



## Editorial

While the concept of ‘quality education’ has been widely debated, there is by no means a universal definition in the literature (e.g. Harvey and Williams 2010; Mishra 2007; Tam 2001). Different approaches and conceptualisations reveal the context-based nature of quality as a value judgement. In the education field in particular, its vagueness is further compounded by the difficulty in measuring education performance: learning outcomes are reflected in transformations of individuals in terms of their knowledge, characteristics and behaviour (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis, and Fitsilis 2010), and these outcomes are defined and understood in ways that are highly contextualised (Tikly 2011; Walker 2006). The critical role of context in the construction of quality education is a central theme in this special issue.

In the quality education literature, approaches such as the human capital approach (with a focus on economic gains), the human rights approach (with a focus on education as a basic entitlement for learners) and social justice approaches (with a focus on giving voice to the marginalised and emphasising the agency and capabilities of learners and teachers) have provided varied lenses through which to explore ‘quality education’. While they have all received criticism for failing to address fully some of the socio-political complexities obtaining in some educational contexts (see for example Freeland 2013; Tikly 2016; and Thondhlana and Madziva 2017) they have however influenced the development of frameworks that help us understand the factors that may impact quality education in particular contexts. For example, the human capital approach is the basis of input-output models commonly used in education policy texts such as the Global Monitoring Report (2005), and has been found to have the most powerful influence on education in the Commonwealth Caribbean countries (see Jennings-Craig 2017). The human rights and social justice approaches have influenced the development of, for example, Tikly’s framework for understanding education quality for disadvantaged populations in some contexts in Africa (Tikly 2011, 2016).

In the same vein the 2016 BAICE conference brought together scholars and practitioners to discuss the different and fluid understandings of what quality education is, how to define it and how to measure it. The articles in this Special Issue were all presented at the conference and represent the wide variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, as well as local and national case studies, illustrating potential meanings and understandings of quality education in diverse contexts. Illustrating the diversity of both theoretical and locally defined understanding of quality education is at the heart of this issue of *Compare*.

Mindful of the tension between a language of quality as being ‘fit for purpose’ and, hence, implicitly deeply context-specific, and global practices that are frequently constructed around decontextualised ‘best practices’, a comparativist perspective seeks to ask questions regarding the forms and patterns of distribution of knowledge production and consumption involved in decisions about education quality. Whose knowledge counts, and whose doesn’t, are crucial to this special issue. These are widely discussed issues of the comparative education literature, of course, but they are too rarely applied to the educational quality debate as has been done in this issue. Moreover, the composition of this special issue also acts as a counter-argument to the tendency to concentrate thinking about quality at certain points of the education system. As contributions make clear, notions of quality are being constructed in global discourses, policies

and practices, at national and institutional levels, and at the level of individual and communal interactions in the classroom and beyond. At all levels, the contributions in this special issue point to the need to link quality to values and purposes, which are always subject to contestation, rather than conceiving of it in technical terms related to the efficient delivery of apparently neutral and incontrovertible outcomes.

This special issue begins with an article by Kenneth King, which looks at challenges of translating the four targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) into measurable indicators of education. In doing so King critically traces and reviews the history of global education goals and targets setting from 1990 to 2015, examining historical approaches to goals and targets and also exploring the accompanying indicators in the SDG process. He observes that the 11 indicators he explores vary in terms of levels of operationalisation with the indicators being ranked as tier I, 'conceptually clear' and having an established methodology with country data being regularly made available; tier II, with established methodology but country data not regularly made available; and tier III, with no established methodology. He also observes that while there are suggestions that quality learning is a target interest of SDG 4, the global indicators do not reinforce such a focus. He concludes that a lot of work needs to be done to enable countries to utilise the indicators and argues that it may still be possible to revisit them, in particular at regional and national levels.

The second paper by Zellynne Jennings-Craig examines interventions aimed at improving learning quality in three Commonwealth Caribbean countries. Although her research is grounded in the experience of education policy and practice in these countries, it speaks to wider challenges of aligning quality and equity and ensuring quality education for all. Drawing on available documents and existing research and the relevant literature, she explores and highlights the challenges of teacher training as a crucial link between quality, learner-centred education in discourse and in practice while also reporting relative successes of the investigated interventions across the three countries. She observes that additional change drivers such as pay incentives to motivate teachers to transform their preferences and behaviours may enhance the levels of success of existing interventions. There are, however, other considerations that could stand in the way such as teachers' associations' lack of support of performance-based pay. She concludes that quality learning intersects with complex social, cultural and political issues.

