
Seeking the meaning of quality education: Paradigm changes from the 1960s to the 2010s

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Abstract

While quality education has regained global attention since the World Education Forum 2015, there is rare agreement on the term “quality education” within the international community, as well as in academia. This study aims to review articles on quality education published in selected academic journals between the 1960s and the 2010s to find a pattern of change in how quality education is defined. Inspired by Tikly and Barrett (2011) and Tikly (2011), this study applies four main discourses — postcolonial, input-output, human rights and social justice — to explore trends in international journal articles on quality education. From the 1960s to the 2010s, the number of published articles on quality education has increased each decade. While the predominance of the input-output approach has continued, our analysis shows that the conceptualization of quality education has diversified since 1960. The human rights approach in quality education studies has steadily increased since 2000, although rarely do studies address the postcolonial approach. Moreover, research embracing the social justice approach noticeably increased in the 2010s. While further rigorous studies are required to analyze why the way we address quality

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education has changed, we conclude that it has been influenced by diversified multilateralism in the education sector and the varying roles education plays in the changing paradigm of international development.

Keywords: Quality education, postcolonial approach, input-output approach, human rights approach, social justice approach

Introduction

Quality education, which was one of the six Education for All (EFA) goals adopted in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, regained international attention in Incheon, Korea. The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Goal 4 of the aligned Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) propose to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Much global attention is focused on quality education which is beyond access to education in particular in low-income countries. Although the exact definition of quality education is not included in the Declaration and the Framework for Action, we can infer how it is understood by the international actors setting the global education agenda. Various understandings about quality education are intermingled on the Declaration and the Framework for Action. While a traditional input-output approach is implied, the document also emphasizes processes, empowerment, training of teachers and evaluation to ensure quality education. In terms of the role of quality education, it states that it fosters creativity and knowledge; ensures the acquisition of literacy and numeracy as well as cognitive, interpersonal, and social skills; and develops the skills, values, and attitudes of citizens (UNESCO, 2015).

Historically, the global discourse on educational cooperation emerged after World War II has expanded its interests in access to education, supported by human capital theory, to quality concerns which include education contents, processes, and systems since the 1990s (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel, & Ukpo, 2006). This expansion of interest is in line with the current multilateralism of educational development cooperation, which includes diverse actors, including civil society, private actors, and other international organizations, expanded from traditional donor countries and international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO (Mundy & Manion, 2015).

Such diverse conceptual implications of quality education, suggest a rare convergence upon the term within both the international community and academia. To explain the current diversity of approaches in discussing quality education, tracking the academic discourse on it might be significant. From this background, this paper focuses on periodic changes in the meaning of quality education and reviews the international journal articles on quality education which were published between 1960 and 2016 to determine how quality education is conceptualized and changes over time. Although there have been a number of studies with various ways of categorizing education quality, by drawing on Tikly and Barrett (2011) and Tikly (2011), this research analyzes the selected papers through four lenses: a postcolonial approach, an input-output (i.e., human capital) paradigm, a human rights approach and a social justice approach.

The studies analyzed for this research were selected using the methodology described below. First, we searched the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) for the titles of international journals containing the keywords “education” or “educational.” This search found 179 journals; 133 journals were found by using the keyword “education” and 46 journals containing the keyword “educational.” To ensure generality, in the next step we eliminated journals that mainly cover specific regions or areas of study. This resulted in 21 journals. We further narrowed down the number of journals to analyze by selecting six accessible journals that have a Journal Impact Factor over 1.0. Although the Impact Factors of *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* and *Comparative Education Review* do not exceed 1.0, they were also included in the literature for analysis because they cover general themes in the field of comparative education as well as discuss access and quality of educational opportunities for low-income countries. This meant that nuanced information about the quality education could be provided by these additional journals. After selecting the eight international journals for analysis, we searched for articles with the keywords “quality education” in each journal. We also searched for papers which contained “quality” in the title. As a result, a total of 121 studies in eight international journals published between 1960 and 2016 were collected and analyzed by decade.

In the first part of this paper, we explain and introduce the four theoretical lenses we used to analyze the papers. It is followed by our findings based on analyzing the selected literature, arranged by decades. Then we discuss how the concept of quality has been understood by scholars. We also analyze whether the change of discourse occurs during the period examined and, if not, whether it is related to shifts in the global discourse on education development. Lastly, the limitations and implications of the research are discussed.

