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Quality Education in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals: An Interpretation Model

ABSTRACT: This theoretical paper explores the concept of quality education in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since the operationalization of this concept remains challenging. A clarification of related concepts was explored through literature analysis, and the concept of quality education was found to be elusive. Consequently, I suggest two interpretations of quality education. Firstly, as a highly desirable aim, i.e., the fourth SDG in Agenda 2030, and, secondly, as formal education (structured education system) of high quality as a means to promote sustainability. In addition, I proposed an interpretation model by identifying pillars, or attributes, of quality education for sustainability. However, further investigation is required into how these two interlaced interpretations and the proposed model could support stakeholders in a global context to better understand quality education in terms of a sustainable future.

KEYWORDS: equity, inclusivity, indicator, lifelong learning, quality education, quality, sustainability, target

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The evidence is unequivocal: education saves lives and transforms lives; it is the bedrock of sustainability” (Bokova, as cited by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021a). This statement by Irina Bokova, the former Director-General of UNESCO, emphasizes the significance of education for a sustainable future. UNESCO fosters the realization of the United Nations’ (UN’s) fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4), namely “quality education.” The UN advocates the prioritization of SDG4, among 17 other SDGs, by member governments worldwide (UN, 2018).

Both the UN and UNESCO described quality education in the context of the SDGs. According to the former, SDG4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015, p. 19). UNESCO (2015) asserted that quality education promotes learning that is deliberate, intentional, purposeful, and organized in the defining resource.

While both these organizations are committed to quality education, the operationalization thereof remains a challenge in the global agenda to reach the SDGs by 2030 (i.e., Agenda 2030) (Sayed & Moriarty, 2020). This can be due to the vagueness of the quality education concept because of the global and diverse nature of the SDGs. It is, therefore, open to interpretation according to specific settings (Unterhalter, 2019), and this uncertainty in cross-cultural understandings may lead to challenges in implementing, developing, or enhancing quality education worldwide (Kaur, 2017). In light of this, I discuss different interpretations of quality education and related concepts in the context of the SDGs. I also analyze the meaning of quality education through an SDG lens, focusing on sustainability. Subsequently, I propose an overall interpretation model (not definition per se) suitable for a global context.

Quality, referred to as something excellent or exceptional, formal education (or structured education systems) of high quality, and SDG4 labeled as “quality education” were integrated with my analysis. First, I discuss the importance of quality education for sustainability. Second, I suggest two interpretations of quality education resulting from an in-depth literature analysis. Finally, I propose a comprehensive interpretation model to represent the pillars of quality education. The three main pillars represent the three attributes of quality education as an SDG in the model.

The sub-pillars represent the attributes of the second interpretation of formal quality education to promote sustainability.

2. SUSTAINABILITY AND QUALITY EDUCATION

Limits on Earth's capacity to absorb the exponential growth of human consumption have been recognized since the early 1970s (Brundtland, 1987; Meadows et al., 1972; UN, 2015). Development needs to occur sustainably to prevent these limits from being exceeded for humanity's present and future good (Lazăr et al., 2022). The UN (2015) states that sustainability includes "quality" aspects, such as ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG1), sustainable economic growth, and work opportunities. Additionally, sustainability involves building resilient infrastructure and innovation, promoting peaceful and just societies, building influential institutes at all levels, strengthening the means of implementation, and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015).

Normative principles and life quality play a role in this context. Agyeman et al. (2003) emphasized the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, presently and in the future. This author furthered that it should be provided justly and equitably within the limits of the ecosystem. Normative principles (needs, equity, and ecological limits) appearing in Agenda 2030 that cannot be explicitly defined serve as the foundation of sustainability. Agenda 2030 is an attempt to reach the SDGs by improving life quality globally (Block & Paredis, 2019; UN, 2015).

Quality education is crucial to sustainability and is an exigent issue: "education can create individuals who are more aware, responsible, and can bring about the meaningful and required change in the society" (Kumar, 2020, p. 745). A global initiative, namely the Education Commission, encourages more significant progress on SDG4. This commission mentions that the above outcomes or expectations of quality education "go well beyond learning outcomes as defined by standardized tests and include student well-being and an expanding list of knowledge and skills" (Education Commission, 2019, p. 31). Accordingly, I propose two interlaced interpretations of quality education in the SDG context.

3. TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF QUALITY EDUCATION

The literature analysis clarified what quality education means in the context of the SDGs. There is a variety of literature on the meaning of formal quality education. Since SDG4 is labeled as "quality education," formal quality education could not be ignored because formal education supports learning for a sustainable future (Karuzis, 2020). Three key data/measuring priorities identify quality education in this context: (1) areas that are on the "margins" of the formal education system, which are critically significant to achieving the SDGs; (2) quality education, referring to the results of learning at all stages in a formal educational setting, including other informal learning opportunities; and (3) equitable opportunities for all (Thaung, 2018). The first

priority can be linked to Dewey and Small (1897), who viewed education as a process of living since it refers to everyday life experiences bordering formal education. This fits well into the context of the SDGs since quality education refers to more than the formal education norms according to which we measure quality education. The third priority is linked to SDG4 in particular, which attempts to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015, p. 19). Therefore, our first interpretation of quality education as a highly desirable aim is linked with the fourth goal of Agenda 2030 and can be related to the quantitative aspects of education for sustainability (UNSDSN, 2015).

Aside from quality education being interpreted as a goal (SDG4), I also interpreted formal education as essential to sustainability. This can be linked to Thuang’s (2018) first and second priority, mentioning that quality education results from learning at all stages, both in formal educational settings and other informal learning opportunities to support the SDGs. Therefore, formal quality education plays a role in promoting sustainability. In this second interpretation, quality education is education in a formal setting and consists of various quality aspects, including character, resources, and inputs (Williams, 2001), the application of resources, content (knowledge, attitudes, and skills), outputs, and of value for improvement selection criteria (Adams, 1993). Importantly, quality education involves the application of appropriate strategies by teachers (Deacon, 2012; Pant, 2020). It also involves teachers with professional and content knowledge (in this context – including sustainability) as well as skills to positively affect learning, skills development, and self-exploration in light of their students’ needs, problems, and goals (Hightower et al., 2011; Knowles, 1975; Shulman, 1987).

Furthermore, supportive system management from an organizational level plays a role in quality education (Budiharso & Tarman, 2020; Education Commission, 2019; OECD, 2013). The teacher and educational effectiveness models used by management in education systems support quality education (Kyriakides & Charalambous, 2021). Analysis of the interpretations of formal quality education highlighted the following significant themes: (1) teachers as leading means for quality education; (2) system management and support; (3) access to and practical application of resources; (4) appreciation of students’ backgrounds and individuality; and (5) effective strategies for more complex and profound topics, such as sustainability.

The two abovementioned interpretations are not independent of one another in this context, they need to be integrated for a sustainable future. The three essential pillars, or attributes, of quality education as a goal (SDG4) are expanded in the next section.

4. THREE PILLARS OF QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

According to the literature analysis, I first interpret quality education as an SDG based on Agenda 2030, focusing on three main pillars: quality, inclusivity and equity, and lifelong learning (UN, 2015).

4.1 Quality

Quality is difficult to define and depends on the context and the viewer's perspective (Brooks, 2021; Elshaer, 2012; Seawright & Young, 1996). This paper presents some essential interpretations because of the interconnectedness and diverse nature of quality. This concept has been interpreted as the conformance to requirements (Crosby, 1979), specifications (Gilmore, 1974; Levitt, 1972; Shewhart, 1931), and standards of customers' needs and expectations (Crosby, 1979; Feigenbaum, 1951; Grönroos, 1984). Additionally, it is viewed as a relational characteristic of something judged by human verdict (Smith, 1993). Therefore, it is both an abstract characteristic and a relational attribute and can be determined via comparisons with something similar (Smith, 1993).

Furthermore, under situational conditions, quality can be elaborated as a value (Abbott, 1955; Buzzell & Gale, 1972; Crosby, 1979; Feigenbaum, 1951; Hoyle, 2009). It can refer to desirable attributes of a product or process (Leffler, 1982), fitness for use (Harvey & Green, 1993; Juran, 1974), and excellence (Pirsig, 1999). Quality pertains to excellence and can be viewed as something exceptional: "Quality is the goodness or excellence of something. It is assessed against accepted standards of merit for such things and the needs/interests of users and other stakeholders" (Smith, 1993, p. 237). Budiharso and Tarman (2020) summarized Harvey and Green's (1993) interpretation of quality as something exceptional or extraordinary, perfection, or consistency with a set standard, meeting a high standard and assuring stakeholders of receiving high value for their investment.

Seawright and Young (1996) organized quality interpretations into seven major categories: transcendent, manufacturing-based, product-based, user-based, value-based, multifaceted, and strategic. These categories aid the interpretation and measurement of quality in a specific context. The multifaceted and strategic categories are most applicable to quality education since they consist of multiple interpretations involving planning, considering stakeholders, containing the attributes mentioned below, and being deliberate.

