Improving Education Quality

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Can improving the quality of education experienced by people from poor families and communities assist in the fight against poverty and gender inequality, asks Professor Leon Tikly from the Graduate School of Education.

A research programme on Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries (EdQual) has recently been established by a consortium of institutions led by the University of Bristol. The consortium includes the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa), Bath (UK), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Cape Coast (Ghana), and the Kigali Institute of Education (Rwanda). The aim of the programme is to generate information to improve the quality of education in ways that will benefit the poorest people in the world and promote gender equity. The programme is organised around five large-scale projects in the areas of: school effectiveness; language and literacy; science and mathematics curriculum; information and communication technology (ICT) to support basic education; and education leadership and management. The consortium also aims to create a sustainable resource through supporting African partner institutions to become regional centres of excellence in one or more areas of education quality.

Good-quality education has a positive impact on enrolment and can lead to pupils staying in school longer. In addition, it helps reduce drop-out and repetition rates. Increased levels of literacy and education are also linked to greater control by women over their fertility and to a reduction in risk-taking behaviour associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. Further, improvements to education quality lead to higher cognitive achievement, which in turn is linked to higher individual productivity and economic growth. This is increasingly important in the global era because poverty reduction relies on the ability of education systems to produce the range of skills

required for successful global integration and this in turn depends on improving the quality of basic and post-basic education. The processes of learning associated with a good-quality education can also assist in achieving wider social goals such as social cohesion and conflict resolution, understanding of citizen-ship and human rights – including equal rights for women and girls – and respect for cultural diversity.

Scratch below the surface, however, and the issues become more complex. As Yusuf Sayed, an expert in this field, has pointed out, 'the concept "quality" is elusive and … frequently used but never defined'. It has multiple meanings that reflect 'different ideological, social and political values'. For these reasons, developing a conceptual understanding of education quality and its contribution to poverty reduction is a key objective. An initial review of the literature identified two broad approaches to education quality. One links quality to achieving higher learning outcomes with a more efficient use of resources, whilst the other views quality in terms of developing students' capabilities and fulfilling childrens' rights to survival, protection and development.

Increased levels of literacy are linked to a reduction in the spread of AIDS

Our view of the importance of education quality has been reinforced by the views of the policy makers and others who participated in the national consultative workshops that we held in each partner country during EdQual's recently concluded inception phase.

Communicating effectively with these different groups is critical not only to determine research priorities, but also to assist with identifying the mechanisms that will enable new initiatives to be mainstreamed. The outcomes of the workshops and literature reviews informed our ongoing research design. In particular, the quality of teaching and learning has emerged as a key research priority, as has the need to address the development needs of large numbers of under-qualified teachers. Three of our five large-scale projects, therefore, focus on aspects of teaching and learning – innovations in the maths and science curriculum, the use of ICTs, and language and literacy. These projects will all include research into forms of support for the teachers' professional development.

Other issues that were raised are the need to improve the quality of management and leadership at the local and school level at a time of decentralisation of state education systems, including the management of staff (reducing absenteeism and raising motivation), the mobilisation of resources, and the procurement of materials. Given the scope of the quality issues covered by our research programme, the need to identify key priorities and a very tight research focus within each project has become paramount, as has the need to develop our own capacity and capabilities as researchers. Chief amongst these has been the ability to effectively communicate across national and continental boundaries. Whilst remaining fully aware of the enormous challenges ahead, we are buoyed by our conviction as researchers of the absolute importance of education quality for tackling disadvantage.

The use of ICT to support basic education in Rwanda

This large-scale project aims to develop initiatives for the effective introduction and use of ICTs in disadvantaged primary schools. During the project design stage, a team of researchers visited schools in Rwanda and talked to a range of educationalists.

They found that in many cases the computers available in schools are relatively old – the majority running Windows 98. The only software available is Microsoft Office and some games. Access to the internet is often not available, sometimes because there is no electricity, and schools lack technical support for maintenance of their computers. Where computers are being used in classrooms, this is almost entirely to teach ICT skills and not to support teaching and learning across the curriculum. The same is also true for teacher training with implications for teachers' confidence and competence to use ICTs. There are often around 50 pupils in each class and all teachers observed use a traditional 'hands off', teach-from-the-front approach, even when teaching computer skills. Yet, Rwanda aims to use ICT for 'teaching purposes' by 2008.

The research team aims to develop strategies to support this policy in the core curriculum areas of science and mathematics. At the same time it hopes to promote awareness amongst parents and communities of the potential role of ICT both in children's learning and community development. A particular focus will be on designing professional development programmes for teachers.

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