Theoretical background: Major discourses of quality education

Quality education is a notion which still remains unsettled and contested in the realm of education studies (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). Nikel and Lowe (2010) suggest seven conceptual dimensions of quality in education: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, responsiveness, relevance, reflexivity, and sustainability; and by using a fabric metaphor, emphasize a contextualized balance across the dimensions. O’Sullivan (2006) divides the various definitions of education quality into six broad conceptualizations – the deficit notion; the competency approach; the value-added and fitness for purpose view; Bergman’s (1996) four types; teaching and learning processes; and the contextual understanding of quality. O’Sullivan (2006) points out that only the input and output definitions are influencing policy and argues that more emphasis should be placed on teaching and learning processes in the school and classroom. Tikly and Barrett (2011) critically analyze the two dominant approaches, human capital and human rights, and suggest a social justice framework as an alternative approach. Also drawing from Tikly (2011), in terms of his discussion on a postcolonial analysis, this article proposes four major discourses of quality education as an analytical framework to explore the past research: postcolonialism, input-output, human rights, and social justice.

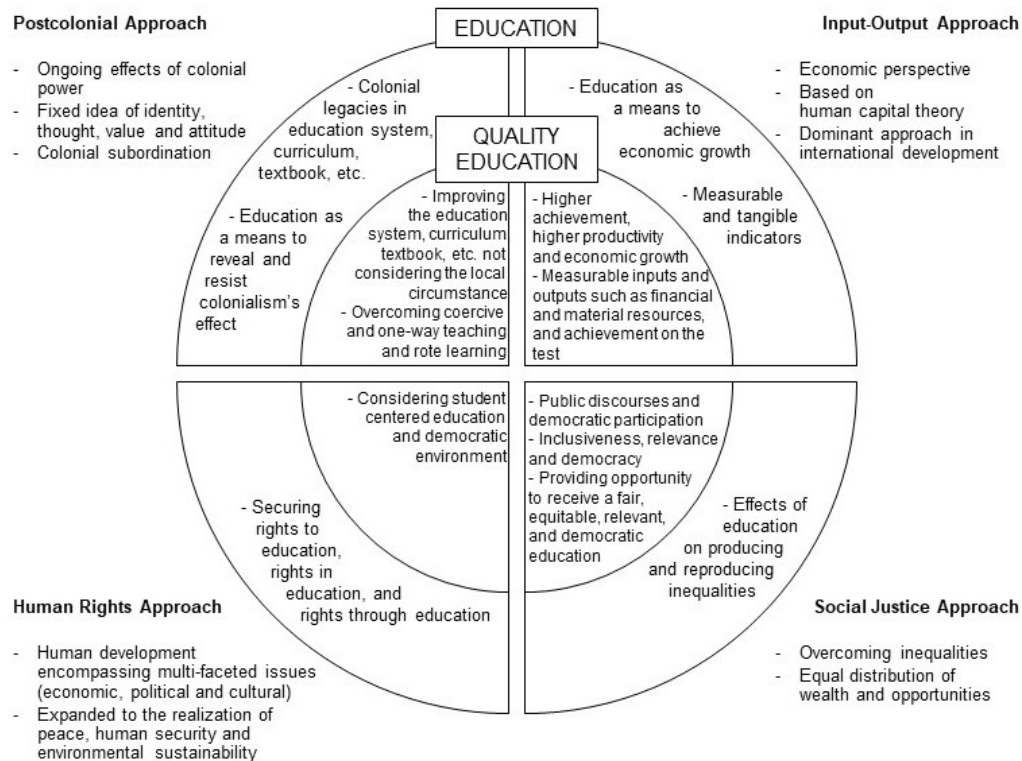


Figure 1. Four discourses of quality education

Note. This figure is restructured from the contents discussed below.

Postcolonial approach

We consider postcolonial theory to be an early approach influencing quality education. Historically, the colonizer did not allow the culture, tradition and language of the colonized, but instead threatened and destroyed them. As a result, the colonized were subordinated to the colonizer in a country's economy, society and culture, a behavior that remains in present developing countries which have had colonial experiences. In this circumstance, people believe education is the only means of escaping from and overcoming the colonial legacy pervasive in people's values, thoughts and everyday life in general (Rizvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006).

