# Quality Primary Education: The Potential to Transform Society in a Single Generation

In addition to being a right, basic primary education underpins the success of a society. Every year of primary education increases a person's productivity and reduces their dependence on social resources. The goal of education is to enable childrento learn, realize their full potential, and participate meaningfully in society. In spite of increasing enrolment rates, too many children are learning far less than what they are taught about or what they ought to learn in school. This low learning achievement is most frequently due to a combination of factors that include inadequate learning environments, inappropriate teaching methods and frequently unmotivated teachers, and the malnourishment and ill-health of children themselves.

Enhancing the quality in education, therefore, must be based on developing educational systems that are integrated and responsive to the multiple obstacles to children's learning. Quality education redresses gender and other inequalities; children's health and nutrition; issues of parental and community involvement; and the management of the education system itself. The benefits and impact of quality education also make invaluable contributions to all areas of human development, improving the status of women and helping to alleviate and eventually eradicate poverty.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes the right of every child to education and requires States to provide free and compulsory basic education (article 28). It further calls on governments to ensure that education leads to the fullest possible development of each child's ability, and to respect children's parents' cultural identity and for human rights (article 29). The CRC obligates both national governments and the international community to promote cooperation and ensure that the rights of children are met. The World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand sponsored by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank marked a significant shift in the world's collective approach to education, broadening notions of quality in basic education and understanding its delivery focussing special attention on the world's poorest citizens

# **Quality Primary Education**

#### Introduction

According to one World Bank study, every extra year of primary education increases a person's productivity (in this case hourly wage rate) by 10 to 30 percent<sup>1</sup>. Another study of thirteen low income countries found that four years of basic education resulted in an 8 percent increase in farm production. Moreover a 10 percentage point increase in girls' primary enrolment is expected to decrease infant mortality by 4.1 deaths per 1000<sup>2</sup>. The high rate of return on education clearly defines it as the surest way of breaking cycles of poverty<sup>3</sup>.

Previously, education had been assessed in terms of gross enrolment and completion rates at different levels. The priorities were primarily on enabling increased access and enrolment. However, this was at the neglect of social access such as gender and family context, issues of high drop out and absenteeism, and if children were actually learning and retaining what they were taught. This concept of learning achievement has economic as well as educational implications. If class repetitions and drop-outs —indicators of inefficiency and poor quality — can be reduced, limited resources will stretch much further. A survey of Latin American education in the 1980s showed that, on average, a child took 1.7 years to be promoted to the next grade and that each year 32 million students repeated grades in primary and secondary schools, representing an annual waste of \$5.2 billion. Overall, low income countries spend on average four years' worth more resources to produce a primary school graduate than they would if there were no repeaters or drop outs4. The poor quality of education deters children from attending schools5. Child labour experts have found that children would rather work than be subjected to a school regime that is irrelevant to their needs6.

There is an increased focus on the gap between what is taught and what is learned. A World Bank survey in Bangladesh for example found that four out of five of children who had completed five years of primary schooling failed to attain a minimum learning achievement. A study of more than 60 countries on the Monitoring of Learning Achievement project revealed that only five per cent of primary school pupils surpassed the minimum level of learning achievement.



Low learning achievement is rarely explained by one inadequate component or a single paucity in educational programming. Rather it is most frequently the result of many, often interrelated factors that signify a deficiency in educational systems. Children cannot learn if they are sick, and crammed into classrooms. Children will not learn if they are passive recipients of lessons delivered by ill-equipped teachers, if they do not apply their learning in supportive home and community environments. Moreover, educational systems cannot improve and develop without community acceptance and support, without resources and the simultaneous attention to how and what educational programming is developed and delivered. Quality education refers to a system of education that through programming process, structure and content enables:

Learners who are healthy, well-nourished, and ready to participate

and learn, and supported in learning by their families and

- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention, and peace;
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skillful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities;
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society<sup>8</sup>.

