

## Unraveling the Inherent Complexities of Quality Education: Emerging Implication for Policy and Practice

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### Abstract

Quality education has numerous definitions and connotations, establishing the complexity and multifaceted disposition of the concept. This vague conceptualization depicts quality education as a multifarious system entrenched in a political, cultural and social framework. As such, there isn't any single best definition of quality education and the very evolving nature of it further complicates the issue. This research intends to expose the salient attributes and associated complexities of quality education. A mixed methods approach using focus group interviews and a survey using a Likert type scale were implemented to get more in-depth information on perceptions, insights, and experiences of practicing teachers regarding quality education. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic approach while SPSS was used to analyze the quantitative data according to the mixed methods conventions. Results indicate that quality education has several connotations as such any single factor cannot be affirmed to be the exclusive determinant of quality education. Evidently, more awareness of the different attributes of quality education should be created so that complexities are reduced resulting in a better realization and utilization of the concept.

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**Keywords:** quality education, concept, complex, reforms, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, research, parental participation, digital natives

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### INTRODUCTION

The dawning of the new millennium has seen a precipitous rise in fundamental changes in the education structure globally as the world realized that the economic successes of the countries are directly determined by the quality of their education systems. The evolution of science and technology have been emerging at an accelerated rate and they have an increasing influence on education, on the organization of educational institutions, the teacher's role, school curriculum and student self-determination (Belcastro, 2015; Odhiambo, 2008). The widespread and fast paced proliferation in technological advancement has raised considerably the focus and its importance to the education system (Ross, Morrison, & Lowther, 2010). The students of today have spent a good part of their lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, smart phones, and similar tools of the digital age (Prensky, 2001). This great transformation poses tremendous challenges to educators and policy makers to rethink their basic tenets, to review the curriculum, the teacher preparation programs and to restructure the pedagogies and practices to respond constructively and progressively to the technological and social changes.

Likewise, impacts from globalization and advances in information technology have necessitated a review of the relevance and quality of the education systems worldwide. It is no doubt that the education system will play a leading role in the socio-economic arena in the 21st century. Notwithstanding the growing consensus

about the need to provide access to quality education, there is much less agreement about what the term actually means in practice. The notion concerning the mission of education dominates the educational policies of most countries in the world in their quest to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016). Despite the existence of conceptual ambiguity, there is a plethora of definitions of quality education. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept encompassing its many attributes (Colby & Witt, 2000). Revamping and transforming teaching and learning has become a collective agenda among policy makers and educators in the region and beyond.

### Aim of the Study

It is no doubt that the meaning of "quality" is ambiguous, and there are various approaches to establishing its definition. It could be considered that the required quality is achieved when it meets customer satisfaction, through a competitive process based on quality processes (Giuffr  & Ratto, 2013). In educational context, quality can refer to the extent that an education system is able to achieve the generally accepted goals of education, central to which are cognitive knowledge and skills development together with the holistic development of the students.

### Statement of Problem

The ambiguity associated with quality education has led to many misconceptions about the concept. This study intends to create awareness that quality education has numerous definitions and is multifaceted in nature as such it is guided by the following overarching research question:

*What are the salient attributes and associated complexities of quality education?*

The study is further guided by the following underpinning questions:

- What constitutes quality education?
- Who decides what quality education is?
- What are some of the complexities of quality education?
- What are some implications of quality education?

The analysis of data gathered from responses to the above questions will assist in establishing the veiled intricacies of quality education and will succor towards having a better understanding of the concept.

### Research Significance

There are several reasons why this research is considered to be significant. There has been a paucity of previous research regarding what quality actually entails in education in the Fijian context. It is commonly conjectured that students' pass rate in examinations is the sole evidential predictor for quality education. The present research will be significant because it will address the above issue and highlight other variables considered to impact quality education. Since there is a dearth of local literature available on quality education, this study will contribute to local literature on the subject, which in turn could be used by relevant agencies towards broadening their conceptualization of quality education.

The findings will also be of value to policy makers and educators in understanding the many causative factors of quality education so that they could be appropriately addressed in way of policies and educational reforms. Education policies play a critical role in transforming the education landscape and outcomes of learning. Evidently, a prominent characteristic of successful educational transformation in many countries is the advent of policy reforms guided by clear goals and implemented through systems of coherent planning, management and monitoring processes. Policies and programs need to address all of the components of the system in a coordinated and coherent way so that changes, in turn, become reciprocally reinforcing and promote a sense of ownership and commitment.