How, then, is postcolonialism linked to education and quality education in practice? First, colonial legacies exist in the education system of many postcolonial nations (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). The countries with colonial experience mostly pursue an elite education system without considering the rest of their citizens. This widens the discrepancy between the rich and poor, which is reproduced and becomes permanent over the generations. Second, the colonial experience still influences curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and materials, including textbooks (Nwanosike & Onyije, 2011). In these countries, teaching tends to be one-way, even coercive, and focuses on rote learning. Most importantly, they do not consider the circumstances of learners such as their identity, culture, language and

ethnicity. To persuade people to think and behave as citizens of the country, the postcolonial approach assumes that the following changes to education must take precedence to escape the influence of the colonizer: reform the education system, revise textbooks and teaching materials, and improve teaching and learning methods.

Input-output approach

The input-output approach is one of the most influential discourses in quality education, along with the human rights approach. The input-output approach has its origin in human capital theory. Human capital theory has been, and still is, a dominant approach in education development, directly affecting the direction and framework of many international organizations and donor countries. In the input-output approach, education should be invested in as a means of achieving economic development. Using human capital theory, the input-output approach also rationalizes its emphasis on education quality. According to this approach, students who receive a quality education have a higher productivity (i.e., higher achievement or better learning outcomes), which ultimately leads to economic development, the goal of national development from the economic viewpoint. This approach argues that if there are investments (inputs) there must be measurable results (outputs). In other words, the input-output approach considers inputs as the form of financial and material resources, teachers and pupil characteristics (Park et al., 2016; Sayed & Ahmed, 2015), which produces educational outputs or outcomes. One representative example of the input-output approach is UNESCO's (2004) framework for understanding education quality.

The input-output approach has faced tough criticism due to its firm foundation on the discipline of economics. Most of all, it considers quality education as a means to enhance labor productivity and ultimately achieve economic growth while overlooking other aspects such as social, political and cultural factors. As mentioned earlier, this approach oversimplifies the factors influencing quality education by classifying input and output and arranging this in a linear format.

Human rights approach

In contrast to the input-output approach with its economic perspective, the human rights approach focuses on human development, which encompasses economic, political, and cultural dimensions and leads to the realization of peace, human security, and environmental sustainability. The human rights approach to education is mostly seen as securing "rights to education, rights in education and rights through education" (Tikly, 2011, p. 7). The same rights are applied to quality education and supported by international organizations, donor countries and civil societies.

The human rights approach to quality education crucially considers student-centered education and a democratic environment in the classroom. It also includes protection from abuse and violence at school, developing the creativity of students, using local languages in classes, and engaging students' participation and involvement in schools in democratic ways. The most distinctive example of the human rights approach is the framework adopted by UNICEF (2000). This framework is composed of five dimensions (i.e., learners,

environments, content, process, and outcomes) which account for process, student-centered education, and a democratic environment. For quality outcomes, it also measures academic achievement in literacy and numeracy as does UNESCO. However, UNICEF includes many other elements such as formative assessment, outcomes sought by parents or related to community participation, learner confidence and lifelong learning, health outcomes, and life skills outcomes in order to overcome the shortcomings of simple academic achievement and measure more complex and less tangible outcomes (UNICEF, 2000).

Social justice approach

Tikly and Barrett (2011) propose social justice as an alternative approach to the human capital and human rights approaches. Before examining this approach to quality education, it is important to understand how social justice is applied to education more broadly. In education studies, social justice has been emphasized from early on in terms of how education produces and reproduces inequalities and the necessity to overcome these. Some have argued that school education produces and reproduces inequalities and social injustice, while others declare that places of learning could play a role in resisting inequalities. For example, Gewirtz (1998) developed a framework linking education to social justice. He draws two dimensions of justice: distributional justice and relational justice. The former refers to the distribution of goods in society, which is the basic concept of social justice defined by Rawls (1972). The latter, relational justice, is about mutuality and recognition. In other words, it means both equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.

Tikly and Barrett's social justice approach to quality education, derived from Amartya Sen's capability approach and Nancy Fraser's social justice theory, could be interpreted as simply providing all students with the opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to narrow any educational gaps (Barrett, 2011a; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Their social justice approach has three dimensions: inclusion, relevance and democracy (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). First, inclusiveness is concerned with ensuring that all learners, not just particular learners, achieve educational outcomes. In addition to accessing resources such as educational materials, each learner should achieve desired outcomes or "functionings" overcoming difficulties, which is based on the idea of capability approach. The second dimension, relevance, means educational outcomes need to be considered in conjunction with the wellbeing of students, sustainability, value of communities, national development plans, and international agreements such as SDGs and EFA. The third dimension is democracy, which means educational outcomes are influenced through democratic ways such as public discourses. Thus, measuring the social justice approach to quality education would mean measuring these three dimensions.

