



Educational Quality. Categorical System against Conceptual Inflation, in Defense of Theoretical Pluralism

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Abstract

This article proposes a categorical system to reduce the polysemy of the concept of *educational quality* and to render its uses in educational research comparable. Building on a conceptual reconstruction that links the philosophical notion of *qualitas* with its contemporary diffusion associated with administrative language, economies of efficiency, and managerial rhetoric, it argues that the ambiguity of the term hinders the accumulation of comparative knowledge and enables implicit normative effects in the choice of definitions. On this basis, five hypothetical analytical categories are formulated: quality as the transmission of values, as the distribution of inputs, as process, as outcomes, and as satisfaction of demand. The proposal is empirically tested through a documentary review of the entire body of publications of the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* (95 issues, 1978–2025), identifying 43 relevant texts (2.6 % of the total) and classifying them according to the categorical scheme, with additional registration of hybrid and critical approaches. The findings show the predominance of quality understood as outcomes, a strong presence of critical perspectives, and the absence of studies whose primary focus is satisfaction of demand, although this dimension appears in hybrid combinations. The article concludes that the proposed categorical system does not eliminate the normative dimension of the concept but makes it explicit and operational what allows the mapping of positions, the identification of historical shifts, and the transformation of an inflated signifier into an analytical tool for the comparative study of educational quality.

Keywords

educational quality; concept formation; theoretical frameworks; educational theories; definitions

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Qualidade educativa. Sistema categorial contra a inflação conceitual, em defesa do pluralismo teórico

Resumo

Este artigo propõe um sistema categorial para reduzir a polissemia do conceito de *qualidade educacional* e tornar comparáveis seus usos na pesquisa educacional. A partir de uma reconstrução conceitual que articula a noção filosófica de *qualitas* com sua difusão contemporânea associada as linguagens administrativas, economias da eficiência e retóricas gerenciais, argumenta-se que a ambiguidade do termo dificulta a acumulação de conhecimento comparativo e habilita efeitos normativos implícitos na escolha das definições. Com base nisso, formulam-se cinco categorias analíticas hipotéticas: qualidade como transmissão de valores, como distribuição de insumos, como processo, como resultados e como satisfação da demanda. A proposta é testada empiricamente por meio de uma revisão documental da totalidade da produção da *Revista Colombiana de Educação* (95 números, 1978–2025), identificando-se 43 textos pertinentes (2,6 % do total) e classificando-os segundo o esquema categorial, com registro adicional de abordagens híbridas e críticas. Os achados mostram a predominância da qualidade entendida como resultados, a forte presença de perspectivas críticas e a ausência de estudos cujo eixo principal seja a satisfação da demanda, embora essa dimensão apareça em combinações híbridas. Conclui-se que o sistema categorial proposto não elimina a dimensão normativa do conceito, mas a torna explícita e operativa, o que permite mapear posições, identificar deslocamentos históricos e transformar um significante inflacionado em uma ferramenta analítica para o estudo comparado da qualidade educacional.

Palavras-chave

qualidade educacional; formação de conceitos; marcos teóricos; teorias educacionais; definições

Calidad educativa. Sistema categorial contra la inflación conceptual, en defensa del pluralismo teórico

Resumen

Este artículo propone un sistema categorial para reducir la polisemia del concepto de *calidad educativa* y hacer comparables sus usos en la investigación educacional. A partir de una reconstrucción conceptual que vincula la noción filosófica de *qualitas* con su masificación contemporánea asociada a lenguajes administrativos, economías de la eficiencia y retóricas de gestión, se argumenta que la ambigüedad del término obstaculiza la acumulación de conocimiento comparativo y habilita efectos normativos implícitos en la elección de definiciones. Sobre esa base, se formulan cinco categorías analíticas hipotéticas: calidad como transmisión de valores, como distribución de insumos, como proceso, como resultados y como satisfacción de la demanda. La propuesta se contrasta empíricamente mediante una revisión documental de la totalidad de la producción de la *Revista Colombiana de Educación* (95 números, 1978–2025), identificando 43 textos pertinentes (2.6 % del total) y clasificándolos según el esquema categorial, con registro adicional de enfoques híbridos y críticos. Los hallazgos muestran predominio de la calidad entendida como resultados, alta presencia de perspectivas críticas y ausencia de estudios cuyo eje principal sea la satisfacción de la demanda, aunque esta aparece en combinaciones híbridas. Se concluye que el sistema categorial no elimina la dimensión normativa del concepto, pero la vuelve explícita y operativa, lo que permite identificar posiciones, detectar desplazamientos históricos y transformar un significante inflacionado en una herramienta analítica para los estudios comparados.