This study will provide important insights into quality education enabling teacher education institutions to strengthen the pre-service teacher preparation programs to better prepare teachers to cope with varying demands of quality education in schools. Trainee Teachers should be provided with better initial opportunities and professional experience to enable them to become skillful and proficient teachers. Having quality teacher training programs would produce better graduates who in turn would zealously strive for higher teaching standards and accountability. The findings of this study could also highlight elements related to quality education and the professional learning which could be integrated into the Bachelor of Teaching Programs offered by tertiary institutions. Recent literature on educational development has highly linked quality education towards creating knowledge based development that in turn would lead towards establishing a knowledge society.

### Conceptualizing Quality Education

The range and diversity of responses to the quality imperative in education globally reflect and in many cases amplify the tensions and dilemmas of the term quality education (Houston, 2008). The decisive literature on quality education affirms that there are many definitions of it as it is contextual and consists of a variety of attributes (Cheng, 2003; Colby & Witt, 2000; Giuffré & Ratto, 2013; Houston, 2008; Odhiambo, 2008). For these reasons, Houston (2008) argues that there are different paradigms to conceptualizing quality education. One pool of thought is that it is about enhancement, empowerment, passion and excellence and according to Houston(2008) this view has been over shadowed by definitions of quality as "assurance, accountability, audit and assessment" (p. 64). Likewise, it seems rather rational that if education is neoliberally defined, then so should be the criteria for judging its quality. Critical literature argues that alternative definitions of quality may be more appropriate to education (Belcastro, 2015; Berry & Bogale, 2011). The problems are not entirely new, but seem greatly compounded by the use of particular determinants only, as the sole reference points for judging the worth of an idea or policy and in this case, quality education.

Quality Education does not exist in isolation as it is culturally, socially, economically, politically perhaps financially oriented with its encompassing attributes and support structures. Taking in consideration the holistic approach to quality education a number of stakeholder's interests and inputs ought to be considered. Consequently, Thaug (2008) stipulates a number of inputs or attributes, such as quality learners, quality

teachers, quality content, quality teaching-learning processes and quality learning environments in order one can achieve quality education. According to Belcastro (2015) quality education is that which provides every child with equal opportunity to engage in society and fulfill their social and economic responsibilities effectively. Specifically, quality education enables holistic development of students towards creating a knowledge society (Belcastro, 2015). Consequently, Stephens (1991) links quality in education with the quality of decision-making and reminds us, following Bowles (1968) advisement, that decision making in establishing quality is a sensitive barometer of establishing quality. To sum up it can be concluded that quality education is an all-encompassing attitude and to single out sole determinants is not just problematic but also questionable and debatable.

While discussing the various definitions of quality education, literature has established that there are a number of attributes and factors associated with quality education. While stake holder interests cannot be ignored, political influence and their predominance are hallmarks of education systems globally (Houston, 2008). In support of the views expressed by Houston (2008), is Tavola (2012) who while discussing the roles of ministries of education in the Pacific Island Countries agrees this is being so, because “the education sector is the largest government sector that in terms of both numbers employed and its share of the national budget”(p. 101). Consequently, this gives them the mandate to a large extent to establish what they expect to be quality education. Henceforth, compliance with such definitions being imposed from a dominant player largely ignores the views of other stake holders, academics, students and others who are positioned as the affected but not the involved party (Houston, 2008). By and large, one must understand that education is a highly political matter as it is often used in election campaigns and decisions, such as giving of scholarships and salary increments to teachers. Seemingly, some political decisions are made with little consideration of other stakeholders like in the instance of education as they are the funding and governing authorities (Tavola, 2012).

Majority of the studies sighted regarding quality education reveal that there is ample political interference in education affairs globally (Belcastro, 2015; Berry & Bogale, 2011; Odhiambo, 2008). For example, in Romania Government Ordinance established the principles of the national policy for Quality Assurance in Education for the entire national system that meets European requirements (Militaru, Pavel, & Zanfir, 2003). At times parents and well-

wishers’ opinions are not heard despite they put in their hard-earned money and they are directly affected by the decisions of the elite few (Belcastro, 2015; Berry & Bogale, 2011; Colby & Witt, 2000; Giuffré & Ratto, 2013; Houston, 2008; Odhiambo, 2008; Stephens, 1991). With reference to mainstream literature on quality education, it can be established that governments worldwide contribute financially a lot towards education. As such, they take on the responsibility of certifying quality to a large extent (Adhikary, 2014; Belcastro, 2015; Cheng, 2003; Griffith, 2008; Houston, 2008; Tavola, 2012). However, they should not be solely in charge of defining quality as there are other stake holders such as parents, teachers and social service organizations that should have a say in conceptualizing quality.

