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EFA and the Quality Debate: Perspective from India's National Curriculum Framework, 2005

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EFA and the Quality Debate

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Using the term 'quality' in the context of education evokes a natural reluctance, yet the temptation to distinguish two institutions, even systems, in terms of the quality of what they offer, is equally strong. Neither the reluctance nor the temptation is particularly difficult to explain. The reluctance one feels when speaking of quality in education has to do with the fear that we might trivialise the concept of education or injure its core if we subject it to the kinds of checks that are applied to judge quality in material objects like cars or in services like the ones provided by the tourism industry. We hesitate to let education be judged by so-called quality standards because we associate education per se with a certain quality or character. Can education devoid of quality be called education at all, we rightly ask, and by asking such a question, realise that there is a characteristic experience involved in an educative process which is essential and therefore non-negotiable.

It is only when we might be forced to describe this characteristic aspect of an educational experience that we notice the first stirrings of the temptation to use the word 'quality' to distinguish minimum from maximum or intermediary levels of the presence of the characteristic experience in the education offered by an institution or system. We feel tempted to say that the quality of institution 'A' or a course it offers is better than the same course when it is offered at institution 'B' because one or more characteristic features of education is relatively stronger in 'A'.

This brief introductory analysis should suffice to indicate why the quality debate persists. However, its historical character should be made equally apparent before we proceed. The dominance of quality as a concern in contemporary debates has to do with conditions posed by international discourses of educational policy and their reflection in national systems of education. Both within countries, and between countries, the imperative to compare progress both in terms of access and quality has grown as a consequence of greater geographical spread of markets of goods and labour than colonization could make possible. Within national systems, universalisation of access, at least up to the primary stage, has meant that education cannot be regarded as a privilege as it once was, hence the argument that access to education of comparable quality for all, is what universalisation really means.

Between or across national systems, the demand for quality along with universal access has acted as a moral stick wielded by donor agencies, but its real power comes from the need to regulate the flow of dependable labour, expertise and knowledge in the globalised economy. Whether the knowledge economy is a reality or merely an ideology, the manner in which its analysts refer to quality in education does imply considerable diminution of the concept of education. Far from showing concern for any core aspects of education, the current usage of quality focuses on the relatively more instrumentalist features of education. Whereas one might expect quality to refer to a comprehensive or holistic view of education, quality in contemporary debates sticks to the limited view of learning that became coterminous with behaviourist research and pedagogy — something that can be planned, predicted and accurately measured when it has occurred.

The predominance of quality as a global concern today cannot be delinked from this historical stagnation of the concept of learning prevailing in policy or systemic discourses. Finally, the dimension of haste which is so apparent in discussions

of globalisation, hinting at the threat that delayed respondents to suggested remedies will be left behind, has also influenced the contemporary discourse of quality in education. Setting of dates by when the so-called developing countries must reach certain goals is a part of this phenomenon. The perception that quality receives attention after access has been achieved is a part of this discourse.

We can now appreciate an ironical element in the current quality debate. On one hand, the concern for quality in education is an expression of the moral imperative of equality and justice; and on the other hand, it assists the management of universalisation by separating access from substance. On account of this irony, the debate has failed to retain the idea of quality as a characteristic of education, as opposed to something that adds value to it.

One consequence of this failure is that a minimalist programme of education looks a valid step towards universalisation. In many countries, including India, the programme is so minimalist that it offers little more than access to a building called the school. Under the haste-oriented ethos of globalisation, this kind of minimalism invites the creation of islands of excellence where the nation's competitive edge can be nurtured while the larger system prepares for transition from mere access to infusion of an ingredient called quality. This argument proposes a basic tension or contradiction between equality and quality, suggesting that as a systemic goal equality can only nurture quantity while quality would require regulation of equality. The three become an 'elusive triangle' as JP Naik had chosen to call it in his analysis of a national policy dilemma.

Revisiting the concept of quality as a characteristic and therefore inseparable feature of education helps us recognize why the triangle is actually illusory, implying that its elusiveness is historically constructed by poor conceptualization

of policy choices. Since comparison is essential to the concept of quality, the chances of any national system's capacity to compete with others depend on its ability to identify its own best products in an fair and open manner. Talent selected from the widest possible pool of human diversity, in all its forms, will be predictably better, in terms of its competitive quality, than the talent selected from a narrower pool.

The opposite also deserves articulation, namely that if talent is drawn from a narrow pool, the drawing process will become reproductive, making the competitive quality of the talent drawn weaker in every round of selection. Hence, it is correct to conclude that equality is an aspect of quality, not contradictory to it. On the basis of this conclusion we can say that national systems which are fair and open to all entrants will compete better in a globalised set-up because the children selected in such systems for successive stages of retention and greater 'quantity' of educational experience will themselves be the best survivors, i.e. those capable of lasting longest in the largest possible universe of contest.

India's new National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) recommends major systemic reforms to make equality an basic aspect of the pursuit of quality. The essential diagnosis used in this document is that the present system is unfair *because* it is rigid. Curricular strategies to make the system flexible and responsive to the diversity of local and regional contexts are suggested as a means to enhance retention in elementary grades. The NCF and the syllabi and textbooks based on it redefine subject matter in each of the major curricular areas with a view to enhance the pedagogic space available to children from rural and marginalised backgrounds for participating in classroom transaction and shaping it. Evaluation methods which would enable the system to recognize the child's construction of knowledge and diverse

forms of success are recommended. Flexibility in subject choices and contributions in the senior secondary grades, bridging academic and vocational streams, and radical changes in the public examination system are among the measures suggested to increase the rate of success and transition to higher education.

The NCF perspective on knowledge and pedagogy are derived from debates on child rights and innovative programmes which emphasize the teacher's agency. Several experiments in the non-government sphere show that relevance, as an aspect of quality, is a function of inclusiveness. The state system needs to learn from such experiments and de-bureaucratise itself by forming institutional links with innovators. In the context of teacher training, programmes such as Delhi University's Bachelor of Elementary Education have established the importance of a strong intellectual training, especially in analytical and self-awareness skills, enable teachers to transcend their own socialisation. Only reflective teachers can practice critical pedagogy required to enable the system to reverse the reproduction of failure in downtrodden settings and to curb discriminatory cultural and pedagogic practices affecting girls. The NCF's response to the quality debate, thus, attempts to restore a humanist focus in educational policy.