The precise definitions of quality are indeed varied according to the local educational contexts of different countries. However, the distinction between simply implementing educational programmes and the commitment to ensure that they produce the desired learner outcomes is being tested in a series of novel programmes around the world. Existing lessons demonstrate that quality educational systems can be realized through multifaceted strategies that promote:

# **Quality learners**

#### Healthy, well stimulated children

communities:

Quite simply, children must be capable of attending school and learning. Hence they must be adequately nourished, stimulated physically and psychosocially and protected from preventable diseases and infection. Essential development that forms the basis for children's learning occurs during early childhood particularly in their first three years. Evidence from Turkey, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines has shown that children who participate in early intervention programmes perform better in primary school than those who do not benefit from formal early childhood programmes, and studies from Latin America, India, and Morocco demonstrate that disadvantaged children benefit the most from such programmes. Indeed, the overwhelming body of evidence shows that a child who is denied adequate stimulation and care or exposed to extreme stress during early childhood is likely to have difficulties with psychosocial development in later life. The quality of ECD interventions is augmented by the **consistent involvement** of parents and caregivers in highly **integrated programming**.





### Supportive parents and families

Parents and families are the first teachers of a child. However, they may not possess the adequate knowledge on care during the early years, or be able to support children's schooling requirements in later years. Children who's parents had primary school education or less are more than three times more likely to have low test scores and grade repetition than children who's parents who had secondary schooling<sup>10</sup>. Poorer and less educated parents are more likely to require assistance within the house, in farming or within a family run enterprise than parents with higher education.

However, developing a stimulating and enabling home environment can be pursued through the inclusion of parents in the education process. The effects of schools in poor areas can often counterbalance the impact of a disadvantaged family background. One example is the creation of student newspapers in China. The result is that, much more than in other countries, pupils and parents have the possibility to read, which is of benefit in particular to otherwise disadvantaged rural families"<sup>11</sup>. Another important strategy for cultivating a supportive family and community environment for education is to garner parental participation in school management. This enables parents to learn, understand and contribute to both the content and process of education.

The support of schooling by parents and community members can be cultivated through creative programming that facilitates contact and collaboration on local issues. The Social Forestry, Education and Participation (SFEP) project in Thailand brought fifth and sixth grade students out of the classroom and into the community to learn about forest management. Students surveyed villagers to identify specific forest management problems and community members gradually became more involved as informal teachers. Together, they developed community projects, such as the care of seedlings or the establishment of a forest nature centre that helped students increase their knowledge of forest ecosystems and the social systems that surround them. Communities supported this new form of teaching and learning, and school-community relations improved. The children were more connected to their local histories, social relations and economic structures. The students and the school came to be seen as a force for positive change in the community<sup>12</sup>.

# **Quality learning environments**

#### **Physical elements**

School infrastructure does influence the quality of various elements of the educational process. The size and organization of classrooms can also influence the instructional method of teachers, for instance, arranging seating in a circle to enable maximum interaction instead of lecturing children sitting in rows. Children's learning is influenced by the availability of textbooks and learning materials, the space and furniture available for studying. The availability of toilets affects attendance and absenteeism amongst girls, for example. A clean water supply encourages attendance amongst both boys and girls. In a rural school project in Tunisia, developing school infrastructure to be safe and inviting has been a priority alongside teacher capacity building. This has demonstrated encouraging results with pass rates for grade six students rising from 46 percent in 1991 to 62 percent in 1997<sup>13</sup>.

#### Class size

The growth of school systems has not kept pace with the expansion of access to education initiated since 1990. Teachers are notably happier, more efficient and able to give children individual attention when the sizes of classes are kept low. One study showed that children who were in classes of 25 students or more were 1.5 times more likely to demonstrate lower test scores and increased grade repetition<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, quality education and learning does not take place by simply packing children into large, standardized classes.

#### **Inclusive psychosocial environments**

An inclusive and nondiscriminatory classroom environment that enables and encourages the equal participation of all children is central to quality education. This includes developing a peaceful and safe environment for girls, minorities, and children with special needs. Developing an inclusive environment encompasses many elements.

In Guinea, the establishment of a high-profile Equity Committee instituted policy reforms related to pregnancy of school-age mothers and the building of latrines for girls in schools, brought more women into teaching and administrative positions, and carried out a sensitization campaign to raise community awareness about the value of girls' education. The end result was an increase in the proportion of school-age girls' enrolment from 17 percent to 37 percent between 1989 and 1997<sup>15</sup>.



