

## Reflections on the definition of quality of education and a focus on its significance for contemporary Muslim societies

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**Abstract:** The quality of education is considered a pillar of development and prosperity in contemporary societies. This importance has given rise to a titanic quantity of scientific publications. However, there is no consensus on the meaning of quality in education. The present literature review aims to show the different approaches used to discuss educational quality in the absence of a universal definition. The quantitative analysis in this work has been conducted to formulate important remarks, among which, the existence of confusion between education and teaching and the importance given to employability as a major objective. To remedy the various shortcomings and flaws, and in order to properly define the quality of education, a change of approach was called for. To define the ideal of education, a philosophical approach was taken as a starting point. In addition, a reflection on how this quality should be defined for contemporary Muslim societies was proposed.

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**Keywords:** *Educational paradigm, Epistemology, Multidimensional man, Philosophy of education, Purpose of education, Quality of education, Teaching.*

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of quality in education has attracted increasing attention. This concept is an important element of national education policies. Every ministry of education around the world is faced with the same question: how can we provide quality education? Answering this question requires a clear definition of the concept of quality education, given the diversity of perspectives and approaches.

The importance of the quality of education means that the debate goes beyond the national level, and the issue is debated at international level. In this sense, in line with the goal enshrined in the Dakar Framework for Action, there is a need to "improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" [1]. Against this backdrop, there have been extensive discussions on the meaning of quality, and opinions still differ on what quality is and how to achieve it [2].

It is in this sense that this article is written, to deal with the definition of quality in the field of education and the different approaches and models related to it, while proposing a line of thought on how it should be defined for contemporary Muslim societies.

## 2. Quality of Education: Overview and Classification of Definitions

Educating is an ancestral act that humanity has known and practiced since the dawn of time, whereas the term "quality of education" is very recent. In fact, over the last decade or so, as a result of the diversification and fragmentation of the "educational offer", increasing attention has been paid to the quality of education [3]. This emphasis is evident at both national and international levels.

One indication of this importance is the sheer volume of scientific output on the subject. For example, the google scholar search engine displays around 8,030,000 results for the keywords "quality", "education" and "definition". This titanic quantity of publications is a perfect illustration of the inflationary nature of current scientific production [4], which makes a complete literature review difficult, if not impossible. That said, despite this large number of scientific articles discussing quality or trying to apply it to the field of education, opinions still differ on what it means and how to achieve it [2, 5]. This leads **Wittek and Habib** [6] to believe that it is unlikely to find a definition of quality in education that is clear and unambiguous, while **Bouchard and Plante** [7] even go so far as to say that "everyone wants quality, but no one wants to go to the trouble of defining it properly".

In this pell-mell of production, the angles from which the question is approached vary from one situation to another. Some authors examine the question in relation to education in general. Others focus on a well-defined cycle (primary, secondary or higher education). Some studies are limited to a geographical area, while others focus on the specific context of a program or reform.

In this sense, **Harvey and Green** [8], referring to higher education, believe that, although the content of certain international agreements indicates a consensus on certain aspects, it is difficult to have a global vision of educational quality in different contexts, with varied educational objectives. They state that quality is seen in five different ways: quality as excellence, perfection (zero defects), fitness for purpose (whether from a customer or mission point of view), value for money (achieving high standards and reducing costs), or student transformation. These last two ways of looking at quality are those evoked by **Ashwin et al.** [9], who assert that a review of the literature on quality in higher education suggests that there is a struggle between definitions focused on student transformation and those focused on fit-for-purpose and value for money, which Ashwin et al, characterize as merchant and consumerist. This finding is not shared by **Wittek and Habib** [6], who believe that, from a pragmatic point of view, there is a consensus in practice that quality means both fitness for purpose and employability. As for those authors who do not limit themselves to a specific level of education, they draw the same conclusions as their colleagues. In the same sense, **Romenti et al.** [3] consider that quality can be defined as the provision of an educational pathway designed to fully develop students' potential to become future professionals<sup>1</sup>. For **Maguire and Gibbs** [10], educational quality in higher education is difficult to define. According to them, it must be analyzed from a specific angle: the notion of "truth". They report that there are five theories of "truth": correspondence, coherence, constructivism, consensus and pragmatism. For them, the most relevant theories are correspondence, coherence and pragmatism, and they use them to define three forms of quality. For the first of these, they assert that "quality higher education is that which meets the requirements of higher education". For the second form of quality, they consider that it relates to the coherence and consistency of the approach to higher education. For them, this definition covers economic, political and societal dimensions. The third form, pragmatic, represents support for the higher education system. As for **Cheng and Tam** [11], referring to the case of education in the Asia-Pacific region, they state that, according to the literature, there is no unanimity on the concept of quality in the business world. This has repercussions on the definition of quality in education, on which there is no consensus, despite the existence of links between the different definitions. This leads them to say that quality in education is a vague and controversial concept, and that the definition can be different for each person, which has repercussions on the indicators used. In this sense, they have identified seven "models" of definition in the literature. These are the "objectives and specifications" model, in which quality is synonymous with