Palabras clave

teoría; teoría de la educación; conceptualización; formación del concepto; calidad de la educación

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Introduction

When analyzing contemporary school education, a widely shared conviction emerges: the need to improve its quality. Various actors—academic specialists, international organizations, governments, NGOs, and teachers' unions—agree in diagnosing the low quality of educational systems, institutional deterioration, and the persistence of policies poorly oriented towards improvement. Likewise, stakeholders disseminate examples they consider successful, presenting them as reference models. As Figueiredo (2025) points out, the concern for educational quality has remained constant since the end of the 20th century, given the central place that education occupies in modern societies. Within this discursive framework, speakers repeat a series of pedagogical and management prescriptions as certainties: systems must have highly qualified teachers and invest in their professional training; they must provide adequate and updated material resources, ranging from building conditions to digital technology; they need to guarantee universal access to quality teaching and address each student's needs; they must strengthen the bond between family and school, and adapt teaching to the 21st-century digital world. According to Sass *et al.* (2025), we can understand the concept of educational quality based on why, what, how, where, and with whom people teach and learn, which explains its persistent ambiguity in contemporary debates.

It is challenging to mention all these slogans, some more plausible than others. However, when trying to specify what "educational quality" really means, conceptual gaps and semantic oscillations appear. What seems evident is not always transparent: the term reinforces its polysemic character and functions as a self-sufficient assumption that scholars rarely problematize. Hence arises the need to theorize the concept of quality in education, preventing it from functioning as an umbrella under which any content can be encompassed. The goal is to endow the term with a specificity that enriches academic debate and clarifies what policies promote, what they seek to improve, and what they aim to question. This study gathers old concerns (Narodowski, 1996) in line with recent bibliometric reviews (Taraza *et al.*, 2024) that address the multiplicity of meanings for educational quality.

The objective of this article is to systematize a set of analytical categories regarding the concept of educational quality, taking as an empirical source the articles published by the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* throughout its entire editorial trajectory due to the publication's history, relevance, and growing bibliometric impact. Founded in 1978 and edited by the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (Colombia), the journal is a periodic and peer-reviewed academic publication dedicated to disseminating original research, systematic reviews, and

theoretical studies in education and pedagogy. It targets specialists, teachers, and undergraduate and graduate students in education, social sciences, and humanities, and it also constitutes a national and international reference. The journal operates under an open access policy according to the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) definition, distributes its content under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license, and assigns DOIs to all its articles. Since 2024, it publishes four issues a year, some featuring thematic dossiers. It accepts articles in Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French, and maintains an acceptance rate of approximately 20 % (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2025). It features in numerous Latin American indices, and Scopus (Elsevier) has included it since 2018 (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2025). Regarding its impact factor, it ranked in the fourth quartile (Q4) in 2019, Q3 in 2020-2021, and Q4 in 2022-2024. In summary, the systematization offered aims to provide an operational conceptual framework that allows researchers to organize the diversity of approaches and facilitates comparisons between investigations.

Advantages of a Categorical System for Educational Quality

A preliminary etymological approach refers to the Latin *qualitas*, a term Cicero introduced as a translation of the Greek *ποιότης* (*poiótēs*), a category developed in classical philosophy to designate that which answers the question of "what kind of thing" something is, meaning the set of properties or attributes that characterize an entity (Ferrater Mora, 2004). This definition poses at least two problems: on the one hand, what it means to consider something as "inherent" or "natural" in education; on the other, the term already implies an evaluation, as it allows people to judge educational quality based on what would be proper to it, even if they have not defined it yet. Absent from the pedagogical tradition, the concept of educational quality only began to massify in the second half of the 20th century, and its incorporation meant an epistemological import from administration and process engineering (Anttila & Jussila, 2017), where practitioners conceive quality as a result or product. This genealogy, which goes from the philosophical sense of "quality" to its administrative import centered on the product, evidences the coexistence of incommensurable meanings and justifies adopting a comparative system to organize these variations without imposing a single normative definition.

From an industrial economics perspective, analysts associate quality with a specific product, using production functions to determine which variables best explain it in relation to price: in a market economy, the goal is to offer higher quality products at a lower cost. Consequently, users often associate quality with efficiency: the objective involves producing better goods with fewer resources. In

administrative or marketing frameworks, experts relate quality to satisfying consumer demand rather than treating it as an intrinsic quality of the object. As Hackman and Wageman (1995) warn, this rhetoric often carries more weight than its technical application, and organizations rarely implement its complete prescriptions. The result is that the concept of educational quality reveals itself as polysemic, having diverse political, technical, and ideological uses. Authors such as Tawil, Akkari, and Macedo (2012) recognize the existence of a "lexical labyrinth," from which they attempt to escape through a normative definition of what educational quality "ought to be". There is even a vast academic production that does not seek to operationalize the concept but to question it as a tool, as shown by or Gentili (1995), who analyze its role in replacing political language with technical language or in introducing neoliberal models.

This ambiguity constitutes an obstacle for systematic analysis. For decades, every institution, theoretical current, or researcher, used the notion according to their assumptions, hindering the construction of common references. When speaking of quality, one does not always know whether the speaker refers to learning, processes, inputs, values, or user satisfaction. This indeterminacy generates fragmented diagnoses and limits the possibility of accumulating comparative knowledge. This article proposes that this dispersion can be rationalized through a categorical system that classifies the heterogeneous uses of the term without reducing them to a single normative criterion. Instead of adopting our definition or joining the general lack of definition, we aim to offer a framework that allows scholars to compare different conceptions under the same analytical scheme.

