

Quality Education in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Quality education (QE) is the key to a successful youth population which is able to make right decisions in regards to their day to day lives. This essay proposes that quality education is needed to unleash the infinite potential of humanity. The notion of QE needs to be understood by stakeholders in the education arena in order for it to be successfully implemented. This essay focuses on only four major aspects of QE, which the author deems most necessary in the context of Fiji. The four aspects are the learning environment, the learner, the educator and the projected curriculum. These four major aspects when connected and harmoniously blended together provide the essence of a successful QE.

Introduction

Quality education (QE) should be seen in a broad sense that it should be able to take on a holistic approach to teaching. When defining quality education the terms efficiency, effectiveness, and equity have often been used synonymously (Adams, 1993). The framework of quality should take on a concentric approach, emitting from the Centre outwards. The whole Centre needs to revolve around having an optimistic learning environment, optimistic and futuristic learners and educators, and a quality curriculum which provides avenues for QE to take place. According to *Education for All: Global Monitoring Report 2005 - The Quality Imperative*, two principles characterize most attempts to define quality in education: the first identifies learners' cognitive development as the major explicit objective of all education systems. The second emphasizes education's role in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and in nurturing creative and emotional development. What, then, is quality

education?

Woolfolk (1998) defined learning as encompassing a range of theoretical approaches where in the broadest sense, learning occurs when experience causes a relatively permanent change in an individual's knowledge or behaviour (as cited in Kelly, 2002). Atkinson et al. (1993) described learning as 'a relatively permanent change in behaviour that results from practice'. Simon (1996) points out that the purpose of learning has recently shifted from being able to recall information (surface learning) to being able to find and use it (deep learning). Thus it is evident that quality education relates to change.

This brief paper will focus on four main aspects of quality education - the learning environment, the learner, the educator and the projected curriculum. Fijian educational system consists of three levels - primary, secondary and higher education. The following educational values have formed the national curriculum of the Fiji Islands. During the implementation of the National curriculum framework (2007) these values were addressed:

- Civic Pride
- Compassion Creativity
- Cultural understanding, empathy and tolerance
- Environmental sustainability
- Faith
- Flexibility
- Honesty, fairness and respect for truth and justice
- Human rights, human dignity and responsibility
- Integrity Lifelong learning Peace and prosperity
- Safety and security for all citizens (especially the child)
- Sense of family and community.

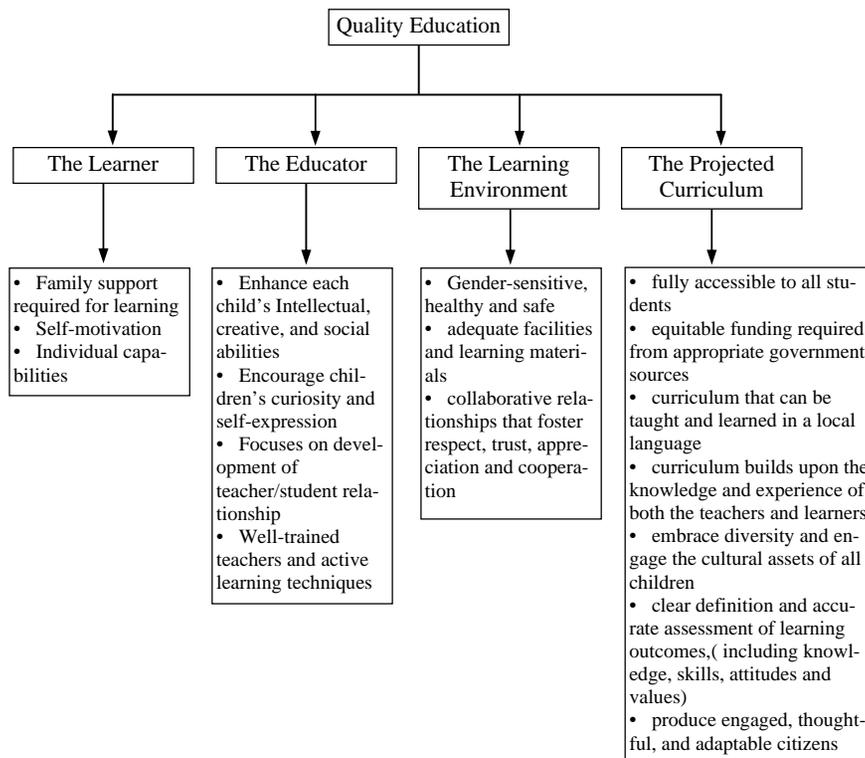
Quality education is needed to unleash the infinite potential of humanity. QE requires a number of factors as reflected in the Figure 1.