The behaviour of teachers within classrooms affects students' actual safety as well as perceptions of security. Regardless of a teachers' competence or instructional method, their attitudes towards children can result in discriminatory practices and violations of children's safety. The widespread use of corporal punishment poses a serious threat to the safety of children. Learning cannot take place if children's security and protection are threatened. Clearly articulated and enforced policies on discipline and classroom management can help regulate and ensure that teachers' behaviours meet acceptable norms and facilitate quality learning.

Children with disabilities and special needs however minor are also routinely marginalized. An examination of special education policies and practices in Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, China, and Vietnam found that although most educational policies include some philosophy of inclusion, significant gaps between policies and actual practices in schools and classrooms exist<sup>16</sup>.

#### Service delivery

The integration between services and schooling contributes significantly towards ensuring learners are healthy, as well as developing a quality educational system. The nexus between health and education is most common and demonstrates many positive results. School-based health services have been employed to address problems of protein-energy malnutrition, micronutrient deficiency disorders, helminthic infection and temporary hunger<sup>17</sup>. School-based deworming programmes in Guinea, for example, led to increased achievement outcomes -- failing scores fell from 32 percent to 23 percent over three years, while passing grades improved markedly<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, the integration of health services with schooling can form the basis for increasing the cognitive functions of children. It also establishes a positive relationship between families and schools thereby mobilizing and promoting the centrality of schooling within the community.

The effectiveness of school-based health programmes prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to launch the Global Health Initiative and garnered the support and interest of the World Bank. The World Bank views school-based health programmes as one of the most cost-effective ways of improving public health<sup>19</sup>.

#### **Quality content**

Quality content refers to the planned and taught curriculum of schools. National goals for education and outcome statements that translate those goals into measurable objectives should provide the starting point for the development and implementation of curriculum<sup>20</sup>. The aim is to help children develop the skills they need in life, rather than only acquire knowledge.

# Student-centered, non-discriminatory, standards-based curriculum structures

In general, curricula should be structured in a way that children are able to acquire analytical and problem solving skills as well as knowledge: emphasis on deep rather than broad coverage of important areas of knowledge; authentic, contextualized problems of study; learning by applying. Curriculum should also selectively integrate subject matter and focus on results, standards and targets for student learning Curriculum structure should be gender-sensitive, inclusive of children with diverse abilities and backgrounds, and responsive to emerging issues. Ideally curriculum should reflect and respond to national and local realities. In all content areas, curriculum should be based on clearly defined learning outcomes and these outcomes should be grade-level appropriate and properly sequenced<sup>21</sup>. As mentioned previously curriculum development is frequently enhanced through community participation.

#### Literacy

Literacy, the ability to read and write, is one of the primary goals of formal education. Policies and practices in education for literacy vary significantly among countries. Literacy skills are often taught purely as a separate subject in a language course, where the instruction tends to be linear -- first teaching aural skills, then speaking, reading, and writing skills. These skills should also, however, be developed and applied through other subjects, such as social studies and science. A UNICEF study found that in these cases there is a greater focus on language as a tool for social development; situations from daily life are incorporated into activities that foster the acquisition of reading and writing skills.<sup>22</sup>

#### Numeracy

Numeracy encompasses a range of skills from basic arithmetic and logical reasoning, to advanced mathematics and interpretative communication skills. Because mastery of many curricular areas, from geography and social studies to science and vocational training, requires numeracy, many mathematics educators advocate teaching numeracy skills in an integrated way rather than as an isolated subject in a mathematics course. Numeracy skills not only give people more control in their daily lives through, for example, more informed management of household or small enterprises, but also allow for more effective participation in communities and nations, since understanding many collective issues requires an ability to make sense of financial and other quantitative information.



## Life skills & peace education

The term life skills can be broadly interpreted, and is often assumed to include such topics as health, hygiene, norms of behaviour and vocational skills. Therefore, life skills encompass refusal skills, goal setting, decision-making, and coping skills<sup>23</sup>. Life skills curriculum focuses on attitudes, values, and behavioural change, rather than seeking to provide young people with a body of knowledge about a set of topics. They are meant to enable learners to resolve conflict and make decisions. Similarly, peace education seeks to teach students about how to prevent and resolve conflicts peacefully in intrapersonal, interpersonal, inter-group, national or international settings.

