

## EMPOWERMENT AND QUALITY IN LEARNING PROCESSES

Since the nineties' Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG 2) have put formal education on the agenda of governments, international organisations and donor agencies. Lots of efforts and means have been mobilised to ensure equal access for all to foremost primary education, but to secondary education as well. Large and impressive improvements on access have been achieved, including access for girls.

But we also need to admit that the successful access-story has its serious drawbacks: in Uganda for instance, previously one of the so called "donor darlings", enrolments have risen to even 94.5 %, but retention and completion rates are far from satisfactory, since drop-out in primary is as high as 48 %. Moreover, at the level of P6 many children cannot read, write and calculate properly (59 % on English, 54 % on numeracy). The same applies to many other countries throughout the world. We can hardly call this a successful development. Some even call it the collapse of the education system. Unfortunately and in many cases, high enrolments and easy measurable quick results appeared to be more important than effectiveness (read: quality), resulting into overcrowded classrooms and ill-prepared underpaid demotivated teachers.

Besides, the focus on formal education by EFA and MDG 2 was at the expense of participatory non-formal (adult) education, being very well developed and effectively implemented in many countries (being also suitable for teaching and learning of children and youth), foremost by NGO's. Since EFA and MDG 2 participatory non-formal education, despite its proven effectiveness and cost-efficiency, is almost completely ignored and forgotten, and the still existing vast body of knowledge regarding effective non-formal methodologies is at risk of getting lost soon.

Another but interlinked problem is the demographic fact that the world has never before seen such large numbers of children and youth, foremost in the Middle-East, Africa, the Caribbean and South and Southeast Asia: today, 1.5 billion people are ages 12–24 worldwide, 1.3 billion of them in developing countries, the most ever in history (World Development Report, 2014). Many of them reaching adulthood without being properly prepared for today's challenges and opportunities, due to a low quality and therefore irrelevant education. But they have already looked through the window of opportunities offered by today's world, via modern media. Of course they would like to join that world, to take part and to express their talents, to seek for a meaningful life, but they lack the minimal competences necessary and feel excluded. Frustration and anger could very well be the negative effects, with its devastating fall-out on societies: undesirable behaviour, including various types of violence and abuse.

The launch, in September 2015, of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's: 2016 - 2030) could provide for a highly necessary turning point. SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, proposes the establishment of quality education for obtaining and enhancing the necessary competences for access to employment, for youth and adults. It also includes a focus on early childhood development, being a determining factor for successful learning. The private sector is explicitly invited to take its share in implementing quality education, since it is obviously in their interest too to educate competent employees and to avoid unrest in society. We must however resist the existing temptation to aim for easily measurable and quick results, at the expense of improving the quality, and prepare ourselves for long-term commitments: a school is not just a building... The urgent question now is: what do we mean by quality education and how could we measure it?

## Metaphor: education is a coconut



- The hard shell represents the conditions for (quality) education: infrastructure (buildings, classrooms), furniture and equipment, curriculums, tests and exams, teaching aids, budgets, support structures, etc.
- The soft inner and nourishing part represents the core element of education: the teacher – learner interaction in classrooms: the so-called “Primary Process” in education.

Quality learning or education implies that the learners achieve the competences to become citizens who contribute to their society and who effectively enter the world of work, for earning a decent living for themselves and for those who are depending on them. Competences contain three elements: knowledge, skills and attitudes:

- Most knowledge is subject related;
- Most skills and attitudes are also subject overarching;
- These subject overarching skills and attitudes include the following: safe cooperation, communication and leadership skills, being pro-active, being able to take initiative, critical self-reflection, accountability and responsibility, being flexible, being able to overcome challenges, etc.

## Direct Instruction and Inquiry Based education

For teaching subject related skills and knowledge *Direct Instruction* (DI) is proven to be the best teaching and learning approach. DI teaches by explicit instruction by teachers who are experts on the subject at stake. DI relies on a systematic curriculum design delivered by implementation of a prescribed behavioral script. It includes tutorials, laboratory classes, recitation, seminars, workshops, practical and / or internships.

But for the subject overarching skills and attitudes, or cross cutting issues, so called “Twenty-first century life skills” or “Entrepreneurial skills” are more effective. This *Inquiry Based* (IB) approach of teaching and learning is rooted in validated constructivist approaches. Constructivist teaching and learning takes the mental framework and the context of the learner as its starting point: the already existing views and ideas, experiences, norms and values, opportunities and hindrances, etc. Then the learner is challenged in a safe and conducive environment to expand his / her views to a next level of development, step by step, to reflect on the achievements, and then to improve him or herself further. Teaching and learning is highly interactive and participatory, with workshops, discussions, role plays, etc., taking real life situations as starting point. The curriculum is not fully pre-described, but a comprehensive set of flexible modules guides the teacher. This is *empowerment*: people acquire the competences to take control over their own lives and resources<sup>1</sup>.