Even if the article only talks about communication, we are convinced that the idea can be generalized.<sup>1</sup>

compliance with established specifications and the achievement of declared institutional objectives; the "input-oriented" model, in which the quality of education is synonymous with the quality of inputs and resources; the "process" model, in which quality is synonymous with the fluidity of the internal process associated with successful learning experiences; the satisfaction model, in which the aim is to satisfy strategic stakeholders; the institutional legitimacy model (position and reputation); the zero-problems model and the organizational learning model, in which quality is identified with continuous improvement.

This ambiguity in the meaning given to educational quality is shared by **Chapman and Adams [12]**, who assert that the exact meaning of educational quality is often unclear. They add that, depending on the context, educational quality can apparently refer to inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes. They assert that quality education goes hand in hand with the achievement of objectives. They also report that other views exist, such as equating educational quality with the reputation of an institution or program, or the influence of teaching on students' knowledge, attitudes, values and behavior, or a comprehensive theory or ideology of learning acquisition and application.

The impact of context in the way quality is viewed pushes **UNESCO [13]** to consider that quality education is a dynamic concept that changes and evolves over time, and is adapted according to social, economic and environmental contexts. Because it must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate, it will take many forms worldwide. In the same sense, **Chua [14]** believes that quality in education needs to be approached in a different way to that used in industry and services, but this does not prevent him from asserting that we need to consider students as consumers and try to meet their needs. He believes that quality is a rather dynamic process, and adopts an input-process-output model where the result obtained is evaluated in terms of academic level and employability.

This idea is echoed by **Laurie et al. [15]**, who also point to the lack of a common definition. They also report that the literature on educational quality is dominated by three models: the economic model, which focuses on the inputs and outputs of the education system and stems from human capital theory, where education is very important for economic development and poverty reduction; the humanistic model, which sees education as a student-centered process with two kinds of objectives: individual and societal; and the learning-as-connection model, based on a constructivist perspective on education, and which stresses the importance of creating links between abstract concepts and the knowledge that the learner draws from his or her environment. For their part, **Dembélé and Oviawe [16]** note the absence of a universal definition of educational quality, and report that each speaker starts from his or her own perception when discussing this theme. They report that Samoff believes we need to move beyond discussion of inputs and focus on process. In his view, the absence of a standard process is due to the interactive nature of learning, "locally contingent" objectives and the fact that they are negotiated, i.e. continually redefined and specified.

### 3. Approaches to Defining the Quality of Education

From the above, and according to the literature reviewed, ambiguity is the watchword when it comes to defining the quality of education, as it is difficult to have a global vision of the quality of education in different contexts, with varied educational objectives, although the content of some voluntary international agreements indicates a consensus on certain aspects. This difficulty in finding a definition has contributed to the emergence of a movement that, aware of the difficulty of defining the quality of education, is content to propose a multidimensional framework for understanding it.