There is a close correlation between social justice and equity when considering the first dimension, particularly inclusion. The meaning of equity is often interchanged with another concept, equality. Equity and equality have clearly different assumptions: Equality means sameness and equal opportunity whereas equity is about justice and injustice, or fairness and equal outcomes (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). If this is applied to education, educational equality is about offering all students the same education (e.g., the same number of textbooks) and educational equity is about providing education so that all students can achieve the same outcomes. The social justice approach to quality education is more about equity, not equality.

Findings: Analysis of international journal articles on quality education

From the 1960s to the 2010s, the number of published papers on education quality increases each decade (see Figure 2). While only four studies were published in the 1960s in the journals analyzed for this study, 48 relevant papers explored education quality between 2010 and 2016.

The papers published between the 1960s and 1980s suggest that the input-output approach was dominant during those periods, but since the 1990s, the approaches and perspectives have grown more diverse. Although the input-output approach was still dominant in the 1990s, a few studies focus on the issue of social justice and emphasize the “process” aspect of quality education. In the 2000s, more than one-third of the research published focus on the input-output approach, while others explored alternative or comprehensive approaches, including analysis embracing both the human capital and human rights perspectives. Although the input-output approach still garnered academic attention in the 2010s, published papers mostly paid attention to outputs, including learning and cognitive abilities, rather than inputs. An increase in the number of studies using the social justice approach becomes noticeable in this period. Besides, papers that cannot be classified into the four categories are classified as ‘others’ in Figure 2. These include discussions linking quality education to teaching and learning, culture, social value, and gender equality, but it does not mean that these approaches are unimportant.

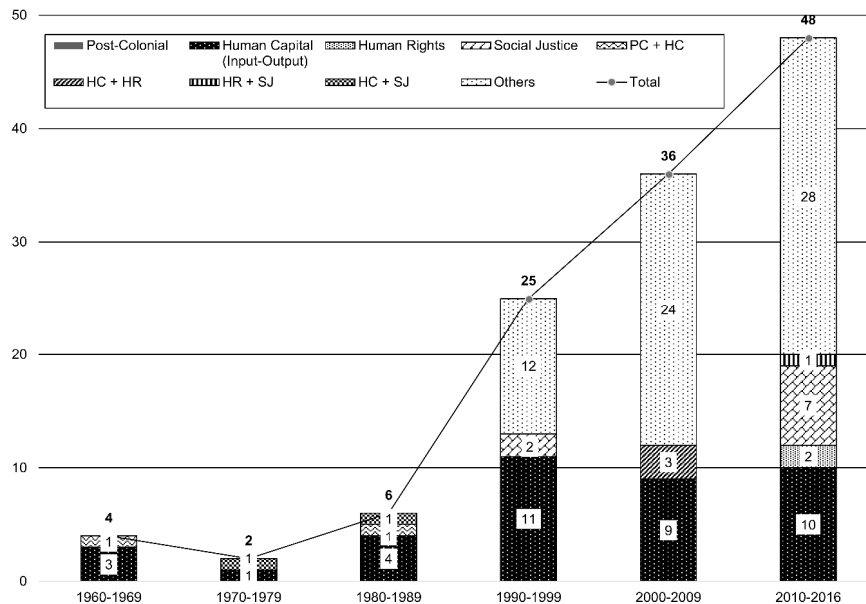


Figure 2. Number of articles on quality education, 1960s-2010s

Note. Counted articles have been extracted from the eight international journals in the field of education studies, which are: *Comparative Education*, *Comparative Education Review*, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *Education Research Review*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, *International Journal of Educational Development*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, and *The Journal of Educational Research*.

1960-80s: Emphasis on close relations of quality education with economic growth

From the 1960s through the 1980s, the selected journals published only a small number of articles on education quality. Among the 12 papers from this period, half were published in the 1960s and 70s, and the other half in the 1980s. This small population size might not be enough to extract general characteristics of each decade in conceptualizing “quality.” However, the approaches taken in each research to describe education quality clearly reflect the then-current perception toward education.