When it comes to testing and examination (assessments) of the outcomes of teaching and learning, a more *summative* assessment with perhaps some formative elements is recommended for DI, while a more *formative* assessment with perhaps some summative elements is advisable for IB. Summative

---

<sup>1</sup> Rood, Rogier A. van 't (1996/7).

assessments evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against a standard or benchmark, like exams. Formative assessments monitor the student learning by providing ongoing feedback, helping students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work, and where students are still struggling and addressing problems immediately. Examples are portfolio's, presentations of products manufactured / created, interviews and observations.

The same applies to nonformal adult education. Mere (functional) literacy courses are proven to be ineffective, since neo-literates easily lose the capacity of reading and writing if they do not exercise these on a daily basis, being the case in many disadvantaged environments. Participatory approaches on the other hand are far more effective and sustainable. These approaches focus on achieving awareness and competences on the context related issues that matter to the learner (see Paulo Freire). In such approaches acquiring literacy is not a goal in itself but just one of the means for achieving the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for active and fruitful participation in society.

Many employers throughout the world complain that many young job seekers lack necessary basic skills and foremost attitudes, and they are therefore rather reserved and hesitated hiring them. This is due to the fact that traditional teacher centred approaches merely focus on the acquisition of knowledge. Testing is foremost on knowledge, often neglecting necessary skills and attitudes. It is even worse: because of rigid testing practices teachers being trained in constructivist teaching feel enforced to fall back on inefficient rote learning, because of the requirements of these tests and exams. As a result, many young people are excluded from the world of work.

Inquiry Based (constructivist, participatory) teaching and learning on its turn, comprehensively focuses on the acquisition of relevant subject overarching skills and attitudes, and related to the context of the learner, next to subject knowledge and skills by Direct Instruction. This is quality education, since education experts and scientist generally consider the interaction between teacher and learner (the "Primary Process") on all aspects of teaching and learning (knowledge, skills and attitudes), as the determining factor for the quality of education, for its effectiveness and (potential) impact.

## **Towards an indicator for education quality and empowerment**

Quality education enhances the acquisition of empowerment. Empowered people take control over their own lives and resources<sup>2</sup>. In other words: they are able to organise themselves effectively for facing challenges and solving problems. This problem solving capacity is the indicator, embedded in constructivism, for quality education. It includes the following sequential elements<sup>3</sup>:

- Identification and analysis of a problem / challenge
- Settling of a problem solving goal
- Development of a problem solving strategy
- Mobilisation of resources (human, physical)
- Implementation of the strategy
- Reflection on the achievements (self-evaluation), for developing further improvements and next steps.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rood, Rogier A. van 't (1996/7).

<sup>3</sup> Rood, Rogier A. van 't (1999/2010/2015).

## EMPOWERMENT INDICATOR

General goal of this qualitative outcome indicator is to assess effectiveness and (potential) impact of the educational intervention at stake.

Theme Description and Implementation	Output and Indicators	Measuring indicators	Evidence
<p>People (learners / students, teachers, staff) acquire “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” / an entrepreneurial attitude: respectful cooperation, communication and leadership skills, being pro-active, being able to take initiative, critical self-reflection, accountability and responsibility, being flexible, being able to overcome challenges, etc.</p>	<p>People take control over their learning processes, by effectively organising themselves for solving challenges / assigned problems.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identification and analysis of a challenge / problem;</li> <li>2. Settling of a problem solving goal;</li> <li>3. Development of a problem solving strategy;</li> <li>4. Mobilisation of resources (human, physical);</li> <li>5. Implementation of the strategy;</li> <li>6. Reflection on the achievements (self-evaluation) for further improvements and next steps.</li> </ol>	<p>Portfolio's, presentations, interviews and observations (for learners / students)</p> <p>Performance assessments (for teachers, staff).</p>

This quality indicator and its elements can be implemented for formative testing at all levels and types of education, and for every age, but each time geared towards the relevant social, cultural and economic context at stake, also taking the developmental stage of the learner into account.

Validation instruments will be (a combination of) portfolio's, presentations, interviews and observations.