

## Policy Article

# WHAT ENTAILS QUALITY IN EDUCATION? UNPACKING THE QUALITY CONUNDRUM

### **Abstract:**

*The term 'quality' has remained an elusive concept in the educational discourse due to its broad nature, thus leading to varied interpretations. This diverse understanding of quality is due to different approaches which interpret 'quality' in different ways. These approaches themselves have underpinnings in different theories concerning the role of education in the society. On one hand, education is viewed as a catalyst in upward social and economic mobility while on the other hand, it is viewed as a socially conservative force perpetuating the existing social inequalities. The present paper investigates different approaches that have played a critical role and influenced the way 'quality' is understood within the domain of school education. It then situates the quality debate in the Indian context and highlights the criticality of both tangible and tacit aspects of quality to gain a holistic understanding of the term instead of being confined only to a few quantifiable parameters.*

**Keywords: Quality, School culture, Education, Privatization, Tacit, India**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of quality has always been paramount in the discourses on education. Its importance has been further highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) wherein SDG4 exclusively focuses on quality and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Furthermore, the issue invariably comes to the centre stage in the debate on the public and the private schools. Several research studies have highlighted the significant growth of private schooling sector in the developing countries (For instance, Kingdon, 1996; Kitaev, 1999, Srivastava, 2007; Tooley and Dixon, 2003). Poor quality education in public schools has been the basic premise on which private schools are increasingly proliferating and thriving in the education landscape. While for many, quality of education is often related to the performance of the students measured through standardized tests, it has deeper philosophical aims than just being

confined to test scores and results. Ironically, there is no shared consensus on what constitutes quality and how it should be measured (Sayed, 1997; Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel & Ukpo, 2006; Kumar, 2010; Mehendale, 2014). Highlighting on this aspect, UNESCO (2005) mentions:

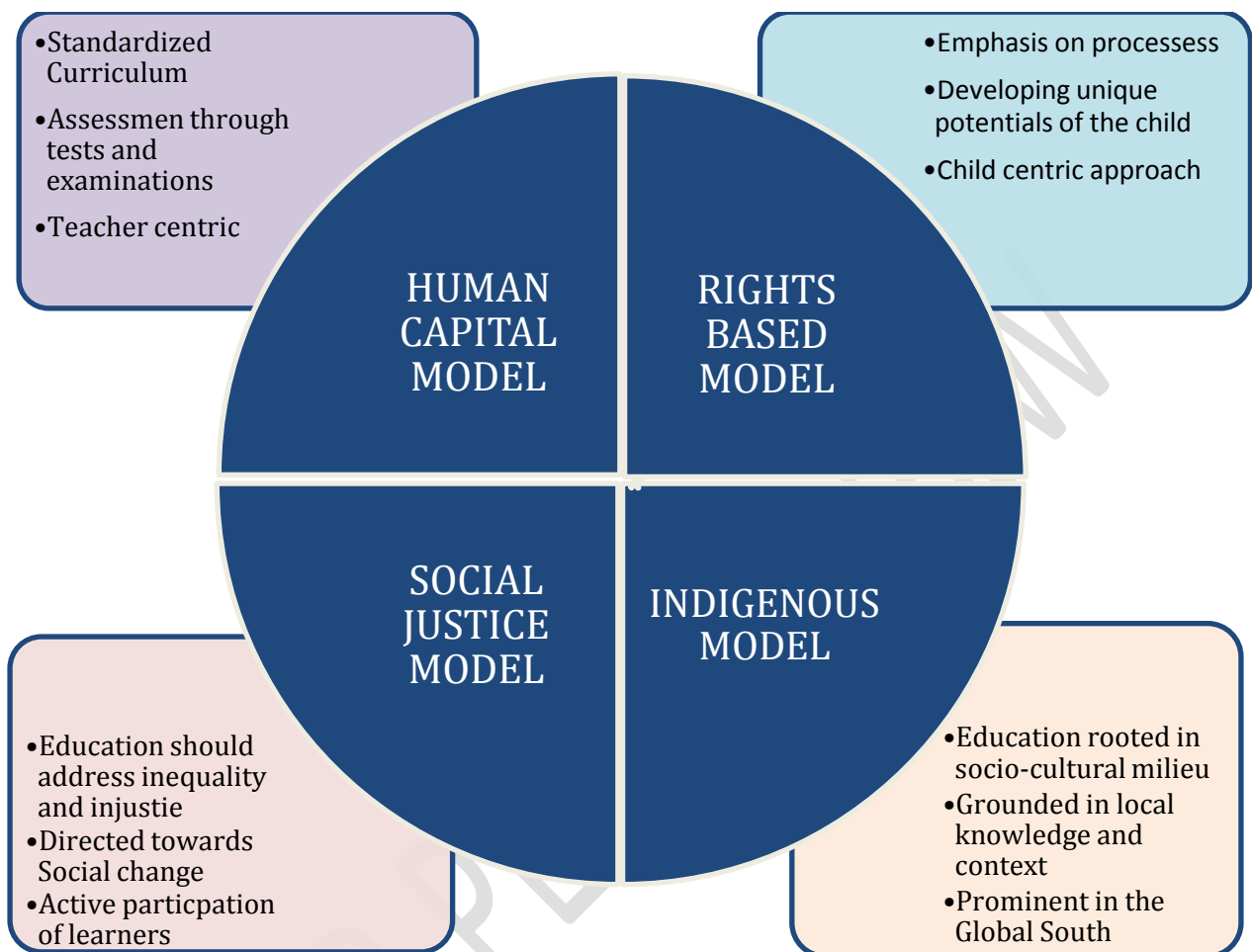
*Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralist world. There is no one definition, list of criteria, definitive curriculum, or list of topics that comprise a quality education. Quality education is a dynamic concept that changes and evolves with time and is modified according to the social, economic and environmental contexts. Because quality education must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate, quality education will take many forms around the world. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 1)*

