



Teaching and learning for all? The quality imperative revisited[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) is the second with 'quality' in its title but the only one in the series whose title explicitly highlights teaching and learning. While GMR 2014 assesses progress towards the six EFA goals with particular reference to the quality of teachers and teaching, this paper considers progress within the methodology of the monitoring process itself. EFA indicators can attend to only a limited range of variables, and proxies are inevitable. Yet with the post-2015 EFA agenda in view it is essential to ask whether what is truly transformative in teaching and learning has been adequately captured in the EFA monitoring process, the literature on which it has drawn, and the recommendations it has produced. The paper argues for a more radical and creative approach to the defining and use of indicators and argues that despite pedagogy's pivotal role in generating educational quality, it remains the missing GMR ingredient. The problem is both conceptual and evidential, and the paper argues for a more inclusive, less top-down use of the available research in order to bring into EFA and GMR discourse evidence on teaching and learning that can really make a difference.

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Quality: now you see it ...

Like its predecessors, the 2013 – 14 Global Monitoring Report *Teaching and Learning: achieving quality for all* – hereafter GMR 2014¹ – is impressive in the scale of its evidence, the progress it documents, the warnings it issues, and the humanity of its endeavour.

Quality has been an EFA goal since the 2000 Dakar framework declared it to be 'at the heart of education' and a fundamental determinant of student enrolment, retention and achievement²; while, along with quality, learning featured a decade earlier in no fewer than three of the six Jomtien goals.³ Yet despite these early emphases, quality in the global monitoring reports, and quality in teaching and learning in particular, have since then been surprisingly elusive. In part this may have reflected a preoccupation with those EFA goals whose urgency has seemed the more

pressing because their pathology and progress are readily computed. With 57 million children still out of primary school, half of them in 32 countries suffering conflict, and only 13 out of 90 countries likely to achieve universal primary school completion by 2015, we understand why this is so. Numbers offer headlines and dramatic immediacy. 'Quality' does not.

Paradoxically, quality may also be elusive because it is ubiquitous. For instance, a consistent argument in the GMRs has been the inseparability of quality from equity, because until an education system is equitable in terms of access, enrolment, gender parity, retention and completion it can hardly be described as being of good quality, even if for some children, in some schools, the experience of learning is rewarding and high standards are achieved. We are justifiably disturbed by the finding of GMR 2014 that while the richest boys may on present trends achieve universal primary education by 2021, the poorest girls will not catch up until 2086. Quality for some is not education for all.

Indeed, quality pervades all six EFA goals.⁴ The first GMR called quality a 'composite goal' and one of the strengths of these annual reports is that though each of them has had a specific theme – gender, literacy, early childhood, governance, the marginalised,

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¹ UNESCO (2014) (hereafter GMR 2014).

² UNESCO (2000).

³ UNESCO (1990).

⁴ The EFA goals are: (1) early childhood care and education; (2) universal primary education; (3) youth and adult skills; (4) adult literacy; (5) gender parity and equity; (6) quality of education.

conflict, quality, inequality – each has begun by tracking progress towards all six goals as a reminder of the way they are intertwined and must be simultaneously pursued if EFA is to be achieved.⁵

But quality's very pervasiveness may have encouraged the view that it requires no further elucidation. So it becomes all the more important to examine how quality has been handled in the EFA monitoring process and how this 'composite' goal has been translated into working indicators and measures in the two GMRs – 2005 and 2014 – which have included quality in their titles and remits, for these, *post hoc* if not *a priori*, may reveal the definition we seek. Having uncovered that definition, and mindful of the pedagogical orientation of GMR 2014, we can then apply three tests:

- Does the account of quality in EFA attend to what in teaching and learning really matters?
- Are the classroom processes and outcomes that are truly transformative for our children adequately captured in the EFA goals, objectives and targets, the EFA monitoring indicators and measures, and the evidence on which EFA thinking and policy draw?
- If not, what are the implications for the UN's education mission after 2015, and if learning is to be a target, how should it be defined, indicated and assessed?

In addressing these questions I first return to the analysis I was invited to undertake for the UK Department for International Development (DfID) in 2007⁶ during a period when I was making annual visits to India in connection with the Government of India's ambitious EFA initiative, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and its predecessor the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). The choice of title for this paper should now be clear. In the sense that it re-engages with quality, teaching and learning, GMR 2014 revisits GMR 2005, *The Quality Imperative*⁷; and this first revisiting allows a second: a re-assessment of my earlier concerns about how quality, teaching and learning have been handled in the GMR process as a whole.

