Contributing to the debates on quality

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I am pleased to introduce the December 2011 issue of Prospects, which brings together research articles on topics as seemingly varied as selective teacher attention and student achievement, girls' performance in primary education, in-service teacher development for rural teachers, links between higher education and the labour market, and international education and peace and human rights education. Although this is not a special issue with a specific topic, these articles do share an underlying focus on improving the quality of education in various ways.

The authors move the research agenda forward with respect to quality by presenting evidence, analyses, and contextual differences that highlight key policy challenges today. They do this by raising attention to girls' performance progress in the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI)¹ countries (the poorest countries where it is hardest to achieve the EFA goals); by questioning the pervasive effect of teacher inattention that marginalizes the poorer performing students when it should seek the opposite; by pointing at the need to develop more sophisticated measures of teacher capacity, such as knowledge of subject matter in studies of teachers' effect on achievement; and by highlighting the need for curriculum changes in higher education in countries like Egypt and Oman, to address the mismatch between education credentials and employment requirements.

A second set of articles directly addresses the relevance of quality in content, thus focusing on UNESCO's core mission: "building peace in the minds of men and women". They do this in three ways. One considers dilemmas in the integration of human rights values within peace education programmes in conflict and post-conflict societies. Another conducts a discourse analysis of the 1974 UNESCO *Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, recognizing its full force today as an international normative guide that was collectively constructed and therefore allows politically, economically, and culturally different actors to find their own solutions based on their own

¹ The Education for All Fast Track Initiative (FTI) is now called the Global Partnership for Education, but the name was changed after the article was submitted for publication.

situations. The third conducts a historical analysis of the ideas and values behind UNESCO's current conceptions of international education.

While laying the groundwork for further research, the views expressed in this issue will be essential to debates on quality and to understanding the role that international organizations such as UNESCO play in policy making.

The issue opens with two powerful Viewpoints.

First, Helen Abadzi and Stavri Llambiri tackle an intriguing topic that has not been sufficiently documented and analyzed: selective teacher attention. The authors argue that in classes with many low-income students, teachers may concentrate on the few who can perform and neglect those who require more help. Taking Albania as an example, they link this phenomenon to dropout and illiteracy. Unnoticed in class, those students may fail to learn, attend school less often, and eventually drop out. The authors analyze the issue from unexpected angles; what makes their work so commanding and refreshing, in addition to their deft descriptions, is their remarkable ability to look beyond conventional academic research and government data. They highlight the urgent need to study in detail how this phenomenon arises and to develop strategies to reduce it in the countries and areas where it is prevalent.

Second, Prema Clarke looks into issues related to girls' performance in primary education in the countries that joined the Education for All Fast Track Initiative between 2002 and 2008. She notices significant differences between two groups of countries. The first group is the "high performer" countries that had already achieved high and equal enrollment of girls and boys at the time they joined the initiative, and the "good performers", which witnessed progress after joining the initiative. The second group is the "weak performers", which continue to struggle to achieve any increase in girls' enrollment. Clarke reviews various interventions that countries have adopted to encourage girls to attend school and stresses the importance of developing strategic plans based on extensive collaboration between development partners and government. She also comments perceptively on three crucial and continuing challenges: increasing learning, reducing the numbers of out-of-school girls, and improving girls' performance in fragile and post-conflict countries.

Thomas Luschei and Amita Chudgar analyze the relationships between teachers, fourth-grade student achievement, and national income across 25 selected countries that participated in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The authors found limited evidence that teacher characteristics such as experience, education, readiness to teach, and gender—which are usually considered important to student success and to recruiting and rewarding teachers—are systematically related to student test scores. Also, no clear links were identified between these characteristics and lower-income students' achievement; nor were any found between these characteristics and national income, as they are not more consistently related to achievement in lower-income countries than in higher-income countries. The authors argue that efforts to improve teacher quality should look beyond simply increasing and rewarding measurable teacher qualifications such as experience and education level. Instead, their findings call for alternative, context-specific approaches to teacher compensation. They highlight the need to develop more sophisticated measures of teacher capacity, such as knowledge of the subject matter, which could help us "better understand the complexity of teachers' work cross-nationally". Also, by using longitudinal data and data on teacher effects, researchers studying cross-national teacher quality could start exploring how to measure the entire impact of teachers on student achievement.

Chunmei Yan and Chuanjun He analyze a specific in-service teacher training (INSET) programme designed to enhance rural teachers' professional development in Central China. Their investigation reveals that the programme had a variety of positive impacts on the teachers' professional development, such as a change in their beliefs and attitudes towards their careers, their lives, and their students. It also involved several drawbacks, including the length of the training period, schedule conflicts between the training and the teachers' work in their schools, the heavy theoretical base of the training content and methodology, the high cost of the programme, and the lack of follow-up support. Drawing on the lessons from this study, the authors highlight the need for fundamental changes in INSET programmes more generally. For example, they need to be supplemented by various other forms of teacher development activities and to involve teachers more dynamically and directly, as active participants in the planning and implementation of those programmes. Only by doing that, the authors argue, can the INSET programmes better support teachers in understanding and enhancing their practice, and help them connect personal and professional/institutional learning. In the authors' view, these changes would also sustain the programme's positive impacts and generate longer-term fundamental change in the teachers' daily teaching practice.

