

[Speaker Presentation]

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY OF EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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“ There are no favorable winds for someone who does not know where they are going”

Séneca

BASIC POINTS OF DEPARTURE

What is a human being?

We have felt the need to begin from the previous question because whatever the role which circumstantially falls on us to play in life (student, teacher, father of a family, educational administrator, etc.), what we all have in common is the fact that we are human beings. For this reason it appears to me to be useful and, at the same time necessary, to initiate this presentation attempting to respond to this crucial question.

Independent of the diversity existing among other human beings, we have the same biological structure which makes us belong to the human species. Each member of the human species has three dimensions:

- Corporal dimension
- Rational dimension
- Emotional dimension

Consequently, we are physical beings who think and feel. When these three dimensions are in perfect harmony and balance, the human being is in a condition to appropriately develop and form.

A good education should favor the individual to develop and form according to his potential in accordance with that which can be expected at each stage or time of growth. A good system of evaluation of the quality of education should have this holistic approach which permits to identify which of these dimensions of being human are affected and why.

The previous reflection leads us to the need to deepen in relation to what we understand by quality of education.

Usually in the field of pedagogy, and of social sciences in general, there is a lack of definition and ambiguity of terms which makes each individual attribute a different meaning to a single meaning or word. That is, each interprets the same word differently, and this leads to significant difficulties in communication. What is even more important is it limits the integration of efforts in attaining goals, which specifically could be attaining a high-quality education for all.

At times it appears it is known what the quality of education is, but it is not possible to express it. For this reason, in the following we humbly attempt to define what we understand by this.

It seems that the most logical is to commence by undertaking and studying, in depth, the concept of quality. In spite of the difficulty that this undertaking involves, we accept the challenge of offering definitions of this concept which help to clarify its content and scope.

Etymologically, “quality” comes from the Latin *qualitas*, which is a derivation from the Latin *qualis*. The dictionary “Diccionario Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico” [Spanish and Hispanic Etymological Dictionary] by Corominas and Pascual indicates: “In Latin *qualis*,” “of a certain kind,” “how,” “of what class,” indicates the quality, the state of being.

On reading the dictionaries of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, of Spanish Usage, by María Moliner, and the “Ideológico de la Lengua Española,” by Julio Casares, it is possible to infer the following meanings for the word “quality”:

1. Property or set of properties inherent to something, which permits to consider this as the same, better or worse than the remainder of its kind.

Example: This fabric is of lower quality.

2. In an absolute sense, good quality, superiority or excellence.

Example: The quality of Jerez wine has dominated all markets.

As we see in the previous meanings, on the one part, quality, understood as a characteristic of quality, is a neutral word that does not imply judgments of value and to which we should add a description, an adjective. On the other hand, quality, understood in absolute terms such as superiority or greater advantage of something, is an ambiguous term, to which each may provide a very specific meaning. The latter is the meaning with which quality of education most frequently appears in literature, although to us it appears to be a drawback.

Now we consider it necessary to define what we understand by “education.” In this regard, we assume the definition which is provided by Grupo Pedagogía del Instituto Central de Ciencias Pedagógicas de Cuba [Pedagogical Group of the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences of Cuba] when it states that:

“Education is a consciously organized, directed and systematized process on the basis of a determined pedagogical concept, which establishes as a more general objective the multilateral and harmonious training of the student, in order to integrate the society in which they live and contribute to its development and improvement. The essential core of this training has to be moral wealth.”¹

The quality of education is primarily a social and political problem - and not only pedagogical and technical - for which it is improbable that a universally accepted definition can be found.

Tendencies existing in the world in regard to the definition of the concept “quality of education”

A careful analysis of the literature in Cuba, and in another 10 countries of Latin America and Europe in regard to the treatment given to the concept “quality of education,” brings us to the conclusion that, in general, there are three clearly defined tendencies on undertaking this: an attempt to discuss and define it on a constituent or conceptual basis; that is, to theoretically define it; the second attempts to define it on an operational basis, through a set of indicators; and the third eludes definition.

Based on specific examples, in following we will analyze each of the tendencies referred to.

First tendency

The Argentine author Pedro Lafourcade indicates that:

“a quality education may mean what makes possible the understanding of a disinterested knowledge which is manifested in the acquiring of a scientific or literary culture, which carries out the maximum capacity to generate richness or convert someone into a suitable human resource to contribute to the productive apparatus; which promotes sufficient critical spirit and strengthens the commitment to transform a social reality deranged by the rule of a powerful structure which socially benefits a few, etc.”²

This author attempts to offer a theoretic definition of the concept of quality of education. In our opinion, in doing

¹ Collection of authors of Grupo Pedagogía del Instituto Central de Ciencias Pedagógicas, Cuba, Principales Categorías de la Pedagogía como Ciencia [Main Categories of Pedagogy as Science]. Journal, 1997, page 29.

