

Quality Assurance in School Education

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ABSTRACT

The concern of any parent today is to make their children realize their dreams in life. The race for a good education starts the day the child enters in the school. With the economy becoming global year after year and parents attaching more importance to quality education, the competition to secure a seat in the best schools has become even more severe. Schools, therefore, should allow early acquisition of life skills within a complex learning environment. To be successful, teaching and learning – and the learning environment in the school – must be coherent. This requires a capacity-building process, which permeates the whole school life and aims to achieve a wide range of governance including knowledge, skills, values and dispositions. Large numbers of researchers have viewed school quality in terms of the learning outcomes of students exhibited in form of cognitive achievement, which has been identified as the major explicit objective of all schools. Hence, it is the students' cognitive achievement that is most often taken as an indicator of school quality. The NPE 1986 envisaged that teaching staff would be responsible for academic standards and providing academic leadership to ensure better performances by schools. School authorities, therefore, must adopt a proper quality assurance mechanism, monitor quality continuously with respect to different identified indicators and initiates appropriate actions to achieve the goals. Such an approach will help the management and the teachers to become aware of their responsibilities with regard to establishing quality in their management and teaching functions.

Keywords: Quality, Accountability, Autonomy, Empowerment, Self-evaluation

The mission of a public education system is to offer the best possible education to all the young people whom it serves. Because some fundamental human values are unchanging, there are aspects of school life and learning that remain from generation to generation. On the other hand, the world into which young people are growing up is in a constant state of flux. Therefore, aspects of school culture and classroom practice must be change in response to merging challenges.

It falls on each generation of teachers and educators to carry this task forward – preserving the good of the past, while evolving to meet the challenge of the new. This is a hard enough task for an individual school or teacher; and is a real challenge for a school system. Yet good and effective school systems are what the public pays for, and what young people have a right to expect. Good and effective public education systems are part of what politicians are elected to deliver, and they must organize to bring it about.

All over the world, however, this task – the task of creating and implementing effective policies for educational development – has proved exceptionally difficult to achieve. Whole ranges of approaches – curriculum development, the continuing professional development of teachers, the empowering school-led self-improvement – have been implemented. Until recently, the task of achieving real improvement across school systems has, however, proved both elusive and expensive. Since the early 1990s, a coherent approach to educational development has evolved combining all of these elements together with new forms of empowerment and accountability. It offers more than a methodology or description of good practice. It is a dynamic process, with its own underpinning concepts and theories, roles and responsibilities, activities and interactions and has come to be known as ‘quality assurance’. It has been shown to add value to policy implementation and is proving effective in enhancing school and classroom practice. From the point of view of democratic governance, it is proving effective as a way to bridge the gap between policy and practice. From the point of view of schools and teachers, it is a practical way of offering the quality of guidance and support that are needed to achieve real improvement in the education offered to young people. From the point of the young people themselves, it appears to be successful in achieving a better, more relevant education – and improving standards of achievement in priority areas.

Characteristics of Quality Assurance System in School

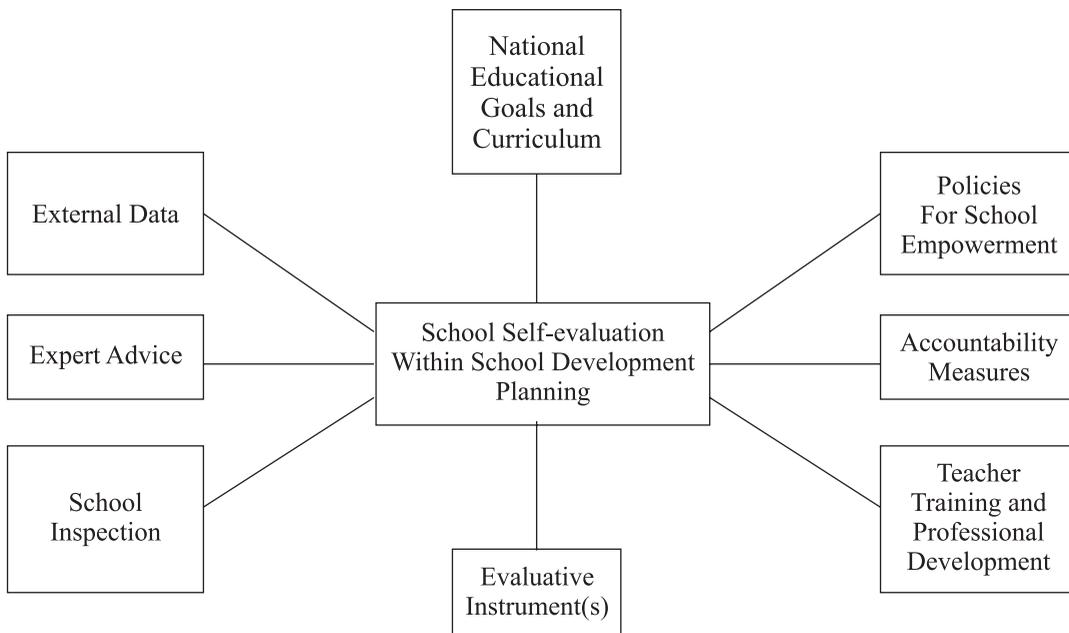
A quality assurance system means not only that these elements are present and functioning efficiently, but that they are coherent and interrelated. A quality assurance system:

- Makes arrangements in which the school becomes the key agency for ensuring the quality of provision and progressive development towards its own goals.
- Empowers schools in making decisions that carry forward its own development planning, and supports them in their course of action.
- Produces, together with schools, clear statements of national educational goals and of national curricula in a form that addresses the question: ‘What is quality?’ and stimulates the development of course planning and evaluation strategies that are powerful in generating new insights and ideas.
- Develops simple, easy to use, evaluative tools, including indicators, and supports their effective implementation. These tools can be used as part of a self-evaluation process to answer the

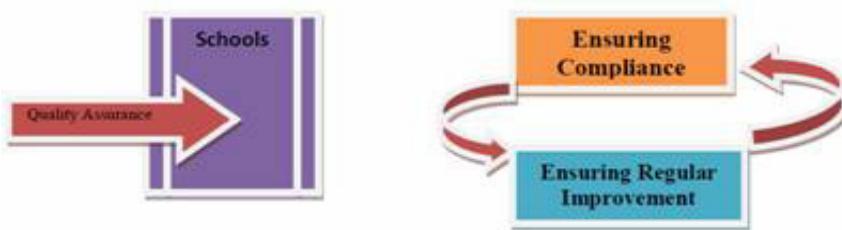
question: ‘How well are we doing?’ to inform development planning providing practical answers to the question: ‘What should we do to improve?’

- Provides assessment strategies that help schools to meet national standards and to benchmark themselves on an international basis, using external national examination/assessment/certification agencies that carry the confidence of both the public and the profession. These arrangements provide schools with reliable and valid measures of key indicators of quality in the system.
- Creates or reforms a national agency with responsibilities for developing and implementing a national quality assurance system. Importantly, this national agency is empowered to act as an independent monitor of performance at school, local and national levels. Its judgments on quality of performance provide an important national standard of reference, and vital source of feedback to the system at all levels.
- Finally, and crucially, creates effective processes of accountability (usually, but not always,) designed to provide the quality assurance system with its own internal dynamic in pursuit of continuous improvement.

The important characteristic of quality assurance as a system is that its elements which are shown pictorially are interrelated and influence one another.



A good quality assurance system in school education:



(Source: www.ajku.edu.pk/qec/QEC-Workshops)

- Makes explicit the purpose and nature of educational provision.
- Have clear educational goals and the relevant curriculum.
- Responsibility for ensuring quality in the school system remains with the main actors in the system – the schools and teachers themselves.
- Helps to create a sense of accountability for the day-to-day work of schools and classrooms and a shared commitment to high standard.

Need for Quality Assurance in School

The need for quality assurance in schools cannot be overemphasized in order to ensure quality of teaching and learning. However, the following are may be the major needs of quality assurance in our education system:

1. To serve as indispensable component of quality control strategy in education.
2. To ensure and maintain high standard of education at all levels.
3. To assist in monitoring and supervision of education.
4. To determine the quality of the teacher input.
5. To determine the number of classrooms needed based on the average class size to ensure quality control of education.
6. To determine the level of adequacy of the facilities available for quality control.
7. To ensure how the financial resources available could be prudently and judiciously utilized.

Processes /Strategies for Quality Assurance

Quality assurance consists of a variety of processes. The starting point of quality assurance is defining quality. It means spelling out what we understand by ‘quality’ derived from what is most valued and

important in education and objectives that one aims to achieve. Quality assurance includes devolving responsibility, decentralizing responsibility of decision-making at school level. It implies, on the one hand, involving stakeholders in a process of change, while at the same time being accountable for the impact and success of those changes. Therefore, empowerment and autonomy of schools imply a reciprocal accountability of stakeholders in schools and in the education system. In order to facilitate that relationship, there has to be a policy framework that supports schools in their development, and outlines respective roles and responsibilities. Its key ingredients are:

- In-service teacher education - ongoing advanced training
- School inspections
- External assessment of knowledge
- Pedagogical leadership by the school head
- Self-evaluation