This proposal offers several advantages. First, it analytically organizes a set of scattered notions, preventing analysts from treating them as equivalent. Second, it enables the comparison of diverse discourses, recognizing their differences in assumptions and modes of operationalization. Third, researchers can apply it to the empirical analysis of academic, normative, or public policy texts, identifying conceptual shifts over time. A fourth advantage lies in the fact that normative definitions always remain debatable by definition, since they rest on evaluative positions subject to controversy and begging the question. In contrast, the proposed category system seeks to remain operational and adaptable to different theoretical and ideological registers, allowing scholars to analyze diverse discourses without necessarily sharing their presuppositions. For example, this pluralistic approach admits that one perspective may define quality based on spending efficiency and results measured in standardized tests, while critical pedagogy associates it with emancipation and social justice. Through analytical categories, analysts can comparatively examine both approaches without adopting the normative position of either.

A Proposal for Categorizing Educational Quality

To advance this achievement, we propose hypothetical definitions of categories regarding "quality" based on previous studies and relevant academic literature. Recent scholarly works agree that conceptual typologies remain necessary to reduce the ambiguity of the term without imposing single normative frameworks (Figueiredo, 2025).

Quality as the Transmission of Values

This category defines educational quality by the school system's ability to transmit moral, religious, ideological, patriotic, economic, or political principles, knowledge, and values that structure subjects' belonging and cohesion in a political community (Levin, 2002). Its central object is the value-based formation of students as a means to guarantee the stability of the social order and citizen development. The associated educational purpose involves constituting autonomous or heteronomous subjects according to the values the State promotes or the dominant pedagogical projects of each era (Paglayan, 2024). The mechanism for verifying quality lies in confirming compliance with the values stipulated in the state curriculum, observing their effective teaching and their coherence with public purposes. Historically, authorities translated this into inspection and hierarchical control systems aimed at supervising the transmission of values they considered legitimate. We can find a paradigmatic example in the 19th-century state school, where moral and civic education fulfilled a role of social cohesion against modernization processes. In the 20th century, educators associated the transmission of values with democratic citizenship training and, more recently, with the promotion of emancipatory values and human rights, often established in the self-replicated development of the normative vector (Narodowski, 2026).

Quality as the Distribution of Inputs

This definition conceives educational quality as the adequate and equitable availability of material, human, curricular, symbolic, and technological resources at the starting point of the educational process. The central object is the initial provision of means that make learning possible. The associated educational purpose consists of guaranteeing equal opportunities and conditions for all students, so that differences in results do not depend on prior inequalities (Braslavsky, 1986). The mechanism for verifying quality relies on checking the presence or absence of these inputs, through indicators for infrastructure, teacher training, teaching materials, or access to technologies. The empirical observation

of these factors allows evaluators to estimate the potential of the system to achieve significant learning. A historical example of this conception appears in school effectiveness studies, which linked quality to measurable institutional factors such as pedagogical leadership or organizational climate (Murillo, 2003). In contexts of inequality, scholars articulate this definition with the debate on education as a social good, where the distribution of educational resources reflects the general distribution structure of other public goods (Tedesco, 2012). Recent research confirms the validity of this approach by relating equity in access to inputs with the fulfillment of sustainable development goal (SDG 4) on quality education (Angrist, *et al.*, 2025).

Quality as Process

Under this conception, the organization, coherence, and stability of the pedagogical activities that shape the school experience define educational quality. The central object is the set of procedures that structure teaching and learning. The associated educational purpose lies in guaranteeing the continuity and coherence of school processes, so that innovations, adaptations, and practices respond to shared institutional objectives. The mechanism for verifying quality focuses on observing institutional dynamics: planning, time and space management, interaction among actors, and the existence of internal review mechanisms. Temporality becomes a significant element, since educational processes develop and transform over time. An illustrative example is the longitudinal evaluation of programs or reforms, which allows researchers to identify how institutions sustain consistent and adaptable practices in the face of environmental changes. This approach values the ability of schools to maintain their pedagogical identity while adapting their routines and procedures.

Quality as Results

This category defines educational quality as the effective achievement of measurable learning according to previously established standards. The central object comprises learning outcomes, expressed in individual, institutional, or systemic performance indicators. Starting from the studies and methods proposed by Eric Hanushek (Hanushek, Rivkin and Jamison, 1992), the associated educational purpose consists of maximizing the system's achievement and efficiency levels, ensuring that invested resources produce verifiable results. The mechanism for verifying quality relies on standardized national and international tests, such as TIMSS, PIRLS, or PISA, which offer comparable data on student performance and help guide public policy decisions. This model relies on the educational production function, which relates inputs and results to measure

process efficiency. A historical and contemporary example involves the expansion of standardized evaluation systems, which transformed information on results into a central axis of educational governance. Countless academic literature has highlighted this phenomenon, particularly since S. Ball's landmark article (1998): the verification of quality coincides with its very object, as the results simultaneously constitute the criterion and the proof of quality. Recent literature analyzes the impact of these systems on equity and on the global governance of education.