### **Attributes of Quality Education**

As advocated by Thaug (2008) and well supported by Berry and Bogale (2011) there are many attributes of quality education apart from stakeholders and environmental factors. Although numerous studies on quality education have stressed the importance of stakeholder interests, only a few have mentioned children specifically (Colby & Witt, 2000; Thaug, 2008). Many a times the system fails to acknowledge the views of the children and assuming the sole authority to determine what constitutes quality education. Colby and Witt (2000) have substantiated a number of attributes they believe needs to be considered in deciding what actually represents quality education. The forthcoming sections present literature pertaining to relevant and established attributes of quality education.

### **Quality Learning Environment**

First and foremost, to achieve quality education one needs to have quality learners and for that to happen, they need quality learning environment. While learning can occur anywhere, the positive learning outcomes are generally achieved in quality learning environments inclusive of teaching and learning resources (Derrick, 2003). Hence, learning environments are made up of physical, social and economical factors to mention a few supporting factors. According to Colby and Witt (2000) there is ample empirical evidence that quality of school facilities seems to have a direct effect on learning. For example, a study in India reveals that the quality of the learning environment was strongly correlated with pupils’ achievement in Hindi and mathematics (Carron & Chau, 1996). Other studies undertaken in Latin America, Nigeria and Papua New Guinea concur with these findings that children whose schools lacked classroom materials and had inadequate library showed lower test scores and higher repetition rate (Colby & Witt, 2000). Well-managed schools and

classrooms contribute to educational quality. Inexorably, the quality may be related to other quality issues, such as sound working conditions and the availability of quality teachers.

### **Teacher Preparation and Working Conditions**

An equally significant equation in achieving quality education is the need for quality teachers who have gone through rigorous teacher education programs. Teacher education programs should not be only skills oriented but they need to equip trainee teachers to use efficient routines and to seek out and apply new strategies in situations where routines are not enough (Darling-Hammond, 2000). An important but often contentious determinant of quality education is having quality working conditions for teachers. It is contentious at times because there are many aspects of working conditions and establishing quality becomes introspective in nature. The importance of having sound teacher working conditions is magnified by the many expectations of the teaching profession (Morehead, Layman, & Foyle, 2003; Sprenger, 2011). Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers make a greater difference in student achievement than any other single school factor (Hirsch, Emerick, Church, & Fuller, 2006). On a similar note, Raymond (1968) argued that while salaries may not be an exact predictor of quality, but it would surely have ample impact on teacher performance.

### **Quality Curriculum Content**

Inevitably, the quality of instructional materials and textbooks also has a bearing on quality education. Quality curriculum content refers to the intended and taught curriculum that is responsive to changing demands of the society (Alvior, 2015; Kuamoo, 2008). There is abundance of literature supporting the view that curriculum should be well planned and written by qualified experts in consultation with teachers and other stakeholders (Alvior, 2015; Molukanele, 2012; Pridmore, 2007; Thaman, 1987). The specific contents of school curriculum, however, should depend on local and national values and take into consideration the aspirations of the digital natives (Alvior, 2015). Subsequently, it is widely accepted that those that get affected by curriculum change should be involved in the decision making process. For this reason, Molukanele (2012) asserts that parents together with teachers and other stakeholders should be involved during the curriculum development process. Quite often, the central figure in the equation, 'the students' are not consulted despite they will be the ones to be affected by the curriculum. The voices of the digital natives should be heard and there should be student representatives in committees to enhance the quality aspect in curriculum

content and design (Alvior, 2015; Molukanele, 2012). Curriculum developers should always keep in mind that curriculum development is all about students and their holistic development.

### **Complexities of Quality Education**

The diverse attributes and the multi-faceted nature of quality education contribute towards the complexities of quality education. The increasing demand for good quality education by all stakeholders imply that finding the concrete measurements to evaluate the quality of education needs to be established (Colby & Witt, 2000). While high pass rate can be determinant of quality education but it is not the sole determinant as Wilkinson (2014) argues that pass rate cannot be not a true indicator of quality education and refers this comparison pass rates in different years as comparing apples to oranges. Evidently, he justifies his claim by stating the idiosyncrasies associated with variables as years unfold leading to set new students with new set of teachers employing new styles of teaching. Examinations are simply not designed to compare the performance of the schooling system across years. They are designed to test whether the individual learner has mastered the cognitive aspect of a subject matter as tests do not measure the holistic development of students (Wilkinson, 2014). The quality of students, type of parental support, home environment, teaching learning resources, curriculum, teacher preparedness and teacher education programs all contribute towards quality education (Colby & Witt, 2000).