A successful qualitative process begins with an organizational environment that fosters quality, followed by an understanding of the principles of quality, and then an effect to engage employees in the necessary activities to implement quality. When these things are done well, the organization typically satisfies its customers, and obtains the competitive advantage. Ultimately, school self-evaluation and development planning correspond to a continuous cycle of improvement. They are not a mechanistic nor a linear process, but an ongoing way of reflection and improvement of the day-to-day practice of school and classroom. The elements that can be adopted and reinforced by a certain strategy for school improvement and effectiveness are as follows:

- Clear and shared vision of what students are to achieve in the particular school.
- A means of translating this vision into a strategic development plan for the school.
- Ownership of the vision and development plan by all stake holders in the school community who is responsible, for what, and by when.
- Identification of the professional development requirements for staff to implement the schools development program.
- Structures and processes for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the strategies for school development, with provision for feedback to the implementation process itself.
- A periodic review and evaluation of achievements, one which takes stock of plans for further development in the school.

Difficulties in Implementing Effective Quality Assurance System

There are certain reasons why effective quality assurance systems are apparently difficult to implement. One reported reason is the difference of interests and conceptions of quality between stakeholders. Another problem identified is the ‘implementation gap’ and finally the external ownership of quality assurance systems which often leads to compliance instead of improvement.

(i) Different interests and conceptions of quality between diverse stakeholders

There is some difference between the government and the institutions in their approach to quality assurance. Government has a more summative approach, while the approach of the institutions tends to be more formative. Government is interested both in accountability and improvement. It aims at demonstrating to the society it makes justifiable decision on educational policy (such as allocation of funding or termination of academic programmes). On the other hand, the schools’ main objective is quality improvement. Their concerns are whether it is possible to offer high quality education within the conditions set by the government and to convince the public that the quality of their educational provision is the best possible. This difference in the conception of quality can make the successful implementation of quality assurance systems more difficult.

In the case of self-assessment there are several factors that can create difficulties in the implementation. Within school, there is likely to be dissent on the nature of the curriculum and how it should be delivered. When self-assessment is carried out without taking into account dissenting values, members of the school will take part in the process with varying degrees of enthusiasm or not at all. There is also unlikely to be group ownership of the final report or allegiance to the values adopted within it. Moreover, there are political pressures, such as reputation, “that can and do have a profound effect on whether the self-assessment findings are accepted by individual members and, if accepted, how, when and whether they will be implemented. These also reflect different degrees of commitment of the academic staff concerned with implementing suggested changes” (De Vries, 1997).

(ii) The ‘implementation gap’

Newton (2001) highlights the importance of the ‘implementation gap’: defined as the difference between planned outcomes of policy, or preferred definitions, and the outcomes of the implementation process. How policy is received and decoded by academic staff seems to be of particular importance. The success of a quality assurance system may be dependent less on the rigor of application or the neatness of the ‘dry’ documented quality assurance system *per se* and more on its contingent use by actors, and on how the quality assurance system is viewed and interpreted by them (Newton, 2001).

Similarly Rodriguez and Gutierrez (2003) report that one of the weaknesses of quality evaluation is the insufficient executive capacity of the academic leaders. There is a disconnection between the government, the institutions and the autonomous governments concerning the definition of the objectives of quality assurance which inhibits the effective implementation of such policies. Another problem identified is the lack of preparedness of staff to quality assurance activities.

(iii) External ownership leading to compliance instead of improvement

Another reason for the failure of quality assurance systems is that they are imposed on academics, who are, through internal mechanisms of audit and review, encouraged to use them. “This encouragement is backed by the use of rewards and sanctions to ensure implementation. However, the ownership of the system, let alone its intended outcomes, is unlikely to be achieved when the development of the system is carried out at a distance from the academic to whom, and by whom, the system is applied” (Barrow, 1999). There is a risk that quality assurance systems lead to a dramaturgical compliance to the requirements of the system, instead of quality improvement. As cited in Barrow (1999) “although most institutions are able to provide evidence of the implementation of their approved quality systems, it is likely that the compliance to the systems is in the nature of dramaturgical compliance (Goffman, 1971)”.

Conclusion

Assurance for quality education is a total holistic process concerned with ensuring integrity of outcomes. Thus, the responsibility for quality assurance rests with the schools’ managers and this is expressed through its relationship with other stakeholders in the school system. By promoting dialogue and strategic partnerships between school leaders, key stakeholders and civil society, school leadership can promote positive change and reform at various levels, empowering the stakeholders to demand transparent and effective services from the schools. Lastly, quality assurance recognizes the autonomy of educational institutions and seeks to enhance their capacity to operate in a responsive way.

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