Hence, the term 'quality' has remained an elusive concept in the educational discourse due to its broad nature, thus leading to varied understanding. The discourse around quality has its underpinnings in four broader frameworks that played a critical role in understanding quality. The following section elaborates on these theories.

### **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS TO 'QUALITY'**

In the international normative frameworks, there are four dominant approaches through which the issue of quality has been dealt with. These approaches, namely, the human-capital-based approach, the human rights-based approach, the social justice approach, and the indigenous approach have interpreted the term in different ways (See. Fig.1).

**Fig. 1: Different Models to Understand Quality**



The human-capitalbased approach primarily uses the linear input-output model to understand the quality. The basic premise of this economic, utilitarian approach lies in the framework that inputs, in the form of financial and material resources, teachers and pupil characteristics are acted on by educational processes producing outcomes (Tikly, 2011). The quantitative, measurable outputs are used as a measure of quality, which include enrolment ratios and retention rates, rates of return on investment in education in terms of earnings and cognitive achievement as measured in national or international tests (Barett et al, 2006). Thus, learning of basic cognitive skills as well as general knowledge are considered vital aspects to quality. Standardized curricula and assessment through tests and examinations are central to the learning of the child. Though it straightforwardly frames education as consisting of inputs or variables that result in greater effectiveness, the limitations lie in a ‘one size fits all’ approach

to quality and insensitivities to culture, context, belief systems and social structures within schools – all of which affect how inputs are used (Tao, 2009; Tikly, 2011). Moreover, the major constraint with representing education as a production process remains that some of its inputs and all of its outcomes are embodied in pupils, who have autonomous behaviour (UNESCO, 2004).