### **METHODOLOGY**

Given the purpose of the research, this study was guided by the following research question:

*What are the salient attributes and associated complexities of quality education?*

The study was further guided by the following underpinning questions:

- What constitutes quality education?
- Who decides what quality education is?
- What are some of the complexities of quality education?
- What are some implications of quality education?

These research questions guided the study to develop a better understanding of the salient attributes and associated complexities of quality education. Educational research, as well as research in other similar areas of inquiry, is typically conducted within relevant paradigms depending on appropriate ontological and epistemological orientations of the study.

**Mixed Methods Research**

Subsequently, awareness of philosophical assumptions increases quality of research as such this research was conducted from within an interpretive paradigm, and this has implications for the selection of an appropriate research method. Successively, a mixed methods approach was adopted for this research to build on the strengths of both quantitative as well as qualitative methods (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In the context of this research, methodological triangulation was achieved by combining input from qualitative data obtained from focus group interviews with quantitative data from the

survey. Surveys are a favoured tool for many who are engaged in research as it provides a quick and effective way of collecting data (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). As such, five point Likert type scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (Unsure) was used in the survey to address theoretical and practical impact of the program while open ended questions were used to gather finer points about the leadership program. Table 1 shows all the study constructs and variables of each construct.

Table 1: Study Constructs and Variables

<b>Quality Education (Likert type)</b>
Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all
Quality education leads towards knowledge based development
High pass rate is the sole determinant of quality education
Quality education is multi-dimensional as it has many attributes
Quality education prepares students for a life long journey
<b>Teacher Education</b>
Quality admission process needs to be established to get the best candidates in teacher education programs
High quality teacher education programs should be offered by the Universities
Well qualified academic staff should be in charge of delivering quality teacher education programs.
Having better qualified teachers will lead towards enhanced learning opportunities for students.
Teachers are the sole determinants of quality education
<b>Student Background</b>
Students' physical background has an impact on their learning opportunities
Students' social background has an impact their on learning opportunities.
Students' emotional background has an impact on their learning opportunities
Students' mental and health background has an impact on their learning opportunities
Quality education should consider the needs and aspirations of the digital natives.
<b>Teacher Working Condition</b>
Teaching has become quite stressful in recent years
Happy working environment leads to better teacher cooperation and team work
Better salary incentives for teachers act as catalysts for better teacher performance
Appreciating teachers' hard work empowers them to perform better in their classrooms
Teachers in Fiji have reasonable teaching workload
<b>Curriculum Development and Implementation</b>
Teachers should play an important role in the curriculum advisory process
The Curriculum in Fiji is well prepared according to the different year levels
The Curriculum is centrally developed in most of the countries
Covering of the curriculum in two terms is a very good initiative of the Ministry
The curriculum materials are dispatched to schools in a timely manner
<b>Parental Involvement</b>
Positive parental involvement has a significant effect students' their performance.
Students whose parents are involved in their school affairs tend to have fewer behavioural problems
Positive effects of parental involvement demonstrates better student teacher relationship
Positive parental involvement increases student retention and completion rate
Parental support is vital for student success in the long run.

Selecting research sample is an imminent issue frequently raised by researchers and students (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) researchers are always concerned with what can be labelled as an adequate size for a sample especially in qualitative research. They further suggest that despite shortage of time and financial constraints into consideration, it is advisable to obtain “as large a sample as they reasonably can” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 104). For the purpose of this study, 150 participants were randomly selected for the survey. 128 completed surveys were received and 40 participants were selected for the focus group. The section that follows explains the data recording and analytical procedures that were used in the research.

**Focus Group Interviews**

Surveys are good for collecting information about people’s attributes and attitudes but focus group interviews enables one to understand things at a deeper level (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Evidently in support, Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003), state that participants can be randomly selected from a larger group that should be able to give insight into the topic. In this study the participants were randomly selected from the group of 100 teachers. The participants were selected because they had certain characteristics in common and in this case they were all practising teachers and enrolled in the postgraduate program (Bloor et al., 2001; Legard et al., 2003). The researcher, in this case was able to create a permissive and nurturing environment that encouraged different perceptions and points of views, without pressuring participants to vote, plan or reach consensus (Krueger, 1988). The group discussion was conducted in all the major educational districts in Fiji. There were 10 participants in each of the four districts and the proceedings were recorded and transcribed later in a holistic manner. Table 2 shows the questions that were implemented during the focus group interviews:

Table 2: Focus group interviews

i)	What constitutes quality education?
ii)	Who decides what quality education is?
iii)	What are some of the complexities of quality education?
iv)	What are some implications of quality education?