In the earliest paper analyzed in this study, quality of education is discussed within the context of equality. Nash (1961) contrasted the European and American viewpoints that constitute Canadian education and explained why it was difficult to reconcile quality and equality, especially because Canada draws from both orientations. In the European orientation, the idea of equality is something to be disrespected, and the quality of education was the purview of small elites and measured by the amount of knowledge they acquired. This conflicts with the democratic values of the American ideal of universal education. Canada’s challenge was to combine these opposing models to define quality education. In this article, Nash (1961) emphasized curriculum, teachers and support, which are more sensitive to individual and local needs, as the basis for improving education quality. These three dimensions are constantly found in later studies.

As the democratic values of America spread, the values of general education have also been gradually recognized, particularly in relation to economic development and growth during the period. The economic tradition within education at the time is reflected in the approaches used in the studies. To a greater or lesser degree, all 12 papers could be analyzed using the input-output model, which is strongly connected to the human capital theory. Inputs and outputs are used in each research, with the inputs classified based on the three directions that Nash (1961) proposed. In each article, the input factors and indicators chosen to measure or describe education quality are diverse; however, they can ultimately be categorized as curriculum, teachers or support. With regard to teachers, both qualification level (Correa, 1964a) and pedagogy/instruction issues (Brooke, 1982; Weinert, Schrader, & Helmke, 1989) were mentioned. Discussions of support focused on financial support for students, teachers and infrastructure (Carnoy, 1970; Correa, 1964b; Fuller, 1986; Heyneman & Loxley, 1983; Hurst, 1981). Administrative, government support for improving systems was also mentioned (Danskin, 1979; Hurst, 1981; Lewin, 1985). As outputs, productivity (measured by rates of retention, dropout, repetition, promotion, etc.) and income indicators were frequently used during this period. During the 1970s, academic performance and achievement began to appear as main indicators of support (Brooke, 1982; Carnoy, 1970; Danskin, 1979; Heyneman & Loxley, 1983; Weinert et al., 1989).

1990-1999: Dominance of input-output discourse

The expansion of basic education services of quality was stated at the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action and adopted at the Jomtien Conference in 1990, before the definition and measurement of quality education had been sufficiently discussed (UNESCO, 1990). Although the term “quality” officially appeared at the global education agenda, of the 25 studies published on this topic during the 1990s, almost half of the articles on quality education focus on the input-output approach. Two

papers take a social justice approach and cover the issue of process in discussing quality education, while few studies conduct a conceptual discussion about quality.

In the 1990s, the input-output approach was still dominant in terms of emphasis on education resources and student achievements, although the studies rarely explicitly stress the relations between education quality and economic growth as did the human capital approach in the 1970s and 1980s (Crossley & Murby, 1994; Heyneman, 1990; Heyneman, 1997; Muskin, 1999; Parafox, Prawda, & Velez, 1994; Raudenbush, Kidchanapanish, & Kang, 1991). Heyneman (1990, 1997) discussed the issue of education quality with examples of input indicators including the quantity of textbooks and reading material, and outcomes in terms of student, system, and labor market aspects. Memorization skill, efficiency of presentation, self-generated skills of investigation and self-generated habits of learning are each discussed as examples of product outputs. Inputs are emphasized by Crossley and Murby (1994), who discussed the quality of the school curriculum in terms of providing textbooks and other learning materials. Mboya and Mwamwenda (1994) also studied quality education in black schools in South Africa with a focus on human and physical resources. Meanwhile, the study of Palafox, Prawda, and Velez (1994) is based on the assumption that quality is measured by output criteria: the information retrieved from existing standardized achievement tests. Muskin (1999), interestingly, covered the connection between school quality and academic measures by exploring the case of Save the Children community schools in Mali.

Rarely does the research explored emphasize the perspective of social justice, except for Stephens (1991) and Kanu (1996). Stephens (1991) argued that quality education must be valued in terms of processes as well as the end goals, inputs and outputs. Starting from this assumption, he examines “the quality of change and decision-making processes, the context within which these decisions are made, and possible ways forward for improving educational decision-making at both the local and international levels” (p. 223). Considering that this conceptualization is related to how agendas are drawn up and how decisions are made and implemented, it is regarded as a matter of participation and realization of social justice. Kanu (1996) similarly emphasized people’s participation in the decision-making process and striving toward positive change.

Among the 25 papers investigated in our study, a large proportion covers the issues of teacher training and teacher quality. Five studies which are categorized as ‘others’ in Figure 2 directly discuss teacher training and teacher quality (Fuller & Kapakasa, 1991; Kanu, 1996; Ndawi, 1997; Slavin, 1994; Thompson, 1990). Four of these studies, all but Slavin (1994), are based on the context of a developing country, typically cases from African countries.