UNESCO (2021b) provided a quality framework for stakeholders that comprises five dimensions of quality education, namely (1) student characteristics; (2) economic, social, cultural, and national context; (3) input enabling intent; (4) containment of different pedagogical dimensions; and (5) outcome.

Since Agenda 2030 aims to enhance life quality, sustainability can form part of quality education in terms of life quality globally. For the proposed interpretation model, quality in its broader sense is regarded in the multifaceted and strategic cat-

egories mentioned above. It is further evaluated in terms of good value and refers to something excellent or exceptional by integrating inclusivity, equity, and lifelong learning, as stated in SDG4. The following section explores the second pillar, i.e., inclusivity and equity.

4.2 Inclusivity and equity

Agenda 2030 is committed to providing:

Inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical, and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race, or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children, and youth (especially those in vulnerable situations), should have access to lifelong learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society (UN, 2015, p. 11).

This statement is self-evident while Agenda 2030 also strives to provide a nurturing environment for young people to fully realize “their rights and capabilities, helping our countries to reap the demographic dividend, including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families” (UN, 2015, p. 11). Dewey interprets “equitable opportunity for all members of society to engage with a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences” as a fundamental human right (Dewey, quoted by Leo, 2020, p. 403). In this regard, “all members of society” include all cultures, ages, races, genders, and ethnicities, regardless of social or economic status, background, or disabilities (UN, 2015).

I accept the principle of potentially marginalized people not being excluded and link equity to inclusivity by ignoring the exclusion of any persons. Generally, everyone should be given the same opportunities, and those excluded or marginalized should be supported and included. Furthermore, ensuring quality education for all promotes lifelong learning and in the next section, we consider the final pillar of quality education as a goal.

4.3 Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning opportunities, literacy, and numeracy are vital to quality education. Priyadarshini (2020, p. 299) stated that “literacy, adult learning, and education lie at the core of all the SDGs.” This author mentions the positive impact of literacy on social and economic aspects, emphasizing its role in the development of communities and nations. Furthermore, the lack of literacy can significantly interfere with the development of lifelong learning (Priyadarshini, 2020).

Lifelong learning requires literacy and numeracy and involves shifting from learning solely in formal education settings to learning in everyday life. Illiteracy and innumeracy cause learning deficits, excluding and marginalizing certain social groups (Priyadarshini, 2020). This marginalization leads to inequity for people with learning deficits. Therefore, foundational literacy and numeracy should be prioritized, as it is crucial to meaningful progress in the broader SDG4 context (Beeharry, 2021). Lifelong learning requires that new levels of learning be reached, including

changes in and applications of the latest knowledge and skills. This involves applying new knowledge to diverse personal, social, and physical contexts (Mazmanian et al., 2021). Generally, lifelong learning is a learning continuum, assisted by adequate literacy and numeracy, that will support individuals in gaining and applying knowledge and skills in different situations throughout life.

For the proposed interpretation model, I use the three main pillars of quality education as a goal, as mentioned above, and various sub-pillars, representing the attributes of formal quality education promoting sustainability

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I showed that the interpretation of quality education depends on the context and the viewer's perspective. Brooks (2021), Elshear (2012), and Seawright and Young (1996), who analyzed the meaning of quality in different contexts, support this notion. These authors indicate that the situation predicts the sense of quality.

I illustrate the two interpretations of quality education with two sets of pillars, each defining an attribute of quality education. The first interpretation proposes quality education as a highly desirable goal in Agenda 2030 and is represented by three main pillars or attributes: quality, inclusivity and equity, and lifelong learning (black pillars in Fig. 1). Secondly, quality education is interpreted as formal education to promote sustainability, with the sub-pillars (gray pillars in Fig. 1) reinforcing the main pillars.