Inter-personal Skills	Skills for Building Self-Awareness	Critical & Creative Thinking Skills	Decision-Making Skills	Coping and Stress Management Skills
Empathy building	Self-assessment skills	Analytical skills	Critical thinking skills	Self control skills
Active listening	Identifying personal strengths & weaknesses	Creative thinking skills	Problem Solving skills	Coping with (peer) pressure
Giving and receiving feedback	Positive thinking skills	Skills for generating alternatives	Skills for assessing (personal & other risks)	Time management skills
Non/Verbal	Values	Info gathering skills	Skills for assessing	Skills for Dealing with anxiety
Assertion & refusal skills  Negotiation & conflict management  Cooperation & Teamwork  Relationship & community Building skills	clarification skills; (social norms, beliefs, myths, ethics, culture, gender, stereotypes, discrimination)  Identifying & acting on rights, responsibilities & social justice	Skills for evaluating information Including sources of information such as the media	Goal setting skills	Dealing with difficult situations  Help seeking skills

Source: UNICEF 2000, Working Paper:Curricum, p. 30

#### **Quality process**

There has been a gradual realization in recent years that the process of how teachers, planners and administrators use educational inputs and resources largely determines the quality of education.

#### **Teachers**

Teachers are one of the most important factors in helping children learn. Unfortunately, teachers are frequently poorly prepared for their task. Little attention, emphasis or energy has been put into teacher training. For example, in Uruguay, one the most prosperous countries in Latin America, 70 percent of teachers have no teacher education, while 12 percent of newly hired teachers in the United States of America enter the classroom without formal courses in education, and 14 percent have not taken enough such courses to meet State standards<sup>24</sup>. Teacher selection and training has tended to favour general knowledge over essential pedagogical skills that help students learn. Observation of teachers in Mexico, India, Guinea, and China indicated that they had not mastered the subject matter they taught nor the pedagogical skills required for good presentation of the material<sup>25</sup>.

A 1991 International Labour Organization (ILO) meeting on the conditions of work of teachers concluded that their situation had reached an 'intolerably low point'<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, low motivation amongst teachers is not surprising given the environment that they are forced to work in: crowded classrooms with sub standard infrastructure, training and inputs, and a lack of support from principals, supervisors and the broader community.

Ongoing professional development and recurrent teacher training is a critical part of building the teacher's capabilities, and appropriate instructional style. In fact, investing in teacher training is an assured way to have direct impact on the quality of student's education. Case studies from Bangladesh, Botswana, Guatemala, Namibia, and Pakistan show that ongoing professional development, especially in the early years after initial preparation and then continuing throughout a career, contribute significantly to student learning and retention<sup>27</sup>. Teacher training and professional development need not be restricted to off-site teacher training. Experiences from UNICEF supported projects indicate that video technology, peer learning and supervisor observation are all effective and appropriate media for capacity development.

Teaching styles in many places, however, remain traditional, teacher-centred, and fairly rigid or even authoritarian<sup>28</sup>. This ensures that children are afraid to learn by asking questions and instead must passively adapt to the teacher and what is taught. Teachers must demonstrate a continued support for child-centred learning.

For example, some children learn better by doing, others prefer to listen and still others visualize. A UNICEF supported project in Bangladesh is focused on developing teachers' capacity to diversify and adapt their teaching styles to students learning styles<sup>29</sup>. Greater understanding of child-centred learning processes underlie the ability to facilitate active student learning as an alternative to passive instruction based on methods such as rote memorization. This type of learning activity promotes critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and community involvement. Such activities can build the attitudes and values in children that contribute to democratic societies.

When asked, 'how do children learn?', a group of rural Malagasy teachers replied: "They do not copy accurately from the board", "They do not listen well enough to me", "They do not under-stand the instructions".

Perhaps it was the wrong question. If it had been 'how do the children learn about rice?' (it was a rice growing area) they would have immediately said: "They learn by doing — by weeding the paddy, by watching their parents while they hang off the back of their brother or sister, by smelling the newly threshed rice, by feeling the difference between the fresh and dried grains and weighing it in their hands."<sup>30</sup>