2000-2009: Increase in comprehensive and alternative viewpoints

Compared to the 1990s, the number of studies on quality education increased in the 2000s from 25 to 36. This larger number of published papers signifies greater diversification in the discourses and approaches on education quality. Although many studies continued to use the input-output approach, defining quality as educational inputs and outputs, a growing number of researches embraced alternative approaches including values, culture, and teaching and learning processes to conceptualize quality.

In the 2000s, the input-output approach remained important in defining and measuring

quality of education (Anderson, 2005; Baker, Goesling, & LeTendre, 2002; Courtney, 2008; Peters & Hall, 2004; Salmi, 2000; Zhang, 2006). Out of 36 studies, nine articles use the input-output perspective. For example, in a study on Haitian private education Salmi (2000) suggests learning achievement as a direct output indicator to measure quality and provides a list of input indicators including quality of instruction, unqualified teachers, lack of textbooks, unco-ordinated development of curriculum and instructional materials, and poor facilities. Influenced by Heyneman and Loxley, Baker et al. (2002) used 11 resource shortage variables to measure the quality of the teaching environment to explore school quality. Anderson (2005) examined the relatedness of interventions — including classroom libraries, textbook distribution, and in-service teacher training — to achievement as output. Zhang (2006) regarded achievement in reading and math as an important indicator to measure school quality. Although Courtney (2008) introduced various definitions of quality education, indicators such as inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes are still of concern. Peters and Hall (2004) added contexts to these general categories.

With the increase in the number of studies on quality education, some scholars emphasize comprehensive approaches (Lloyd, El Tawila, Clark, & Mensch, 2003; Motala, 2001) and provide alternative viewpoints in discussing quality education (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Hawes, 2003; McNess, 2004; N'tchougan-Sonou, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2006). Lloyd et al. (2003) expanded the definition of school quality limited to aspects of school effectiveness by embracing diverse elements of schooling that affect enrollment and retention. Also considered are not only resources or inputs including supportive teachers and advisors and school orderliness, but also human rights-related indicators. These indicators include gender attitudes of teachers, school policies on sexual harassment, and students' views on issues of gender equity within the school, although the exact words "human rights" or "rights" are not mentioned in the research. Lloyd et al. (2003) and Hawes (2003) also emphasized the human rights and input-output approaches. Motala (2001) chronologically traced the research on quality education that was conducted mainly in South Africa. This analysis reveals that the discussion on education quality in the late 1980s and early 1990s focuses mainly on the input-output perspective. Since the 1990s, however, research has diversified and began to include the aspects of effectiveness, value, and transformation.

The emergence of several alternative approaches to viewing quality education is a noticeable trend in the research on quality education in the 2000s. With reference to Bergman (1996), N'tchougan-Sonou (2001) introduced value quality as the concept of quality and discussed the degree to which the goals of the educational system relate to each society's value system. The concept of school quality discussed by Hawes (2003) takes a slightly different point of view from N'tchougan-Sonou by considering something special, which goes beyond the normal expectations of a school. Meanwhile, the necessity of considering culture and context while defining quality was advocated by McNess (2004) and Dello-Iacovo (2009). In research on the effects of teacher values on quality, McNess (2004) found that concepts of quality are neither static nor universal but "individual and situated, and strongly influenced not only by custom and practice but also by current policy and individual teacher experience" (p. 326). With a review of the curriculum reform attempts made by the Chinese government, Dello-Iacovo (2009) implicitly revealed how quality education could be defined differently in various contexts. Finally, there is an increasing emphasis on process in conceptualizing quality education (N'tchougan-Sonou, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2006). This shift to emphasizing teaching and learning processes and interactions is noteworthy.

2010-2016: Remarkable growth in the literatures taking a social justice approach

In the 2010s, the perspectives on quality education became more diverse, with a noticeable growth in social justice literature. Although the input-output approach still secured academic attention, its focus was now on outputs such as learning and cognitive abilities rather than inputs, including school-related resources. Among the 48 articles published between 2010 and 2016, three papers are related to the human rights approach (Gordon, 2010; Rose, 2015; Santhya, Zavier, & Jejeebhoy, 2015) while studies focus on the significance of the cultural aspect in defining quality (Cravens, Liu, & Grogan, 2012; Hu, 2015; McCormick, 2011).

