

Quality and Qualities

Tensions in Education Reforms

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Quality and Qualities: Tensions in Education Reforms is a provocative call for understanding and further exploring the elusive concept of quality in education. Although education quality has acquired high priority in the past few decades, the multiplicity of conceptualizations of quality also reflects the concerns and foci of multiple stakeholders. Coming to an understanding of quality education involves careful analysis of the context from which any particular reform or program emerges and of the continuing struggle to define and achieve it. Two main questions persist: who benefits from particular policies focused on quality? And what are the potential tradeoffs between a focus on quality, equitable distribution of education, and inclusion of various traditional expectations?

This book explores notions of quality as understood within various systems of national, formal, and nonformal education. Also it considers the tensions that arise with the introduction of new standardized notions of quality in relation to international measures and educational reforms in developing countries. In all cases, specific national issues and concerns compete with global agendas. Challenges to quality that are given particular attention in the book chapters include changing definitions of quality, high expectations for education and issues with implementation, and the introduction of English as a means to achieve quality in a globalizing world. Special attention is also given to possible actions that support a more equitable education without ignoring the requisite of quality. The final chapter suggests three models/choices for seeking higher quality and guiding the educational future of nations.



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QUALITY AND QUALITIES: TENSIONS IN EDUCATION REFORMS

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Quality and Qualities: Tensions in Education Reforms

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IN SEARCH OF QUALITY EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

For the last few decades, increasing international and national attention has been directed toward education quality, its meaning, its measurement, and its status as an integral goal in the design and implementation of educational reform. Coming to an understanding of quality education involves careful analysis of the context from which any particular reform or program emerges and of the continuing struggle to define and achieve it (Adams, 1993). In practice the definition depends in part on a series of additional choices, including the level of education under reform, who conducts the research, and importantly, who participates in the policy-making process. As Ginsburg et al. (2001) observe, the educational stakeholders concerned with quality will rarely make their choices consciously or freely. Rather, “ideologies and resource distributions” make having some choices impossible and choices may have “to be negotiated among the different individuals and group actors” (p. 21).

This chapter reflects an interpretation that much controversy persists concerning the concepts of development, quality, and measurement: the main actors, objectives, and desired outcomes. A case can be made that there is incremental improvement in the dialogue between the margins of the main conflicting groups of participants. A case can also be made that the chasm between the centers of the movements remains great. The main issues between conflicting groups often relate to the level of commitment to issues related to equity and gender, and particularly to disadvantaged populations. However, goals and programs to promote equity do not necessarily conflict with policies to promote quality. High quality education systems or programs should also seek equitable treatment of students. Indeed equity could be viewed as one requisite of quality. What is important is to determine the source or origin of the inequality in knowledge, skills and ability. What are the factors which have created inequalities in learning achievement? What deficiencies in the system can create barriers to learning? Strong teachers, using appropriate pedagogy, should be expected to teach every student to the highest possible level of learning.

The Jomtien Framework for Action (World Conference on Education for All, 1990) specifically recommended that countries set national targets for improvements in learning achievement. By explicitly addressing quality of

education, subsequent studies have found evidence about specific factors that affect learning, such as curriculum alignment and implementation, effective schools, provision of learning materials, instructional time, teacher quality, and children's readiness to learn (Lockheed & Vespoo, 1990). In practice, however, analyses of education reforms reveal significant variations across countries in their definitions of educational quality and in the actions and programs used to attain national and local objectives, which are often influenced by major political, demographic, social, and cultural changes. To deliver quality of education will require that changes occur at various levels and in various aspects of the educational system. The following chapters will illustrate the struggles, successes, and problems encountered in seeking to define, and extend, quality education. The present chapter situates the struggle to define and achieve quality of education in the evolving context of development.

The authors draw insights and ideas from a range of readily available publications by UN agencies and UNESCO specifically.

THE EVOLVING CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The evolving conceptualizations of development and globalization provide the context for, and give impetus to, the struggle to define and foster quality education. Table 1 attempts to capture broad changes in nine dimensions as models of development have been redesigned over time to cope with new goals, priorities, and challenges. As shown, strategies for development have moved from a focus on economic growth and basic needs toward an emphasis on institutional capability, economic growth, and social globalization. With these changes over time, the trends in educational policies have shifted from an emphasis on access to schooling toward increasing the quality of basic education and most recently toward a priority on expanding post-basic education. However, the process of development remains a much contested concept.

Strategies for attaining economic and social growth reflective of the newer development model labelled "economic and social globalization" appear to have been strongly influenced by multilateral agencies. Of particular influence are the World Bank, regional banks, and the UN agencies, as they assisted national governments in their attempts to: (a) reverse traditional patterns of centralized dominance of educational decisions; (b) extend social participation and opportunity; and (c) demonstrate good governance and institutional efficiencies. Clearly, even greater challenges and higher expectations for the contribution of education are found in the newest model in Table 1.

There are at least three major implications of the globalization model for education policy, planning, and practice: (a) the increased centrality of education in national development policy and planning; (b) the increased focus and priority on decentralization and localization with further empowerment of teachers and administrators; and (c) the trend toward an emphasis on, and assessment of, education quality at all levels.

Table 1. Dimensions and models of development: 1970 –2010

<i>Model</i>	<i>Economic growth</i>	<i>Economic growth and basic needs</i>	<i>Institutional capability</i>	<i>Economic and social globalization</i>
Dimension				
Goals	Economic change, sustaining economic growth	Economic change, sustaining economic growth, economic stability, meeting basic health and educational needs	Democratic processes and open, transparent governance Poverty reduction, social development, social inclusion, economic growth, productive assets	Educational quality, global competitiveness, lifelong learning, global citizenship, local voice
Policies	Centralized control Investment in technologies, human capital, technical and higher education	Mixed central and local control Investment in technologies, human capital, basic education for all, nutrition and health programs, development of local economies	Strengthened civil society and knowledge economy Basic education and work training, health programs, political training, public and private partnerships, girls' education, and transnational education	Post-basic education, tertiary and lifelong education, extension of information economy, public-private partnerships, university-industry linkages, transnational education, private tutoring Lifelong education on demand, globalized basic education, education without borders
Planning and decision mode	Top-down, government-driven, public, technocratic	Top-down, public, technocratic, with some decentralization	Bottom-up, transactive, participatory, generative, transparent political process	National vision and goals, localization of management, formal and informal networks, increased market forces, wider range of stakeholders International vision and goals,

<i>Model</i>	<i>Economic growth</i>	<i>Economic growth and basic needs</i>	<i>Institutional capability</i>	<i>Economic and social globalization</i>
Dimension				
Evaluation	Pre- and post- testing: expert-driven and quantitative	Pre- and post- testing: expert-driven and standardized	Inclusion of participatory, ongoing, qualitative research	global language, global histories Local reviews, local choice, national standards, national and international tests
Outputs	Satisfactory growth	Satisfactory growth; safety nets for the poor	Reduction in number of poor, increased assets of the poor, empowerment and reduced corruption, local ownership	Global indicators, global thinking, global standards Skills in science and mathematics, competence in world language, meta-cognitive skills, world-class ranking
Outcomes	Higher per capita income	Higher per capita income, equitable basic educational opportunities	Increased local capacity, improved well-being of the poor, equitable social capital	Global and local thinking across disciplines Knowledge-based economy, global competition Continuous, innovative educational change
Change process	Exogenous	Largely exogenous	Endogenous	Commitment to global standards, and to global and local social and technical solutions Endogenous and exogenous School-based initiatives, extra-school learning, endogenous and exogenous learning initiatives,

<i>Model</i>	<i>Economic growth</i>	<i>Economic growth and basic needs</i>	<i>Institutional capability</i>	<i>Economic and social globalization</i>
Dimension				
Sustainability	Little focus on implementation and sustainability	Increasing concern for implementation and sustainability	Implementation and high sustainability integral to model	school and global community-based learning Political support, sustainability of innovation, creative and productive institutions
Constraints/limitations	Uneven growth, high level of dependency	Frequent exclusion of the very poor, limited employment opportunities for poor in globalized economies, limited social development	Need for high rate of capacity building, strong political will, access to accurate information, and ability to cope with change	Local, national, and international support Global and local utilization of human resources, level of vision and effectiveness of parental and stakeholder involvement, fiscal resources Competition for scarce resources, fear of change, persistence of global conflicts

As the national and global social contexts have evolved and educational opportunities have expanded, the foci of educational discourse, policies, and priorities also have been changing. As shown in Table 1, the role of education looms large and has been portrayed positively across the many changes. However, the new globalization model identifies education as a primary centerpiece and a requisite for fulfilling many individual, familial, and national aspirations. In this model, education systems redefine their programs by recognizing changing patterns of work and leisure, and the growth of civil society. Some efforts also are being made to involve, and at times, focus on communities. The range of expected involvement of communities in such discourse has been disappointing to some observers. The suggestion has been repeatedly made by *Development*, the journal of the Society for International Development (SID), that there is a need to ask questions seeking deeper insights into the lives of ordinary people.