#### **Teacher Standards**

- Knowledge of students: Teachers draw on their knowledge of child development and their relationships with students to understand their students' abilities, interests, aspirations and values.
- Knowledge of content and curriculum: Teachers draw on their knowledge of subject matter and curriculum to make sound decisions about what is important for students to learn.
- Learning environment: Teachers establish a caring, inclusive, stimulating and safe school community where students can take intellectual risks, practise democracy, and work collaboratively and independently.
- **Respect for diversity**: Teachers help students to learn to respect individual andgroup differences.
- Instructional resources: Teachers create, assess, select and adapt a
  rich and varied collection of materials and draw on other resources
  such as staff, community members and students to support learning.
- Meaningful applications of knowledge: Teachers engage students in learning within and across disciplines and help students understand how the subjects they study can be used to explore important issues in their lives and the world around them.
- Multiple paths to knowledge: Teachers provide students with multiple paths needed to learn the central concepts in each school subject, explore important themes and topics that cut across subject areas, ands build knowledge and understanding.<sup>31</sup>

#### Assessment and evaluation

Similarly, quality processes should encompass assessment and evaluation methods that allow teachers to gauge the performance and progress of individual students. Unfortunately many teachers and educational systems continue to rely almost exclusively on traditional written tests of factual knowledge that tend to promote rote memorization rather than higher order thinking skills<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, assessment of academic scores and achievements are generally used for summative rather than formative purposes. Whereas in most cases, testing is the basis for deciding if a child progresses to the next level, assessment and evaluation of performance can also reveal areas of deficiency and sheds insight on how educational processes can be improved.

A project in Ghana demonstrated that ongoing assessment of student performance can provide teachers with the information they need to improve student learning. An assessment tool for curriculum-based rating was developed and administered in pilot schools. This tool allowed teachers to determine students' level of mastery of previous and current years' curricula, helping them determine the extent to which alternative instructional strategies and remedial content were necessary for both individuals and groups. The proportion of children who fully mastered reading at grade level, for example, rose from 4 percent to 21 percent over just 18 months after the project's inception.<sup>33</sup>

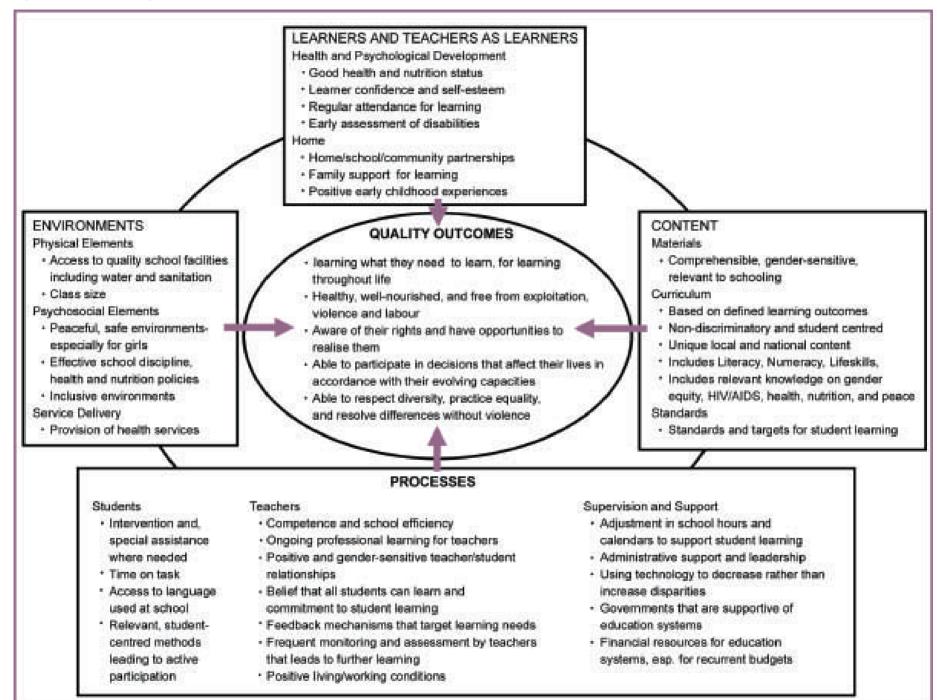


# **Quality outcomes**

Quality learner outcomes are the intentional and expected effects produced by the educational system. Quality outcomes are what children know and what they can do as well as their attitudes and expectations they have for themselves and their societies. Achievements related to literacy and numeracy represent key educational outcomes. Other achievements of quality education are related to community participation and learner confidence, enhanced life-skills, and the capability to make responsible choices and resolve conflict.