One of those concerns was the striking neglect of pedagogy despite the fact that pedagogy is at the very heart of education and without pedagogy discussion of educational quality makes little sense. Another was the gulf between the evidence on both quality and pedagogy cited in the EFA GMRs and the much larger body of evidence about these matters that appears in the research literature: one world but two discourses. To counter these tendencies I shall end my paper with an example showing how the EFA movement and its post-2015 successor could increase their effective purchase on the declared priority of advancing quality in teaching and learning if they were prepared to foster a more inclusive discourse and consult a less exclusive literature.

Input, output, proxies and process

Here, briefly summarised, are the problems I identified when I examined EFA and contingent literatures on quality published up to 2007.

First, the quest for indicators and measures of quality produced an understandable preoccupation with *input* and *output* – pupil/teacher ratio, balance of male and female teachers, balance of trained and untrained teachers, expenditure per pupil as percent of GDP, net enrolment ratio, adult literacy rate, survival rate to grade 5 – but this was at the expense of indicators of *process*. Output is in part determined by process but is not synonymous with it.

Second, when attempts were made to plug the gap, the identified process elements appeared to reflect not teaching and learning as either experienced or researched but those few random aspects of classroom life that were deemed measurable, regardless of whether they had the significance that their selection implies. Hence, for example, the foregrounding of learning time, time on task and class size.

Third, the very act of isolating such aspects validated them in the eyes of those – governments, administrators, donors – who had the money and power to make them matter, and set in train policies for embedding them ever more exclusively, whether or not this response was justified by the evidence. In this way, the monitoring distorted both what it monitored and the decisions and interventions to which it led. By way of illustration of the risky consequences of this approach we might note that in Lockheed's and Verspoor's influential 1991 World Bank cost-benefit analysis of investments for improving primary education in developing countries, pre-service teacher education and midday meals were rejected as 'blind alleys'.⁸ Today we take a very different view of the efficacy of both interventions.

Fourth, in an attempt to engage more comprehensively with process, some frameworks posited unashamedly qualitative variables such as 'high expectations', 'strong leadership', 'positive teacher attitudes', 'appropriate use of language', 'committed and motivated teachers', 'appropriate teaching and learning materials', 'meaningful assessment', 'effective management of physical assets' and the ubiquitous 'active teaching methods' and 'child-friendly environment'.⁹ But each of these modifiers – high, strong, positive, appropriate, committed, meaningful, effective, active, child-friendly – lacks objective meaning and is open to many interpretations, not just across cultures but also within them, while the overall selection is no less arbitrary notwithstanding its abundance of adjectives.

Fifth, in the absence of watertight measures, compensatory use was made of proxies. 'Survival rate to grade 5', as the proxy indicator of quality in the EFA Education Development Index (EDI), is a prominent example.¹⁰ This approach is not confined to EFA. Many governments, and certainly the world's media, treat the performance of a sample of 15 year olds in the PISA tests at a single moment in their educational journey as a valid and reliable measure of the performance of entire education systems. Some proxy.

As a not entirely flippant aside I find the use of 'survival' in this context bizarre as well as evidentially ambiguous. 'Survival' allows two very different takes, one of them suggesting that education is to be endured rather than enjoyed: (i) 'How good was your education?' 'Excellent: I survived to grade 5.' (ii) 'How good was your education?' 'Terrible: I survived to grade 5 but then could take no more and left school.'

This brings me to three overarching problems, which like the tendencies summarised above apply no less in 2014 than in 2007, when I first itemised them.

Quality: a mantra in need of definition

First, there was – and still is – a conspicuous lack of precision in the use of the keyword 'quality' itself. Though 'quality' is often used quasi-adjectivally, as in 'quality healthcare', 'quality teaching', 'quality learning' and so on, it is actually a noun. The adjectival use of 'quality', as in 'quality education', is no more than a slogan, offering limited purchase on what quality actually entails. But even when used as a noun, 'quality' is multi-faceted, for it can mean an attribute – as in 'the qualities we look for in a teacher' – or a degree

⁵ The previous GMRs, from 2002 to 2012, are listed on p (iv) of GMR 2014.

⁶ Alexander (2008a).

⁷ UNESCO (2004) (hereafter GMR 2005).

⁸ Lockheed et al. (1991), 87.

⁹ Alexander (2008a), 3–6.

¹⁰ UNESCO (2007).

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