Implied in the new model are ambitious changes at the very core of the organization, governance, management, curriculum, pedagogy, and practice of education. The model further assumes extensive supporting political commitment outside the system, continuing bureaucratic support at all levels, strong incentives within the system, relevant information and supporting research and effective intersectoral networks which provide guidance and support. In terms of education priorities, the most recent trends indicated in this model of development have meant a refocus on the early grades of schooling as well as post-basic education. The newer functions of higher education are extending beyond the traditional roles of teaching and research. In the new global economy, universities not only produce high-level manpower but also develop a range of linkages with industry to engage in the development and assimilation of new technologies.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE STATE: FEWER MANDATES AND MORE INCENTIVES

Katz (2001, p. 237) maintains that “the value of the welfare state as a normative concept ... has effectively been destroyed. The image of welfare has been shifted from its positive connotations in supporting the common good to a negative association with the undeserving poor”. Grubb and Lazerson (2004) suggest a new or replacement of the current welfare state. “The Foundational State ... would provide the preconditions of foundations for a richer, more equitable version of the Education Gospel. The Foundational State would encompass a range of policies and goals: overcoming barriers to opportunity within schools; strengthening quasi markets in education” (p. 214). The term *foundational state* suggests that the government ought to take broad responsibilities for the well-being of its citizens. Actions would include the development of effective and equitable schooling and lifelong education for all. Exclusion, even partial exclusion, on any grounds, would be morally unacceptable.

This emerging approach to development, at least in rhetoric, goes well beyond the interpretations in most of the literature emphasizing only economic growth and basic needs. In the newer development model, the outlines of a localized participatory model for policy and planning are beginning to emerge. This trend is hastened by national policies and international trends in decentralization, publicized by the grassroots experience of NGOs and other organizations working in local health, education, and rural development, expedited by the marketplace; recently, these have been strongly encouraged by the changing priorities of major international donors.

In the emerging model, human capital concerns continue to dominate the policy dimensions. However, the additional concepts of cultural capital and social capital have become part of the broader capital concept. Implementation, monitoring, and valuation of the development process and sector reform, and therefore the measurement of education outputs and outcomes, have been freed from an exclusive preference for narrowly defined quantitative approaches, e.g., a preference for “objectively verifiable indicators”, to giving encouragement for inclusion of a wide range of research methods at the school, community, national, and global levels. Much of the success and legitimacy of the new development model is assumed to lie in redefining the national and local educational roles emphasizing local, participatory responsibilities and school-level inquiry. Thus accountability is viewed as important to the processes of policy making, planning, assessing, and sustaining change in serving both local and national aspirations and expectations.

In recent decades, policy papers prepared by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, USAID, and UNESCO have suggested that education is indisputably accepted as an essential element in economic growth, in individual and familial health, and in the provision of skills for the labour market. The educational level of a population is recognized as a major indicator of the investment climate. Investment in the education of women is expected to yield not only valuable increases in human capital but also high development dividends in the form of, for example, lower infant mortality rates, improved child nutrition, and a greater likelihood of enrolling all children in schools. Educational opportunities for girls have shown some increase at lower levels of education. However, significant gender bias persists in higher education and in leadership positions in the workplace.

Modifications and extensions of development goals have meant that the ideas of economic growth and of addressing basic needs, most explicitly in health and education, gained importance in the 1970s and remain a current priority. More recent work has introduced the notion that development is a means to improve the lives of human beings, emphasizing the role of education in developing human capacities that lead to wider forms of participation and improving the life chances of the poor and those who are most excluded. An inclusive quality education can thus have redistributive effects towards a fairer society (Acedo, 1999; Sen, 1996). Another change in emphasis recognizes the strong inhibiting effects of government corruption and the importance of honest, effective governance as a context for

endogenous change. The emerging overarching goals of most development agencies and many developing countries have become poverty reduction and, most recently, improvement in education quality, a condition which may be achieved both through empowerment of the poor in processes of social development and social inclusion as well as in economic growth. Yet much controversy about development remains, and the discourse on education's future continues. The trend toward decentralization is viewed as a necessary condition for successful and accountable education governance. Education governance provides for effective policies and institutions which would include support for public sector management at all levels, and legal and judicial reform, for improvement in public accountability. Governance also is expected to promote processes and procedures for more effective participation in decision making in order to promote equitable and inclusive growth (Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002).

Advocates claim that empowerment of administrators and teachers within a decentralized pattern of administration makes continuing educational change possible and can lead to higher enrollments and better quality schools. The argument goes as follows: "When communities can hold teachers, administrators and government officials accountable through formal institutional mechanisms, community members become more interested in school improvement—more willing to commit their own resources to the task" (Narayan, 2002, p. 231). Such empowerment thus transforms the way schools operate, making them more directly accountable to students, parents, and communities. However, as will be described later, given the growing influence of national and international tests, schools may become increasingly accountable to the higher levels of educational bureaucracy in terms of educational standards.

A focus on improvements in quality at all educational levels fits well into the newer model of development. In support of an information economy, newly focused attention is particularly given to post-basic, tertiary, and lifelong education. The extension of the role of the private sector in education and an increase in private tutoring is to be expected. Public-private partnerships, university-industry linkages, and transnational education will increase and take many forms.

In the competition for funds, quality still may have to continue to compete with access. Though both have political appeal, expanding access in the poorer countries, in some cases, may be more politically saleable than raising quality. Increasing access conveys an egalitarian value while raising quality may appear to be exclusionary. Consequently, maintaining the commitment to quality improvement may be difficult, particularly during times of economic uncertainty. A major challenge is how to keep education quality high on policy agendas and a public concern at all levels of governance.

THE EXPANDED ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY

The traditional set of actors making educational policy has been significantly altered in many countries. There has been an increase in the number of

stakeholders and the range of stakeholder involvement. Although the private sector has had a long and often distinguished history in many countries, elsewhere private involvement in educational policies and administration of education is relatively new.

A growing number of formal and informal public-private relationships have been formed, linking public and private efforts in education. These linkages have often extended the provision of educational opportunities. Patrinos and Sosale (2007) conclude that the impetus for the growth of public-private partnerships “originates from increasing and competing demand on the state; constrained resource environments; diverse and differentiated demand for educational services; and the consequent need for the private sector to share a public responsibility: that of financing and/or providing education” (p. 1).

Informal as well as structured parent and public involvement reflects both the increasing interest in education and the newer trends in governance which encourage widespread participation by the civil society in education. Crişan (2008) highlights a number of evolutions in society’s increasing role in education. Public perception and interest towards education have increased significantly in the last 15–20 years.

Education has become much more than before a “public matter” but also a space for exercising social and corporate responsibility. For the public, civil society (CS) included, it was not sufficient any more to be just a passive “beneficiary” of educational services; CS has gradually taken and currently takes over a number of more active roles; as a consequence, it gradually becomes a generator of social *responsibility* towards education.

The explanation for this shift is simple: the “space” between the “realm of education” and “the world of real life” (e.g., the ‘world of employment’), between school and society has gradually become smaller and smaller (p. 182).

One important concern often associated with civil society in many nations, and most particularly with multi-ethnic nations having democratic aspirations, is social cohesion. Examining the relations of education and social cohesion, Heyneman (2008) explains:

School systems affect social cohesion through four mechanisms: (i) through the formal curriculum which adheres to social norms; (ii) by sponsoring a climate within the school which is consistent with those norms; (iii) by successfully adjudicating the differences across social groups on what and how to teach; and (iv) by successfully convincing the public that the opportunity offered to their children is ‘fair’. (p. 93)

However, education systems may be part of the problem as well as a contributor to the solution. To varying degrees, education systems and individual schools reproduce the values, attitudes, and social relations of the larger society. In this manner they may reduce, perpetuate, or strengthen many of the conditions that underlie civil conflict. Thus schools may need to be explicitly proactive both in developing the curriculum and in fostering a positive social environment.

DEFINING AND MEASURING EDUCATION QUALITY

Beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, the UN Group, particularly UNESCO, took early international leadership in defining education goals. This declaration included the right of all to education. In a vision, bold at that time, this document stated that elementary education was to be made free and compulsory for all children in all nations. Clearly and reasonably viewed as a long-term goal, this objective was restated subsequently on many occasions by international treaties and in the United Nations conference declarations. However, many of the earlier declarations and commitments were silent about the quality of education to be provided.