The rights-based approach, on the other hand, is learner-centric and more concerned with the realization of fundamental human rights. It emphasizes the promotion or protection of children's rights within, as well as through, education (Barrett, 2011). Through this lens, the 'quality' of education is not judged on inputs or outcomes represented by examination scores, but rather on the processes that affect students and their ability to learn (Tao, 2009). As mentioned in the Dakar Framework for Action, access to quality education remains the right of every child and set out its parameters, viz., desirable characteristics of learners (healthy, motivated students), processes (competent teachers using active pedagogies), content (relevant curricula) and systems (good governance and equitable resource allocation). This approach of access to good quality education as a human right has been adopted and underpinned primarily by UN agencies. UNICEF's framework (2000), for instance, elucidates five dimensions as the desirable dimensions of quality: learners, environments, contents, processes and outcomes, and lays utmost primacy on the learner-centred view of education. In a similar vein, UNESCO (2004) perceives learning at two levels - at the level of the learner and the level of the learning system. Contrary to the previous economic model, this humanist tradition aims to develop the whole personality as well as creativity and problem-solving abilities and often equated with terms like learner centred, participative and democratic. This approach embraces contemporary concerns of human rights and environmental sustainability (Barrett et al., 2006; Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004).

Apart from these two approaches, the third approach, i.e., the social justice approach, views education quality in terms of the principles of social justice and highlights the importance of context. Tikly (2011) gave a more comprehensive view of quality as one that enables all learners to realize the capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance the overall wellbeing. Incorporating local issues in everyday knowledge is brought into relationship with abstract and academic concepts so that both can grow together.

In addition to these, there is also another approach of quality education that is rooted in the historical and socio-cultural context of any nation. Rejecting the dominant western approaches, proponents of indigenous approach focussed on the collectivist oriented, value-based education benefitting the society as a whole and not just the individual.

Thus, in the international normative frameworks, there are different approaches through which the issue of quality has been dealt with. This is also partly because education itself has been viewed through different lenses. The critical role of education in social and economic mobility has widely been advocated by several scholars and researchers. This view of considering the role of schools in upward mobility and social integration was challenged by critical theorists who viewed education as a tool of ruling class interests and highlighted the role of schools in social reproduction (Levinson and Holland, 1996; Bourdieu, and Passeron, 1977, Bernstein, 1975, Young, 1971). Schools were not considered innocent sites of cultural transmission, rather, they served to exacerbate or perpetuate social inequalities (Levinson and Holland, 1996). The school system contributed to reproducing the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes, apart from contributing to social reproduction. Critical theorists, thus, view educational quality as something which can trigger social change (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Any education system characterized by discrimination against any particular group is not fulfilling its mission (UNESCO, 2004). Thus, any understanding of quality remains incomplete without the equity dimension and addressing the concerns of different marginalized groups remains indispensable.

## **UNDERSTANDING QUALITY IN INDIAN CONTEXT**

In the Indian schooling context, the demand for quality education is not a recent phenomenon. It has been reiterated time and again in several policy documents. The usage of the term 'quality', however, began in the mid-1990s (Sarangapani, 2010). Educational quality requires that the learner retains some control in his or her growth and the teacher remains autonomous to respond to the learner rather than to demands that emanate from parents or the market (Kumar, 2009). However, in Indian context, educational quality has been primarily equated with examinations and test scores of the students. As very succinctly pointed out in the Yash Pal Committee Report (1993), children are daily socialised to look upon education as mainly a process of preparing for examinations and no other motivation seems to have any legitimacy. Syllabus completion has been the sole emphasis completely undermining the philosophical and social aims of education. There is much focus on the quantitative aspects of

education in understanding the quality that obliterates not only the broader aims of education but undermines the role of different stakeholders and the tacit processes that have direct implications on the quality.

The demand for quality received great impetus with the onset of the privatization of school education. Privately run institutions often thrive on the popular assumption that whatever is not under state control must be of some quality (Kumar, 2004). The high-fee charging private schools, thriving on exclusivity and abundant human, physical and financial resources, have been quite successful in creating this image of providing improved quality education among the parents. These schools have impressive inputs in terms of physical and human resources and succeed in achieving better examination scores, which is widely perceived as the key output of quality education. While such schools have primarily been accessible to the students belonging to higher and middle-class backgrounds, the parents from the lower socio-economic background, who aspire for their children to have access to quality education, could not afford those schools and public schools remained their only choice. This large void between the demand and supply was fulfilled by the Low Fee Private School (LFPS). Such schools have emerged as an alternative to parents belonging to lower socio-economic strata who desire their children to have quality education and look at private schools as the major providers.

