
Meaning of Quality in Education: Views of Primary School Teachers in Nekemte Town

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Abstract: The primary objective of the study is to investigate the meaning of quality in primary school education from the teachers' perspectives by using qualitative case study methodology. Teachers who teach in governmental primary schools of Nekemte town were the participants of the study. Data were generated via interview and focused-group discussions from nineteen purposefully selected "information-rich" cases ranging in diversity. In all, 19 teachers were interviewed and three focused-group discussions were held. The data secured through these techniques were categorized and thematically analyzed. The findings of the study indicated that the participants' perceived quality of education in terms of input and output/outcomes.

Theoretical Background of the Study

Education is the most effective means that society possesses for confronting the challenges of the present and future. It is considered as a compulsory prerequisite for sustainable development in any country, developed or developing. Progress increasingly depends upon the product of the educated mind, research, invention, innovation and adaptation (UNESCO, 1997). It is also stated in Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (1994) as a very important factor to human development. In line with this argument Lockheed and Verspoor (1991) assert that education is a corner stone of social and economic development.

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Psacharopoulos (1985) stated that education is widely regarded as the route to economic prosperity, the key to scientific and technological advancement, the means to combat unemployment, the foundation of social equity, and the spread of political socialization and cultural vitality.

Education serves society in a variety of ways. The goal of education is to make people wiser, more knowledgeable, better informed, ethically responsible, identify harmful practice and replace them by useful ones, strengthen individuals and societies problem solving capacity, realize their full potential and participate meaningfully in society and capable of continuing to learn. According to UNESCO (1997), education serves the society by providing a critical reflection on the world especially its failing and injustice, and by promoting a greater consciousness awareness, exploring new visions and concepts and inventing new techniques and tools. It is also a means for disseminating knowledge and developing skills for bringing about desired changes in behaviors, values and life styles and for promoting public support for the continuing and fundamental changes that will be required if humanity is to alter its course.

Today, with a great understanding of the function that education has to the society and to the nation as whole, the world is striving to deliver primary education to every child. This goal has been on the international agenda since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed in 1948 that elementary education was to be made freely and compulsory available for all children in all nations. This movement was renewed by the recent Jomtien and Dakar framework for action Education for All (EFA) conferences and declarations. These declarations emphasized that to achieve EFA by 2015 would require in addition to increased participation in educations all nations “to improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all.” Accordingly, all nations, developed or developing, prioritize the delivery of universal primary education. While they do so, they also realize the importance of quality of education.

The advocates of universal primary education (UPE) contended that mass education will result in an increased supply of educated human power, accelerated economic growth, more social justice, reduced regional disparities, and improved social welfare (Chimombo, 2005). However, it is strongly believed that achievement of UPE depends on the quality of education (UNESCO, 2004). Improving quality of education is the best way to improve access to education. Adding to this argument World Bank (1997) cited in Mirza, (2003) confirm that the best way to improve access is to improve quality which would make coming to school or staying in school a more attractive option from the perspective of parents as well as children.

Good quality education will also enables people to read, write, reason, communicate and make informed and healthy choices. As the proverb goes, 'Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will eat for ever.' People who have received education cannot only fulfill their potential but also contribute to their local communities. Quality education has critical importance and is very demanding in the 21st century where countries are confronted with new economic, social, and cultural challenges in which knowledge, skills, values and attitudes will play a central role.

The EFA global monitoring report of 2006, by stressing the importance of quality noted that a child denied the right to a quality primary education is deprived not only as a child: he/she is also handicapped for life – unable to cope with situations requiring reading, writing and arithmetic – unless given access to educational opportunities latter in life as a youth or adult.

Generally speaking, education of the high quality has paramount importance to the individual, society, countries and the world as whole. It has a great significance for the economic social and cultural development. It equips an individuals with the required tools needed to deal with different tasks they perform in their lives and prepares them for the future by enhancing their capacity. Quality of education is also a key to creating, applying and spreading knowledge in this very changing world.

Although quality education is the foundation for all our future which empowers us to overcome challenges of social, cultural, economic and technological changes, there is a little agreement as what quality education itself means and indicators to be used to measure it. Quality is an elusive concept having many definitions as there are categories of stakeholders. This is mainly due to the fact that quality in education is complex and multifaceted concept embedded in political, cultural and economic context (Fredrksson, 2004; Mirza, 2003). Csizmadia, (2006) states that quality has no single, absolute, agreed or universally accepted definition though there exists a range of overlapping interpretations of it. Its definition is open to changing context, new understanding of the educational challenges (UNICEF, 2000). The difficulty of defining quality, thus, makes it impossible to obtain universal agreement on the concept rather the definition is a matter of negotiation between the different parties involved and depend on the circumstances.

In general, it seems difficult to give a definition of quality as most experts would agree on. Teachers are central to the delivery as well as quality of education (Lockheed and Verspoor 1991). Teachers understanding of the context in which education operates and various factors influencing education will enable to make education a crucial tool for solving various problems and to meet the demand of the 21st century.

