

Quality and equity in basic education: can we have both?

The declarations of the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education and the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum both emphasized that to achieve Education for All (EFA) by 2015 would require, in addition to increased access to education, all countries to improve the quality and equity of education "so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all".

ALTHOUGH ministries of education worldwide fully agree with this interpretation of the EFA mission, many educational planners in developing countries have raised two related questions: When resources are scarce, can greater improvements in the performance of a population of students be made by focussing these resources on a limited section of the population? Or would it be better to spread these resources thinly across the whole student population?

These two questions suggest that there might be an **inherent trade-off situation** that operates in education systems between the average level of student learning outcomes and their equitable distribution. **That is, a country can either have quality or equity in education – but not both.**

The data archives of the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) offer an opportunity to test the validity of this trade-off proposition by using a modified version of a graphical procedure developed for the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) project by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.¹

The SACMEQ data archives contain extensive data collected during 2000-2002 on large-scale samples of Grade 6 students in 14 African systems of education. The data include reading test scores that provide valid comparisons of student performance across countries, and socio-economic index scores that provide a measure of the human and material wealth of students' home circumstances.

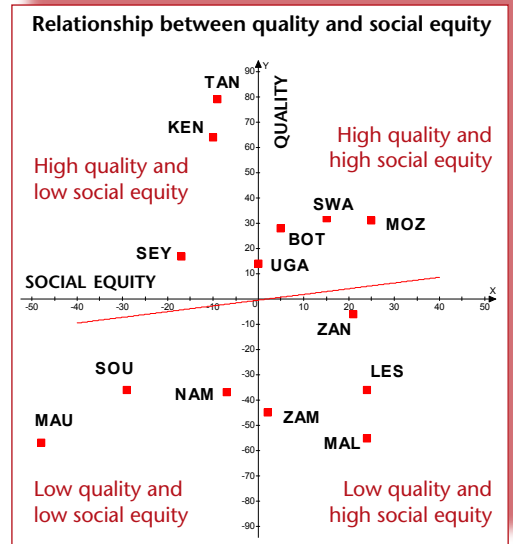
This information was used to draw the graph above which illustrates the 14

SACMEQ school systems along two dimensions: **a) an 'alternative' measure of quality** (vertical axis) – which was equal to the expected average student reading score for a school system if the average socio-economic intake of students was the same for all SACMEQ school systems; and **b) a measure of social equity** (horizontal axis) – which was equal to the expected difference in reading scores of students in the same SACMEQ school system whose socio-economic background scores differed by one standard deviation unit.

Note that the word **'alternative'** has been used here to distinguish the measurement of quality from **'traditional'** approaches based on average student reading scores that have **not** been adjusted for student socio-economic intakes to school systems. The alternative measure of quality provides a fairer comparison of the quality of school systems in terms of reading achievement because it presents an estimation of what might have been the situation if all school systems had student intakes with the same socio-economic characteristics.

Both the alternative measure of quality and the measure of social equity were re-scaled to give an overall average of zero, and to ensure that positive values on these two measures indicated relatively higher quality and relatively higher equity (and vice-versa). School systems located above the horizontal axis in the graph had above-average quality; and school systems located to the right of the vertical axis had above-average social equity.

The upper right hand corner of the graph was the most desirable location – because these four school systems (*Botswana, Swaziland and Mozambique*



– and *Uganda* as a borderline case) had both high quality and high social equity. Three school systems, *South Africa, Namibia* and *Mauritius* (bottom left-hand corner of the graph), had both low quality and low social equity.

Three school systems, *Seychelles, Kenya, and Tanzania* (upper left-hand corner), showed high quality and low social equity; and four school systems, *Zambia, Zanzibar, Lesotho* and *Malawi* (lower right-hand corner), had low quality and high social equity.

The overall pattern of these results challenged the validity of the quality-equity trade-off proposition presented above. There are SACMEQ school systems (top right-hand corner) that have simultaneously delivered both high quality and high equity. And there are other SACMEQ school systems (bottom left-hand corner) that have simultaneously delivered neither quality nor equity. When a linear regression line was fitted to the observations in the graph, it showed a small positive slope (0.22) which suggested that those school systems with higher levels of equity tended to have higher levels of quality.

In short, the SACMEQ data do **not** support the proposition that the pursuit of higher levels of educational quality must necessarily be accompanied by social inequalities in the distribution of student learning outcomes. On the contrary, these data provide concrete examples which show that school systems do not need to aim for **either** quality **or** equity – because they can have **both**.

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¹ OECD. 2003. *Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow*. Paris: OECD. www.oecd.org/