The evaluation and assessment of learner outcomes from the standpoint of quality is essential to strengthening and improving educational systems. In China, for example, children were shown to be gaining an inadequate understanding of reading, writing and mathematics. But their learning achievement in life skills was significantly less, which led to the recommendation that "the teaching-learning process in China needs to emphasize more problem-solving skills and the ability to apply knowledge in dealing with real-life problems".

# A System for Quality Education:



Source- UNICEF 2000, Defining Quality in Education

# **Programming for Quality Education**

Quality education requires the development of systems of education that closely connect a child-centered learning environment with community development. Whereas in the past, government commitment to education was gauged according to physical inputs and gross numbers of schools built, governments are now challenged with the more sophisticated but necessary task of strengthening processes of learning, teaching, teacher capacity building, community participation and educational institution building.<sup>34</sup>. Developing enabling policy thus requires that national governments align their national educational objectives with quality learner outcomes. Policies need to go beyond enabling access to schools to reframe education in the context of multi-sectoral integrated programming, enabling community participation in school management, developing capacities of teachers and education specialist, all of which should be guided by the best interest of the child. These policies will necessarily be accompanied by the adequate provision of financial resources for basic primary education.

The most critical role of the State in education is as a guarantor of children's right to basic education. However, this obligation encompasses many actors that play vital roles in delivering high-quality basic education to all children, from central to local governments, from international agencies to local communities and NGOs. Only the State can pull together all the components into a coherent but flexible education system.

In developing systems of quality education, it is important that programming address early childhood development. Intervention focusing on the early years to develop healthy, well-stimulated learners that will be able to concentrate, think creatively and learn is essential for quality learning when children come to formal schooling. Early childhood interventions also provide the basis for building the capacity of families and communities that are supportive of children's learning and education.

Establishing a process where learning outcomes (the levels of achievements which should be linked to national goals for education) are compared with actual learning outcomes is essential to determine if children are genuinely learning. Using practical assessment tools within the classroom and developing systems of education to address areas of weakness is the most efficient and effective way of promoting quality education.

Improving learner achievement by enhancing the quality of education is contingent on the development of strong community-based school systems that are upheld by highly mobilized communities and supported by enthusiastic and competent local government departments.

UNICEF recommended decentralization as a strategy for realizing quality education for all in its State of the Worlds Children Report 1999. Noting that that the process often required additional resources, decentralization cogently mobilizes and develops institutions that are closest to children and their families. Reorganizing resources and decision-making at sub-national and community levels is perhaps the most effective way of building teachers' capacity, enabling community participation and membership in school governing bodies and management committees.

Teachers are perhaps the most influential variable to develop a quality learning environment in the classroom. Developing the skills and motivation of teachers through innovative and ongoing training is a single investment guaranteed to enhance the quality of classroom exchanges and improve learning achievement. The most comprehensive programme for developing quality education will be limited unless quality teaching is given adequate attention. On the other hand, good teachers can often overcome deficiencies in other parts of an educational system, such as poor infrastructure, bad curriculum, lack of books, etc...



# **Quality Primary Education**

# UNICEF's Core Messages in Education: Working Together and Making a Difference

All children will realise their right to basic education of good quality.

- For Young Children enrich their development and learning
- For Excluded Children get all of them into school and help them stay there
- For Girls ensure that they have full and equal access to, and achievement in, basic education
- For Children in Conditions of Crisis ensure that they can start learning again, in safe and stable spaces
- For Children Affected by HIV/AIDS ensure they can respond to all aspects of the pandemic and have the resources to do so
- For All Children help them learn what they need to learn in rights-based, child-friendly learning environments effective with children, healthy for children, inclusive and protective of children, and gender-sensitive.<sub>35</sub>





#### **UNICEF Desired Outcomes for Children**

- to be healthy, well-nourished, and free from exploitation and violence
   and from labour which interferes with learning
- to be aware of their rights and have opportunities to realise them
- to be able to protect themselves and develop to their full potential
- to be able to participate in decisions which affect their lives in accordance with their evolving capacities
- to respect diversity, practice equality, and resolve differences without violence
- to be able to learn in environments that are effective, healthy and safe, inclusive and gender-sensitive, and protective of their rights
- to learn what they need to learn for learning throughout life<sup>36</sup>



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