Taking into consideration the roles that teachers play in teaching-learning process, this study aims at investigating teachers' perceptions of quality in primary education. To pursue this objective the study intended to deal with the question: How do teachers in primary education understand quality in education?

Delimitation of the Study

This case study is delimited to the investigation of teachers' perception of quality issues in education. The study is also delimited to government primary schools in Nekemte for the sake of in-depth analysis.

Research Method

Knowing that I can never know in the same way as I know my own thoughts and feelings, what another persons' experience is really like, I want to get as close to that knowing as possible. Having this assumption in mind, this study employed qualitative case study design, which is holistic, contextual and understanding and focusing on design and procedures to gain real, rich and deep data to have a wide understanding of the entire situation.

Sample Selection

Regarding the sample within the case, Merriam (1998) asserts that since generalization, in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research. Thus, non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative researches. Researchers should locate a group of participants rich in knowledge and experience – “purposive” or “purposeful” sampling. Therefore, I located individuals within the school based on the following attributes: commitment of time – agreed to participate in the study, academic background – data collection was limited to few individuals within the school. Hence, Natural Science, Social Science, Aesthetics and Physical Education, Language and Ethics and Basic Science academic categories were used for the selection, Experience – teachers having relatively better experience were selected to get the right, rich and deep information, gender - mixed sex, and principals' recommendation. Therefore, a total of nineteen (19) teachers teaching in Nekemte government primary schools were involved in the study.

Data Collection

In any qualitative study, the primary data collection instrument is the researcher; yet, it is also standard procedures to use multiple methods of data collection (for triangulation) to increase the trustworthiness of the data.

For this reason, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were used as methods of data generation.

Data Analysis

According to Merriem, (1988) qualitative data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning and between description and interpretation. She further explained that analysis of collected data is ongoing in qualitative research and begins with data collection simultaneously. In my data analysis I used the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview and FGD transcripts that I accumulated by reading the transcripts as well as listening to the taped sessions. Through repeated readings, I was able to find themes and patterns. Specifically, I searched for certain words, phrases or patterns that repeated themselves as I studied the transcripts. I then began to develop my own theme to put the data into categories to help me analyze and sort the data.

Result and Discussion

Teachers were asked to describe and explain quality in educational context. This was done to find out teachers own explanation of the term quality. After listening to the teachers' responses in the course of data collection for the study, I tried to learn how the teachers define the quality of education from their perspectives. The chart below shows a summary of the definition and explanation of quality as given by the teachers.

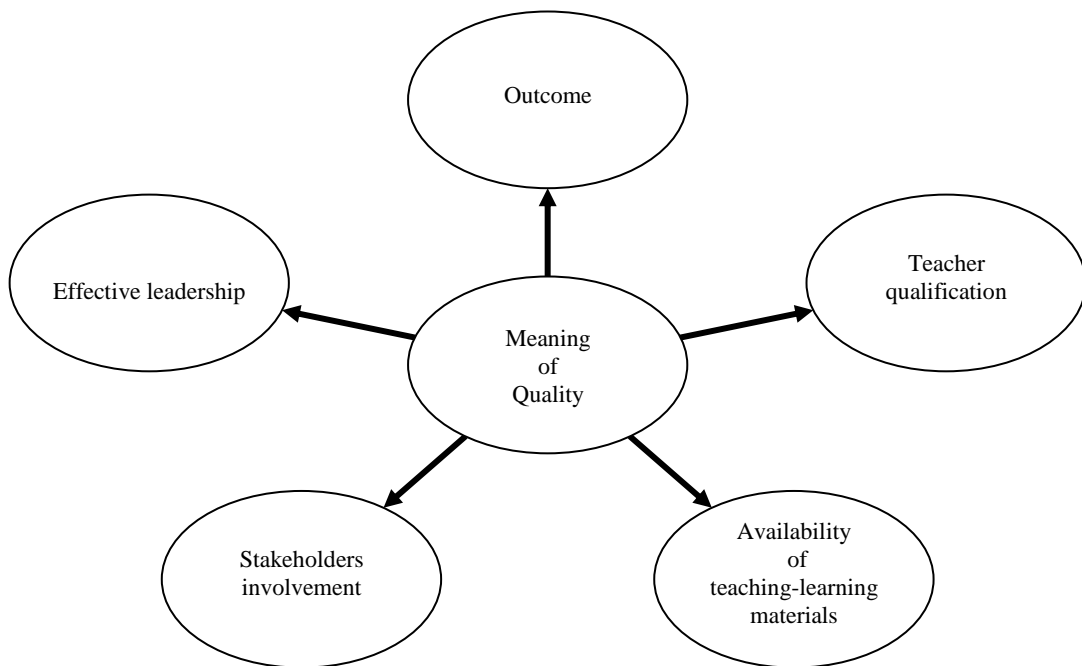


Figure 1: Meaning of Quality as Viewed by Teachers.