The Learning Environment (LE)

Creating a conducive educational environment is as important as what is taught and shared (Kwa, 2007). It is true that every child comes from a different background with different experiences and values which will result in differentiated perceptions of ideas in a classroom. Learners need to feel welcomed in the learning environment. Govender (1997) proposes that the learning environment (which is inclusive of some of the

following – lecture halls, individual study areas, libraries, instructional materials, support services and options available) must not simply permit learning to occur in the educational institution; the learning environment has to be conducive to the child. The chalkboard, for example, is not only a relic from the past, but even today holds importance in the primary classroom as a key contributor towards teaching and learning. The teacher needs to create a 'belonging zone' for the learners to benefit fully. The classroom climate should be ideal for learners to want to learn.

Figure 1: Framework for Quality Education



A quality LE will be set up with different corners such as library corner, toy/brick corner, nature corner, creative corner and many more. This requires planning and reflection from the Ministry of Education,

school stakeholders and educators as to the design of the classrooms for optimum learning to take place. Learners, therefore, need to be provided with a rich environment that appeals to their different learning styles with ease. A learning style is a student's way of countering to and using stimuli in the context of learning (Clark 2004).

In addition to that, learners need to feel comfortable in the LE. An environment that supports QE would encourage a space in the classroom where students feel they belong to that particular environment and that the classroom is not merely a punishment arena where the child sees separation from the home environment. Adelman & Taylor (1997) state that an improved classroom climate would promote wellbeing and address barriers to teaching and learning. Adequate facilities and learning materials also are an aspect of the learning environment to which attention needs to be paid.

A quality learning environment would contain colourful and attractive learning materials such as charts, models and other resources to better teach content information. For optimal understanding, abstract teaching needs to be substituted by concrete teaching with students being able to visualise the concept being taught with concrete materials.

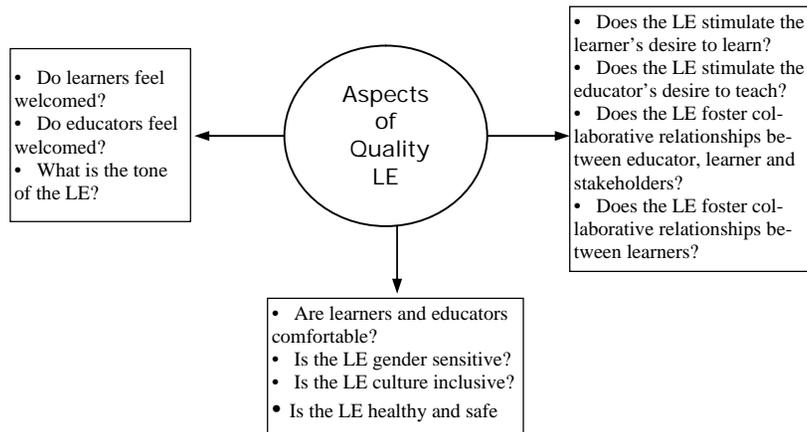
Moreover, the learning environment needs to be gender-sensitive, and healthy and safe for all learners. A gender sensitive environment would enable parity for all genders and encourage participation from all learners regardless of their gender. Learners need to feel at home in the learning environment without fear of victimization by peers or the educator.

A QE classroom should focus on developing the child holistically and encourage collaborative relationships that foster respect, trust, appreciation and cooperation within the class environment, with the teacher including the parents. Figure 2 illustrates this.

The learner has a role to play in the journey towards attaining QE. In fact, the learner is often seen as an individual who needs to be driven by the educator or the school's system in order to be able to successfully attain education. However, a learner needs to be prepared to learn, the mindset of a learner needs to be properly moulded from the home environment and clear directions laid by the parents/guardians towards pursuit of education. The first factor enabling a learner to obtain QE is self-motivation. The notion of the learner being driven either by the teacher or the school system is replaced by self-driven learning. A change in attitude of the learner then becomes a turning point in the attainment of the goal of QE. There needs to be collaboration between the learner, the teacher and the educator in how and what the learner needs to learn at particular

stages. No two learners would either learn at the same pace or perform at the same pace. Therefore individual learners need to be able to understand their self-strengths and be able to draw from this strength for optimum performance in the academic realm.