This increase in academic emphasis on social justice and capabilities is remarkable in the research on quality education conducted in the 2010s (Barrett, 2011b; Frempong, Reddy, & Kanjee, 2011; Jerrard, 2016; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). From a social justice perspective, Tikly and Barrett (2011) suggested three interrelated dimensions of the quality of education: inclusion, relevance and democracy. While the human capital and human rights approaches were still considered dominant, the former was criticized for its inability to design a framework to explain education quality while the latter was contested for its top-down characteristics in terms of agenda setting and implementation. Based on the presumption that education quality is a political issue, these later studies emphasize participation in deciding the valued outcomes, processes, and development of capabilities. In a discussion of the post-2015 education agenda, Sayed and Ahmed (2015) also used the framework of Tikly and Barrett (2011), and Jerrard (2016) employed a social justice framework to explore school benefits in village schools in Pakistan.

Comprehensive approaches in defining quality education also appear in the articles published so far in this decade. Nikel and Lowe (2010) provided a multi-dimensional model that contains seven conceptual dimensions: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, responsiveness, relevance, reflexivity and sustainability. Aikman, Halai, and Rubagiza (2011) repositioned gender equality in an education quality context with four identified approaches: human capital theory, human rights and power perspectives, gender equality as transforming unjust structures, and postcolonial critiques.

Conclusion: Diverse actors in global governance of education and change of international development paradigm

Drawing from Tikly and Barrett (2011) and Tikly (2011), our research applied four main discourses — the postcolonial, input-output, human rights and social justice approaches — to explore trends in international journal articles on quality education published from 1960 to 2016. The analysis of these 121 studies reveals that the conceptualization of quality education has diversified over time, in spite of the dominance of the input-output approach. Although few studies apply the postcolonial approach, the human rights perspective has steadily received scholarly attention since the 2000s. Noticeably, studies embracing the social justice approach have increased since the 2010s. Considering that academic concerns should not be separate from global and domestic policies and practices, these changes in the discourse of quality education might have originated from the following background.

First, the trend of more varied discourse over the period of 1960-2016 might reflect that

the main actors in the global governance of quality education have been diversified. Human capital, or the input-output approach in education, has been supported largely by the World Bank since its creation after World War II. During the 1960s, the World Bank emerged “as a global governor in social policy fields” (Mundy & Verger, 2015, p. 10) and its education sector lending gradually increased. As a growing number of independent nations joined the institution with their aim of economic growth, access to education was the World Bank’s main concern, and quality education was discussed in relations to economic matters (Tilky & Barrett, 2011). A small number of studies on quality in education and its relatedness to human capital or input-output approach published between the 1960s and 1980s revealed the global dominance of the economic approach in educational policies and discourse. Although UNESCO managed to maintain its role as a main actor in educational multilateralism with the World Bank during that time, the budgetary constraints and internal turbulence led to the human capital approach playing a greater role in global educational discourse (Mundy, 1999). Since the World Conference on Education for All hosted in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, there has been clear coordination among multilateral actors including UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank. In addition, civil society and private sector organizations have emerged as new actors in educational multilateralism. These new partnerships are regarded as having influenced the increase in policies and projects in relation to quality education as well as introducing different approaches in academic discourse.

Second, the shifting trend in studies on quality education is closely linked to the changing paradigm in the field of international development and the roles of education. The hegemonic neo-liberal discourse mainly highlighting market-based economic growth has gradually faced criticism since the end of the 20th century, while alternative viewpoints emphasizing sustainability, social justice, gender equality and empowerment have gained attention from the various layers of actors. This implies that the political and social environments have been transformed. The linkage of quality education with economic outputs and outcomes combined with its relevance to the changing international development agenda has affected the diffused characteristics of academic analysis regarding quality in education studies.

The analysis of the 121 studies from eight international journals might be regarded as insufficient to find a general pattern of variation in the discourse on quality education. By setting up its own criteria to select journals, the study aimed to ensure its validity in discussing academic trends in the conceptualization of quality education. Considering the close connection of scholarly work with policies and practices, the shift to multiple quality education discourses is closely tied to the diversified multilateralism in the education sector and the changing paradigm of international development and the roles of education. The finding of this study also implies that to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education as suggested by SDG 4 it is necessary to have a coherent and productive mechanism of discussion, at the global, national, and regional level, on what quality education is.

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