Simple straight forward questions were posed during the focus group interviews. The interviews were duly recorded and later transcribed in their entirety and discussed either in support or otherwise with the survey data.

**Data Reliability**

Research supports the importance of research questions and the aim of the study in establishing the data analysis procedures (Caracelli & Greene, 2008; Chenail, 2012; Thorne, 2000). The survey data was analyzed by coding and entering the information into SPSS while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic approach using coding Lichtman (2006). Five variables were considered for the theoretical impact of the program while there were ten variables for the practical impact of the program. The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was used to assess the reliability of the study constructs as it is widely used for assessing the reliability of measurement scales with multi-point items. Thus, the overall reliability of the study constructs .767. The high value of Cronbach’s Alpha reveals that the constructs were reliable to examine the six attributes of quality education that were derived from literature on quality education (Colby & Witt, 2000). Likewise, trustworthiness was enhanced by triangulation of data sources; that is the use of qualitative data to exemplify the quantitative information. The participants have not been identified in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Limitations of the Study**

There is a lack of local literature on quality education as such international literature has frequently been quoted. Additionally, this study only focuses on students who are practising teachers of their perceptions while there are other teachers and stakeholders who are not considered for logistical reasons. Subsequently, one should proceed with caution when seeking to extrapolate findings from this research. However, this study provides a strong scope for further research where the views and perceptions of other stakeholders could be considered for a more holistic and comprehensive result.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In essence, quality education in the contemporary world is about developing pedagogies and practices for effective learning and teaching towards creating a knowledge society.

**Knowledge Based Society**

Findings reveal that majority of the teachers either strongly agreed (74%) or agreed (24%) that quality education leads to knowledge based society (See Table 3). Likewise, it is commonly established that knowledge is power and education empowers us in achieving a better society for all. It is an indispensable part of the growth equation in creating a knowledge based development that in turn can propel innovation and entrepreneurship towards a knowledge society.

Table 3  
*Knowledge based society*

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	96	75.0
Agree	31	24.2
Disagree	1	.8
Total	128	100.0

On a similar note, almost all (99%) of them also agreed that that quality education was multi-dimensional and had many attributes. The finding is supported by Houston (2008) who argues that different attributes reflect and in many cases amplify the tensions and dilemmas associated with the term quality education. Cheng (2003) validates the argument by Houston (2008) that there are many definitions of quality education as it is contextual and has socio-economic connotations. Many a times a lot of emphasis is placed on summative examinations and pass rates are considered as the sole determinant of quality education. The findings refutes this claim as majority (81%) of the teachers either disagreed (63%) or strongly disagreed (18%) that pass rate is the sole determinant of quality education (see Table 4).

Table 4: High pass rate as the sole determinant of quality education

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	.8
Agree	15	11.7
Disagree	81	63.3
Strongly Disagree	23	18.0
Unsure	8	6.2
Total	128	100.0

Similar sentiments are shared by Wilkinson (2014) who argues that high pass rate can be a determinant of quality education but it cannot be not the sole determinant. He further states that the pass rate is not a true indicator of quality education and comparing pass rates in different years is in fact like comparing apples to apples. Evidently, Wilkinson (2014) validates his stance by arguing that the variables including the students, teachers, teaching styles of teachers all changes over the period of time resulting in weak reliability and validity. He further establishes that “examinations are simply not designed to compare the performance of the schooling system across years as they are designed to test whether the individual learner has mastered the cognitive aspect of a subject matter” as

tests do not measure the holistic development of students (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 2).

However, all the teachers agreed that quality education prepares students for a lifelong learning. The very fact that we know that there is always something new for us to learn simply makes life more interesting in an era of technological revolution (Adhikary, 2014). Likewise, in a phase where we are inventing new technologies like electronic tablets and smart phones, it is practically impossible to get by without learning new stuff, however old we are. It must be established here that findings from the focus group interviews reveal that teachers unanimously agreed that some of the most common attributes of quality education were the getting the best applicants for teacher education programs, student support system, teacher quality, the relevancy of the curriculum and parental involvement. None of the teachers agreed that high pass rate was even a determinant of quality education as majority of them believed examinations were not a holistic overview of student performance. Evidently (Davis, 2017) has a similar believe and agrees that pass rate is just an indicator of whether the system is moving in the right direction but it cannot be an indicator of quality education as it can mask what is really happening behind the numbers.