Quality as Demand Satisfaction

In this definition, the degree of satisfaction of the users—families and students—regarding the service received determines educational quality. The central object is the subjective assessment by the educational system's beneficiaries. The associated educational purpose involves responding to the expectations and needs of the communities the institutions serve, strengthening their legitimacy and social relevance. Surveys and enrollment movements express the mechanism for verifying quality: increased demand or student retention indicates service approval, while dropout or enrollment loss reflects dissatisfaction. This measurement requires a plural or non-monopolistic supply environment, in which comparisons between institutions remain possible and meaningful. An illustrative example is the application of school choice policies or demand-side financing, such as voucher systems, where student mobility functions as a signal of perceived quality. In its broadest version, this definition also covers community or popular education experiences, where the valuation by families and local actors determines the educational offer's legitimacy. Recent studies on school choice and user satisfaction show that the perception of quality depends on both institutional identity and context conditions (Tooley, 2021).

Methodology

The study employs a census documentary review design with a conceptual categorical content analysis. The empirical object is not the general field of literature on educational quality, but rather the universe of articles published in the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* from 1978 to 2025; therefore, it involves an intentional, institutionally delimited, and exhaustive corpus that aims to cover the universe without sampling procedures. The review is documentary because it works exclusively on published texts; it is a census because it examines all issues published in the considered period; and it is analytical because it does not merely describe thematic frequencies, but classifies and codes the articles according to a previously constructed categorical system. The units of analysis

comprise the ways in which each text defines, conceptualizes, operationalizes, or problematizes the notion of "educational quality". We considered an article to address the notion of quality explicitly when the term "quality" or directly associated expressions (for example, "educational quality," "quality improvement," "quality evaluation") appear manifestly in the title, abstract, keywords, or argumentative development, constituting a conceptual axis recognized by the author. In contrast, we considered the notion of quality implicitly present when the text does not necessarily use the term "quality," but discusses dimensions that analytically refer to any of the components in the proposed categorical system. In this way, identifying the corpus did not restrict itself to a lexical search of the term, but incorporated a conceptual criterion of relevance. This design allows researchers to observe the historical traceability of the educational quality notion within a reference academic publication, reconstructing how scholars have used the concept and the semantic transformations it has undergone over time.

The methodological procedure followed five phases: a) Identification and selection of the corpus: we surveyed all articles that address the notion of educational quality explicitly or implicitly. To ensure exhaustiveness, we complemented the automated review using web scraping tools (Anaconda Inc, 2023; Richardson, 2023, and BeautifulSoup) with a traditional review of an official list of 1.664 publications between 1978 and 2025 provided by the editors. b) Categorical classification: we subjected each article to an analytical reading under the scheme of the five hypothetical categories: values, inputs, process, results, and demand satisfaction. The analysis deepened the relationship between the central object of the text (what the author observes), its educational purpose (why people educate), and its verification mechanism (how one proves that quality exists). d) Coding of complex cases (hybrid and critical): facing the impossibility of reducing the complexity of certain articles to a single category, the procedure incorporated an open coding instance for hybrid approaches, where we identified category combinations (for example, inputs linked to results). Likewise, we isolated a category of critical texts that, although not offering an operational definition of quality, focus on deconstructing the term as a tool for political or economic regulation. e) Verification and triangulation: we applied a manual validation procedure to rule out "false positives" from the automated search, ensuring that the final corpus of 43 texts presented the minimum conceptual density necessary for classification. f) Discussion: based on the results, we reviewed the scope and limits of the proposed categorization, adjusting it according to the need to achieve greater analytical coherence and consistency, thus contributing to an academic consensus on the concept of educational quality.

The analyzed universe comprises the first ninety-five issues published between 1978 and 2025. This corpus includes 1.664 publications of various types: articles, documents, essays, interviews, reports, investigations, polemics, presentations, projects, reflections, reviews, and revisions. We used a mixed methodological strategy, combining digital tools, systematization procedures, and theoretical classification. Initially, we employed web scraping techniques (Anaconda and BeautifulSoup) to automate the search for articles linked to "quality," "educational quality," "quality of education," and "quality education". The objective was to leverage the internal filters of the journal's website to identify the broadest possible set of relevant texts. However, the automatic filtering proved imprecise, generating false positives and negatives that hindered the precise identification of relevant material. Given these limitations, we used an official list provided by the journal, which included all publications from the 95 analyzed issues. From this universe, we identified 44 articles associated with the theme of educational quality; after manual relevance verification, we discarded one, forming a final corpus of 43 texts (see Annex 1), equivalent to 2.6 % of the total production of the period. The record of the authors' institutional affiliations shows a total of 80 institutional affiliations, of which 28 % correspond to the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (Colombia), the country that concentrates 83 % of the participating institutions in our sample. This bias means the obtained results do not warrant statistical generalizations, although that limitation is not decisive for the theoretical consistency of the categorization.

In summary, the manual verification procedure aligns with good practices in qualitative systematic reviews. The triangulation between automated search, manual review, and validation allowed us to minimize selection biases and guarantee the exhaustiveness of the corpus. As methodological approaches that combine computational tools and interpretive review suggest, these strategies strengthen the robustness of findings in educational policy studies.