Robin Alexander, in his monograph, *Education for All: The Quality Imperative and the Problem of Pedagogy*, presents important, timely, and strong criticisms of some of the current international literature on educational quality, and its definitions and use. His purpose is to “investigate the empirical and conceptual basis for accounts and indicators of quality, arguing the importance of national culture and circumstances alongside international pedagogical research” (p. vii). He provides several examples of the limitations of the definitions of quality education offered by various international bodies including UNESCO and the OECD.

As for indicators of quality, Alexander asks the question: “Who at each level of the system needs to know what in order that quality can be assured?” (p. 16). However, the answer to this question may vary by location and over time. Possibly in the past the answer could have been: x for teachers; y for administrators, and y or z for policy makers.

Currently, however, this question may not be so easily answered.

Drawing a line between the knowledge needs of teachers, administrators, and parents is becoming a more difficult task. In several countries strong educational programs are being financially supported which engage parents and other citizens in education decisions. At the local level parents and citizen committees have become significant actors in both choices of policy and in the processes of implementing educational changes. Additionally, ‘hybrid’ conferences of various relevant experts and citizens are gaining momentum as an important part of planning for and defining major decisions.

The focus on access and inputs also matters. In the early post–World War II decades, the education emphasis of the UN agencies, like that of other multilateral organizations, was focused largely on extending school access to a complete first level of education. In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO, 1990) reinforced the priority on education as a human right and set priorities to accomplish universal primary education by the year 2000. The priority for primary education was supported by several multilateral organizations and national governments, both in terms of goals of equality of educational opportunity and later as one strategy in poverty reduction. Most recently, the first educational level has been emphasized within a strategy for localization of education decisions. The established goals clearly fall within the generalizations found in the

globalization model in Table 1. Subsequent UNESCO publications stated that the goals of EFA in 1990 had implied quality education for all, and although the publications of the organization continued the focus on education as a human right, UNESCO also entered the discussion and debate over the meaning of education quality.

At the 2000 UNESCO World Education Forum in Dakar, a new date—2015—was set for the achievement of universal primary education. In the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) six EFA goals were approved: (1) provision of early childhood care and education; (2) free and compulsory primary education; (3) life skills; (4) literacy; (5) gender equality; and (6) quality. The framework is particularly significant for its inclusion of the goal of quality. Moreover, these goals seemed to herald a new era in the drive to define and assess quality through indicators. The framework included the process of improving all aspects of the quality of education, and ensuring that excellence of all recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills. The report noted that quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people, and adults. The report further concluded that a quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living (UNESCO, 2000).

Subsequent efforts by UNESCO, OECD, and other international organizations resulted in lists of characteristics believed to represent quality education or suggested actions necessary to build effective education systems. The following list further indicates the somewhat tentative movement to begin to reach beyond access into the process of instruction and learning and to recognize school outcomes. The DfID's EFA goals for quality primary education (DfID, 2000) offer the following list of minimum essentials (emphasis added):

- Developing *committed* and *motivated* teachers
- Defining and implementing *appropriate* curricula
- Providing *appropriate* teaching and learning materials
- Using *appropriate* languages for learning
- Promoting community participation
- Managing physical assets *effectively*
- Strengthening site-based management
- Undertaking *meaningful* assessment
- Creating a *child-friendly* environment
- Harnessing technology

The apparent emphasis in the latter prescriptive definitions is on government policy. The devil, of course, is in the modifiers. Obtaining agreement on indicators of “committed”, “appropriate”, etc. may be difficult. Measuring them may be even more difficult. Emphasis on government and government policy may be appropriate but insufficient, particularly for implementation of new programs and

actions. Clearly much ambiguity about the concept of education quality has persisted. As shown above, one approach has been to state that quality is implicit in all of certain preferred characteristics about education. Such lists may indeed characterize good education but are not particularly helpful to those who make curriculum choices, or who plan and implement education or school reforms.

The EFA Monitoring Report 2005 (UNESCO, 2005) further examines progress toward the six EFA goals. In terms of attainment of these goals this report notes that countries that have the most difficulty in achieving goals 1 through 5 are also farthest from achieving goal 6 (quality). The report also links quality with success in achieving universal participation in education.

PROGRESS, PROBLEMS, AND THE TASK AHEAD

The 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2008) provides a comprehensive review of (1) the progress made toward the achievement of each goal; (2) the scope of the challenge remaining; and (3) key actions countries need to take to further implement the goals. The following is a summary of the general progress and the recommendations with respect to quality.

(1) Progress. Many of the EFA goals probably will not be achieved by the target year 2015. However, there has been significant educational expansion in some countries. Net enrollments have increased in several countries and this increase has been greater in recent years than in prior decades. The report notes that the average net enrollment ratios have continued to increase since Dakar. Sub-Saharan Africa raised its average net enrollment ratio from 54% to 70% between 1999 and 2006, for an annual increase six times greater than during the decade before Dakar. The increase in South and West Asia was also impressive, rising from 75% to 86%. Adult literacy rates have also increased. 59 of the 176 countries reviewed have achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education.

(2) Challenges. The report points to persisting wide “achievement gaps” between students in rich and poor countries. Further inequalities exist between regions, communities, schools, and classrooms. While recognizing the importance of the significant quality gaps between countries, the report concludes: “it is within countries that the greatest disparities exist, with teachers unevenly distributed across regions” (p. 8).

(3) Recommendations. The report offers the following top quality recommendations as requisite actions leading to improved primary education:

- Strengthen policy commitments to quality education and create effective learning environments for all students, including adequate facilities, well-trained teachers, relevant curricula and clearly identified learning outcomes. A focus on teachers and learning should be at the heart of this commitment
- Ensure that all children attending primary school for at least four to five years acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills that they need to develop their potential

- Develop the capacity to measure, monitor and assess education quality, in areas that affect learning conditions (infrastructure, textbooks, class sizes), processes (language, instructional time) and outcomes
- Revise existing policies and regulations to ensure that children have sufficient instructional time and that all schools minimize the gap between intended and actual instructional time. Participate in comparative regional and international learning assessments and translate lessons learned into national policy and develop national assessments that best reflect each country's particular needs and goals
- Participate in comparative regional and international learning assessments and translate lessons learned into national policy, and develop national assessments that best reflect each country's particular needs and goals (pp. 6–7)

Shifts in Educational Governance and Changes in Educational Choices

The notion of education as a human right persists in the international literature describing global goals. Considering the millions of children with no access to schooling, such confirmed attention is appropriate. However, in the closing decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, significant progress was made in extending the provision and benefits of basic education, and primary enrollments in many countries approached 100%. Lower secondary education rapidly expanded, and in several countries had become part of basic education. Moreover, economic globalization was making demands on educational systems to produce new and more advanced skills and knowledge. There were calls from UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank and other international organizations for more attention to education quality and to post-basic education.

There appears to be widespread support for the belief that the tools and learning provided by primary education are no longer sufficient for people entering new labor markets. It has also been noted that the curriculum in post-basic education is often seen by employers as too academic to prepare youngsters for the evolving world of work. Further, vocational education and training, often under criticism in the past, is now seen to need radical changes. Currently, effective school-to-work connections appear to be few, and opportunities for updating new skills are not available in many education systems.

Much recent research by the World Bank and OECD has focused on linkages between education, the labor market, and skills development. The World Development Report 2007 (World Bank, 2006) emphasizes how certain investments in education can reshape a person's future: by broadening opportunities through expanding access to, and improving the quality of, education; by developing capacities through recognizing people as "decision-making agents"; and by providing effective systems of second chances through targeting programs. Johanson and Adams (2004) analyze the labor market context and development in Africa, identifying the roles of public training, non-government training, training by formal sector enterprises, and skills development for informal sectors; they recommend strategies for mobilizing and allocating

resources for training. Riboud, Savchenko, and Tan (2007) focus on how skills affect labor market outcomes. They present data from South Asia and highlight the importance of upgrading skills, reducing the gender gap, and expanding secondary and tertiary education and vocational education and training, as well as in-service training.

Global trends in the role of the state may facilitate the implementation of education reforms in many countries. The trend away from the emphasis on command and control toward less intrusive forms in new models of government can be interpreted as part of pervasive globalization and its powerful economic and cultural drivers.