In this regard, there are several approaches: the dynamic approach, the systemic school unit approach, the Bouchard and Plante approach<sup>7</sup>, the OECD model, the **Gérard and De Ketele [17]** approach, the Nickel and Lowe approach, the social justice approach and the human capital approach.

#### 3.1. The Dynamic Approach

The dynamic character of the concept of quality is evoked by **UNESCO [13]**, which asserts that quality education is a dynamic concept that changes and evolves over time, and is adapted to social,

economic and environmental contexts. In the course of its work, **UNESCO** [13] has attempted to identify the essential dimensions that influence the fundamental processes of teaching and learning: the dimension of learner characteristics, the contextual dimension, the dimension of facilitating inputs, the dimension of teaching and learning, and the dimension of results.

### 3.2. *Systemic Approach to the School Unit*

The systemic approach constitutes another conceptualization of educational quality. It states that the school unit, as a social organization, is a system made up of interacting parts within the wider educational environment, i.e. it is the subsystem of a wider system. It is an open, dynamic system made up of the following elements: the transformation process (through the administrative and pedagogical process), outflows (knowledge, skills, and behavior of students, socialization), feedback as a control mechanism and the environment [18].

### 3.3. *Bouchard and Plante Approach*

In their attempt to define quality, Bouchard and Plante [7] consider that the systemic approach is essential in overcoming debates on the definition of quality. For them, a distinction must be made between three qualities: desired quality, rendered quality and perceived quality. They assert that quality can be seen as the conformity of an object or phenomenon to specifications previously defined by demanders (society, environment, community and individuals), designers or specialists. This means that the main problem is to define the elements against which the degree of conformity is to be measured, and to represent these elements in relation to each other. In the model they propose, they break down overall quality into nine elements which they consider to be transversal. These are relevance, coherence, timeliness, effectiveness, sustainability, efficiency, performance, impact and flexibility.

### 3.4. *OECD Model*

The idea of quality is deconstructed by the **OECD** [19], which suggests that "the quality of education can be defined using a conceptual framework that describes education within schools as a productive system in which school inputs are transferred into outcomes" [19]. In the context of this view of education, the OECD states that the quality of an education system, presented as a box working with the principle of causality, can be defined and perceived through six different points of view: productivity; instrumental effectiveness; adaptation; equity; efficiency; and the disjointed point of view [19].

### 3.5. *Gérard and De Ketele's Approach*

In attempting to examine the quality of education by taking as their point of entry the management of the education system at its various levels, **Gérard and De Ketele** [17] assert that quality is always relative, and is therefore essentially expressed in terms of the relationship between an object on which information is gathered, the "referent", and a "reference" that serves as a criterion for comparison. For them, the education system is based on fundamental elements: the environment of needs, the environment of standards, the environment of actors' strategies, intentions, means and results (short term and long term). They consider that the quality of an organization depends on a set of "qualities", each of which is the result of a comparison between two components, one serving as an object or "referent", the other as a "reference frame" or comparison criterion. In this way, they have identified the main qualities, namely: Relevance, Political Realism, Validity, Consistency, Feasibility, Applicability, Means Regulation, Internal Effectiveness, External Effectiveness, Sustainability, Efficiency, Adherence, Synergy, Conformity, and Equity.

### 3.6. *Nikel and Lowe's approach*

A synthesis of studies on educational quality was made by **Nikel and Lowe** [20], in which they proposed a framework in which educational quality is presented as a "web", with seven dimensions of

quality held in dynamic tension: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, responsiveness, relevance, reflexivity and sustainability. This conceptualization of educational quality is dynamic and based on the interaction between the dimensions presented above. Nickel and Lowe consider that a balance can be achieved if equal weight is given to each of the dimensions. However, the education system is contextual, i.e. it is conditioned by environments that differ from one region to another. To achieve quality, the educational fabric must be stretched without being torn.