Since the study relies exclusively on analyzing publicly accessible academic documents—articles published in the *Revista Colombiana de Educación*—it involves no interaction with people or treatment of sensitive data, and therefore requires no informed consent or ethics committee evaluation. However, we adopted explicit criteria of academic integrity. First, verifiable textual evidence grounds all interpretations, avoiding decontextualizations, improper attributions, or extrapolations not supported by the original content. When an article presents ambiguous or hybrid formulations regarding the notion of educational quality, we performed the classification according to the categorical criteria defined and applied consistently across the entire corpus. Furthermore, we systematically distinguished between description and evaluation. The assignment of categories responds to an analytical procedure oriented toward conceptual comparability, not toward a normative assessment of the examined positions. We centered our

effort on guaranteeing methodological transparency, replicability, and the minimization of interpretive biases.

Educational Quality in the *Revista Colombiana de Educación*

Analyzing the articles published in the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* allows us to reconstruct the unfolding debate on educational quality across different decades. The examination reveals the presence of four of the five theoretical framework categories (values, inputs, process, and results) alongside two additional ones: hybrids (a combination of more than one category) and critical (questioning the concept of quality itself), which confirms the coexistence of perspectives and polysemy.

Table 1

Distribution of Articles by Category, frequency, and percentage

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Educational quality as value	4	9.3
Educational quality as input	7	16.2
Educational quality as process	6	18.6
Educational quality as result	10	23.2
Educational quality as demand satisfaction	0	0
Hybrids	7	11.6
Critical	9	20.9
Total:	43	100

Note. The total sample (n = 43) corresponds to the analyzed articles. The matrix includes the category "Educational quality as demand satisfaction," although it presented no frequencies.

The initial relevant data point is the absence of articles that approach educational quality in terms of demand satisfaction as a primary category. However, some hybrid works integrate this approach. The most frequent definition frames quality as results (23.3 %), followed by critical perspectives (20.9 %). Together, the input and critical categories represent slightly less than half of the published texts.

An initial line of studies approaches quality from a value-based perspective and associates it with the ethical and political ideals that orient teaching practice.. From this perspective, "good education" ties into inclusion, citizenship, and moral formation. An example of this is the work of Arnaiz-Sánchez and Azorín Abellán (2014): "attention to student diversity is considered an important indicator of teaching quality (...). There is no quality without inclusion, because in a democratic society education is either inclusive or it cannot be called education"

(p. 229). Along this same line, other works highlight the figure of the teacher as a bearer of values and an ethical reference. Ripoll-Núñez and Arrieta-Caycedo (2022, p. 12) affirm that the traits of a "quality teacher" exceed disciplinary transmission and include justice, respect, accessibility, and enthusiasm. Pérez Abril *et al.* (2014) also mention that the "outstanding teacher emerges as a subject involved with his ethical, political, and social convictions. These convictions operate as the place from which they make the key decisions that guide their actions" (p. 172). This conception recovers a Latin American tradition that understands the school as a space for moral and political socialization.

A second series of articles defines quality in terms of inputs, emphasizing the availability and equity of material, human, and financial resources. García *et al.* (2014) argue that "the effectiveness of interventions depends on teacher training in the use of materials" (p. 103); Fresneda (2017) points out the need to "increase the number and training of teaching staff" (p. 11); while Jaramillo Uribe (1994) affirms that all effort "must be directed towards a goal: the training of the essential element of any educational enterprise: the teacher" (p. 2).

From the process perspective, the analyzed articles highlight pedagogical organization and teaching dynamics as the core of quality. Zubieta and González (1985) state that an education has quality when it promotes "the pleasure of discovering and redefining knowledge" (p. 8). Vélez-Gutiérrez and Ruiz-Ortega (2025) add that quality reflects itself in "the transformation that educational processes generate in learning and in the ability to learn throughout life" (p. 3). In turn, Riera-Negre, Riffo Arriagada, and Verger (2025) focus on the fact that "An inclusive and quality educational process must also address the personal and social growth and development of students" (p. 12).

The results category, dominant especially in recent decades, associates quality with performance measured by standardized tests. Vargas-Sánchez (2023) shows that "less than 1 % of Mexican students obtained an excellence level" (p. 239). Montoya and Frugoni (2016) define quality as "the degree of fulfillment of the educational system's primary objectives" (p. 151). In this line, teacher evaluation and international indicators become the primary verification mechanism. A clear example of this appears in the article by Colbert de Arboleda (2006) in which she affirms that Colombia's educational quality has improved and this "has been evidenced through evaluation studies carried out by various national and international organizations" (p. 2).

Hybrid works combine more than one category explicitly or implicitly in their argumentation. Pacheco Giraldo and Rodríguez Salazar (1994, p. 3) describe non-formal education as a flexible and low-cost alternative, which articulates dimensions of input, process, and result. Fundación Empresarios por la Educación

(2007, p. 83) highlights the relationship between quality and family participation, incorporating elements of demand satisfaction.