² Lafourcade, Pedro. Calidad de la Educación [Quality of Education], Dirección Nacional de Información, Difusión Estadística y Tecnología Educativa del Ministerio de Educación y Justicia [National Department of Information, Diffusion of Statistics and Educational Technology of the Ministry of Education and Justice]. Buenos Aires, April, 1988, page. 1.

so, he uses the acceptance of the term “quality” which gives it an adjectival character when speaking of “education of quality,” thus assuming the existence of education “without quality.” Thus, in our opinion, he commits a philosophical error, since the quality of all objectives (in this case, education) is linked to the entire objective, it completely encompasses it and inseparable from this. The concept of quality is linked to the objective which, being the same, cannot lose its quality. Unfortunately, most authors prefer this acceptance of the word “quality,” which renders it an absolute character, which we consider a drawback and inaccurate.

Consequently, all education has a determined quality. However, this may be more or less (quantity), to the extent that these characteristics approach or depart from the philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and sociological paradigms which prevail over a specific historic society.

On the other hand, for our society, the central objective of education is not the training of a suitable “human resource” but that each man and woman develops fully, in accordance with their potential, and is capable and able to apply their talents and energies to the service of society from universal and national values which it has appropriated. In addition, education should not only enable the understanding of “knowledge,” but also a “knowledge of how” and “knowledge of being.” The latter is determined by the formation of a set of qualities of the personality - not reduced to having a determined critical spirit - which enables the individual to learn to “live together with other human beings,” accepting them as legitimate “others.”

Within this first tendency, we can assume the existence of several subtendencies, of which the main one is that which presents “definitions centered on the process vs. definitions centered on the product.”

Most theoretic definitions found relate to the quality of the results. One of these is as follows:

“An education will be of quality to the extent that all the elements which intervene in this are directed toward the best possible attainment.”³

Education, understood as a simple review of the end results, loses sight of the consideration of the center as an ecosystem which permits to explain and give meaning to the general functioning, and to the processes through which educational teaching activities are carried out.

Esteban and Montiel (1990) show an example of theoretic definition of the concept of quality of education, centered in the process:

“Process or principle of performance which does not exclusively aim at obtaining immediate or final results, but, fundamentally, a method of approaching things, little by little, to attain the best possible results in view of what we are required to provide and of the real existing possibilities and limitations.”⁴

We understand the quality of education as a tendency, as a path, as a continuous construction process and as perpetual improvement of the results.

Another important subtendency groups a set of authors which, in an attempt to provide a theoretic definition of quality of education, proposes to center this in one of the elements which intervene in the teaching-learning process or influence this. Thus, we find definitions which provide priority to the curriculum, to the student, to the teacher, to the institution as a whole, etc. The following are some examples:

Centered on the faculty

“The objective of the study of quality of education consists in understanding it better, in clarifying how it can be attained and in channeling the resources to assist all teachers in improving the existing level of performance and thus

³ Cobo, J.M. El reto de la Calidad en la Educación. Propuesta de un Modelo Sistemático [The Challenge of Quality in Education. Proposal of a Systematic Model]. En Revista Educación [Educational Journal], No. 308, Spain, page 358.

⁴ Esteban, M.C.; Montiel, J.U. (1990). Calidad en el centro escolar [Quality in an Educational Institution]. En Cuadernos de Pedagogía [In Pedagogy Notebooks], Spain, No. 186, page. 75.

satisfying public expectations of the investment in the education system.”⁵

“The quality of teaching is conceived as the permanent optimization process of the professor’s activity which promotes and develops the training of the student.”⁶

Centered on the student

“The ultimate destination of the effort for improving the quality of education is the students. It is they who finally should benefit by the better operation of the teaching centers. What it is attempted to attain is that the students, all students, and according to their possibilities, learn more and better, learn to learn by themselves, develop a taste for studying, a desire to know more, and progressively reach a personal, social and moral maturity which allows them to act responsibly and independently.”⁷

Centered on the curriculum

“Quality consists in planning and evaluating the optimum curriculum (according to the optimum criteria of each country) for each student, in the context of a diversity of individuals who learn.”⁸

Centered on the educational institution

“Quality of education, inasmuch as it is manifested in a valid product, will basically depend on what occurs in the school, the structures and processes of the educational institutions.”⁹

Each of the previous definitions gives light on the essentials which should be attained in the tasks of each educational agent, and on the vital elements of the educational system, such as the school and the curriculum. But it is necessary to build a more holistic vision of the concept of quality of education, in order to “catch” its essential elements “as a whole.”