Hamood Al-Harthi delves into the complex relationship between higher education and the labour market. This key linkage has been thoroughly discussed in the specialized literature, with a focus that has shifted over the years, from analyzing the connection between expenditure on education and economic growth and the links between investment in education and individual returns, to examining the match or mismatch between education credentials and employment requirements, and also towards graduate employability. Yet the author manages to introduce two new and refreshing perspectives on the topic. First, he focuses on a developing/non-western context and takes as examples Egypt and Oman, two countries that face the acute problem of graduate unemployment, influenced as they are by complex demographic, cultural, social, and political considerations, as well as by large-scale employment of contract immigrant workers, especially in the Gulf area. He backs up his comparative view with a change of perspective, as he sees the issues at hand through the eyes of 827 Egyptian and Omani seniors—males and females, studying commerce, education, and engineering. Al-Harthi describes their perceptions about the relationship between their university education and the labour market. His findings reveal that students are driven to higher education by their perception that it will help them get better and more secure employment. They are, however, less satisfied about how effectively their university curricula prepare them for appropriate careers. Also, the Omani students are more confident about their education than the Egyptians—who call for more reform of their curricula, in order to accommodate to labour market requirements. Finally, a data analysis by gender reveals that women are more motivated than men to enter a career after university. Al-Harthi's study has implications for a broader comparison: one between developed countries, where the focus is on ensuring that graduates are employable in a competitive global economy, and developing countries, where the debate revolves around curricular changes that can enhance employment opportunities. His findings can easily extend to other developing countries, where the problem of employability results from a potential mismatch between the skills they acquire in university and those they need to get jobs.

Michalinos Zembylas' article deals with dilemmas emerging from efforts to integrate human rights values within peace education programmes being carried out in conflict situations. These dilemmas refer primarily to legalistically oriented or Eurocentric approaches to human rights, which focus mostly on awareness-raising. The main

achievement of this largely theoretical article lies, above all, in the author's profound elucidation of the ways that ideas like freedom, human rights, peace, and nationalism can appear, develop, and be challenged in a conflict situation. A solution to those dilemmas is offered, in Zembylas' view, by critical transformative pedagogies, conceptualized in notions of rights as ethical and anti-disciplinarian. Drawing on the author's reflections and experience from conducting ethnographic research in Cyprus, the article concludes that peace education efforts in conflict and post-conflict societies should go hand in hand with efforts to develop a values-oriented approach to human rights, one grounded in solidarity and social justice. Only this way, Zembylas says, can one "begin to create a critical pedagogical approach to peace education that promotes ethical responsibility toward the other".

The article by Kaisa Savolainen and Judith Torney-Purta provides a genuine continuation of Zembylas' comments. The authors aim to stimulate new attention to the area of education for international understanding, peace, and human rights, while also increasing our understanding of the work of organizations such as UNESCO in this area. They examine how culturally, politically, and economically different actors define education in the UNESCO 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The Recommendation, which is still in force today, is an important UNESCO normative (standard-setting) action, and UNESCO's only legal instrument directed specifically at peace and human rights in education. The authors describe the mechanics of discourse analysis, and employ it to identify the modes of discourse used in the document: instruction, principled, factual, stand-taking, and adjusting, as well as a wider discourse of rationality. This task requires rare analytical sensitivity and the capacity to enter into the variable geometry of interests and politics, including the repertoires that construct positions for the speaker, here the General Conference of UNESCO, and those to whom the Recommendation is addressed, the member states. Their close and skillful reading of this UNESCO document reveals how much it contains, and how much attention it deserves from both educators and policy-makers.

Juan Ignacio Martínez de Morentin would probably not dissent from much of the preceding analysis, as he repeatedly mentions the 1974 Recommendation as a turning point in articulating the notion of "education for international understanding", as well as the notions of "culture of peace" and "sustainable development". In his engaging article, he actually goes further than Savolainen and Torney-Purta in certain respects, by clarifying and exploring the main ideas and values that lie behind UNESCO's current conceptions of "international education": seeking a historical understanding of whence they came, and how they came to be what they are now. Although he does not openly aspire to be a historian of ideas in the grand general sense—that is, to give a complete intellectual image of any era—but aims only to reveal the contradictions and paradoxes in the historical development of ideas that we still grapple with today, he offers a surprisingly fresh and comprehensive historical analysis of the concept whose "ultimate aim", in his words, is "to achieve and preserve peace".

For all their differences in topics and research methods, the authors are engaged, at base, in the same sort of intellectual exercise: they aim to explore ideas and thus to diminish the dangers of being at the mercy of unexamined beliefs, but they also aim to alter attitudes and redirect mind-sets. Their views are shaped by experiences that coincide on some points and differ significantly on others. Their articles are also notable for their depth of observation and insight and for the vividness of their descriptions of particular events and situations. Finally, the authors tackle key education concepts and the way they play out in

practice. Yet they subtly and repeatedly remind us not to overlook the influence of those concepts, as well as of various political and social events, on developments in education: they remind us not to detach them from their historical and contextual settings, and, when possible, to analyze them microscopically. The entire volume is punctuated by such deep analysis, which prompts empathic responsiveness to the main ideas in all their variety. In the current quicksilver economic and socio-political context, the articles in this issue emerge as powerful reminders of the important role that education research can play in understanding, and sometimes alleviating and even solving, issues and conflicts. They also advocate for a stronger relationship between research, policy, and practice, a relationship that is key to the success of any education initiative. For 2012 and beyond, we are planning a few exciting special issues, dealing with some related and equally stimulating topics, such as the internationalization of teacher education, world-class education, student learning in primary schools, and intercultural education.

Let the debates continue.

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