

# Shifting the Focus From Quantity to Quality

**Education for all is not the same thing as quality education for all. Countries approaching full primary-school coverage increasingly realize that the pursuit of education for all should encompass the pursuit of excellence.**

Governments from China to Brazil are now talking about quality, a concept which covers everything from the physical condition of schools to better teacher training and from the availability of textbooks to more parental involvement. There is also increased focus on pupil's needs before and after the primary school years.

"In our rush for numbers, quality missed out," says Bangladesh's education minister, Abu Sharaf Hifzul Kader Sadique. His country has made great strides in literacy, but difficulties in quality remain. Despite its remarkable advances, China admits to the same problem: "The overall quality of school teachers leaves much to be desired," said Lu Fuyuan, deputy education minister, citing the difficulty in reaching remote areas. Bangladesh and China are not alone. Brazil, Malawi, and Mexico, along with most countries that have made major strides towards education for all, now wish to match increased access with quality.

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*Getting and keeping pupils' attention is the key to a quality learning experience. The intense concentration on the faces of these Cambodian pupils show that this is taking place.*

Today, however, in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, less than three out of four pupils reach grade 5. In terms of measuring efficiency, their school systems are wasting up to a third of their resources on repeaters and drop-outs.

The quest for better quality can be tackled in various ways. One way is by recognizing that learning begins at birth. In the past ten years there has been a steady growth of early childhood education all over the world. "The brain

development that occurs during the early years is critical to lifelong learning," says Judith Evans, a specialist in early childhood care and development. Early childhood education, research shows, results in increased mental agility, regular school attendance, less repetition and drop-out and improved academic skills. According to the World Bank, a dollar invested in early childhood education yields a higher rate of return than a dollar invested in secondary or higher education. Early childhood education is particularly effective in the poorest communities, where it informs and empowers parents too.

Poorly prepared teachers are one of the main causes of low-quality education. Having achieved 96 per cent primary school enrolment, Brazil is now concentrating efforts on improving the quality of instruction, as almost half of the country's pupils are one year behind and repeat one or more classes. A recent nationwide study showed that pupils of teachers with university-level education made much faster progress than those whose teachers lack it. Today only about half of the 1.5 million teachers in state primary schools in Brazil have a higher-education qualification.



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Paradoxically, as some countries are upgrading teacher training, others are watching as qualified, talented teachers desert the profession for better-paid work in computers or tourism; a brain drain provoked by low status and even lower salaries. "Male primary-school teachers who are heads of families are as rare as stars in the daytime," remarks Mongolian teacher Tzerendozhin Urtnasan, who describes his salary as "a pittance".

**"Pupils today must not only learn to read, write and count, they must also learn to think critically and creatively, work co-operatively with others, integrate different subjects, become skilled in the use of new technologies and learn behaviour appropriate to citizens of a civilized society."**

Errol Miller,  
Professor of Education in Jamaica.

Drop-out and repetition are the most glaring consequences of poor quality. A quarter of the 96 million pupils who entered school for the first time in 1995 are likely to abandon their schooling before grade 5. By failing to be sensitive to the needs of many ordinary and low-achieving pupils, schools cease to be truly open and accessible to all. Access, then, is where quality meets equality.

"Many countries have adopted 'standard' models of education for all which pay little or no attention to country-specific issues," remarks Vinayagum Chinapah of UNESCO. Perhaps this is why many parents do not see education as a sound investment that directly improves household welfare. This is gradually changing. The community learning centre model in Africa, Asia and other regions is a success precisely because it is rooted in community life and culture, caters to local learning needs and uses local languages. Experts agree that pupils should first learn to read in their native tongue before transferring their reading skills to a second language. From now to 2006, several African states will be introducing national languages as a medium of instruction in the first three years of schooling, a change which promises to improve quality

Many external factors influence the quality of education, not least the pupils' social status and state of health. "Quality education is not only about having good quality teachers and materials," says Sheldon Shaeffer of UNICEF. "It is also about the quality of the learners. Children need to be healthy, well-nourished and ready to learn." ■

The school environment also affects the quality of learning: when adequate, it can have a positive impact on attendance and success rates. The opposite is also true. A UNESCO/UNICEF study in fourteen least developed countries in Asia and Africa found that between 35 and 90 per cent of schools needed repairing or rebuilding. Many had no furniture or running water. Most developing countries face serious problems in producing and distributing appropriate textbooks and teaching materials, from mathematical instruments to maps.

"School systems are becoming obsolete sooner than we realize," warns Victor Ordoñez, an expert on basic education. Because education systems have been so slow to adapt to economic crises and other factors that erode quality, the question must be asked if what is taught is relevant any more. When education programmes exist out of context, without a bearing on the surrounding job market, or on the local culture, sooner or later they lose their "clients".



*Without teachers, education for all is unachievable. Yet their status, salaries and working conditions have seen little improvement in the past decade.*