Figure 2: Aspects of a Quality Learning Environment



The Learner

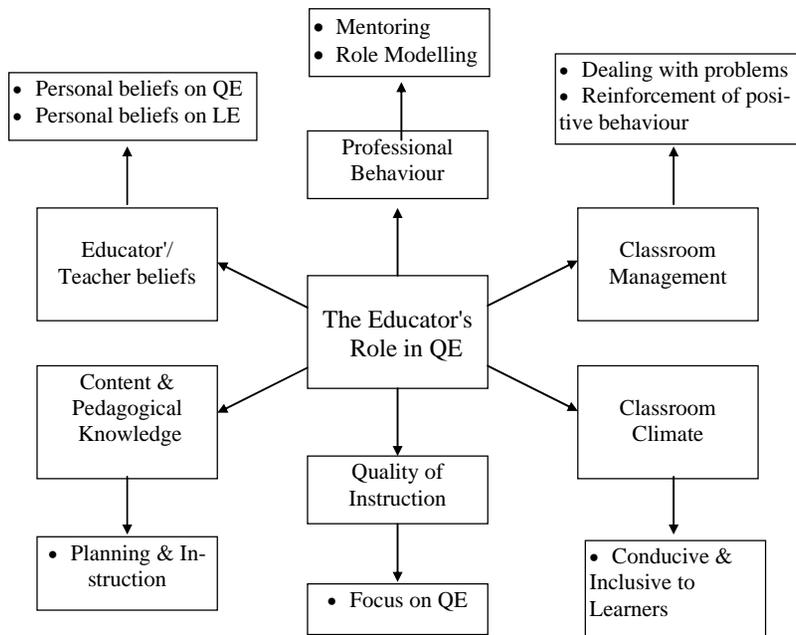
In addition to self-motivation, a learner needs family support in the journey towards QE. Family support in terms of a conducive home environment to study, relevant resources, and emotional support/guidance which can be improvised as per need and situation. In one study, children whose parents had primary school education or less were more than three times as likely to have low test scores or grade repetition than children whose parents had at least some secondary schooling (Willms, 2000). Parental education not only influences parent-child interactions related to learning, but also affects parents' income and need for help in the home or field — help that often comes at the expense of keeping children in school (Carron & Chau, 1996). However, it would not be plausible to reflect on parental education in order to improve a child's education. Even less educated parents can and should show responsibility towards their child's education. Parental concern and interest in the learner's learning will create a learner infused atmosphere for successful implementation of QE. Therefore, the home environment becomes an important factor contributing towards QE.

The Educator

The educator/teacher is the key to QE. The educator's role involves more than simply standing in front of a classroom and preaching. The classroom educator plays a vital role in the lives of learners under his/her care, by setting the tone in the classroom through appropriate mentorship and etiquette development. An educator with QE as his/her focus wears various hats to ensure all students receive quality education. Quality teaching is a pre-requisite for quality education. Brookfield (1985) argues that the role of teachers is to 'facilitate' the acquisition of knowledge, not 'transmit' it'. The Fiji national curriculum framework (2007) recommends that the goal of education shift from an emphasis on comprehensive coverage of subject matter to helping students develop their own intellectual tools and learning strategies. The highest quality teachers, those most capable of helping their students learn, have deep mastery of both their subject matter and pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Well-trained teachers who are able to employ active learning techniques incorporating experiential learning and content knowledge in the classroom become vital in the pursuit of QE. Educators then take a very profound role in the uplifting of quality as they are the key players in the field. As Figure 3 indicates, the educator's main position description should revolve around:

- teaching knowledge—planning , instruction
- creating classroom environment
- mentoring-role modeling, other professional duties

Achieving quality education means quality teaching with a quality mindset. The educator needs to be self – motivated and a futuristic thinker with appropriate training and active learning techniques. A lethargic educator results in lethargic learners, resulting in a lack of quality teaching and quality learning. Teaching styles in many places, however, remain traditional, teacher-centered and fairly rigid or even authoritarian (Carron & Chau, 1996). This eventually imposes that a school system needs quality teachers. Quality teachers are needed who not only aim to develop cognitive as well as affective domains. A quality teacher is needed for QE to enhance each child's intellectual, creative, and social abilities. An educator needs to be a critical thinker and continuously self-reflect in order to improve. In addition to that, a quality teacher needs to limit the use of adaptive technology and develop classroom activities with relevant resources and experiential learning, thereby developing good teacher-student relationship which is essential to quality learning. This would enhance and encourage children's curiosity and self-expression.