Second tendency

The Mexican author Silvia Schmelkes maintains:

“In countries such as ours, in which the universalization of basic education is still not a reality, it is important to stipulate that due to the quality of this level of education we are understanding a complex concept which at least includes the following components:

- a) *Relevance*: To be of quality, an educational system should be capable of offering training to its real and potential demand which are relevant for the present and future life of the students and for the present and future needs of the society in which they develop. The relevancy of the educational objectives and achievements becomes an essential component in order to understand the quality of education, basically because this has a lot to do with the capability of ensuring coverage and permanency of the students within the educational system.
- b) *Effectiveness*: I understand effectiveness as the capacity of a basic educational system to attain the objectives - assuming that these are relevant - to all the students who theoretically should meet the standard, and within the times allowed for this. An educational system will be more effective to the extent that this objective is

⁵ Wilson, J.D. *Cómo Valorar la Calidad de la Enseñanza* [How to Evaluate the Quality of Teaching]. Paidós/MEC, Madrid, 1992, page. 34.

⁶ Carr, W.; Kemmis, S. *Teoría Crítica de la Enseñanza* [Critical Theory of Teaching]. Editorial Martínez – Roca, Barcelona, 1988.

⁷ MEC. *Centros Educativos y Calidad de la Enseñanza* [Educational Institutions and Quality of Teaching]. Centros de Publicaciones del MEC, Madrid, 1994, page. 33.

⁸ Wilson, J.D. *Cómo Valorar la Calidad de la Enseñanza* [How to Evaluate the Quality of Teaching]. Paidós/MEC, Madrid, 1992, page. 34.

⁹ De la Orden, A. (1993). *La Escuela en la Perspectiva del Producto Educativo. Reflexiones Sobre Evaluación de Centros Docentes* [The School in the Perspective of the Educational Product. Reflections on the Evaluation of Educational Institutions]. En Bordón, Vol. 45, No. 3, page 264.

approached. This concept includes that of coverage, permanency, promotion and of real learning.

- c) *Equity*: A basic education system - which is the level presented as obligatory for the entire population of a determined age - in order to be of quality, should depart from the recognition that different types of students receive basic education with different starting points. On doing so, it is proposed to offer differential support in order to ensure that the objectives of education are attained, on an equitable basis for all. Equity implies giving more and providing more support to those who require it. Equity will be reflected in the effectiveness.
- d) *Efficiency*: A system will be of higher quality inasmuch as, compared with another, it attains similar results with fewer resources.”¹⁰

This author assumes the same position as already commented on previously, in relation to the use of the expression “education of quality.” Although from the beginning of this work we clarified that this meaning of the word quality is very common, in our opinion it is not philosophically appropriate. In addition, from an operational definition of the concept of quality of education, without a precedence of its theoretic definition, it causes us to lose the relationship between the theoretic and practical and, consequently, it leaves many essential questions unanswered. For example, when can we say a training, an objective or an educational achievement is relevant?

Third tendency

In their book “Claves para una Educación de Calidad,” [Keys for a Quality Education], the Chilean authors Juan Casassus and Violeta Arancibia state: “Quality of education is one of those significant, mobilizing and emotionally charged concepts which is extensively handled in society. Its richness is precisely based on its ambiguity.”¹¹

From the philosophical viewpoint, in general, and logical viewpoint, in particular, we consider this position inadequate for purposes of being able to penetrate the essence of this complex objective, which is the quality of education (CE). Defining, characterizing, exemplifying, dividing, limiting and generalizing a concept are logical operations of thought which should be carried out for an in-depth understanding. There is no doubt that if there is insufficient clarity in regard to the essence of this concept, little can be done to design an appropriate system which permit to evaluate it.

What position should we then take? What tendency do we belong to? Although all the efforts to determine what quality of education is are valid, and contribute to the penetration of its essence, we share the opinion that although the road to understanding an objective is infinite, there are routes which facilitate this while others make it more difficult.