Finally, the critical texts (20.9 %) problematize the limits of traditional definitions. Arias Gómez and Torres Puentes (2014) point out that "numbers will account for the quality level, and many factors that involve the teaching practice will be left out" (p. 62). Noguera Ramírez (2003) proposes to "make visible the differences and the multiplicity of meanings of pedagogical practices" (p. 18). The Research Group (1978, p. 2) proposes a comprehensive vision that combines internal dimensions (teaching, infrastructure) and external ones (socioeconomic context). This critical orientation consolidates itself by reviewing the political role of the concept of quality as a global regulation mechanism.

In summary, the results show the coexistence and tension between the different ways of understanding educational quality. The evaluative category emphasizes inclusion and citizenship; the distributive one, resources and equity; the processual one, continuous improvement and historicity; the results one, efficiency and measurable achievements. Hybrid orientations seem to demand the need for integrative and reflexive approaches, while critical ones form a counterpoint to the rest. These findings confirm that the concept of educational quality remains a field of theoretical and political dispute, but one susceptible to analytical systematization (Figueiredo, 2025).

Convergences, Divergences, and Absences

The synthesis of findings shows how the contributions of the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* distribute their approaches to educational quality among the proposed frameworks. Although no category predominates, we observe significant concentrations in definitions centered on results and in critical perspectives. This antithetical pattern seems to correspond with the major trends in educational studies: one with a neoclassical or neoinstitutionalist sociological tradition that seeks to establish achievements and improvement mechanisms, normally using statistical and econometric methods where cost-effectiveness is central; and another rooted in a tradition of critical thought with Marxist, post-Marxist, Freirean, etc. origins. It is understandable that this dialogue remains impossible without a common categorical base to understand what authors refer to in each case.

The presence of hybrid approaches reinforces the need to recognize areas of conceptual overlap that expand the limits of the original categories. These hybrid zones could reflect transitions between technical and socio-critical paradigms in analyzing educational quality or express an unresolved theoretical tension. As we analyzed, the evaluative category emphasizes inclusion and citizenship; the

distributive one, resources and equity; the processual one, continuous improvement and historicity; the results one, efficiency and measurable achievements; and the satisfaction one, relevance and the relationship with beneficiaries. Simultaneously, critical perspectives emerge that question reducing quality to quantitative standards and propose articulating models that link the school's internal dimensions with its external conditions. These tensions coincide with the diagnosis of scholars who observe that the search for equity and excellence configures today the core of the contemporary debate on educational quality.

The absence of studies focused exclusively on demand satisfaction is striking, which could indicate that market logic does not yet constitute a dominant axis in academic production in the region, or that its authors have not chosen this journal to disseminate their work. Future research could account for this phenomenon.

The analysis reveals that the polysemic nature of the concept confers upon researchers an implicit normative power, as choosing one definition among several possible ones also implies an evaluative position. Research not only describes, but indirectly prescribes what counts as quality and what evaluators should measure (Narodowski, 2026). By defining what they understand by educational quality, researchers delimit which dimensions they consider relevant, which indicators they prioritize, and which aspects remain invisible. In other words, using the term quality is never neutral: it produces normative effects by directing attention toward certain dimensions and excluding others. It is notable that even those who situate themselves in a critical position do not escape this mechanism. When objecting to certain definitions, critical approaches select the aspects they consider problematic and, in doing so, displace—rather than eliminate—the normative burden towards other focuses of analysis. Criticism, therefore, does not nullify the concept's normativity, but reconfigures it. One could conjecture that this dynamic suggests that works focused on critiquing the global discourse of quality sometimes reproduce its very legitimation schemes and opposite normative registers, but of a similar magnitude (Narodowski, 2025).

The polysemic nature of the term "educational quality" makes it function less as a precise analytical category and more as a signifier susceptible to multiple appropriations. This ambiguity hinders the accumulation of comparative knowledge, since different studies use the same expression for non-equivalent phenomena. The result is a proliferation of terminological debates that frequently substitute semantic disputes for theoretical discussion. We can analyze quality seen in antagonistic terms as a process of conceptual inflation (Kitsik, 2025): a change in linguistic practices that facilitates pointing out a problem, but neither limits nor significantly improves our ability to communicate about relevant

subproblems, nor helps us recognize similarities and differences between them given the flexibility of lexical resources, which is inevitable.

The proposed categorical system does not eliminate the normative dimension, but makes it explicit. In this way, the researcher's choice inscribes itself in a shared repertoire, and studies no longer depend on idiosyncratic or endogamous conceptualizations: we do not eliminate inflation, but we control it. The emphasis shifts from defending a particular definition toward analyzing how different discourses distribute themselves in the theoretical and political field, enabling cross-sectional comparisons and knowledge accumulation. Even the critique of the educational quality concept benefits from this framework. Questionings cease to formulate themselves in general terms and acquire analytical precision: we can clearly identify whether the objection targets the results approach, the (sometimes) economistic bias of inputs, or the universalist pretension of values. Consequently, criticism gains theoretical density and stops operating on a diffuse signifier. We do not discard the problem of polysemy, but we render it analytically tractable.

Consequently, the five proposed categories—values, inputs, process, results, and demand satisfaction—function as a matrix that organizes a fragmented discursive territory. By using them, scholars clarify what they are discussing in each case and enable comparison between divergent definitions. In this way, academic discussion stops centering on the abstract meaning of the term "quality" and pivots toward examining its concrete uses, conceptual effects, and political implications.