### 3.7. Social justice approach

The social justice based approach, in low-income countries, is set out by Tikly and Barrett [21, 22] and emphasizes the importance of context including history, politics and culture. For them, a quality education is one that enables all learners to acquire the capabilities they need to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies, and improve their well-being." The learning outcomes that are essential depend on the context, but by the end of the benchmark education cycle, they should include literacy, numeracy and life skills, including disease awareness and prevention. This approach is made up of three main dimensions: the inclusion dimension, the relevance dimension and the democracy dimension.

### 3.8. Human Capital Approach

The human capital approach proposes a framework for interpreting the relationship between education, productivity and economic growth. Some research establishes a link between high levels of education and high incomes [23]. In addition, the human capital approach allows us to explain this phenomenon by referring to a link between education, productivity and income, whereby the higher incomes of educated workers reflect their greater productivity.

## 4. Critics

A review of the literature on educational quality reveals confusion between education and teaching. Indeed, in most of the publications consulted, these two terms are used synonymously. We believe that this confusion is partly due to the language used. The definition given by the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary illustrates this confusion. Thus, this dictionary defines education as the process of teaching or studying [...] or the knowledge one receives from this process [24] and defines the verb teach as giving knowledge or instructing or training someone [24], whereas in the French language there is a distinction between the two. Indeed, Le Robert dictionary [25] gives education three meanings:

- 1- Implementation of the means to ensure the training and development of a human being;
- 2- Methodical development (of an organ or faculty);
- 3- Knowledge and practice of the customs of society.

Whereas in the same dictionary, teaching means "the action of transmitting knowledge to a pupil" [25].

This confusion is not limited to what has been stated, as the question of how is often addressed without clarifying the question of what. Indeed, many authors have asked the question "how can we improve the quality of education?" without bothering to answer the question of what this term means. We see this as a manifestation of liquid modernity, as made explicit by Bauman.

Another important criticism is that of the objective. Sometimes it is unclear [10], while at other times employability is considered the most important objective [3, 14]. This emphasis on employability is, in our view, the manifestation of two problems that need to be addressed. The first problem concerns the reproduction of the dominant system. In this sense, Engel and Rutkowski [26] report that the neoliberal economic agenda is promoted by certain international organizations through their influence on education systems worldwide. In this sense, and according to Samoff, two major obstacles stand in the way of improving the quality of education in Africa: the divergent and changing working standards of funding agencies, and the structure of the aid relationship, which is a source of "planned dependence" and "exclusion from national ownership and local control" [16]. In this sense, **Mesquida and Ferreira**

[27] report that Freire considers the school, as it is today, to represent one of the "apparatuses" that the capitalist system uses to perpetuate its domination. This tone is the same as that of Illich, who considers modern schooling to be very important for capitalism, as it prepares individuals for servitude [27].

As for the second problem, it concerns the reductionist character of the human that this choice takes on. Indeed, in this way of seeing things, the individual is reduced to the economic dimension [28]. He is stripped of his humanity and his status does not go beyond that of useful matter [28]. This degradation of the Human also manifests itself in the projection of approaches applied in the world of industry and services onto education, where the graduate is assimilated to the product.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Is it possible to clarify the definition of educational quality? In our opinion, it is possible, but it requires a change of approach. What we propose is first to identify the purpose of education, then to define the objectives to be achieved, followed by the outputs, i.e. to give a detailed description of the qualities and abilities the individual must possess. The next step is to design the process that will produce these outputs, then determine the inputs and the means to be used, and finally define the quality of the education.

Before identifying the purpose, we need to have an idea of the meaning of education. The meanings given to education by **Le Robert dictionary** [25] are a good starting point. Thus, among the meanings we have already cited are: the implementation of means to ensure the training and development of a human being and the methodical development (of an organ or faculty) and knowledge and practice of the customs of society. By combining these meanings, we can say that education is the methodical development of a human being towards an ideal. This ideal may come from society (knowledge and practices of society's customs) or from another source. This means that teaching, as defined by Le Robert, is the action of transmitting knowledge, in relation to this ideal, to a pupil. This combination allows us to say that teaching is a component of education, which means that reducing the quality of education to that of teaching will, in the best cases, result in partial quality. Defining education in this way means that this ideal must be known. If so, from where can it be extracted ?

