

## **Quality Education Imperatives for Inclusive Basic Education: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric**

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### **Abstract**

Although quality education is central to both international and national education debates and practices in most countries, there is a reluctance and lack of urgency in providing it for all. There are disparities in the policies, equity and provisioning strategies of basic education for all learners. Most South American and South Pacific countries are battling to realize the Millennium Goals regarding this matter. Some African countries are not progressing in this regard too. Those that are better off have not begun to monitor and evaluate the quality of their basic education except ensuring that teachers teach and learners attend classes. The only quality control and measurement is through examinations. This paper looks at quality in basic education for all as the controls that are within an institution of learning, the teaching and learning processes, and which entail amongst others, education for sustainability and indigenous knowledge systems. Hence, the argument that quality basic education for all should move beyond the rhetoric of educational policies to quality basic education practice.

### **Overview**

Both national and international educational issues are not only complex and problematic to resolve, but also fall short of providing informed policy guidance to transformative educational programmes regarding basic education for all. The continued neglect of the girl child in education in some parts of the world, and blatant disregard of some of the needs of disabled learners in educational environments, in spite of international conventions and agreements (Dakar Declaration 1990; Millennium Goals 1990; World Declaration on Education for All and Framework For Action 1990; Dakar Framework For Action 2005), provide startling evidence of what still needs to be done. In most education systems of the world the management, policy, provisioning, quality assurance processes, knowledge production processes, are still unprogressive, hence, the proposition of certain ways of moving forward out of this despondency.

Internationally, education for all is declared as a human right. The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (UNESCO), in its Foreword (No Date: 1) states that, “achieving the right to education for all is one of the biggest challenges of our times. The second

International Development Goal addresses this challenge: universalizing primary education in all countries by 2015. ”

This right cannot be denied to any learner, whether a child or an adult. Most countries, as signatories of international conventions and agreements, have rectified policies that put the learner at the centre of social advancement programmes (Conference on Education For All 1990; Millennium Development Goals 1990; Dakar Framework For Action 2005). However, the implementation of such commitments is of concern.

### **Defining Inherent Concepts**

In most countries basic education is seen as an alternative to the colonial education system, hence and its content and process are expected to be contextually relevant. According to Chanana (2004), Mahatma Gandhi advocated for basic education that focused on the rural poor and their needs. With a primary education curriculum that was crafts-based, vocational skills focused, and integrating life experience with classroom experience, thus emphasizing both learning by doing and the learner’s use of local knowledge. President Julius Nyerere (Akinpelu 1992: 120) also worked hard to introduce an anti-colonial education system in Tanzania. His self-reliance system was based on the notion that education must enable a person to function competently within the community. And that the provision of hegemonic knowledge types was to be done skilfully so that local knowledge is not marginalized or undermined because such knowledge carries the child’s home and community values on which the child needs to draw experiences from for learning in the classroom. Importantly, the experiences of the learner were critical in the learning settings just like those proposed by Mahatma Gandhi.

According to these scholars, the scheme of basic education is underpinned by local knowledge, which entails organic links with life and work experiences (Akinpelu 1992; Chanana 2004). Akinpelu posits that for President Nyerere, a sound education system was supposed to cultivate “equality and respect for human dignity” (Akinpelu 1992: 116). President Nyerere further advocated and emphasised the importance of a localized value system in learning that does not divorce the learners from their society, but prepares the young and old to contribute to the wealth of society. To achieve such a fit, it meant that the education system was envisaged to be broad based in type and function. It had to acknowledge the knowledge and wisdom of other older people and that of younger people. Indicated differently, all groups of people in society were also expected to participate deliberately in their education. Needless to say, all knowledge, through basic education is essential for advancement

Chanana (2004: 16-17) agrees with Nyerere but adds that basic education is also founded on rigorous principles of cognition, described as the ability to acquire knowledge through the process of reasoning, intuition or perception. As part of basic education, individuals or ‘collectives’ (groups of people

acting on a common goal) practice cognition everyday, because it encompasses not only their common life experiences, but also their practical and pragmatic needs, their aesthetic, speculative wonders and amazement of universal processes. Chanana further argues that such a basic education is neither primary, nor adult nor the typical extension of an educational system. Of note is that, basic education is practiced by and in all levels and that the inclusion of traditional knowledge in all forms of basic education is pivotal to learning and the work place.

Kabeer, Nambissan and Subrahmanian (2003: 16) see education as formal primary and non-formal schooling. They further equate primary education to basic education and universal education. This observation seems to be inadequate since it does not indicate where secondary and higher education would fall, and the equating of primary education is also inadequate. According to the Wikipedia, basic education is an essential education and it is formal education deemed necessary for somebody to function properly in society, and it is regarded as priority for developing countries. The Wikipedia also concurs with Kabeer et.al. (2003: 16), that basic education is universal education.