Table 2. Directions of changing roles of national government in education

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Earlier roles</i>	<i>More recent roles</i>
Role of government	Finance, design, evaluate education development	Serve as catalyst and partner with local bodies in developing quality standards regulation
Purpose of policy planning	Ensure control/compliance Allocate public resources	Coordinate policy, manage and monitor regulations Actively coordinate public/private collaboration
Role of strategic planning	Focus on control	Mobilize/coordinate interest groups
Focus of management support and administration	Oversee details of administration Provide services	Set national vision Provide leadership in equalizing services Monitor national standards for R&D Facilitate good services

The implications of this trend for a number of dimensions are shown in Table 2. Regulatory functions of governments continue but additional enabling functions may appear. The latter include creating an enabling environment and support for expanding education, improving choice in education, ensuring all schools meet minimum conditions, and preparing teachers and principals in a manner consistent with the curriculum for students. Other enabling functions provided may be: alternative modes of service delivery, extending incentives for providers to serve the disadvantaged, encouraging a diversified network of service providers, coordinating the planning efforts of local government and civil bodies, promoting

capacity-building for lower-level government officials involved in implementation and enabling participation of a wide range of players in consensus building.

Shifts in Focus to Post-basic Education

Improvement of the quality of basic education remains a high priority in most countries. However, within the last few decades the outlines of a new priority for several countries have emerged, focused on post-basic education. In the new model nations seek further education development and competitiveness for participation in a globalized economy which has forecast a reduction in demand for routine manual skills and an increased trend in demand for complex communication and “expert thinking” skills and competencies. This more recent goal, at minimum, appears to require special skills in math, science, new technologies, and a global language. Also required are new public-private partnerships, including universities and industries; larger investments in quality education at all levels; expansion of preschool education; equality in post-basic education for girls; and strategies for poverty alleviation. The new model is expected to respond to changes in the composition of the labor force with a predicted demand for increases in creative or expert thinking and complex communication skills. Education quality in schools may be expected to include cognitive, metacognitive, and non-cognitive skills.

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, impetus has been given to post-basic education by those governments which were preparing for the knowledge society and global economy by developing long-term plans, funding transnational education, and financing radical expansion of postsecondary education. Examples of new ambitious national goals include China, which has set target dates for attaining a goal of 100 “world-class” universities; Korea, which has the “Brain Korea” project to strengthen selected universities and extend R&D in education (Kim, 2007); and Malaysia, with the “20/20 Project”, which has set goals to improve science and English language programs by 2020 (Kee, 2004, 2008). In several countries (e.g., Turkey and Korea), ministries of education or authorized ad hoc bodies are designing long-term “road maps” towards world-class educational futures.

The globalization focus tends to translate into ways to make education more economically relevant. Yet an argument can be made that education has also become a social necessity. As Zgaga (2008) points out,

Today, there is a consensus that people need applicable knowledge; we can also hear that schools should not teach anything that is not applicable, useful. If this conceals criticism of the long ago obsolete school methods or the hindered access to education and learning, such standpoints must be accepted. However, they become problematic the moment they are interpreted to say that there can be nothing in the school curriculum and nothing important for non-formal ways of learning which is not directly ‘useable’ and which does not make my most individual, private interest satisfied. (pp. 179–180)

Carnoy (2001) focuses on somewhat different new demands of educational resources. He argues that new demanding social functions may need to be assumed by schools. New functions appear partly because so many married women have come into the workplace, part-time and then full-time. With the loss of the social relevance of the workplace, and of work-based forms of social organization, a greater demand is placed on other forms of sociability. The family can no longer be assumed to reproduce labor and knowledge as it has in the past.

Alternative Forms of Quality Education

The discussion thus far has focused largely on the traditional organization of schooling common to most countries. With notable exceptions, the publications from UNESCO and other international bodies have tended to equate learning with education and education with formal schooling. National educational plans and reforms have done much the same. Extensive growth in the roles of the private sector and the civil society has extended educational opportunities and increased educational innovations. However, most of these efforts have utilized the existing model of schooling.

An educational reform which has attempted a radically different model of learning and has demonstrated considerable success in including the hard-to-reach children and youth is briefly described here. Perhaps the best known of such programs are *Escuela Nueva* initiated in Colombia, the non-formal Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) program, and the Egyptian Community Schools Program. Many of these “alternative schools” operate within ministries of education or under the supervision of NGOs. A project monitoring the progress on alternative schools now claims to have over 250 cases in its data base (Farrell & Mundy, 2008).

Alternative schools usually follow the prescribed national curriculum but often have demonstrated successful non-traditional pedagogy. Such schools tend to have close relationships with the community and make extensive use of local or community resources. Farrell and his associates (Farrell, 2007a, 2007b; Farrell & Hartwell, 2008; Farrell & Mundy, 2008), who have been studying this expanding alternative schooling for a number of years, have observed several indicators of “quality education”. Their findings indicate that in most of the cases which have been evaluated, the results are good in terms of enrollment, retention, completion, and movement to the next level of education, and in achieving academic success as measured by tests. On the whole, students in these schools perform at least as well as and often better on achievement tests than students in traditional schools. Box 1 identifies the most common characteristics of the alternative programs.

Box 1. The Emergent Model: Common Features of the Alternative School Programmes

Child-centered rather than teacher-driven pedagogy
 Active rather than passive learning
 Multi-graded classrooms with continuous progress learning
 Combinations of fully-trained and partially-trained teachers with community involvement
 Peer-tutoring
 Self-guided learning materials
 Teacher- and student-developed learning materials
 Active student involvement in the governance and management of the school
 Use of radio, correspondence lesson materials; sometimes television, computers
 Ongoing, regular and intensive in-service training and peer-mentoring for teachers
 Ongoing monitoring/evaluation/feedback systems
 Free flows of children and adults between the school and the community
 Community attention to the nutrition and health needs of pre-school age children
 Locally adapted changes in the school day or school year
 Focus of the school less on teaching; more on learning

Source: Adapted from Farrell and Hartwell (2008, p. 19)

The success of these alternative approaches to learning raises issues as to their future and the possible impact on mainstream schools. Can the success of non-formal schooling offer lessons in pedagogy and flexibility of program useful for traditional school systems? Are there roles for both to coexist? Even discounting some of the enthusiasm among researchers into non-formal schools who have become advocates, the achievements of these schools have been significant. They would appear to have earned a place in any global, national, or local strategy for attaining quality education.

Clearly the style of schooling described in Box 1 is significantly different from the types of formal schooling discussed or implied in much of the literature reviewed earlier. Although the structure of schooling tends to be similar across nations, there appear to be some conditions emerging which provide a context for experimentation. With changing patterns of educational governance, increased parental involvement, and aggressive private investment, one might expect significant local and national experimentation. Some observers claim that such opportunity thus far has largely been weakened when rigid traditions of testing and selection are present.

SEEKING MORE SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING
OF EDUCATION QUALITY

Assessments may be performed at any level: individual, school, or national system. Many teachers, with or without technical assistance, regularly evaluate their own work and adjust their teaching accordingly. Public education, accountable to the public, may be expected to be examined critically at the school or the system level. In some countries parent groups, at times supported by the government, are active participants in regional and national education assessments. National assessments and evaluations of education continue to develop and may serve a number of functions. Implicit or explicit in these functions are foci on one or more of the following: learning outcomes, institutional accountability, gatekeeping to a range of other programs and institutions, cross-national comparisons of certain goals, and insights to suggest modifications and improvements in instruction and learning.

Assessment technologies suggest the potential for quality control at the institutional and systems levels. Accountability as presently conceived seems increasingly mandated by central authorities. There are, however, difficulties in applying large-scale assessment results to instructional diagnosis. Serafini (2001), for example, takes a controversial position and argues from a constructivist viewpoint that top-down accountability is so fundamentally different from providing data for instructional diagnosis that educators should not expect any classroom effects. He goes on to advocate replacing large-scale assessment with "assessment as inquiry" (p. 387). The challenge to stakeholders may be to also ensure that the multiple persisting concerns of community, instruction, and learning are met.

Decentralization and localization of decision making have not simplified the task of planning, implementing, and assessing educational change. However, refinements in the technology of testing and assessment have raised expectations for more control over guiding improvements at systemic and institutional levels.

International Tests and Aspirations for World-Class Education

International student assessments attempt to acquire data which are valuable in revising curricula and educational policies. Low test scores have contributed to a range of changes in curriculum standards, in programs of teacher preparations, and in a broad range of education policies.

International assessments are a relatively recent but important development in assessing education quality. These are typically large-scale, multiple-country, sample-based assessments aimed at comparing the performance of a specific age group in a specific subject or group of subjects across a large number of countries. Examples are the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for international Student Assessment (PISA). Table 3 offers an example of recent PISA data.