In this regard, Tribus believes that the development of quality management in education requires intellectual effort and lateral thinking, not a facile misapplication of business vocabulary and techniques. This prompts him to evoke the importance of philosophy and vision in the way quality is conceptualized [21]. This importance can be seen in Hong Kong's approach to quality education. Indeed, **Chong** [29] argues that for this country, the starting point is the philosophical thought of Confucius, which is based on the belief that quality begins with oneself. If each individual is self-disciplined, his family will be harmonious. If the family is harmonious, then he can rule his country well. And if his country is doing well, then he can rule the world without problems. In this sense, based on this fundamental philosophy, for Hong Kong to achieve the mark of quality education in the future, education will have to be delivered at the individual level by developing each person's character, especially self-discipline, self-reliance, self-awareness, self-cultivation and reflection. Simultaneously, quality education will have to extend to three other dimensions: the teaching of good family qualities, such as a sense of harmony, love, respect and gratitude; the development of social qualities, such as humanitarianism and inclusion, which encompass social justice, social harmony, equality and respect; and the building of national and global qualities, such as national identity, national harmony, universal values, mutual understanding, goodwill and cooperation.

Generally speaking, **UNESCO** [13] identifies five schools of thought in education: humanist, behaviourist, critical, indigenous and adult education approaches. Each of these "differs from the others in its ideology, epistemology and division into disciplines". All these schools ask "what individual and social ends [education] should pursue", i.e., they try to identify the ideal in question.

Thus, philosophical thinking is a good starting point for defining the ideal sought by education. So, what philosophical thinking should we adopt?

In our view, indigenous approaches to education provide a partial answer to this question. Indeed, they consider that "the dominant approaches imported from Europe are not necessarily relevant in different social and economic situations, and that to ensure relevance, curricula, pedagogies and assessment must be designed locally" [13]. We believe this is not enough, as pedagogies and curricula are strongly influenced by the philosophical principles from which they are developed, especially as certain international organizations influence education systems to promote the neoliberal economic agenda [26].

In other words, there needs to be a renewal in the way education is perceived. This renewal must also involve the method with which it is apprehended. Method is defined as a combination of rules, assumptions, procedures and examples that determine the scope and limits of a subject and establish acceptable ways of working within these limits to reach the truth [30]. In reality, method is simply an expression of the way the researcher thinks and sees the world. It dictates the premises and questions to be asked. For El Messiri, the researcher has to start from his own method to arrive at results that stem from his own reality, which will enable him to understand it and give him the hand to change it. Otherwise, if he chooses to rely on someone else's, he runs the risk of ending up with results that explain the other person's point of view and have nothing to do with the researcher's reality [31].

This call to start with oneself is not new to the world of scientific research. Several authors, in several disciplines, have tried to set up their own methods or, failing that, they have expressed this need. For example, in an attempt to decolonize research methodologies, **Smith** [32] set up the "Kaupapa Maori approaches to research" [32]. As for Wa Thiong'o (1994), he calls for a decolonialization of African minds, asserting that "Africa needs to take back its economy, its politics, its culture, its languages and all its patriotic writers" [36]. This is also the case of **Khalil** [33], who advocates the Islamization of knowledge, especially that which touches the human being directly [33]. Education is no exception: every society must start with itself, including contemporary Muslim societies.

In this sense, and referring to the case of Islamic education, **Nurdin** [34] calls for the establishment of a genuine Islamic educational paradigm. For Abd al-Rahmân modernity has separated a large part of the predicates of education from their religious origin [35], and given that any Islamic theory on education must spring from religion, then any utterance stemming from modernity must be objected to until its links with religion are re-established [35]. In addition to this, the rectifying elements any Islamic theory on education must be constant, independent, lively and creative [35].

The ideal towards which we must strive is "to live a good life", and to educate is none other than to methodically raise the individual so that he can live a good one [35]. Now, how is it possible to define the quality of education? We are convinced that it goes through a laborious path that begins by making explicit the meaning of the good life as an Islamic concept.

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