In this article universal education is perceived as education practiced anywhere in the world because of its universal tenets that are applicable to humanity in general. It is therefore, equated to basic education or fundamental education, and is the human right of all people. However, the perception espoused by the Wikipedia that basic education is formal education only, is seen as inadequate. The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* attest to this view that basic education is also non-formal and informal too. It goes on to say that it is made available to young children and adults, and provided through general upper secondary schools and adult centres for adult learners.

The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (UNESCO) seem also to equate basic education to primary education for all and uses these concepts interchangeably. In this study however, these terms are not used interchangeably for reasons advanced further down.

To distinguish appropriately between basic and primary education, the following clarification from the World Declaration on Education for All (2000:7) is essential:

the main delivery system for the basic education of children outside the family. Primary education must be universal, ensure that the basic learning needs of all children are satisfied, and take into account the culture, needs and opportunities of the community (*art. 5*).

This document by UNICEF concludes that primary education is the most important component of basic education and that it must be free and compulsory to all children (ibid: 7). An emphasis is placed on elements of availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, which should also be included in the planning and implementation process. Just like primary being a component of basic education, so is secondary school and higher education. Concurring to this notion the *World Declaration on Education for All* (ibid: 8) stipulates that

if higher education is to respond to the needs of students in different social and cultural settings, it must have flexible curricula and varied delivery systems, such as distance learning; in practice, therefore, both secondary and higher education have to be available in different forms.

This observation regarding the obligation of higher education, cannot be viewed and relegated to form only, but must also be seen as befitting primary and secondary schooling since these are perceived as components of basic education that elucidate the benefits to learners' needs in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

The Wikipedia points out some benefits of basic education as the reduction of: disease through the knowledge of hygiene and nutrition; unwanted pregnancies; and violence through increased understandings in non-violent ways how to solve problems and mutual understandings between groups in conflict resolution. Needless to say, these can only be actualized through deliberate curricular in fundamental education.

In this paper I concur with the views of the *World Declaration on Education for All* (ibid: 8) that fundamental education corresponds to basic education and that by virtue of article 13 (2) (d), individuals who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education have a right to fundamental education or basic education as defined in the World Declaration on Education for All. The implication of this statement is that fundamental education or basic education is not restricted to formal settings only, but can also be offered by education service providers who are not necessarily belonging to formal education institutions. These could include NGOs and CBOs. And the goals and content of basic education should include a broad-based knowledge framework that encouraged open-ended enquiry approaches, without marginalizing learners' experiences, their local knowledge and the work place knowledge. Continuous engagement of governments, civil society and labour on these issues is imperative in order to eradicate poverty and diseases.

### **Some barriers encountered by learners in basic education**

The document *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (Foreword), states that it is vitally important now for achieving the Dakar goals,

...in keeping with the commitments made by Governments for providing education for all, especially free and compulsory quality basic education. But in spite of such legal obligations and political commitments, millions of children still remain deprived of educational opportunities, many of them on account of poverty. They must have access to basic education as of right, in particular to primary education which must be free. Poverty must not be a hindrance and the claim by the poor to such education must be recognized and reinforced.

The views expounded above indicate the seriousness of the nature of barriers in achieving quality fundamental education for all. Some of the factors perceived as hindrance to quality basic education, are: equal schooling for boys and girls; undemocratic and policy-corrupt states; unfriendly environment; narrow mindedness in teaching skills; formal school curriculum marginalizing traditional ways of knowing or practices; high cost of education; and lack of appropriate learning devices.

*Equal schooling for girls and boys*

*The News Letter Beyond Access: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS*, (2005) commenting on the missed 2005 Target, “to secure equal access to schooling for girls and boys worldwide”, the new data from UNESCO shows that 94 countries had missed the target, rather than the 71 predicted in 2004. Failing to meet the target means that the girl learners will continue to face challenges in formal schooling, and probably more challenges in the other non-formal and informal settings of their fundamental education. Access to schooling is critical if poverty and health issues are to be eliminated, especially amongst the most vulnerable members of society.

*Undemocratic and policy-corrupt states*

The 94 countries that could not meet the target are claimed to have a number of undemocratic processes that hinder them to realize this millennium development GOAL. Needless to say, the education systems in some of these countries are poorly resourced and managed. *The News Letter for Beyond: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS*, (2005), further indicates that at the 2005 World Summit, leaders of countries recommitted themselves to eliminate gender inequality and imbalance and to renew efforts to improve girls' education, and to enhance resources through EFA fast-track initiative (point 44 of World Summit outcome document). The recommitment of world

leaders should be realized through their unwavering financial support to educational progress seeking justice in gender imbalances.