Conclusions: Towards an Articulated Pluralism in the Debate on Educational Quality

The analysis conducted allows us to affirm that the concept of educational quality, far from constituting a univocal notion, unfolds across multiple theoretical, normative, and empirical registers. The five proposed categories succeed in organizing a historically scattered discursive field, offering an analytical framework capable of reducing polysemy without annulling it. Examining the corpus of the *Revista Colombiana de Educación* evidences that these categories do not operate in isolation, but in interaction, juxtaposition, or conflict. The predominance of defining quality as results, together with the strong presence of critical approaches, shows that contemporary debate oscillates between technical-instrumental rationality and the need for a contextual and reflexive understanding of the educational phenomenon. Various authors warn that this tension reflects a global shift between the measurement logic and the situated understanding logic of learning.

This panorama reveals that different ways of conceptualizing quality also imply different ways of exercising normative power. Defining what counts as quality is not a neutral operation: each conceptual choice determines which dimensions analysts consider legitimate, which problems they make visible, and which others remain outside the field of analysis. Quality definitions operate as discursive regulation devices that condition possibilities for political and pedagogical action. Hence the importance of making explicit the assumptions and categories from which scholars build knowledge about education.

The proposed categorical system does not seek to resolve the debate, but to make it more transparent and cumulative. By offering a common reference framework, it allows us to compare discourses, analyze conceptual shifts, and detect historical continuities. This orientation tends to inhibit conceptual inflation. This aligns with contemporary calls to develop "common languages" of educational evaluation that allow comparability without homogenizing contexts. Its value lies in transforming the concept's indeterminacy into a rigorous observation tool, capable of situating controversies within a shared analytical terrain.

In synthesis, educational quality ceases to function as an ambiguous signifier and becomes a structured field of theoretical and political positions. This framework does not eliminate diversity, but makes it intelligible: it shows that differences are not merely terminological, but expressions of distinct visions regarding what education should be, whom it should serve, and with what ends society should organize it. In this way, analyzing quality becomes a privileged pathway to understand contemporary disputes over the public, social, and political meaning of education.

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Annex 1

Sampled articles by year and publication number, author/s, and institutional affiliation

Year	No.	Title	Author	Institution/s
1978	1	<i>Quality of basic rural education</i>	Research group	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1978	1	<i>Analysis of the supervision system of the primary basic level in DRI areas</i>	Research group	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1978	1	<i>Research in teacher training</i>	Research group	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1979	3	<i>Social indicators a perspective for a statistical information system in the educational sector</i>	Oscar Fresneda	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1979	3	<i>Statistical information seminar for the planning and administration of education in Colombia</i>	Piedad Caballero Prieto	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1981	8	<i>School cost and qualitative improvement of education</i>	Alba Paulsen de Cárdena	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1985	16	<i>The teacher and the quality of education A reading experience</i>	Leonor Zubieta & Olga Lucia González	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1991	22-23	<i>Modernization and quality of education: regarding recent ICFES publications</i>	Angel Facundo	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1993	26	<i>The quality of education. University and Popular Culture</i>	Marina Camargo Abello	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1994	28	<i>Education: the root of the problem</i>	Jaime Jaramillo Uribe	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1994	29	<i>Non-formal education: Low quality and poverty?</i>	Juan Carlos Pacheco Giraldo & Adriana Rodríguez Salazar	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1996	32	<i>Evaluation of results in the Escuela Nueva of Colombia is multigrade the answer?</i>	George Psacharopoulos, Carlos Rojas & Eduardo Vélez	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia

1999	38-39	<i>The instrumental university</i>	Marilena Chaui	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
1999	38-39	<i>Educational policies and "quality evaluation"</i>	Guillermo Bustamante Zamudio & Luis Guillermo Díaz Monroy	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia; Universidad Nacional de Colombia
2003	44	<i>Quality and equity of education. The case of Colombia. IIPE_Restrepo Barco Foundation</i>	Gloria Calvo	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2003	44	<i>Factors associated with the performance of students of Guillermo Bustamante Zamudio</i>	Gloria Calvo	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2003	44	<i>Policies for the improvement of Education Quality: Equal opportunities or discrimination?</i>	Carlos Ernesto Noguera Ramírez	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2006	51	<i>Improving the quality of education in low-income schools. The case of Escuela Nueva in Colombia</i>	Vicky Colbert de Arboleda	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2007	53	<i>Overcoming the brick and the bazaar</i>	Gloria Calvo, Marina Camargo & Christian Hederich Martínez	Fundación Empresarios por la Educación, Colombia. Universidad de La Sabana, Colombia; Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2013	65	<i>Educational reforms, instutors and governmental inspection. Antioquia (1903-1930)</i>	Carlos Ospina Cruz	Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia
2014	67	<i>The limits of the economics of education: opening the view</i>	Alejandro Álvarez Gallego	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2014	67	<i>The narrowness of teaching excellence in educational policies: is being good the same as being well evaluated?</i>	Diego H. Arias Gómez & Elizabeth Torres Puentes	Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia
2014	67	<i>Summary and clarifications on After teaching excellence: how to improve the quality of education for all Colombians</i>	Sandra García, Darío Maldonado, Guillermo Perry, Catherine Rodríguez & Juan Esteban Saavedra	Universidad de los Andes, Colombia; Universidad de California del Sur, Estados Unidos