Table 3. 2009 PISA data: Math and science scores for Argentina, China, Chile, Korea, and Finland

<i>Country</i>	<i>Math scores</i>	<i>Science scores</i>
Argentina	388	401
China:		
Shanghai–China	600	575
Hong Kong–China	555	549
Chinese Taipei	543	520
OECD Average	496	501
Chile	421	447
Korea	546	538
Finland	541	554

Source: OECD (2009)

The purpose of these tests is to provide internationally comparable evidence of achievement, so that countries can monitor learning outcomes within a common framework. Unfortunately, the results are often used by media, politicians, and educators merely in terms of “rank ordering” countries rather than as a basis for policy dialogue and a better understanding of the causes of observed differences in performance. In some countries the attainment of a “world-class” educational system, presumably one whose students score well on international tests, has become a vigorous national policy.

The growing importance of international assessments points to the potential for a wider consensus about the knowledge and skills all students need, as they enter adult life in a world that is globally interdependent. Critics might view such instruments as entrance examinations to the exclusive “world-class” educational club of countries or see them as a set of “supranational” instruments for standardization. Here, attention is focused on PISA because of its increased use in cross-national comparisons of quality and its growing role in setting national educational targets.

CONCLUSIONS

Innovations circle the world and the search for education quality takes place in many contexts and often with great passion. Literally hundreds of academic analyses and funding agency documents attempt to review “lessons learned” or “best practices”. This is a reasonable activity, for nations have been borrowing from each other, often successfully, for centuries. As noted, a possible problem with such attempts is that educational innovations as well as broader education reforms have a sticky quality and, at minimum, need adaptation and careful monitoring in any attempt at transfer.

Improvements in education quality commonly appear among the goals and objectives of education systems and institutions in most countries. Many education

reforms today seek curriculum changes and readjustments that can reorient teaching and learning to the new demands described earlier. As demonstrated by several decades of attempts, defining and assessing education quality is difficult and its meaning and measurement remain contested. There is no universal agreement on its definition, its relevant variables, or on how higher quality is to be attained. The complexity of this task reflects the complexity of educational processes characterized by many variables simultaneously interacting. Although education quality has acquired high priority, the multiplicity of conceptualizations of quality also reflects the concerns and foci of multiple stakeholders. Given a working agreement on the meaning of quality, issues may continue over its measurement. The questions persist: who benefits from particular policies focused on quality? And what are the potential tradeoffs between a focus on quality, equitable distribution of education, and inclusion of various traditional expectations?

The current trend to give increased power to national and international tests has two key elements: incentives to encourage local schools and districts to change, and methods for determining who should be rewarded for compliance with centrally-defined standards. The new strategy transfers certain responsibility for reform from central to regional governments or, at times, from regional governments to districts and schools and teachers. However, given the growth of national and international educational testing and the correlative focus or increased bureaucratic control over testing technology and its applications, what may be transferred is not so much the authority for choosing responsibility as that for implementing the change.

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EDUCATION REFORM AND THE DISCOURSE OF QUALITY IN ARGENTINA

In this chapter we analyze the reform of basic education in Argentina in relation to discourses of quality. We focus mainly on the policies on primary and secondary school reform implemented during the last two decades.

We argue that the concept of educational quality that has informed the reform can be seen as a combination of elements of the prevailing global discourse—framed mainly by multilateral organizations like the World Bank and regional bodies like the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)—and of local discourses of quality. The period we analyze (1990 to 2009) saw both shifts and continuity. Even though the current dominant discourse rejects the neo-liberal model of development, the concern for educational quality and its measurement has not disappeared.

Argentina is a federal country, but the provision of education and other services has traditionally been organized in a very centralized way. The relatively high levels of literacy, educational attainment, and social democratization that the country had achieved by the mid-twentieth century were significantly reversed by the joint effects of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) and the economic crisis of the 1980s. During the last two decades, the educational system has been reconfigured, and has been adapted in response to new challenges posed by local and global forces, raising important issues in the public arena.

We consider the concept of educational quality to be an empty or floating signifier: a concept that may adopt different meanings, according to different political views. The vagueness of the concept has been pointed out by various authors and organizations in the fields of comparative education and education planning (Casassus, 1999; Myers, 2006; Pedró & Puig, 1998; Santos Guerra, 2003). In order to understand both the meaning of the concept of educational quality in Argentina and how it has been translated into practice, we have analyzed the reform policies as well as some key texts from the national government, local academics, and international organizations. We focus on three events that led to change: (1) the emergence of the discussion about quality at the end of the 1980s, (2) the enactment and implementation of the Federal Law of Education in 1993, and (3) the enactment of the Law of National Education in 2006.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DISCUSSION

At the end of the 1980s, during which Latin Americans had experienced economic stagnation and the rebirth of liberal democracy, a new rhetoric of education reform developed in the region, based on three key or dominant concepts: quality, equity, and efficiency (Braslavsky, 1999; see also Casassus, 1999). Braslavsky (1999) argues that each of these concepts allowed for different interpretations, but together they established a common framework for reform in most of the countries in the region. At that time, the concern to expand educational systems began to be replaced, at least in part, by concerns about school performance, in terms of both student learning and equality of opportunities.

According to Casassus (1999), new weight was given to the concept of quality because of the strategic centrality of education for economic development and social integration that was established globally at that time for both central and peripheral countries (see also Carnoy & Moura Castro, 1996). This shift began to be clear in the documents produced at the regional meetings of national ministers of education in 1989 and 1991 (Casassus, 1999; Gajardo, 1999). At the fourth conference of PROMEDLAC (Comité Regional Intergubernamental del Proyecto Principal de Educación en América Latina y el Caribe) in Quito in 1991, participants declared that Latin American education systems had been based on strategies that were no longer able to “harmonize quantity with quality”.

The document produced there (UNESCO/OREALC, 1991) linked the improvement of quality to processes that would professionalize teachers and transform curricula; it also stressed the need for a new model of educational development in the region, one built around decentralization policies and the establishment of systems to assess and evaluate students. For countries in Latin America, the global Initiative of Education for All, launched in Jomtien in 1990, was also influential in emphasizing the issue of quality and its measurement. One goal established in Jomtien was an emphasis on learning outcomes as fundamental indicators of quality. In this regard, Pedró and Puig (1998) highlight the shift from concerns about equality of opportunities during the 1960s to quality, from the 1980s on. They point out the predominant political interpretation that identifies quality with academic achievement; this leads to an emphasis on evaluating educational products or results rather than processes.

A key text during this period, because of its impact on both the regional educational discourse and national policies, was *Education and knowledge: Basic pillars of changing production patterns with social equity*. Produced by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 1992), its objective was to update the regional development model. This new development model was supposed to strengthen democratization and help integrate Latin American countries into the world economy. The document outlined an educational reform strategy that would help to address “both the internal challenge, which is that of building citizenship, and the external challenge, which is that of competitiveness” (Summary, para. 2). As its title indicates, the document primarily emphasized equity, rather than quality. But it did recognize the need to expand

educational systems; it pointed to shortcomings in “the quality of their results, their degree of adaptation to the requirements of the economic and social environment, and the degree of equity in the access of the different strata of society to them” (Summary, para. 3).

This new emphasis on equity seemed to respond to high (and increasing) social inequalities as well as to the awareness that educational policy should also provide an answer to the growing social and cultural diversity in the region (Feijoó, 2002). Casassus (1999) notes that the concern for quality is necessarily linked to the concern for equity, even when they are independent concepts. Given the extension of formal instruction to the great masses of students, he argues, the goal is to achieve a high quality education for all.

It should be noted that the crisis in educational quality was seen as critical not only by multilateral organizations or from functionalist viewpoints. For example, Arnove, Torres, Franz, and Morse (1997), arguing from a neo-Marxist perspective, point out that the quality of education in the region was severely affected by neoliberal policies implemented during the 1980s and early 1990s: “Decreased expenditures, outdated pedagogies and curricula, and restricted access all contributed to the general decline in the quality of education. Low teacher salaries also affected educational quality” (p. 147).

In Argentina, the re-establishment of democratic political institutions in 1983 had allowed for a more open and more broadly-based discussion of the structure and content of education. With the Pedagogical Congress (Congreso Pedagógico, 1986–88), which involved teachers, parents, community members, students, and representatives of different organizations in a debate about the situation of the educational system, “an effort began to build consensus and to seek out or create new policies and action strategies” (Braslavsky, 1998, p. 299). At the same time, other issues related to quality began to appear in the academic discourse: the mismanagement of the school system, its increasing segmentation, and the need for policies to promote equality of opportunities and school democratization (Filmus, 1995).