**Teacher Preparation**

It is no doubt that quality teachers are needed to deliver quality education. Darling-Hammond (2000) stresses this point that the system needs quality teachers who have gone through rigorous teacher education programs. The findings strongly supports the views expressed by Darling-Hammond and Bartz-Snowden (2007). In responding to one of the survey questions all the teachers agreed that universities offering teacher education programs should have high quality teacher education programs. Accordingly, literature supports the view that selection of candidates can affect students’ later academic achievements as a teacher (Lukas & Samardzic, 2015). Teacher education programs should be designed with a full range of student populations in mind. They should reward rather than penalize (as is too often the case) the "local knowledge" about their students and communities carried by candidates from diverse backgrounds (Maher, 2002). All teacher education programs would impose rigorous standards for academic subjects and provide the opportunities to learn them. Programs would include pedagogical training and extensive work in the field, juxtaposing educational theory and classroom practice. They would be made financially and educationally accessible to a wide variety of potential students (Maher, 2002).

In light of producing quality teachers, recent studies reveal that the developed countries have strict entry requirements into teacher education institutes and have better understanding of the importance of selecting the best candidates into the teaching profession (Brenneman, 2011; Lewin & Stuart, 2003; Lukas & Samardzic, 2015; Zeichner, 2006). More so, findings from the survey reveal that majority (92%) of the teachers are assertive about the need for the establishment of a more rigorous and upgraded admission procedures. Findings have strong implications for universities as they can revisit their entry requirements for candidates into teacher education programs. Research further indicates that there is a connection between the selection of more capable candidates for teaching profession and student achievement (Lukas & Samardzic, 2015). In Finland only the most capable individuals can become teachers and there are several conditions that must be met before a candidate can successfully enter the teachers college. Literature further reveals that only the best candidates reach is the interview in which they have to explain why they have chosen teaching as a future profession (Lukas & Samardzic, 2015).

Noting the compelling nature of quality education, majority (70%) of the respondents either disagreed (50%) or strongly disagreed (20%) that teachers were the sole determinants of quality education (See Table 5). However, some of them (25%) agreed that teachers were the sole determinants of quality education while a few (5%) were unsure. The differing views of the respondents reveal the complexity that is associated with understanding what actually entails quality education.

Table 5: Teachers are the sole determinants of quality education

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	7	5.5
Agree	26	20.3
Disagree	64	50.0
Strongly Disagree	25	19.5
Unsure	6	4.7
Total	128	100.0

It is however, important to note that majority of the respondents support the view that while teachers are important stakeholders, they are not the sole determinants of quality education. The interview data also reveals that majority of the teachers strongly believed that teachers should not be considered as the exclusive determinants of quality education. One of the teachers' commented that "we often get the blame if the results are not so good, not realizing that there may be other factors such as student quality". This point is also sustained by Colby and Witt (2000) that quality learners are an important component of quality education.

**Student Background**

An equally significant aspect of quality education is to have quality learners. Evidence for and in support of this view can be found in the abundance of literature that suggest that positive early childhood education is also vital to preparing a quality learner (Colby & Witt, 2000). Subsequently, many elements go into the shaping of a quality learner including students' physical, social, emotional and mental wellbeing to mention a few. Respondents in the current study entirely agreed that sound physical, social, emotional and mental backgrounds positively impact student learning (See Table 6). Colby and Witt (2000) assert that regular attendance in classes coupled with sound parental and family support has a multifaceted positive impact on children's performance and their ability to excel academically in life.

Table 6: Background impact on student learning

Background	Physical background		Social background		Emotional background		Mental background	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	117	91.4	126	98.4	121	94.5	125	97.7
Agree	11	8.6	2	1.6	7	5.5	3	2.3
Total	128	100.0	128	100.0	128	100.0	128	100.0

Teachers who took part in the survey unanimously agreed that parents who were concerned about

childrens' studies took more interest in their school work. Evidently, subsequent research has corroborated

the finding that family background is strongly correlated with student performance in school (Egalite, 2016). Likewise, research further indicates that children from low socio-economic communities develop academic skills more slowly compared to children from such higher groups (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). Initial academic skills are correlated with the home environment, where low literacy environments and chronic stress negatively affect a child's pre-academic skills (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Inadequate social and emotional support can lead to increased dropout rates affecting children's academic achievement. Subsequently, there is ample research evidence to support the view that sound physical, social, mental and emotional wellbeing of students significantly contributes towards academic performance of students (Ali, Haider, Munir, Khan, & Ahmed, 2013). Undoubtedly, all the respondents unanimously agreed that quality education should consider the needs and aspirations of the so called 'digital natives', a term coined by Prensky (2001).