2014	67	<i>Ten pillars for a professional teacher development program focused on student learning</i>	Mauricio Duque, Jorge Celis, Bibiam Díaz & Margarita Gómez	Universidad de los Andes, Colombia; Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia
2014	67	<i>The teacher's statute</i>	Pilar Méndez	Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia
2014	67	<i>What characterizes an outstanding teacher? Traits of practice in the early grades of schooling</i>	Mauricio Pérez Abril, Catalina Roa Casas, Ángela Patricia Vargas & Lida Alexandra Isaza	Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia
2014	67	<i>Teacher self-evaluation for the improvement of educational processes in schools moving towards inclusion</i>	Pilar Arnaiz Sánchez & Cecilia Ma. Azorín Abellán	Universidad de Murcia, España
2015	68	<i>Re-signification and re-conceptualization of the educational quality category: a new look, a new perspective</i>	José Alfredo Díaz Palacios	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia
2016	70	<i>Efficiency or sufficiency in the private management sector?</i>	Silvia Montoya & María Laura Frugoni	Instituto de Estadísticas, Unesco, Canadá; Universidad Católica Argentina, Argentina
2017	72	<i>The idea of the university in suspense. Quality management, cognitive capitalism and autonomy</i>	Esther Juliana Vargas Arbeláez	Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia
2019	76	<i>Concession schools in Bogotá: the limits of economic efficiency in charter programs</i>	D. Brent Edwards Jr. & Andreu Termes	University of Hawaii, Estados Unidos; Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España
2019	77	<i>Educational quality, regarding community management in nine educational establishments in Medellín: 2010 to 2013</i>	Jose Wilmar Pino Montoya & Melina Castaño Gómez	Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Colombia; Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia
2019	77	<i>Book review Allouch, A. (2017): La société du concours. L'empire des classements scolaires. Paris: Seuil</i>	Eguzki Urteaga	Universidad del País Vasco, España
2020	78	<i>Reasons of English teachers to publish in a</i>	Melba Libia Cárdenas	Universidad Nacional de

2021	81	<i>journal and the logics of socio-scientific reasoning The effects of quality policies on bachelor's degrees in Colombia: balance and alternatives</i>	Sandra Patricia Rodríguez Ávila, Olga Cecilia Díaz Flórez & Diego Hernán Arias Gómez	Colombia, Colombia Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia; Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia
2022	85	<i>What is a quality teacher? Perspectives of teachers and students of a higher education institution in Colombia</i>	Karen Ripoll-Nuñez & Camilo Andres Arrieta-Caycedo	Universidad de los Andes, Colombia
2023	88	<i>Examination of predictors of innovative teaching practices among Indonesian teachers</i>	Mohamad Arief Rafsanjani, Albrian Fiky Prakoso, Eka Hendi Andriansyah, Purba Andy Wijaya, Andri Eko Prabowo & M. Rudi Irwansyah	Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia Universitas Islam Riau, Indonesia; Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Indonesia
2023	88	<i>Family capital and school achievement in Mexican middle schools</i>	Juan Roberto Vargas-Sánchez	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, México
2023	88	<i>Incidence of pedagogical counseling with formative rubrics in the improvement of teaching performance</i>	Omar Andrés Aravena Kenigs, María Elena Mellado Hernández & Manuel Montanero Fernández	Universidad Católica de Temuco, Chile; Universidad de Extremadura, España
2023	88	<i>Contributions of departments in school improvement according to perspectives of Chilean managers</i>	Oscar Maureira Cabrera & Carmen Montecinos Sanhueza	Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez, Chile; Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile
2023	89	<i>The inclusion of indigenous students and their school results: teacher perception</i>	Perla Meléndez Grijalva, Celia Carrera Hernández, Josefina Madrigal Luna & Yolanda Isaura Lara García	Universidad Pedagógica Nacional del Estado del Chihuahua, México
20224	90	<i>Early learning and education in Mexico: a factor decomposition study 2012–2018</i>	Sara Nohemí Cortez-Soto & Jorge Omar Moreno-Treviño	Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, México

2024	92	<i>Classroom leadership and teacher efficacy as a moderating variable in academic performance</i>	Martha Lucía Pachón-Palacios & Geli Mercedes Pautt-Torres	Universidad EAN, Colombia; Universidad Externado de Colombia, Colombia
2025	94	<i>Cognitive and metacognitive interactions: an indicator of educational quality</i>	Carlos Fernando Vélez-Gutiérrez & Francisco Javier Ruiz-Ortega	Universidad de Caldas, Colombia
2025	95	<i>Quality of educational care in hospital pedagogy: perception of users and families</i>	Laia Riera-Negre Paulina Riffo Arriagada & Sebastià Verger	Universitat de les Illes Balears, España; DAEM Talcahuano, Chile