Despite the variety of diagnoses and conceptions of quality, a prevailing view existed within the Argentine academic community that educational quality had been declining since the 1960s. While public schools had been suffering from rising enrolments combined with falling investments (Beccaria & Riquelme, 1985), the private sector had been growing by incorporating middle- and upper-class families. This was probably because private schools could better respond to the demands of families (Narodowski, 2002), and were increasingly seen as offering a higher quality of education than the public schools. The decline of public education had been accentuated by both the economic crisis of the 1980s and the policies of the last military government (1976–1983) (Braslavsky & Tiramonti, 1990; Filmus, 1995). Those policies included closing education offices that had planning and research functions (see Paviglianiti, 1988; Suasnábar & Palamidessi, 2007), and neglecting pedagogy and curriculum. For example, Tiramonti (1995) points out that in 1983, 400,000 primary students in the Province of Buenos Aires were offered only 2 or 3 hours a day of schooling, including the provision of a meal.

Moreover, the national and provincial ministries of education appeared to have low capacities for governing the system and affecting the work of schools (Braslavsky, 1998; Paviglianiti, 1988). Meanwhile, the fragmentation of the system led to great inequalities, as schools varied in the quality and types of services they offered to different groups of students (Braslavsky & Krawczyk, 1988). The combination of increases in enrollments and lack of investment in the educational system resulted in overcrowded schools and classrooms, and the sense of crisis. For instance, the secondary *net* enrollment rate rose from 33.4% in 1980 to 53.5% in 1991. But regional differences were huge: in 1991, net enrollment for the city of Buenos Aires was around 72%, compared to about 38% for the province of Chaco, in the less developed northeast (Tiramonti, 1996).

Four texts offer examples of the way educational quality was conceptualized at the local level in the period around 1990. The first is a document produced in the context of the Pedagogical Congress (Ministry of Education and Justice, 1988). One of the six commissions formed to propose reforms based on the work of the congress focused on the issue of quality. The proposal that the commission developed focused mainly on basic education and had four headings: (1) contents and methods; (2) health education; (3) education and work; and (4) teacher training. Although its strongest calls for reform focused on modernizing teacher training and curriculum, this document reflected a broad conception of quality.

The second text was written by two researchers, Cecilia Braslavsky and Guillermina Tiramonti (1990), based at the Argentine branch of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), then the country's most important educational research center. Focusing on the secondary level, they suggested that to ensure a quality education, schools would have to provide students with the knowledge and skills they needed to develop personally and to help build a democratic, prosperous, and just society. These authors described how a strong demand for quality arose during the 1980s in Argentine education. At that time many studies showed that Argentine schools were performing poorly on the dimensions of curriculum and student achievement.

The demand for quality implied the need to implement educational innovations, but that was not possible because of a particular management model that informed the whole educational system, including the direction of schools. This model—the result of many years of political instability, authoritarian ideology, economic crisis, and a non-collaborative organizational culture—was characterized by the rejection of change and innovation, and by a focus on bureaucratic tasks. Implementing educational innovations would require a new management model, one that focused on curriculum and instruction as the central elements of schools. The authors noted that it is always difficult to build a new organizational culture, and that at the end of the 1980s the national government was only starting to process the demands for educational quality.

A third text was written by Inés Aguerrondo (1996), an education planner who later became one of the main architects of the reform during the 1990s. She also stressed organizational and management aspects, but emphasized the need for a commitment to effectiveness and efficiency in the school system. She argued that

traditional management models in Latin America were exhausted as the result of three trends: the expanding educational systems, increasing diversity in the student population, and material restrictions caused by economic adjustments. To her, “the school institution” was “a *service unit*”, the point “where the fate of educational quality and equity is decided” (p. 16); she said the chances of improving quality relied on advancing toward a decentralized model in which the central level had greater capacities, and schools had significant autonomy. In another text (Aguerrondo, 1993) she argued that educational quality should be evaluated globally, not just as the measurement of results, and should take into account the variations in the meaning of quality based on differences in cultural contexts.

The fourth text espouses a view in which school autonomy and competition are the main elements needed to improve quality. FIEL (Fundación de Investigaciones Económicas Latinoamericana) and CEA (Consejo Empresario Argentino) proposed a double process of decentralizing authority and responsibilities to municipalities and to schools and introducing market mechanisms to encourage competition among schools. It also proposed charging tuition at the secondary level (in a country where even higher education is free of charge), and promoted *cooperadoras* or school councils to raise funds for schools. Private schools would continue to receive state grants (traditional in Argentina), since they were considered to provide a greater supply and diversity of education (FIEL & CEA, 1993).

On the other hand, as we have shown, the regional and global discourses expressed by multilateral organizations and meetings had begun to emphasize a focused, narrow view of educational quality, mainly linked to learning outcomes. A World Bank report on the Argentine education system produced in the late 1980s (Kugler, 1991) reflected this view, stressing the need for standards and systems for measuring student achievement that could result in interventions to address problems and shortcomings in underachieving districts and schools.

QUALITY AND EDUCATION REFORM IN ARGENTINA DURING THE 1990S

The reform of the Argentine education system during the 1990s was part of a regional process of educational change that was influenced by both international agencies and local actors, linked to the recovery of democratic political institutions at national levels, global economic restructuring, and the idea that education was central to development and social integration (Concha Albornoz, 2005; Gajardo, 1999). At the same time, educational change in Argentina was influenced by the processes of state restructuring and neoliberal reform: the economy was opened to international trade, state-owned companies were privatized, and economic activities were deregulated. The first step in restructuring the education system was decentralizing secondary schools and teacher training institutes from the national to the provincial level; the next step was enacting the Federal Law of Education (1993) and the Law of Higher Education (1995).

At the basic education level, several changes were made. A new academic structure was created that extended compulsory education from 7 to 10 years.

Provincial systems of educational administration were modernized. Curricula were updated and a new mechanism was established to design them. Compensatory programs were implemented for the most disadvantaged social groups, and systems were developed to assess, evaluate, and inform students. Teachers were retrained, to upgrade their subject knowledge and teaching methods, and a new model of school management was adopted. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) participated in the design and financing of educational reform, supporting some of the policies implemented. The World Bank assistance focused on the reform of higher education and of administrative aspects of provincial systems, while the IDB mainly concentrated on secondary schooling.

The declared objectives of the reform were enhancing quality and equity. Changes were also justified to adapt the educational system to technological changes and to the requirements of the global economy (e.g., Ministry of Culture and Education [MCE] 1996b, 1997). In the 1993 Federal Law of Education, the main legal instrument of the reform, the concept of educational quality was not defined clearly. References to it were very general, but it did state that quality would be guaranteed through evaluation (articles 48, 49, and 53). The evaluation of quality should verify that curricular contents respond to “social needs” and to the “educational requirements of the community” (Article 49), but it did not explain how those needs and requirements would be established.

With regard to the goal of improving equity, the 1993 law stressed that the federal government would play a compensatory role. This was translated into the Social Plan, designed to provide federal funds for improved facilities, computers, and textbooks directly to the poorest schools in the country. The Social Plan reached more than 17,000 schools and around 3.6 million students during the period 1993 to 1998 (Morduchowicz, 1999). The new emphasis on compensatory programs can be seen as a response to the increasing poverty and marginalization that developed despite the high rates of economic growth. The aim of one program, for example, was “to provide poorer children with the same (pedagogical) resources as the most privileged ones” (MCE, 1997, p. 44). The plan can also be seen as a public policy that identifies particular social groups as deficient and needy, while departing from the idea of universal social rights (Duschatzky & Redondo, 2000).

The improvement of quality, on the other hand, was to be achieved through improved governance and changes in teaching approaches. The official discourse linked educational quality to the implementation of a curriculum based on developing competences, moving towards school autonomy, and developing both school institutional projects and more efficient administrative systems at the provincial level (Decibe, 1998). The Ministry of Culture and Education (MEC, 1996a) argued that to successfully implement curricular and instructional changes, the country would need a new organizational and management model: more decentralized, participatory, and flexible. This combination of pedagogical and administrative innovations was promoted through national programs like Nueva Escuela (New School), which worked with provincial governments and schools (Tiramonti, 1996). A primary instrument for this new model was the development

of the *proyecto educativo institucional* (PEI), or school institutional project. As Astiz (2006) explains, “in the course of” using “collaborative endeavors” to design the PEI, “schools were supposed ... to develop innovative management and pedagogy models to produce quality education” (p. 206).