Figure 3: The Educator's Role in Quality Education

The Projected Curriculum

Children have a right to quality education. Justification of teaching and learning is not made through academic outcomes only. It should see the outcomes in value sense. Quality content is, thus, necessary. National goals for education, and outcome statements that translate those goals into measurable objectives should provide the starting point for the development and implementation of curriculum (UNICEF, 2000). If the whole idea of education is to result in behaviour change in learners, then a shift in focus from academic holistic to value implanted approach is mandatory. The society doesn't necessarily need a community with excellent brain functionality and no value for the environment, culture or the immediate society. Where is the quality then? Despite academic enhancement being an important aspect of learning, affective and aesthetic enhancement should not be overlooked or ignored in the process of education. This should form the foundation of quality curriculum. If our education system is unable to implement value-laden curriculum then the out-

put of education will be disastrous and away from the notion of QE.

Formal education was introduced in Fiji about 170 years ago by Christian missionaries. Schools that were built and the curriculum that was developed was to assist the missionaries in spreading the gospel and promoting a Christian way of life. A comprehensive review of the Fiji education system was done in 1999. The Fiji Commission Education Report (2000) outlined a set of proposed directions for education in Fiji. The Report proposed agendas for change and reform in order to make the education system in Fiji more dynamic, vibrant, transformative and innovative to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Education for All Report, 2015). Quality education would fail in its pursuit if the affective aspect of a child is not fully developed. Quality education is not limited to classroom activities and performance only but offers a wide range of life-long experiences related to it.

A quality curriculum needs to encourage and enhance a broad range of human relationships and values. It also needs to explore opportunities to combine mind and emotion, cognition and sensory experience, and analysis and intuition towards understanding something as a whole. All learning domains will be thus developed and encouraged. Anderson et al. (2001) pointed out that there are four categories of knowledge within the cognitive domain, each requiring different kinds of learning; these are: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive. Factual knowledge consists of isolated and discrete content elements. Conceptual knowledge is more complex and organized, including such things as knowledge of classifications, categories, principles, theories, models, and structures. Knowledge of 'how to do something such as techniques, methods and skills is termed procedural knowledge. Metacognitive knowledge is 'knowledge about cognition and awareness of and knowledge about one's own cognition'.

Through participatory activities and reflections, students would develop their affective and emotive capacities, thereby allowing them to deeply engage with and experience educational projects while also making connections to their personal lived experiences, the outside world, and beyond. Education has to be holistic in its true sense. All domains of development should be correctly addressed then only we can achieve a quality education. Gone should be the days where cognition development dominated the curriculum. The heart, the head and the hands matter because if these areas are not appropriately addressed in the curriculum, quality will deteriorate. Education facilities that are inclusive and gender sensitive and provide safe, effective learning environments for all learners are needed.

Blended curriculum could be utilized to cater for diverse learning styles, for example, inclusion of technology and social media in the classroom with acceptable policies and clear directions on social media learning. Our curriculum and school systems are fighting endless battles with technology. It is time that this battle be turned around to the advantage of the curriculum and school system. Appropriate guidelines can give learning a facelift and eliminate the tug of war situation between teachers and technology, especially social media. Resources need to be selected for optimum learner attention to be captured. If learners can access videos on YouTube and learn certain concepts, then the curriculum and the educator need to take a turn and incorporate such resources to enhance learning.

Concluding Comments

Education should be fundamentally beneficial to learners, educators, stakeholders and the general community. Quality education, therefore, aims at quality life. Without quality life, people could emotionally perish. Fiji needs to keep up with its image of *Fiji the way the world should be*. Basic etiquette development should be prioritized in quality list. In simple terms education means a change in behaviour. If we get educated but exhibit no change in behaviour, simply what have we achieved? Therefore, to achieve quality education especially in the case of Fiji, a change in the mindset of the relevant stakeholders is required. 21st century learning should create opportunities for learners to become critical thinkers and be able to use critical thinking skills in their everyday life. Learners need to be challenged with the role of being active creators of knowledge, including utilizing technology. Previously educators were used to be told what to teach, and how to teach it. They were expected to and also used the same methods for all learners. The role of the educator has changed significantly over the years. Therefore, educators need a change in their mindset, encourage learners how to use their knowledge and integrate it into their lives so as to become valuable members of society.

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