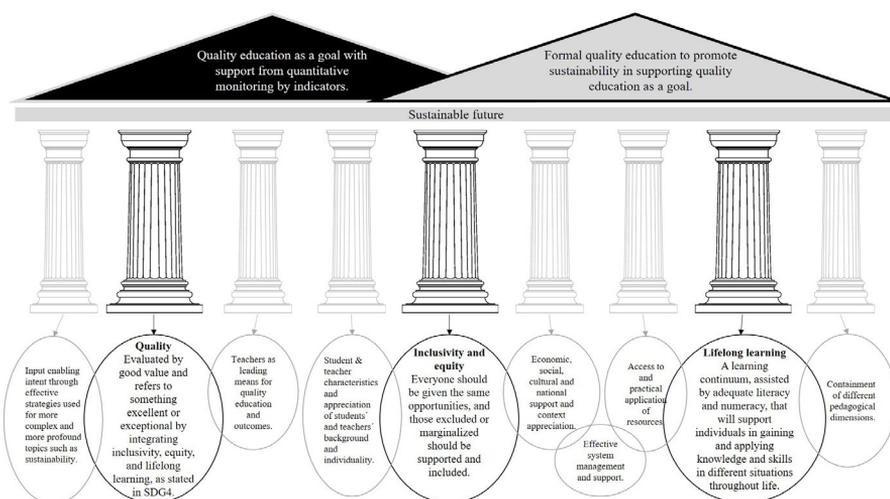


Figure 1. An interpretation model representing the main pillars (black) and sub-pillars (gray), or attributes, of quality education in the context of sustainability

These secondary attributes are integrated with the three main attributes as follows: (1) quality is supported by attributes such as careful consideration of the input enabling intent, expected outcome, and teachers as leading means; (2) inclusivity and equity are supported by attributes such as student characteristics, consideration of the economic, social, cultural and national context, and the appreciation of students' and teachers' background and individuality; and (3) lifelong learning is supported by attributes such as access to and practical application of resources, containment of different pedagogical dimensions, and effective system management and support (also supporting inclusivity and equity). These pillars were interpreted in the most general way possible.

The UN developed targets for each SDG, with an indicator for each target to track target achievement and remaining requirements. This highlights the quantitative aspect of quality education as a goal (SDG4). UNESCO provides continuous updates on the progress of SDG4 on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics website by monitoring member countries via these indicators (UNESCO, 2022). Indicators can aid the implementation of the SDGs since they clarify political views, increase accountability, facilitate new understandings of complex systems, engage citizens in debates, and increase awareness of the SDGs (Mair et al., 2018). Even though the SDG targets have been criticized for being too challenging and non-legally binding, the SDGs should still be pursued as reviewed by Easterly in 2015 (the year Agenda 2030 came to light). These indicators serve as tools to support stakeholders in reaching the SDGs.

With this paper, I aimed to interpret the concept of quality education in the SDG context to support decision-making processes concerning targets and indicators of SDG4 to support the quality thereof. Based on the literature analysis, I conclude that quality education remains an elusive concept. The ambiguity of quality education results from the globality of the SDGs and the diverse contexts of stakeholders. This can lead to challenges in implementing, developing, or enhancing quality education. Nonetheless, the model can be used to better understand quality education in a global context, and the identified pillars can provide a guideline for the worldwide implementation of quality education.

Future studies could focus on implementing these pillars for improved quality in education and determine how the interpretation model can indicate quality education for a sustainable future in a global context to explore the implications of these results. Moreover, specific SDGs (like SDG1) require more attention in developing countries, where providing all children with access to inclusive and equitable quality primary education remains a significant challenge (Pant, 2020).

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JAKOŚĆ EDUKACJI W KONTEKŚCIE CELÓW ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU. MODEL INTERPRETACYJNY

ABSTRAKT: Niniejszy artykuł zawiera wyniki teoretycznej analizy koncepcji jakości edukacji w kontekście celów zrównoważonego rozwoju (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs), ponieważ operacjonalizacja tego pojęcia w podjętych badaniach własnych była dużym wyzwaniem. Wyjaśnienie powiązanych koncepcji zostało zbadane poprzez analizę literatury i stwierdzono, że pojęcie jakości edukacji jest nieuchwytnie. W związku z tym proponuję dwie interpretacje jakości edukacji. Po pierwsze, jako wysoce pożądaný cel, tj. czwarty SDG w Agendzie 2030, a po drugie, jako edukacja formalna (ustrukturyzowany system edukacji) o wysokiej jakości jest środkiem promowania zrównoważonego rozwoju. Ponadto zaproponowałam model interpretacyjny poprzez wskazanie filarów, lub atrybutów, wysokiej jakości edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju. Dalsze badania jak te dwie przeplatające się interpretacje i proponowany model mogą wspierać interesariuszy w kontekście globalnym by lepiej zrozumieć jakość edukacji w kontekście zrównoważonej przyszłości.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: równość, inkluzywność, wskaźnik, uczenie się przez całe życie, jakość edukacji, zrównoważony rozwój, cel