#### *Unfriendly environments*

Basic education ought to be inclusive to all learners. In certain countries inclusiveness is perceived as mainstreaming learners with disabilities in the different formal schools with total disregard for the needs of such learners. The classrooms are not suitable, the pathways, the toilets, etc, are actually asking these learners one question “what are you doing here? You are not welcome! Home environments either encourage or discourage advancement. So are most workplace environments.

#### *Narrow mindedness in teaching skills*

Teaching and learning as a process has evolved since the days of the colonial master in most African countries, and the implication of this evolution is that we now live in an information age. So teachers who enable their learners to make sense of this huge knowledge basis and assist them to be critical and reflexive are not only helping learners with life skills, but are also assisting them to cultivate knowledge most critical to society.

#### *Formal school curriculum marginalizing traditional ways of knowing or practices*

Chananan (2004) and Akinpelu (1992) claim that the school curriculum is very unfriendly to local ways of knowing that the learners bring into the school and classroom learning. Most school curricular view knowledge creation in perspectives that are West or Eurocentric oriented. This has even “convinced” most Africans that the learning of indigenous languages is not beneficial for development and a better quality of life for society.

#### *High cost of education*

In most countries of the world learners in primary schooling are obliged to pay school fees. The Educate to End Poverty (a Coalition of Women and Aids) made a call at the 2005 World Summit through its recommendations that the United Nations should call on rich and poor countries to oblige to certain agreements in order to achieve basic education. One of the recommendations is that rich countries should “take immediate measures to eradicate child labour; and poor countries should abolish fees for primary education in 2006, making education free and compulsory for at least 6 years and establish timetables for expanding free and compulsory education to at least 9 years” (*The News Letter Beyond Access: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS*, 2005: 2-3). Probably most schools in developing countries would argue that they survive on the very meagre school fees paid in by learners since government financial support is not enough.

*Lack of appropriate learning devises*

In most schools in developing countries modern learning technologies are a luxury. Education ministries cannot afford them since they cannot even afford to have sufficient teachers and pay them a living salary. Although school fees does impact negatively on the learning of the child, it seems in many cases it assists schools with meagre funds deemed imperative for quality teaching and learning.

**Quality Basic Education Imperatives**

The concept quality education seems to be complex and broad in its application. Education quality, in a simplistic manner, is measured in terms of standards set and expected to be achieved. If learners achieve the set standards or outcomes, then the education officers are satisfied that their programme is of a good or acceptable or exceptional quality. However, quality is not only to be attained through quantifiable set standards, but must also be excellently disposed by persons who have been capacitated through enabling programmes offered through fundamental education.

The document, *Contributing to a More Sustainable Future: Quality Education, Life Skills and Education for Sustainable Development*, describes the vision of the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as the cultivation of quality education, and that quality education means

An effective means to fight poverty, build democracies, and foster peaceful societies. Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralistic world.

If fundamental education is to be of quality, then it is expected to provide society with enabling knowledge for people to make informed decisions, to foster peace, entrench democratic values, and provide opportunities in a pluralistic world. In this paper we agree that quality education does not only embrace quality assurance processes, but it is also embedded in enabling the types of knowledge critical for people's advancement. It is for this reason that the following approaches for the provisioning of quality basic education are advanced: quality basic education and education for sustainability; indigenous ways of knowing; open-ended approaches to knowledge construction; broad and deliberative knowledge construction approaches.

*Quality basic education and education for sustainability*

What does education for sustainability entail? It is difficult to provide an acceptable description of this concept because it is embedded within development processes that prescribed how natural resources are to be utilized

for the benefit of all. The irony is that the raw materials harvested in the south are returned from the north in the form of expensive packaged goods, appropriately called 'African Colonisation' by Kenneth Kaunda, former President of Zambia (*City Press*, October 23, 2005).

A good example of education for sustainability is the Kyoto Treaty progressively culminated in a binding covenant for some countries. The Protocol also reaffirms the principle that developed countries have to pay, and supply technology to other countries (especially, developing ones) for climate-related studies and projects, over the 2008 to 2012 period (<http://unfccc.int/responce/docs/convkp/>).

Why is education for sustainability perceived as a key concept for quality education? One reason is that explicated by the document contributing to a more sustainable future: Quality Education, Life Skills and Education for Sustainable Development that explains the vision of the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as quality education, and that quality education

Quality basic education therefore is steeped in types of enabling knowledge that are needed to build peaceful, poverty free and just societies where individuals and '*collectives*' are seen as important role players.

#### *Indigenous ways of knowing*

Indigenous knowledge has been 'peripherised' for a long period by the formal education system in most countries. Chanana (2004) agrees that the formal system of education has failed to incorporate traditional knowledge into the school curriculum. Du Toit and Sguazzin (2000: 16) reiterate this view by emphasizing the need for socio-ecological contexts of schooling to understand the contexts and capabilities of learners in the teaching and learning setting. They further argue that knowledge that shapes our educational practice and our actions in the environment is socially constructed. Hence, the call not to marginalize knowledge constructed outside the boundaries of formal schooling.