### **Teacher Empowerment**

Teachers need professional guidance and empowerment in wake of the technological revolution in schools and mass reformation of curriculum and pedagogical practices. Survey findings reveal that almost all (99%) of the respondents agree that appreciating teachers' hard work empowers them to put in their best effort in teaching and learning. Efforts are made by education ministries and school communities to consider essential issues related to empowerment, leadership, facilities and resources, time, and professional development. In Fiji many school committees provide staff quarters in order to retain good quality teachers. Empowering teachers and building a learning community with trust and mutual respect requires a long-term commitment to creating a new school culture. A culture that appreciates and offers their teachers a safe, pleasant, and supportive working environment are better able to attract and retain good teachers and motivate them to do their best. Teachers' working conditions are important to students as well as teachers because they affect how much individual attention teachers can give to students. According to research, there is ample evidence to suggest teacher quality impacts student learning and achievement (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

It can be established from the survey that appreciating teachers' efforts and creating a happy working environment positively contributes towards better teacher cooperation and team work. Many a times, reforms and innovations are handed down to the teachers to implement without any input from them. The issue is not that teachers reject standards-based reforms

and more centralized curriculum, but that they seek the flexibility needed to shape their teaching for the diverse learners in their classrooms (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). It is important however, not to overemphasize the need for better working conditions for teachers as the reality of the situation is quite contradictory. The importance of having sound teacher working conditions is magnified by the many expectations of the teaching profession. This perception could be viewed in the responses of the teachers where they were asked about their opinion about the stress level in the teaching profession. Findings reveal that majority (86%) of the respondents either strongly agreed (32%) or agreed (54%) that teaching has become quite stressful in recent times while only a few disagreed (14%)

Findings get support in the works of Sprenger (2011) who claims that the unprecedented rate of innovation and change with new demands have resulted in teacher stress leading to making teaching a stressful profession. Teacher stress is defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, and depression, resulting from aspects of work as a teacher (Brown & Uehara, 1999). According to Troman (2000) teacher stress is caused by environmental factors as well as individual characteristics. Teachers need to be cared and appreciated for their work as these days many work under stressful environment leading to teacher burnout. According to Leithwood (2006) burnout has significant negative effects on teachers, their schools, and their students. Estimates of the prevalence of burnout or excessive feelings of stress across the teaching population are actually quite alarming, ranging from 15 to 45% (Leithwood, 2006). As such, it is vital to have positive working conditions for teachers so that they are able to work in a stress free environment and are able to contribute effectively towards the learning teaching environment.

Major environmental factors include poor working conditions, scarcity of resources, heavy workloads, and student behavior. In the present research findings reveal that majority (85%) of the teachers either disagreed (69%) or strongly disagreed (16%) that teachers have reasonable workload (See Table 7).

Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers needed to have reasonable workload as they make a greater difference in student achievement than any other single school factor (Hirsch et al., 2006). Findings from the Center for Teaching Quality's analysis of the 2004 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey demonstrated that supportive school environments where teachers are partners in decision making with

school leaders who have a strong instructional emphasis are not just critical to retaining teachers, but improving student learning. The analysis by Ladd (2009) supports earlier findings by Marzano (2003, p. 23) that teachers play a pivotal role towards increasing student achievement.

Table 7: Teachers’ have reasonable workload

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	15	11.5
Agree	4	3.1
Disagree	88	68.8
Strongly Disagree	21	16.4
Total	128	100.0

Having considered the pivotal role played by teachers, it can be established that they do deserve better working conditions as well as being remunerated accordingly. All the respondents in the current research fully endorse better salary packages for teachers. Interview disclosures support survey findings that teachers needed to be paid a decent salary. One of the teachers’ lamented that it had been some time teacher’s salary had not been upgraded but he was hopeful of an increases in the 2018 budget. In Fiji teachers are paid by the state and enjoy a decent salary. However, teacher unions assert that better salary incentives act as catalysts for better learning and teaching. There is ample literature to support the view that there is no doubt a lot of political interference in education affairs globally (Belcastro, 2015; Berry & Bogale, 2011; Odhiambo, 2008). While it is certainly true that salaries are not a precise measure of quality, it is perhaps more important to note that salaries do have some effect upon quality. As such, it can be established that paying teachers a decent salary with incremental increases can positively impact the morale and performance of the teachers (Raymond, 1968).

