

In search of quality

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‘We have addressed the issue of (universal) access with a fair degree of success. The problem of quality remains... it is indeed a very complex problem.’¹ Why is quality seen as a ‘problem’? Is it because we do not understand the exact implications of a composite concept – ‘quality education’? This would basically make it a conceptual issue. Or is it a case of inability to design and handle an implementing mechanism? This can be termed a functional inadequacy. The problematic character of quality education may either be attributed to obscurity at the level of understanding or to an inability to handle a strategic challenge, or both!

While the issue of quality has been worrying educational managers just as much as philosophers of education, a closer look at the above questions reveals that the problem is neither new nor unique to the educational context. It is essentially another manifestation of complexity generated by a mix of the tangible and intangible in a single concept. Similar complex concepts such as ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘health’ figure frequently in development discourse. They too present the tangible-intangible complexity very similar to that in education.

All these concepts derive their meaning from a core qualitative component. As supportive features, some tangible components also get fused in the totality. However, given the emphasis on visibility and measurability, it is the scaffolding dimension which is seen as the dominant feature of the concept, almost creating a synonymy with the totality of the concept.

Evaluation, like ‘access’ in education, captures the visible and measurable and that sets the agenda for what functionaries feel comfortable with, while the intangible, though constituting the core of the conception, acquires a problematic character.

Historically, this complexity has been addressed by many thinkers. Their deliberations can broadly be captured in two sets of approaches – the management and the analytic. These two frameworks effectively represent two ends of the spectrum. Analytic philosophers perceive the challenge at the conceptual level and focus on clearing the logical geography around the terms that figure in the discourse. They shift the inquiry to a more basic concept of ‘good’, and dig at its roots and manifestations to arrive at an understanding of related concepts like ‘excellence’, ‘quality’ and ‘improvement’.

At the other end is the management approach which finds the second set of questions as basic or worth addressing. This group deals with working out a systematic strategy to capture and control the elusive character of quality. ‘If we want quality output, we must know what it entails and what it looks like.’ Deliberations around the above two frameworks have displayed a great deal of diversity, but their verdict with respect to the problematic nature of quality has been fairly clear and in harmony.

Beginning with the latest and most familiar management approach – simplified to its basics – the first step is to dissolve all complexity at the conceptual level. Begin with a clear definition: ‘Quality is that which meets the requirement.’ Focus, therefore on identifying, listing, arranging and understanding the requirements. Two propositions follow from this axiom. First, if the requirements can be delineated with clarity then they can be met satisfactorily. Second, the more detailed the specification, the greater is the possibility of optimising quality. A rider is that all this deliberation/ action is, of course, to be conducted in a realistic framework that is clear about the constraints which need to be specifically dealt with.

From the two basic propositions listed above follows the notion of quality control which essentially is a technique of monitoring. The steps involved are fairly straight-forward. Break the intangible concept into small observable, measurable tasks which can be planned, budgeted, checklist, implemented and monitored systematically.

Take a simple example. If one is looking for a quality cup of tea, the first step should be to specify the requirement – Chinese tea? Darjeeling tea? masala tea? ...and so on. Next, break the operation in small steps, each measurable, e.g. procure clean water, ensure boiling point, ensure required tea leaves, follow instructions to the detail... milk? sugar? Equal? The expectation is that after all these details are taken care of, the tea would be to satisfaction. And if we still have customers who say, ‘Well! something is missing, it is not like the tea my mother makes,’ just remember to overlook with a smile.

Offering an analogy as argument is rarely considered acceptable in a long debate, but the above illustration provides a simple way to explain the approach which addresses quality in a framework which treats measurability as a principle key to control. Quality is not something which is a matter of intimate experience or individual perception. It can be obtained with a clear principle guiding the process – discipline of the detail.

This basic technique of breaking a complex whole into small, simple and manageable parts and converting them into doable tasks has produced outstanding results in commodity production. Wherever sameness, predictability and scale are prime concerns, this approach works. It is not only in automobile manufacture or branded consumer items but also in hotel management and cooking recipes that one finds an operational vision of the range of activities that follow this strategy.

But areas where our preoccupation is not with products but processes, where we are not looking for repetitive sameness but an exploration of new possibilities where the unusual, creative, exclusive is a value, is it possible to follow the same strategy? Does the educational agenda fall in the former or the latter frame? Or both?

Some leading education activists strongly argue that there is much in education which needs to be tackled in the framework designed by quality managers. We have to evolve techniques which can handle the learning needs of large numbers. And these techniques have to be detailed and monitored effectively in order to give results.

An outstanding success story can be seen in the Pratham Read India programme. They have firmly and squarely adopted a limited agenda and chalked out systematic steps to give results. Can a similar strategy be followed in basic mathematics? The outcomes have yet to be evaluated but the acknowledgement of a possible approach cannot be denied. The questions that remain are: Does learning to read make a person a ‘learner’? Can the issue of quality in education be handled by merely extending this approach or does it need making many more choices besides this basic ground preparation?

