# Quality and equity in education

## Trey Menefee and Mark Bray

Although the words are in common daily use, both quality and equity may be difficult to conceptualise. This can lead to ambiguities, with different actors holding different implicit meanings and therefore working towards different objectives. This article outlines some of the possible meanings in the context of Commonwealth education.

## Conceptualising quality

The Background Paper for the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group on the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012a: p. 33) rightly noted that quality of education is a 'contested and dynamic concept'. The document added that it 'has evolved from a focus on inputs (qualification of teachers, teacher–pupil ratio, textbook–pupil ratio etc) to the teaching and learning process itself (i.e. the way inputs are used) and the results obtained (the learning outcomes)'.

One major reason for this evolution in focus has been growing awareness that the advances towards universal primary education had achieved numerical successes but, in some settings, at the expense of quality. UNESCO (2014a: p. 209) reported on assessments in 41 low- and lower-middle income countries, which found that after five or six years in primary schools about 20 million children were still not able to read all or part of a sentence. Thus, universal primary education may in some respects be a hollow achievement.

At the same time, in the Education for All (EfA) context, overall assessments must embrace the zero quality of schooling received by children who are not in school at all. In other words, the concept should not be restricted to those who are currently receiving schooling or some other organised form of education. A country having a low enrolment rate would not be considered to have a high-quality education system, even if the institutions that the enrolled children attend are of high quality.

In this respect, it is useful to recall the 'zones of vulnerability' identified by Lewin (2008: p. 48) and noted in the report for 18CCEM (Menefee and Bray, 2012: p. 19). First are children who never enrol in school, perhaps because of extreme poverty and/or because they live in areas of low population density that are not adequately served by schools. Second are children who drop out with incomplete primary schooling below the formal age of employment. Third are children who are enrolled in schools, but who do not learn sufficiently to gain basic skills or advance to the next level. Such children may be 'silently excluded' by the system and are at risk of dropping out. Fourth are children who do reach

the end of primary schooling, but who do not proceed to secondary education. The fifth and sixth zones mirror at the secondary level the second and third zones at the primary level, i.e. students who drop out with incomplete secondary education, and students who are enrolled but who do not learn sufficiently to gain the basic skills. By taking a comprehensive view of the total population, Lewin stresses that quality concerns out-of-school children as well as in-school ones.

Beyond these basic points are challenges in determining the precise ingredients and measures of quality in schooling around the world. EfA Goal 6 concerned improvement of 'all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all', but lacked quantifiable indicators and targets. Moreover, in some respects it was conceptually muddled. As noted in the background paper for the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012a: p. 13), 'it is not clear how everyone can be excellent, unless one refines "excellence" to mean "achievement of one's potential"'. The Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group perhaps had more meaningful wording in its new proposed Goal 1, which refers to 'demonstrated learning achievement consistent with national standards' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012b).

The quality of education was also the focus of the third of UNESCO's EfA Global Monitoring Reports (UNESCO, 2004). Chapter 1 began (p. 30) by noting evolution in UNESCO's conceptualisation of quality, highlighting the Faure report (Faure, 1972) and the Delors report (Delors, 1996). The latter expanded on the former with four pillars of which the last was 'learning to be'. The others were 'learning to know'; 'learning to do'; and 'learning to live together'.

This conceptualisation has received wide appreciation (see for example Tawil and Cougoureux, 2013), though in practice 'learning to know' – commonly assessed by examination scores and similar tests – has tended to be the dominant concept. The broader concepts may usefully be retained for attention in the context of the 19CCEM discussions.

## Conceptualising equity

Underpinning the concept of equity are notions of fairness. Equity is not quite the same as (mathematical) equality. In some settings equality and equity are synonymous, but in other settings the notion of fairness would require unequal allocations of qualities or quantities of education to match the needs of the persons and groups being served. Thus, for example, children with special education needs may require extra resourcing compared with other

children – and allocating to them equal amounts of resources would in practice be inequitable.

The Background Paper for the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012a: p. 32) highlighted several dimensions of equity, including socio-economic status, gender, geography, ethnicity, sexual identity and special needs. However, it added (p. 32): 'Poverty remains the over-riding factor necessitating global development goals. Therefore, equity objectives should focus on narrowing the gap in learning-outcome achievement related to household income, but should also include other disadvantaged or marginalised groups.'

Later in the document (p. 44), specific examples of policy interventions were provided:

> If children are in school, but do not understand the language the teacher is speaking, or cannot see the chalkboard because of poor eyesight, or are bullied because of their gender or ethnicity, or are frequently absent as they care for relatives, or need to work to pay for items such as their school uniform, they are effectively excluded from the opportunities open to others in the same class. This means a renewed focus on ensuring relevant and appropriate education is offered to those who are currently at risk of exclusion, including the poor; ethnic or linguistic minorities; refugees and asylum seekers; those with disabilities or special learning needs; children suffering from conflict trauma; those affected by health issues; and any other marginalised or disadvantaged community.

Particular themes mentioned in the report (p. 31) also include the expansion of supplementary private tutoring. Such tutoring is commonly called shadow education because its content mimics that of the regular system: as the curriculum changes in the regular schools, so it changes in the shadow. As noted by the report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012a: p. 31): 'such "shadow education" remains a problem, as some households still need to pay significant amounts for private tutorials'. Indeed shadow education has become a global phenomenon and is therefore relevant in low-income and middle-income Commonwealth countries as well as in rich ones (Bray, 2009).

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**TREY MENEFEE** is a lecturer in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. His work focuses on the political economy of educational development. He has worked in and researched various educational sectors and issues in the USA, China, the Philippines and Hong Kong. He has been collaborating with the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Hong Kong since 2007.

**MARK BRAY** is UNESCO chair professor in comparative education and director of CERC at the University of Hong Kong, where he has worked since 1986. Prior to this he taught in secondary schools in Kenya and Nigeria and at the Universities of Edinburgh, Papua New Guinea and London. Between 2006 and 2010 he took leave from the University of Hong Kong to hold the post of director of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris. He has written extensively in the fields of comparative education and administration and financing of education.