In his Philosophical Notebooks, Lenin maintains assures that “knowledge is the eternal and infinite approximation of thought to the objective. The reflection of nature in man’s thought should be understood, not in inert or in abstract form, not lacking movement, not lacking contradictions, but rather in the eternal process of movement, in the emergence of contradictions and in their solution.”¹²

From his words, it emerges that the understanding of the problem of knowledge as a process in which human beings, as a cognoscente subject, go in search of the objective truth through a dialectic road of infinite absolute and relative truths. This reflects the nature of the contradictory nature of knowledge; while its infinite and inexhaustible character allows us to approach, more and better each time, the essence of the objective or phenomenon which we wish to know.

Due to all the above, it appears necessary to us to depart from a theoretic definition of the quality of education

¹⁰ Schmelkes, Silvia. Document 3. Programa Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación [Evaluation Program of the Quality of Education]. Cumbre Iberoamericana, 1997, pages 4 - 5.

¹¹ Casassus, Juan and Arancibia, Violeta. Claves para una Educación de Calidad [Keys for a Quality Education]. Edit. Kapelusz, Buenos Aires, 1997, page 9.

¹² Lenin, Vladimir I. Philosophical Notebooks. Editorial Progreso, Cuba, 1974, page 67.

concept and derive an operational definition from this, whose effectiveness can be corroborated in educational practice by means of multiple multi-varied analysis. Systematically, these will allow us to increase what we know and reduce what we do not know regarding the quality of education.

Since we are not satisfied with the theoretic definitions found in the literature consulted, we will form our own, which we present in the following:

Quality of education refers to the characteristics of the context, the input, processes and results of the formation of man (which includes the three dimensions presented in the first part of this work). This is historically and socially conditioned and takes a specific expression from the philosophical, pedagogical, sociological and psychological thought prevailing in a determined society and is measured by the distance existing between the standard (the thought) and the data (what actually occurs in educational practice). This thought is realized in the end and objectives of education.

See our operational definition of the concept “quality of education” in the Annex.

ANNEX

Operational definition of the concept of “quality of education”

Once our theoretic definition of the concept of the quality of education has been broadly exposed, we are in a position to refer to our operational definition from this, with the latter being understood to be a system of indicators.

On attempting to give an operational definition to a complex concept, such as that of quality of education - we will group the variables or elements of which it is formed, such that the cause-effect relationship is made evident through the incident variable-result variable relationship.

VARIABLES OF THE PROCESS

School organization and environment

Dimensions	Indicators
1. Physical conditions	Constructional condition of the educational institution.
	Care of personal and real property of the institution.
	Space for recess, Physical Education classes and school Library.
	Completion of the shop and laboratory equipment.
	Adequacy and upkeep of the school furniture.
2. Hygienic – school conditions	Lighting.
	Acoustic insulation of the teaching premises.
	Ventilation.
	Water availability.
	Power.
	Sanitary services.
3. Sociopsychological environment	Blackboard conditions.
	Voice modes and tone of students and workers.
	Degree of satisfaction and commitment to the institution.
4. School organization	Teacher, student and parent participation in making decisions and in the evaluation of their results.
	Fulfillment of the teaching schedule and life.
	Rational distribution of human and material resources.
	Attendance and punctuality of students and teachers.
	Discipline and care of the study materials.

School direction

Dimensions	Indicators
5. Involvement of the administration team	Pedagogical vocation of its members.
	Work satisfaction.
	Expectations in respect to the development of their students.
	Sense of justice and pedagogical tact.
6. Operation of the administrative bodies	Political and technical leadership of the director.
	Preparation of the system of meetings and effectiveness of their resolutions.
	Knowledge, interpretation and application of educational policy, adjusted to its conditions.
	Knowledge of functional tasks (diagnostic of achievements and deficiencies, actions to eradicate the latter, control and evaluation of responsibilities and tasks of members).
	Integration relations established with other members or bodies according to the objectives of the institution.
	Degree of autonomy in relation to other levels of administration.
7. Style of administration	Combination of requirement with recognition for the effective fulfillment of collective functions.
	Providing the group with the possibility of establishing its goals and critically evaluating its fulfillment.
	Promotion of self-evaluation and critical evaluation strategies of its performance and of that of its subordinates.
	Establishment of free and cooperative interpersonal relations.
	Promotion of exchanges for feedback on the degree of satisfaction that the style of administration generates.