Before deriving final conclusions, let us examine what the philosophers have to say in this context. Their starting point is an examination of the concept of ‘good’. The approach is to take the issue as it is identified in common language and analyse its intent. For the common person, the issue is to ensure the qualitative dimension by giving it the label ‘good’.

This, in simple terms, means ‘to-satisfaction’ or what has ‘high quality’. This adjective ‘good’ is used in various contexts – good food, good friend, good house, good employee... good education also falls in this series. Analysing the range where this term is used in a meaningful way, all that emerges is that good is a unique adjective which does not denote anything by itself in terms of content. It gets qualified by the noun it relates to. It would be the concept of a friend which would give meaning to the term good-friend. The concept of house would give meaning to our usage of good-house. And our concept of food would tell us whether a specific serving can be labeled good food. Hence, by itself good only stands for meeting the standard set by the noun it qualifies. Following this line of argument, the concept of education would define what good education is.

But what is ‘education’? And here the complexity deepens. There are two possible routes to understanding education as a concept. It can either be understood by its current usage or by what people feel it ‘ought to be’. Both these approaches reveal a good deal of diversity and unresolved differences.

The ‘usage’ route reveals that ‘education’, linguistically, is an inflated word. It encompasses a range of meanings, stretching from anything that happens to ‘enhance the wisdom’ of a person, to only the formalised training which is received in an institution. We find a purely descriptive, value-neutral usage in statements like ‘funds have to be allocated for primary education’ just as often we have heavy, value-loaded usage as in ‘nothing can succeed (democracy) unless people are educated’, or ‘education is the answer to health problems.’ There is seldom a conscious spelling out of the links between ‘education’, ‘information’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ though some implicit relationship or overlap is often assumed. If education is seen as an instrumental value for equipping a person for a ‘better life’ then our confusion about what constitutes a better life reflects upon the preliminary discourse on educational issues in a significant manner.

What education ‘ought’ to be doing has possibly elicited an even greater range of diversity. Policy in India ostensibly declares investments in education as a means for a

larger goal, i.e., ‘good of the people’ – more specifically the marginalised groups.² In contrast to government policy, which envisages education as the means of empowerment of deprived groups, i.e. primarily as a social good, the lay person perceives education as something which ought to give power at an individual level. Most parents feel that education, by providing access to the mainstream service system, ought to enhance upward social and economic mobility. The need to receive education for most people rests on the possible capacity to secure a job or earn a ‘good living’.

For many development interventionists, education is a means of upgrading the productivity of the people and a necessary component of economic improvement. They resist the tall claims of the educationist for changing attitudes, preferring more modest terms like ‘extension’ and ‘training’ to education. It is the acquisition of ‘skills’ which is expected to bring about a change in the lives of people. This understanding of the role of education is generally woven into all development schemes.

What, then, can inform policy as well as people about the core ‘intent’ of education around which quality issues can be made more comprehensible? This issue becomes crucial in view of the fact that educational discourse has finally been placed in the framework of Rights. Not only should the planners have a clear logic for the choices that are made in educational management, but these choices have to be articulated in a manner which are lucid enough so that people understand and support them.

Given the above backdrop, we may have to start afresh and approach the question of quality education, working backwards, from a basic consensus on who we can call an educated person. This seems to be a less trodden path and therefore simpler.

Two distinct features surface here – one, which gives it a cognitive dimension and the other which is derived from what ‘rights’ are all about. First, the educated person despite belonging to diverse contexts must be able to move with growing ease in the world of knowledge.

With the information explosion and fast changing texture of society, the expectation from education has shifted from creating a well-informed person to one who has the basic tools and skills for accessing and absorbing a growing body of knowledge. This is the cognitive dimension of education. It is self-evident that a person who is incompetent to access knowledge at any basic level is not educated. This also eliminates rote-learning from educational expectations.

Second, it is also clear that a truly educated person should have the discretion and habit of using the knowledge within a framework of justice. This is the value dimension of education. The legitimacy for accepting this as a core assumption rests on the understanding that education is stationed within the framework of rights, which acquires legitimacy from a larger framework of justice. If educational processes are not promoting and strengthening a just social order, then education should not be placed as a fundamental right.

If the above position is rationally justifiable, the notion of quality education becomes clearer. Quality education is a process of initiating and strengthening the two strands of cognitive enterprise within a framework of justice. This process needs to be carried on steadily and harmoniously in school, at home, at work, and throughout the life situation.

Footnotes:

1. District Education Officer, Rajasthan.
2. The National Policy for Education 1986 stated that ‘The national education system will play a positive, interventionist role... It will foster the development of new values through re-designed curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering.’