

Global Campaign for Education

Briefing paper on key priority areas informed by the Strategic Plan 2023-2027

Relevant Education

1. Background

Education relevance is often confused with education quality, although they are not synonymous or interchangeable.

The concept of and the attention paid to education quality has changed over time: at first it was mostly related to an increase in school enrollment, a reflection of the universalization and democratization of education, then later it was generally focused on the fight against inequality and inequity, and at present, the dominant visions imposed are, on one hand, a labor-market driven understanding which associates quality with excellence, and on the other hand, the utilitarian focus of education and its colonizing, patriarchal and exclusive impact, which responds to the interests of socially dominant groups. The predominant focus at different times in history does not mean that the obstacles have subsequently been resolved, but rather that preferential attention has been given to a greater extent to certain aspects of educational quality. The truth, however, is that school enrollment, the universalization of education and equity, continue to be the object of historical struggles, accompanied by growing mobilization and activism around decolonising curricula, anti-racist education, climate change education, among others, which together construct meanings of relevance of education today.

This notion of quality illustrates the degree to which ideas originating in economics and business administration gain a foothold in educational discourses, displacing them. In accordance with this dominant vision, the control and assessment of education quality are proposed as universally applicable mechanisms, although they are rarely adopted through global consensus and are carried out by international agencies whose legitimacy is not always clear. These agencies periodically carry out evaluations that seek to promote an analysis across nations, using comparisons as input for decision making, in contexts in which corporations or their foundations have a privileged role in designing education policies. At the same time, each country develops their own evaluative practices, which in some cases replicate these international strategies, and in others generate autonomous initiatives¹.

The emphasis on standardized assessments as a mechanism to define and measure education quality has directed all attention to learning outcomes (object) and not to the needs and rights of the people involved in educational processes.

¹ Muñoz, Vernor, Arteaga, Teresa, Méndez, Marco Vinicio. An innovative approach to education quality for the post-2015 Agenda. UNESCO-OREALC, 2016.

Because of the above, education quality is also an increasingly frequent referent in the definition of public policies and of course in the measurements of learning outcomes. Nevertheless, education quality continues to be a disputed term and is not unanimously accepted by academia or among the right to education activists.

Although relevance and quality are highlighted in SDG4 targets and arguably there is now a lot more attention to relevance, which is also why the tensions around it need to be looked at and addressed by the GCE.

The case of education relevance is certainly complex, due to its limited development from human rights perspectives.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)², for example, made a tangential reference to relevant education when included the notion in one of the interrelated and essential features that education should exhibit: acceptability.

Specifically, the CESCR states: "...the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality) ...". According to this, relevance is an integrating element of acceptability, just as good educational quality is. The CESCR does not clarify the meaning of relevance, however.

The Committee of the Rights of the Child (CRC), in the other hand, analyses the aims of education as stated in article 29 of the Convention on the rights of the child, concluding that; "...the curriculum must be of direct relevance to the child's social, cultural, environmental and economic context and to his or her present and future needs and take full account of the child's evolving capacities", so teaching methods should be tailored to the different needs of different children³.

In this context, CRC suggests that education must also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learned by every child and that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life.

If we accept that etymologically the noun "relevance" denotes the *importance and significance to the matter at hand*, it is easy to understand its difference with respect to the concept of quality and its transcendence to achieve the aims of education.

A relevant education is one that is essential for people to develop their personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential in a their own community⁴.

² Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. General Comment No. 13 (Twenty-first session, 1999). The right to education (article 13 of the Covenant) E/C.12/1999/10 8 December 1999.

³ Committee of the Rights of the Child. General Comment No.1. Article 29 (1): The aims of education. CRC/GC/2001/1, 17 April 2001.

⁴ Cf. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 2, section 2), Convention Against Discrimination in Education (Art. 5, section 1a), International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 13), Convention on the

Making education relevant to the student's own experience is a vital part of transformative education and has increased participation in the classroom and prevented students from dropping out (, 2007)⁵.

The relative success or failure of education systems in building relevance cannot be reduced to the measurement of learning outcomes or to the hypothetical idea of excellence disconnected from cultures, social values or scientific and technological advances that are usually the privilege of a few.

2. The GCE Strategic Plan (2023-2027)

The GCE Strategic Plan (2023-2027) acknowledges that worldwide, education institutions are failing to provide learners with relevant education that responds to their needs and enables their personal and professional growth while helping to build socially just and sustainable societies.

We intend to advance our advocacy and research actions, calling on states and the international community, the expansion and sensitivity of education systems to provide free and open, easily accessible, contextually relevant curriculum and support high-quality digital education for learners, teachers, parents, and communities.

GCE supports mother tongue education, as well as intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, which includes language learning, knowledge, and appreciation of cultures other than the students, as well as respect for religious diversity or agnosticism, and the recovery of ancestral positive values. These demands are in no way incompatible with the obligation of states to provide technological resources and digital opportunities, crucial to leave no one behind when increasing connectivity and access to technology to help close education divides.

3. Critical challenges

It is necessary to counteract the reductionist visions of education, which focus on training people as consumers and not as rights holders. GCE understands that education is a learner-centered complex and multidimensional process, while it is a collective and participatory experience, which aspires to build a human rights-based society and citizenship model.

This aspiration also requires overcoming colonialist curriculum, in which local epistemologies, ancestral or not, are questioned or denied, and maintain a hierarchical, exclusive, and discriminatory system on which models of state, society and education have been conceived and imposed.

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Art. 10) the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Art. 29), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (art. 24).

⁵Cammarota cited by Sanne Müller and Anne-Sophie Bang-Manniche. Gender Transformative Education: How Transformative Education Contributes to Creating Gender Equality. Transformative education. Meanings and Policy Implication. GCE, Johannesburg, 2021. p. 64

States and communities should also pay attention to all educational components, sectors, dimensions, levels, and modalities, understanding that these are interconnected so neglecting one of them will tend to have repercussions in the others.

Attention to education financing should not exempt states from preparing adequate textbooks or fostering gender perspectives in their programs. In the same way, ensuring physical and economic access to marginalized groups, cannot be achieved if culturally meaningful and technologically modern curricula is not implemented.

The indivisibility of the right to education with respect to other human rights also operates among the essential features that education should exhibit availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability.

To achieve effective advocacy, it is convenient for GCE to consider the synchrony of these elements, without this meaning refusing to establish strategic priorities. An example of this systematic approach might be challenging social gender norms and promoting mental and physical well-being when drafting education sector plans⁶.

4. Way forward

GCE must strive to develop critical thinking around the contents of education and pedagogical work, which of course includes teacher and student participation, as well as the broader community. Advancing in the external aspects of the right to education, traditionally linked to the availability of resources and access, is important but insufficient to ensure this human right in a comprehensive way.

Furthermore, the lack of education relevance is an exclusion factor since education should be based on and respond to people's cultural and linguistic environments.

Human rights perspectives allow this comprehensive approach and informs the curricular development in a significant way, combating the patriarchal, standardizing, and exclusive parameters that are widespread practice in textbooks and in the syllabus.

Given that neither EdTech nor digital learning are exempt from instrumental ideological contamination, it is essential for GCE to question the merely mercantilist models of these platforms, so that they are enriched with people's cultural heritage and creativity. All teaching and learning platforms should guarantee academic freedom, so that relevant, horizontal, transformative, and non-epistemologically extractivist pedagogies are ensured and protected.

⁶Sanne Müller and Anne-Sophie Bang-Manniche, op cit, p.62