Teacher performance

Dimensions	Indicators
8. Conduction of the teaching – educational process	Degree of understanding of the content taught, of the Theory of Education, of General Didactics and of the specialty (includes an understanding of the target and objectives to be attained by the students, according to their stage of development).
	Degree of knowledge and handling of the individual psychological characteristics of the students.
	Degree of updated information regarding the students' learning.
	Motivation attained during class, and degree of involvement attained in the student, such that the process has significance and meaning for the student, throughout the activity.
	Appropriate performance during the teaching activity: orientation, execution and control.
9. Other pedagogical capacities	Quality of his verbal and nonverbal communications.
	Ability to appropriately plan the teaching-education process.
	Contribution to an appropriate socio-psychological environment in the classroom and in the school.
	Use of a variety of educational practices.
	Possession of an appropriate representation of his social duty and that of the institution.
	Effectiveness of his training and self-preparation.
10. Involvement	Pedagogical vocation.
	Self-esteem and self-efficiency.
	Ability to act fairly and with pedagogical tact.
	Level of professional and work satisfaction.
11. Work responsibility	School and class attendance and punctuality.
	Degree of participation in methodological sessions and in other workshops of reflection among teachers.
	Fulfillment of the standards.
	Professional level attained.
	Personal involvement in reaching decisions of the institution.
	Degree of relative professional autonomy.
	Fulfillment of that scheduled in the curriculum, adapted to the students' needs and the conditions of the school.

Dimensions	Indicators
12. Interpersonal relations with students, parents, administrators and colleagues	Level of concern and understanding of students' problems.
	Level of expectations in respect to the development of their students.
	Flexibility in accepting diversity of opinion and students' feelings and real respect for their generic and racial differences and socioeconomic situation.
13. Results of his educational work	This is measured in accordance with the operationalization we carry out of the variable "development of the students' personalities."

Family functionality

Dimensions	Indicators
14. Family typology	Socio-class relations (worker, professional).
	Structure or makeup (nuclear, extended, complete, incomplete).
	Residency zone (urban, rural).
	Work situation of the parents or guardians.
	Economic situation of the family.
	Level of education of the parents.
	Living conditions at home.
15. Social, political and moral behavior	Participation in community work.
	Political affiliation.
	Religious beliefs.
	Criminal record.
	Perception existing in the community of a political ideological environment of the home.
16. Fulfillment of biosocial function	Relationship of the couple.
	Family communication and relations.
17. Fulfillment of the educational role	Educational procedures of control used.
	Style of authority.
	Attention to the family life of the children.
	Attention to the spiritual and cultural training of the child.
	Evaluation of relations with the school.
	Expectations in relation to the children's future.

Education management of the community

Dimensions	Indicators
18. Physical, demographic and historic characteristics of the Popular Council of where the school is located	Geographic scope and location of the Popular Council.
	Prevailing characteristics of the homes.
	Origins of the community, historic events and personalities.
19. Relevant aspects of economic, cultural, sports and recreational development of the Popular Council	Economic characteristics of the community. Main productions.
	Cultural, recreation and sports institutions which exist in the Popular Council. Support provided to the development of the Educational Project of the school.
20. Most relevant political and social aspects	Political environment and operation of political and mass organizations.
	Crime problems.
	Prevailing religions and religious sects and their influence on the community.
	Identification and follow up of children with risk factors in socially disadvantaged situations and tendency toward delinquency.

RESULT VARIABLES

Internal efficiency of the school

Dimensions	Indicators
1. Quantitative aspects of the educational service	Education.
	Percentage of retention and students of a cohort who leave school.
2. Efficiency	Average time that the institution requires to obtain qualification of grade level.
	Average education of the students who leave school.
	Percentage of students academically behind.
	Percentage of students who graduated from the school who entered at the next school level.
	Gross efficiency.

Development of student personality

Dimensions	Indicators
4. Cognitive	Amount of assimilated knowledge expressed in the percentage of correct responses attained in standardized tests of the disciplines taken.
	Degree to which they manage to obtain the knowledge expressed at the level of performance attained in these tests.
5. Reflexive – regulating	Presence of procedures directed toward reflective analysis of the conditions of the tasks and search of strategies for their solution, as well as collective and individual actions of control of conduct.
6. Emotional – motivational	Motivation of the student in learning, self-evaluation, their expectations
	Noticeable effects in the formation of standards, sentiments, evaluative orientations.

External efficiency of the school

Dimensions	Indicators
7. Family benefits	Improvement of family relations.
	Raising of the standard of living of the family.
	Useful application of free time.
8. Social benefits	Degree of satisfaction of employers with the graduates (end education).
	Reduction of delinquent index.