Kom (2000: 2) seems to concur with the above views by contending that,

Knowing whether there exist in Africa (or anywhere in the world) not only the conditions but also, and more especially, the desire on the part of Africans themselves to create an autonomous framework for the validation and appropriation of a local body of knowledge, which could help them better

to perceive their environment and construct a context for living which is suited to their own aspirations.

These views are emphasizing that Africans must create an autonomous framework for the validation and appropriation of a local body of knowledge. The implication is that Africans themselves need to create and use their contextually based local knowledge to better their lives, without of course, relegating to oblivion the utilization of other knowledge types.

*Open-ended approaches to knowledge construction*

Learning institutions are inclined to lean towards either an open-ended or closed knowledge inquiry orientation. A closed knowledge construction system perceives the curriculum as a product, with a specified and bounded knowledge that does not allow change. On the other hand, an open-ended knowledge inquiry process perceives curriculum as an ongoing process, which is best refined and reflexively reviewed from within the process over time (Lotz 1999: 6).

The view here is that basic education curriculum ought to be deliberative. Vast experience in curriculum matters does not ensure progressive and open-ended inquiry process, but need to be strengthened with deliberate efforts of engaging participation of practitioners in the field. In many cases this might be negated by funding organisations who are mostly interested in ‘education as a commodity’ to be market driven. There are many difficult questions about curriculum development that will need to be grappled with as practitioners continue to seek better ways of approaching teaching and learning to enable all types of knowledge space in education.

*Broad and deliberative knowledge construction approaches*

Quality education should promote the production of context-based knowledge. Within teaching and learning, curriculum processes should be deliberative and engage both teachers and learners in educational matters. For example, the teaching and learning scenario in most primary schools in Southern Africa is like this: the teachers are in most cases the sole ‘bearers’ of knowledge and the learners are the ‘empty vessels’ to be filled in with knowledge. This observation is also confirmed by Akinpelu (1992). In such a setting of learning, knowledge is engaged in a narrow manner and learners are not actively engaged in creating their own understanding of what they are learning about. Innovative and active learning strategies are critical in teaching and learning if depth in knowledge creation, through participatory approaches is to be practiced.

**Moving Beyond the Rhetoric: What are the Implications?**

For basic education to be improved and become useful to society the following are suggested to those who formulate educational policies: financial commitment; realistic timelines for all initiatives; disadvantaged learners; and the role of parents.

*Financial commitment*

The global community must commit funds to assist developing nations to redress and address unjust educational practices. Learners from poverty stricken backgrounds should be the focus of fundamental education if their parents' cycle of poverty is to be 'broken'. Of note is also that the scrapping of school fees in primary and secondary schools will enable most girls to attend school, without their parents labelling them as money wasters. The attitude of teachers towards girls in the classroom needs to be transformed. They should see girls as having the needed capability to master any subject content. Adult learners also have a right to basic education. Within the limits of resources, they must be encouraged to participate in education to enhance their quality of life.

*Determining realistic timelines for all initiatives geared to eradicate social injustices in schooling.*

Most of the commitments towards the eradication of educational imbalances seem to be open-ended time frames. Governments, especially from developing nations, should be time bound to achieve the promised goals. This issue also calls for deliberate policies to fast-track so-called 'non-formal schooling learners' of which, most of the out-of-school and adult learners fall. These learners must also take full advantage of their right to basic education.

*Learners who are disadvantaged by their circumstances*

There are various community organisations providing service to disabled learners. In most instances governments support such organisations and government schools in some countries have special facilities for disabled learners. However, in many schools that mainstream learners with disabilities, there is total lack of sensitivity to the needs of such learners. Care should also be given to the various diseases manifested in different ways in schools, and that educators need to have contingency plans in place. School personnel and learners also need to be taught the benefits and disadvantages of diversity, and to learn to accept the other 'different' learners and help them to a better quality of life.

*Maximize the role of parents in the education of their children*

The role of parents in the education of their children cannot be overemphasised. When parents relegate this obligation to the state, then things start to go wrong in the education process. It is therefore imperative that

parents involve themselves more conspicuously in the education of their children.

### Concluding Comment

According to Malcolm Gillis, President of Rice University (World Bank, 2000: 15) when commenting about the priority of higher education in knowledge construction said, “today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth – or poverty – of nations depend on the quality of higher education”. The wealth – or poverty of nations depend not only on the quality of higher education, but fundamentally on the quality of its basic education. Those cutting-edge qualities of our education that define and provide the necessary life sustaining capabilities need to be continuously cultivated in learners for the benefit of humanity.

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