Quality Described in Terms of Outcomes

Through analysis of the data I found outcomes of education emerged among the description given to the quality of education. According to the participants, quality of education is an education which develops students' capacity, change their behavior and equip them with required tools to act positively. In one of such explanation, for instance, informant (I₁) view quality of education as:

...understanding plus action... when the student grasps and analyzes what he/she learns and translates it in to practice, the education he/she has got throughout his/her life... is an education which has brought a change in the students behavior and enabled him/her in turn to change his/her surrounding /environment in which he/she lives...

Another informant (I₉) in the same vein further explained quality education as an education which has the capacity to bring a change in the mind of the students, life of the students, understanding of the students and behavior of the students. These participants emphasizing outputs/outcomes in describing quality of education believe that what they taught could be clearly manifested/observed in the students. For education to be labeled qualified, as they perceive it, it should cultivate students' mind, brought up behavioral change on the students and shape them to be productive citizens.

Quality Described in Relation to Teachers' Qualification

As the response of the teachers in the study show, the other description given about the quality of education was in relation to the teacher's qualification. For instance, participants from group two FGD by giving more emphasis to the teacher explained quality of education as it is highly influenced by the teacher. Explaining their past experience, they argue that teacher is a key to quality of education since they are central to the delivery of education. Teachers can make a difference even in a situation where there are no sufficient classrooms, libraries and other required teaching-learning materials if the conditions are suitable for them and get the required training and incentives. Here is an example of excerpt reported during the FGD by the participant:

...if the teachers are well qualified, well paid, motivated, respected and got the opportunity to update his/her knowledge, get prepared pedagogically and content wise....they can make a difference in the students achievement, in their classrooms... initiated to do things with their own effort, they can develop a feeling of ownership, they can work along with national policy to bring the desired development...

In the description above, it is evident that the participants give due attention to the teachers rather than other factor influencing the quality of education. According to them, the issues of teachers are critical for the quality of education. This finding affirms what the NCTAF, (1997) states as the impact of teachers was greater than any other single factors in education system.

Quality Described in Terms of the Availability of Resources and Teaching-learning Materials

Regarding the subject at hand, other participants describe quality of education in terms of availability of resource and teaching-learning materials. They explained that it is the availability of resources and other instructional materials that lead to quality of education. For instance, one of the participants (I₁₀) explained what quality education meant to him as:

...an education system having all the resources needed to accomplish its objective... well equipped schools with facilities and teaching-learning materials from which students learn, curriculum which is relevant to the age of the learner and his/her environment ...

The above response shows that the respondents view quality of education in terms of the availability of teaching-learning materials and resources; the availability of the aforesaid things could be a key to quality.

Quality Described in Terms of Extent of Stakeholders Involvement in the Planning and Deliveries of Education

In the course of conducting hot discussion and interview with the participants, I realized that the participants view quality of education as a system having many stakeholders (teachers, students, community and government), playing their roles for the existence of quality. The participants described quality of education as a team-work among teachers, students, community and government. They also noticed that quality of education is not the responsibility of a single body. The following excerpt is from what have been raised by FGD participants:

... teachers having qualification, competence, knowledge and proper training to run teaching-learning activity effectively; students having interest to learn, well supported and nourished, good psychological makeup, well motivated; communities which will be supportive, positive attitude to education, well informed; Government genuinely supporting the education system: creating CPD opportunities for the teachers, equipping the schools with facilities and teaching-learning materials, provision of adequate budget for the school system...quality of education includes the integration of these...

The aforementioned response indicates that teachers consider quality of education as a team work of teachers, students, communities and government; each of them playing a significant role. Quality of education is a responsibility of many stake holders although the degree of their influence may vary. In fact, for the schools to exist and work towards the achievement of its mission and objectives, there must be partnership with the different stake holders in implementing the school programmes. If the learners are not willing and make no effort to learn, the communities are not supportive and the teachers are not committed to their job, we cannot talk about quality of education.

Quality Described in Terms of Effective Leadership

The other description given to the quality of education was relating quality to effective leadership. In one of such explanation one female teacher from group two FGD mentioned that good governance is a key to quality as other factors should be included in the quality of education. She uttered the following account:

...good governance in the school administration, smooth relationship between the teachers and administrators is a key to quality of education. It creates conducive or enabling environment for the teachers so that they can work in harmony with the administrators and others, motivated them (teachers) to work, to teach, make them to develop a feeling of belongingness and initiated them (teachers) to make unreserved effort, make them to do things on his/her own interest...

According to the description above, effective leadership is crucial to the quality of education. Essentially, it is believed that effective leaders provide a clear vision and sense of direction for their school. They focus the attention of their staff on what is important and do not let them diverted to unimportant activities.

Conclusion

In sum, the participants response on the subject have been by and large surfaced around the issues of outcome - students achievement, behavioral change brought on the students and the ability of the student to use what they learn in their everyday lives after they finish the program; input – qualification of the teacher, finance, teaching-learning materials and facilities. Although the idea of process (what happens in the classrooms) was equally important as input and output, the finding of the study revealed that it was given little attention by the teacher respondents. Thus, based on the finding of the study, it is concluded that teachers' conception of quality seems to be narrow; in terms of two dimensions (input and output).

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