The next three papers explore tensions between global norms and values in education and epistemological traditions rooted in local contexts. Novelli looks at links between the spread of Western education norms and the wider neo-colonial landscapes, at home and abroad. He explores the education-security nexus at home and abroad by looking at the education for 'countering violent extremism' approach and its implications for quality education in the UK and elsewhere. He concludes that rather than combating radicalisation, the approach has the potential to cause mistrust resulting in increased tensions and conflict. Oyarzun et al.'s paper similarly explores the imposition of dominant education paradigms through a case study of education policy and indigenous communities in Latin America. Using theoretical lenses of redistribution and recognition, the authors assess policies relating to indigenous populations in higher education in order to understand the impact of educational interventions for social justice. Their analysis reveals dilemmas and tensions resulting from some programmes and systems appearing to reinforce misrecognition of indigenous populations.

The contribution from Crossley et al. also offers an alternative to dominant approaches in education and development research through a blending of Pacific and Western research traditions. This paper looks at the perspectives of Fijian teachers on quality learning and teaching, and highlights tensions between international education goals and assessment regimes and student-centred pedagogies and policies.

The following two papers pick up on the theme of learning assessment and the challenges of measuring quality learning outcomes in a way that can be both locally rooted and internationally

comparable. Courtney's article examines tensions between local and global understanding of learning and teaching quality and offers a strong critique of performance-based learning assessment. Drawing on teachers' voices her work shows how contextual analyses can facilitate the determination of appropriate programmes for both national and international contexts. The study reveals the impact of globalisation and knowledge economy on perceptions of quality education focusing on measurable outcomes.

Padmini and Moore's article is based on data from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam which uses longitudinal data to explore the conceptualisation of learning quality focusing on measures for English and Mathematics at the primary and secondary levels across the three diverse contexts. This work highlights in particular the challenges of assessing learning in relation to 'soft' or 'twenty-first century' skills increasingly deemed to be important outcomes of secondary education.

The next two papers both take the experience of children, families and communities as their starting point in an effort to understand what quality learning looks like in specific contexts. The paper by Ramos-Arellano offers findings from an ethnographic study of Chilean parents' perspectives on education. Her work underscores that education is not necessarily a tool for social mobility, as many parents struggle to meet the time and resource demands required to support quality learning outcomes. The contribution from Madziva and Thondhlana looks at the lived educational experiences of Syrian refugees settled in the UK and explores what quality education means for them. Drawing on work by Leon Tikly, the authors illustrate how interactions among the wider education context, the school and the home/community serve to construct a notion of what quality education looks like for marginalised populations. They further develop this model through a case study of the Syrian refugee population in the UK, and find that the role of language is particularly crucial in defining quality learning outcomes for this particular group.

The final paper is a think piece from Angeline Barrett that asks what is meant by quality and relevance in the context of secondary science education in Sub Saharan Africa. It starts from an analysis of sustainable work and explores how the science curriculum could better link to the paid and unpaid work young people will move into after school. Drawing on indigenous knowledge perspectives, the article highlights the role secondary education can and does play in sustainable development.

Taken together these articles offer important and critical contributions on the tensions and undercurrents of quality education. What all these papers have in common is that they share a critical view of 'quality of education' as a universal or definable concept. Each paper, on some level, speaks to the tensions between global/standardised and local/contextualised understandings of what education looks like. Several papers raise questions about the extent to which our understanding of quality, based on pedagogical and assessment methods, imposes a Western hegemonic view of education. This understanding of 'quality' serves to reinforce hegemonic views; and such a view typically proposes a single understanding of quality that it considers to be universally applicable. The notion of quality, based on Western pedagogical methods, becomes the dominant ideology, while education is assessed and measured worldwide in a standard fashion, often without considering the local factors.

The local and national case studies presented in the Special Issue all serve to underscore tensions in the role education is presumed to play – and therefore what qualities 'quality education' should have – for individuals and their broader communities. Taken together, the contributions in this issue move us beyond just a recognition that there is no singular understanding of quality education. From different angles and contexts, each article helps us see the contested terrain of learning and teaching, planning and pedagogy. Each shows us how certain policies and practices that aim at improving the quality of learning can also serve to reinforce existing patterns of inequality and dominance between countries or between groups within a country. Through each contribution we see how hegemonic education paradigms can be manifested differently

in different contexts: at local levels, the significance of contextual factors, and particularly of indigenous knowledge and practices, can be devalued and ignored. At the national level, ruling class views predominate or, if we look at the post-colonial countries, the education systems of these countries continue to be shaped by their colonial experiences. The article by Jennings-Craig, for example, highlights how education policies and discourse can unwittingly work to maintain existing hierarchies and power structures. At the global level, we see international measures of education quality that are rooted in the pedagogical traditions of western elite education and spread through international organisations and institutions. By exploring how education quality is defined – and re-defined – at all these levels and in contexts across the globe, this Special Issue offers unique insight into a debate that must remain located in the theoretical concerns of comparative education whilst always subject to the drive to excise from it questions of knowledge, power and cultures.

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