An overview of the existing literature on private schools reveal that the studies often revolved around the issue of the tangible aspects of quality (Kumar and Choudhary, 2020, Juneja, 2018, Baird, 2009; Srivastava, 2008; Tooley and Dixon, 2003). Much of the current usage of the term 'quality' focuses on the relatively more instrumentalist features of education and tends to attach great significance to large-scale testing, which, in turn, encourages the teaching for predictable outcomes (Kumar, 2010). However, privatisation renders education in the form of a 'commodity', a competitive private good which benefits the individuals and valued solely for its extrinsic worth in terms of qualifications and certificates and its worth as a public good is systematically ignored (Ball and Youdell, 2008)

Thus, quality has often been understood in terms of physical reality, which is visible and measurable. However, apart from these measurable parameters, there are several implicit, non-quantifiable processual aspects, which play a pivotal role in gaining a deeper understanding of quality. These are manifested in everyday interactions between the teachers and students, the subjective meanings of the school personnel, the conflicts and disagreement,

and so on. The equally important tacit elements of quality like the language used in the classroom discourses, teachers' work culture and their discontentment, their stereotyped notions and the way students are being shaped up in the schools have ramifications on the quality of education. Unless all these aspects are taken into account, gaining a holistic understanding of quality remains largely inadequate.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thus, quality entails different dimensions and the perspective that one holds concerning the role of the education guides and predominates one's thinking on that particular dimension. A technocratic perspective has mainly dominated the educational policy discourse and discussion of the philosophical aims of education has all but disappeared from the discourse of education in most of the third world countries (Kumar and Sarangapani, 2004). When schooling is viewed only as a technocratic enterprise, quality of education is often viewed in terms of the functional reality, which is completely divorced from the everyday negotiations of the teachers and students in the school and classrooms.

In India, the functional perspective has been quite predominant amongst the lower and middle-income groups wherein quality education is equated with competency in the English language and gaining economic and social mobility. However, when schooling is viewed as a relational reality, tacit elements related to the quality of education attain immense significance. For instance, the culture of the school has direct bearing on the overall quality of education imparted in the schools. School culture includes tangible and visible aspects as well as the tacit assumptions, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of the people (Peterson and Deal, 2009). These aspects of school culture are something which is not given but evolved and created by the members of the school through interactions, interpersonal relationships, perceptions, and through school norms. Hence, schools are not viewed as static, in homeostasis or equilibrium and culture here is not reduced to a checklist of attributes or shared values which glue a delineated group into a static state of uniformity and consensus rather it's a continuous process (Wright, 1999). There is a given formal culture of the organization and within it there are sub-cultures of different groups that are constantly shaped by internal and external environment. These cultures greatly influence the functioning of the school and have ramifications on the overall quality of education.

In this regard, the framework of school culture brings out the reality (both superficial and embedded) of the school and provides a deeper understanding of what exactly happens inside the school and classrooms. It provides a holistic framework to study the processes and dynamics present in the schools. The whole (culture) is present in the parts and the parts (the structure, norms, and attitudes of the people) become microcosms of the whole. All the components included in the school make up the whole. One can seek to understand the multi-dimensional aspects of the quality of education through the framework of school culture. Thus, the outcomes ought to be looked into in a much broader term than confining only to achievement scores measured through standardized tests in an institutional setting.

The concept of quality of education is broad and multidimensional embracing both tangible and tacit components of quality. If the multidimensional nature of the quality of education is taken as a tenable proposition, the embracement of each of these dimensions becomes a prerequisite to gaining a holistic understanding of the quality of education.

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