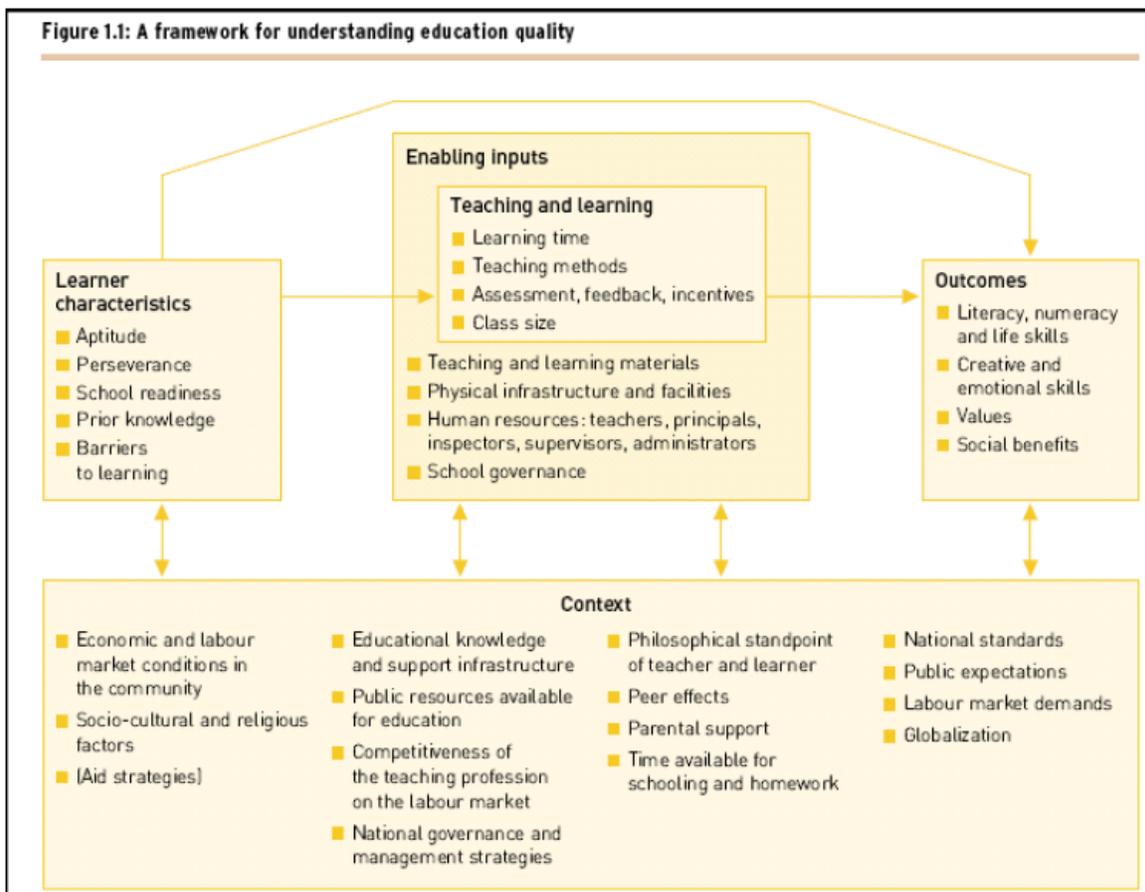
Enabling inputs

Other things being equal, the success of teaching and learning is likely to be strongly influenced by the resources made available to support the process and the direct ways in which these resources are managed. It is obvious that schools without teachers, textbooks or learning materials will not be able to do an effective job. In that sense, resources are important for education quality – although how and to what extent this is so has not yet been fully determined. Inputs are *enabling* in that they underpin and are intrinsically interrelated to teaching and learning processes, which in turn affect the range and the type of inputs used and how effectively they are employed. The main input variables are material and human resources, with the governance of these resources as an important additional dimension:

- Material resources, provided both by governments and households, include textbooks and other learning materials and the availability of classrooms, libraries, school facilities and other infrastructure.
- Human resource inputs include managers, administrators, other support staff, supervisors, inspectors and, most importantly, teachers. Teachers are vital to the education process. They are both affected by the macro context in which it takes place and central to its successful outcomes. Useful proxies here are pupil/teacher ratio, average teacher salaries and the proportion of education spending allocated to various items. Material and human resources together are often measured by expenditure indicators, including public current expenditure per pupil and the proportion of GDP spent on education.
- Enabling school-level governance concerns the ways in which the school is organised and managed. Examples of potentially important factors having an indirect impact on teaching and learning are strong leadership, a safe and welcoming school environment, good community involvement and incentives for achieving good results.

Teaching and learning

As Figure 1.1 indicates, the teaching and learning process is closely nested within the support system of inputs and other contextual factors. Teaching and learning is the key arena for human development and change. It is here that the impact of curricula is felt, that teacher methods work well or not and that learners are motivated to participate and learn how to learn. While the indirect enabling inputs discussed above are closely related to this dimension, the actual teaching and learning processes (as these occur in the classroom) include student time spent learning, assessment methods for monitoring student progress, styles of teaching, the language of instruction and classroom organisation strategies.



Outcomes

The outcomes of education should be assessed in the context of its agreed objectives. They are most easily expressed in terms of academic achievement (sometimes as test grades, but more usually and popularly in terms of examination performance), though ways of assessing creative and emotional development as well as changes in values, attitudes and behaviour have also been devised. Other proxies for learner achievement and for broader social or economic gains can be used; an example is labour market success. It is useful to distinguish between achievement, attainment and other outcome measures – which can include broader benefits to society.

Using the framework

This framework provides a means of organising and understanding the different variables of education quality. The framework is comprehensive, in that the quality of education is seen as encompassing access, teaching and learning processes and outcomes in ways that are influenced both by context and by the range and quality of inputs available. It should be remembered that agreement about the objectives and aims of education will frame any discussion of quality and that such agreement embodies moral, political and epistemological issues that are frequently invisible or ignored.

While the framework is by no means the only one available or possible, it does provide a broad structure which can be used for the dual purposes of monitoring education quality and analysing policy choices for its improvement. In Chapters 2 and 3 of this Report, the determinants of education quality are analysed according to the extent to which variables from different dimensions result in improved learning outcomes (measured primarily in terms of cognitive achievement). Chapter 4 then adapts and modifies the framework to facilitate a more holistic discussion of policy strategies for the improvement of education quality. It focuses on the central teaching and learning dimension of Figure 1.1, placing the learner at the core.