The curricular reform process, which had its precedents in various provincial experiences during the 1980s, was one of the main elements in restructuring the educational system. The new curricula were designed at three levels. At the national level, the Federal Council of Education established the general objectives and guidelines. At the provincial level—including the city of Buenos Aires—the objectives and guidelines were developed further, taking into account the local situation in each province. The final design of the curriculum at the school level required that each school make decisions on content and instruction strategies. The Federal Council had stated that the school was the fundamental unit for the specification of the educational project, so the provinces should leave to the schools the responsibility for completing the development of a curriculum that would respond to their local situations and realities (MCE, 1996a). In the early 1990s, the government asked schools to provide inputs to design a set of common contents, but the final product was decided in a very centralized way (Rivas, 2004). On the other hand, the participation of experts was important, and resulted in a modernization of contents and instructional methods (Dussel, 2001; Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2001). The final product was a curriculum based on the development of “competencies”; it was supposed to allow students to gain understanding and to perform in the personal, social, and work dimensions of life.

Teacher professionalization was also seen as a central element to improve educational quality (Serra, 2004). An MCE document described this idea:

Pursuing schools with higher teaching quality is closely connected with a change in teachers’ role towards higher levels of professionalization. A professional educator is someone who manages the knowledge areas necessary for teaching and learning, who at the same time, is able to make autonomous decisions with independence, freedom and responsibility. (MCE, 1996c, p. 3, quoted in Pini, Musanti, Gorostiaga, Feldfeber, & Oliveira, p. 579)

In spite of this stress on teaching improvements, the quality of the courses delivered under the umbrella of the Federal Network of Teacher Training—created and managed by the national ministry with the participation of the provincial ministries of education—could not be monitored effectively. Two important results were that isolated courses were offered, at very different quality levels, and that teacher training tended to become merely a formality; teachers took courses mainly to earn raises and promotion (Pini et al., 2010; Serra, 2004).

Another significant policy relevant to quality was the establishment of a National System for the Evaluation of Educational Quality, which aimed to measure learning outcomes. Since 1989, the national ministry had been working on planning this system, with important support from international organizations (Nores, 2002). In 1993, the government began to conduct annual national

assessments of learning outcomes through standardized tests on Spanish, math, sciences, and social studies administered to samples of students at primary and secondary levels. Although the test content and items were decided through a consultation process with provincial governments, the evaluation system worked as a tool for the federal government to reassume centralized control over the education system (Benveniste, 2002). Through the publication of results, the national government seemed to seek legitimization for the reform, and to hold provinces and schools accountable for student achievement:

Assessment data would not only inform policy change but would actually serve as a conduit to justify and mobilize public opinion around the incipient Argentine educational transformation ... The national government sought to supply public opinion with immediate, conclusive, and objective evidence that the education sector was in crisis and that this crisis demanded the wide-sweeping reforms inscribed in the Federal Education Law. (Benveniste, 2002, p. 106)

It can also be argued that the selective use of the information provided by the tests implied a focus on teaching as the main variable to explain outcomes (Gvirtz, Larripa & Oelsner, 2006); this accounts in part for the opposition of teachers' unions to the assessment system (Nores, 2002). Unions feared that the results would be used in the future to determine teachers' compensation and promotion, but their critiques also addressed technical issues and the fact that the evaluation of the educational system focused only on students achieving a minimum amount of course contents (Rodríguez & Vázquez, 2000).

The official discourse on educational quality did incorporate references to democratizing schools and developing citizens, but it placed more emphasis on responding to the requirements for the economic and technological transformations, and on measuring educational results. This conception of quality was reinforced by the prevailing global and regional discourses about educational reform. For example, ECLAC (1992) advocated institutional redesign, and PREAL (1998) argued that the region's educational systems needed repair so they could contribute to their countries' economic competitiveness. This conception was also supported, through both argumentation and technical and financial support, by the World Bank and the IDB.

A World Bank (1995) report that helped to set the strategy for assisting with the reform stated that "Argentina's population... is ill-prepared in comparison with countries with a similar income level and with which it competes in world markets ... Despite relatively high coverage rates, the quality and productivity of the educational system is poor" (p. 3). Moreover, it argued that "the low quality of student learning" is "related to the poor quality of educational inputs, including: shortages of educational materials; inadequate teacher training; lack of relevance of curriculum content; and poor school management and lack of school-based initiatives" (p. 9). In a positive appraisal of national reform policies, the document pointed out that the Federal Law of Education "emphasizes and gives special priority to the provision of high quality education and its measurement" (p. 10).

With a similar tone, a report of the IDB (1994) declared that the law “provides for improving the quality of education through curriculum updating, teacher training, and the creation of a National Quality Assessment System” (p. 7).

On the other hand, the prevailing view of educational quality encountered significant resistance among local academics. They characterized the government’s discourse as promoting a technocratic view that reduced the meaning of educational quality to measuring the system’s productivity and responding to market requirements, while ignoring demands for democratization, in the context of restructuring policies that could increase unemployment and undermine universal social rights (Puiggrós, 1997; Tiramonti, 1997). For example, they saw the competencies-based curriculum as part of a neo-liberal discourse that encouraged a social Darwinist model (Frigerio, 1995a). Furthermore, they pointed out that an educational policy that aims to improve quality should be linked to a social policy that attempts to provide a better quality of life for all the population (Frigerio, 1995b), and said that the quality of education was “measured only in terms of specialized learning achievement”, referring to “societal and job market-specific, content-related qualification requirements” (Munín, 1998, p. 231).

Other critiques of the national policy and its conception of quality came from neoliberal think tanks and foundations sponsored by business groups, which became very active in the discussion of education policy during this decade, proposing policies similar to those promoted by FIEL and CEA (1993), discussed above. In addition, FIEL/CEP (2000) argued that the reform of secondary schools had reduced the scope and duration of technical education, which had been neglected by most governments in the past half-century. These analysts contended that compulsory education could have been extended without changing the academic structure, and that a technical education modality starting at the 6th grade should have been organized, making schooling more attractive and useful for students of low socio-economic status.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REFORM AND ITS EFFECTS ON QUALITY

The design and implementation of the reform revealed significant obstacles to enhancing both quality and equity, probably due to a combination of political, financial, and technical factors (see Gorostiaga, Acedo, & Xifra, 2003). Tiramonti (1996) suggests that the national policy represented a dual political proposal that responded to the increasingly dual structure of society. It consisted of compensatory programs like the Social Plan for the poorest sectors, and pedagogical changes for the middle classes, which needed and demanded better education in order to compete in the employment market.

Despite an initial push towards more autonomous schools and the development of institutional projects, the national ministry gradually became more central in curricular and pedagogical decisions. In addition, the high levels of inequality, reinforced by the decentralization of educational funding, prevented schools in poor environments from developing the capacities they needed to become autonomous.

Given the decentralization of the Argentine educational system established in 1992, the implementation of the reform depended to a great extent on the provincial governments. The provinces, which had various political orientations and huge differences in their technical and financial resources, adopted a range of positions with regard to the federal law and the national policies (Senén González, 2000).

The Province of Buenos Aires, home to more than 35% of all the nation's students in basic education, was the province that advanced most quickly in the massive implementation of the new structure and the extension to ten years of compulsory schooling. This implementation, however, took place through a particular appropriation of the reform—one that emphasized coverage rather than quality—and under a political leadership that was in competition with the national government. The political logic was to include and retain low-SES students in order to focus on social policy, but without addressing the segmentation of the educational system. Provincial policy-makers recognized that this strategy would unavoidably lower quality (see Acedo, Gorostiaga, & Senén-González, 2007).

Despite a significant increase in educational expenditures, salient problems remained in the infrastructure and in teacher training. In many schools, quality suffered not only because teachers placed lower demands on the students, and because primary school methods of teaching and evaluation were adopted at the lower secondary level; another challenge was incorporating students who were overage, had a history of failing in school, and belonged to social groups that had never before had access to secondary education. A discourse of “diversity” was articulated in official documents and among educational authorities, including supervisors, addressing the need to adapt teaching styles to the situation of low-income students; this often resulted in teachers communicating less of the course contents (Acedo et al., 2007). For the whole nation, the main positive effect of the 1990s reform appeared to be the increase in enrollments, particularly at the lower secondary level (Rivas, 2003; Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2001). Most of the measures that could help improve quality—curriculum updates, administrative modernization, improvements in infrastructure and equipment—were neutralized by an ineffective system of teacher training and the lack of adequate planning to extend compulsory schooling and adopt the new structure of primary and secondary education. Furthermore, many of the reform policies and programs were cut, beginning in the late 1990s, as the result of the economic recession and changes in the leadership of the national government.

The tensions between quality and equity were reinforced by global social and cultural processes that had been producing a new configuration of relationships between individuals and institutions; these developed rapidly in Argentina during the 1980s and 1990s, with specific features based on local traditions and social structures. This new configuration was shaped by various phenomena like the spread of new information and communication technologies, the growing influence of mass media in everyday life, the transformation of labor markets, and the challenges to the state power by both supranational bodies and local forces. As a result, the construction of people's social identities is no longer determined by

traditional institutions like the state, the school, and the family. In this scenario, schools face huge challenges as the value of school knowledge is questioned, and teachers are no longer seen as authoritative figures (Dubet, 2004). In Argentina, these challenges have become even greater in urban settings where both teachers and students suffer poverty and marginalization (Feijoo, 2002).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND THE ISSUE OF QUALITY

The economic crisis that Argentina suffered in 2001–2002 led to unprecedented increases in the rates of unemployment and poverty, and signaled the failure of the economic model that had been set up in the 1990s. The critiques of the Federal Law and the education reform—seen as part of the neo-liberal orientation of the previous decade—gained momentum as it became evident that its implementation had not improved quality in any of the conceptions adopted by various actors; meanwhile fragmentation and inequalities had increased, both within and between the provincial school systems.

During the administrations of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007–2011), Argentina has seen a reversal of some of the policies of the 1990s in a context of significant economic growth, particularly between 2004 and 2008. Both administrations adopted a discourse that emphasizes state intervention and social rights, but implemented policies that reinforce, or at least, maintain, an economic “productivist model” and social inequalities (Svampa, 2008). Furthermore, Argentina continues to be an example of “delegative and low-density democracies” (see O’Donnell, 1993).

With regard to education, starting in 2003 the national government aimed at establishing a more centralized regulation of the system, while legitimizing policies through consultation processes. The presence of multilateral organizations has been much less salient, but they have remained involved in the national educational policy through their funding of a few programs and Argentina’s participation in some international student achievement tests.

Among other measures, the government raised teachers’ salaries, created a national institute for teacher training, and passed new laws promoting technical education and increasing funding for achieving specific targets like universal initial and secondary schooling. Public investment in education and science grew from 4% to 5.4% of GDP in the period 2003 to 2007 (Delich, Iaies, Savransky, & Gallian, 2009), but in some provinces investment per student is still at a low level compared to international standards (CIPPEC, 2008).

At the same time, the national government has continued to promote the development of projects at the school level and to establish partnerships with civil society organizations. One example is the proposal to provide socio-educational support for secondary schools that the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2011) is currently implementing. Institutional autonomy and competition for resources are also encouraged by some of the policies that have aimed to improve the quality of teacher training institutions (Misuraca, 2009). On the other hand, since 2003, more

stress has been placed on “educational inclusion” for particular groups (dropouts, overage students, etc.); here, a major strategy is the “joint management” of programs by the state and civil society organizations (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology [MoECT], n.d.).

During the past few years, the transition from school to work has become an important issue; in particular, the six-year secondary-level technical education program has been restored and upgraded, reversing the policies of the previous decade. In addition, the Ministry of Labor has developed a system of permanent training involving private companies and unions, while the Ministry of Social Development and some non-governmental organizations are implementing partnerships with secondary schools and other educational institutions to facilitate the entrance of young people into the labor market (CIPPEC, 2008).

The most significant initiative was the enactment of the Law of National Education, in December 2006, which replaced the Federal Law of 1993. The official document that was used to propose the public discussion of the new law stated that “only an education of excellent quality for all the population will allow [us to] reach the objectives of social justice, economic growth and democratic citizenship, which guide the strategy of sustainable development ... Argentines are recovering the conviction that the State must guarantee that these values reach the whole society without exclusions” (MECT, 2006, pp. 11–12). In general, the law stresses that education must contribute to building a more just society, and to overcoming inequalities and different forms of discrimination (see Pini & Gorostiaga, 2008). Among other provisions, the law extends compulsory education to the entire secondary level, creates the National Institute of Teacher Training, and establishes a full-time schedule (*jornada completa*) for primary schools.

As was true of the Federal Law of 1993, in the National Law of Education the concept of quality is not clearly defined, although it is mentioned many times. The first objective established for the national education policy is to “assure an education of quality with equality of opportunities and possibilities, without regional imbalances or social inequities” (Article 11, our translation). The new law devotes a whole section to the issue of quality (Title IV), in which the improvement of quality is linked to the development of information and evaluation systems. In addition, it creates a National Council of Educational Quality—with representatives from government agencies, the academic world, business organizations, and unions. Its functions are to provide advice and propose criteria and modalities for evaluating the national education system, and to ensure that the information produced through the evaluation processes is diffused and utilized. However, this council has not been implemented so far. The law also defines teacher education as a key factor for improving the quality of education (Art. 73).

Even though major organizations of teachers have supported the National Law of Education, some groups, such as ATEN, the Asociación de Trabajadores de la Educación de Neuquén (one of the Patagonian provinces), see a basic continuity between the policies of the 1990s and the new law. They argue that the emphasis on the evaluation of quality still has the objective of controlling teachers (ATEN, n.d.).

Along with some significant changes introduced during the past few years, the education policies show continuities with regard to important issues like the national assessment system, compensatory programs to assist students from the most disadvantaged areas, and the promotion of institutional autonomy and of partnerships between the educational system and civil society organizations.

In recent years, though the official discourse stresses democratization, and legal provisions have been established to increase enrollments in primary and secondary education, the rates of repetition and dropout remain high, and enrollment at different levels has not risen significantly (DINIECE, 2008).

On the other hand, students' results on national evaluations seem to show that learning has not improved. In the 2007 examination, for example, between 44.7% and 65% of secondary students (depending on the grade) got low or unsatisfactory grades on the math section. Meanwhile, private schools continue to significantly outperform public ones (DINIECE, 2009). For almost twenty years, the national system of student assessment has played a mainly symbolic role (see Benveniste, 2002) since changes in test design make it difficult to compare student results from different years, and no policies have been created for communicating results to the general public, or promoting their use to improve school quality (CIPPEC, 2008; Delich et al., 2009).

Not surprisingly, Argentina's performance on international tests such as PISA and SERCE also reveals a low level of student attainment. In 2000–2001 and 2006 Argentine students participated in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), a program developed by the OECD and administered to samples of 15-year-old students (DINIECE, n.d.). On the 2006 evaluation, which involved 57 countries, Argentina occupied the 51st rank in sciences, 52nd in math, and 53rd in reading comprehension, and it was the country with the greatest internal range of scores. In addition, out of the 36 countries that participated in both evaluations (2000 and 2006), Argentina had the largest drop in its results on the reading comprehension test between the two evaluations.

In the SERCE (Segundo Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo), which tests samples of third and sixth grade students in 16 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/OREALC-LLECE, 2008), Argentina ranked 5th or 6th in the various areas (language, maths, and sciences); this represents a significant drop from the 2nd place it obtained for math and language in the 1996 PERCE (Primer Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo). The country's low performance on PISA and SERCE, however, has not prompted any important debate about the quality of education, nor has it had any apparent impact on the policies of the national ministry of education.

Despite the presence of some positive measures (e.g., growth of public investment, establishment of compulsory secondary education, upgrading of teacher education), it can be argued that the country has still not developed a coherent, well-planned strategy for improving quality (even defined in a narrow way) and equity (considering differences between public and private schools or between different types of public schools). In addition, the consultation processes for implementing some of the national government's major initiatives (e. g., the

creation of the National Institute of Teacher Formation, the design of the Law of National Education) appear to be mechanisms that did not allow the various actors to participate significantly in the design of educational policies.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have argued that different conceptions of quality have interacted in the planning and implementation of educational reform in Argentina since the end of the 1980s. Curricular and organizational changes introduced during the 1990s did not have the expected results of improving student learning, while reforms in governance seemed to improve efficiency but reinforced the inequalities among provinces. In addition, provincial governments are currently administering educational systems and carrying out national policies, but most of them do not have the capacity to design and implement their own policies for improving quality and equity.

The national policy has been influenced by different views of educational quality, including the rather instrumental view of international organizations as well as broader conceptions espoused by local academics and policy makers. As a result, the national discourse and policies have tended to express an unresolved tension between competing notions of quality. Moreover, the implementation of reform policies has been marked by difficulties in improving both quality and equity.

Today, demands to improve educational equity and quality remain high. In a context of social inequality that is likely to persist, the disparities are growing between the provinces and schools within the country in relation to educational access, promotion, and attainment. Private education continues to grow; around 24% of primary students and 25% of secondary students attend private schools, according to DINIECE (2008). Meanwhile public schools—with a few exceptions—tend to be seen increasingly as the schools of the poor sectors of society.

Critical issues remain for Argentina's education system, among them implementing a national system of teacher training and increasing public investment in provinces, like Buenos Aires, that suffer from underinvestment (see CIPPEC, 2008). In addition, democratic and research-informed decision-making is crucial to the process of improving quality, a process that should begin with a broad-based and ongoing national dialogue about the aims of education and the strategies for achieving those aims.

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