**Quality Curriculum**

Inevitably, having a quality curriculum in terms of instructional materials and textbooks for students is also an important determinant of quality education. Quality curriculum content refers to the intended and taught curriculum of schools. Keeping the curriculum responsive to changing demands is essential to any organization’s strategy. Findings reveal quite an undecided situation in regards to curriculum development and implementation in the Fijian context. About half (50%) of the respondents agreed that the curriculum is well prepared according to the different year levels. However 39% disagreed while about 12% were unsure. This surely has implications for authorities and maybe more dialogue and further research can be

initiated in this area. Research on educational practices and projections about future needs in society contribute to current understanding of the structure of school curriculum (Campbell, 2014; Paton, 2010). In general, curriculum should emphasize in-depth rather than wide coverage of important areas of knowledge, and contextualized problems of study that stresses skills development as well as knowledge acquisition.

By the way, there used to be three teaching terms in Fiji consisting of 14, 14 and 13 weeks respectively. However, there has been an influx of educational reforms since 2015 and one of it is the covering of syllabus in two terms. This proclamation was formalized in shape of an education circular clearly promulgating that “all teachers must ensure that all syllables are covered by the end of Term 2 so that Term 3 is devoted entirely on remedial work” (Taloga, 2015, p. 1). According to this reform only two terms are allocated for dedicated learning and teaching while the third term is for remedial work and preparation of students for external examinations. Without questioning the good intention of the authorities, it can be established from the survey that there are some mixed feelings about this reform. Survey findings reveal that while some (25%) of the teachers are in favour of the reform to cover the curriculum in two terms, majority (73%) of them disagreed while a few (2%) of them were unsure (See Table 8).

Table 8: Covering of the curriculum in two terms as a good initiative

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	7	5.5
Agree	25	19.5
Disagree	80	62.5
Strongly Disagree	13	10.2
Unsure	3	2.3
Total	128	100.0

On a similar note, Campbell (2014) argues that by overloading curriculum we increase the demand on teachers and students to such a degree that either we fail to teach the basics and essentials in our schools or we have to offload a lot of this to outside of school time. In the Fijian context these often take the shape of afternoon or Saturday classes. Similar sentiments are being shared by Paton (2010) that the education systems are getting bogged down by new reforms, alterations to syllabus structures, strong focus on tests and the addition of new subjects. The contradictory responses made by teachers discussed earlier can be explained in the following table (See Table 9) where they were

required to give their views about the curriculum structure.

Table 9: The curriculum is structured to be covered in two terms

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	11	8.6
Agree	15	11.7
Disagree	70	54.7
Strongly Disagree	27	21.1
Unsure	5	3.9
Total	128	100.0

Majority (77%) of the teachers did not believe the curriculum has been structured to be covered in two terms. Although new curriculum materials had been developed, they still believe that it is sort of overloading of the curriculum. There is ample literature to support the view that curriculum overload and constant demands for change in schools can have significant negative consequences for both teachers and students (Campbell, 2014; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2010; Paton, 2010). Certainly, there isn't any shortage of agreements in regards to the position, and according to Campbell (2014) administrators should consider the demands on teachers and students whenever changes and innovations are implemented. While many of the reforms and changes made in the system may be inspired by good intentions and in many cases provide real benefits to teachers and students alike, administrators should consider the unintended consequences of some of the reforms and changes (Campbell, 2014; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2010; Paton, 2010). Therefore, innovation and change should be supported by research and involve balance and good judgment.

Meanwhile, findings reveal that majority (70%) of the teachers were pleased with the timely manner in which the curriculum materials were dispatched to the schools in Fiji. Some (30%) disagreed with the statement and it is explicable due to the rural and remote location of schools in Fiji. A few schools in the western division and majority of the schools in the eastern division are located in the maritime zones and only be accessed by boats and small ships. Moreover, there is irregular travelling of boats to these islands and the duration even increases during bad weather and rough seas. While curriculum specialists and administrators spend countless hours developing curriculum, it is the teachers who know best what the curriculum should look like. After all, they work directly with the students and in order to create a strong curriculum, teachers must play

an integral role in every step of the process. As such, students should be involved in process of design and curriculum development that is often overlooked and disregarded by relevant authorities (Campbell, 2014; Paton, 2010).

**Parental Involvement**

It is no doubt that parents' play very important role in the education of their children. Students with parents who are actively involved in their school tend to perform better in their academic life. According to Nandlal (2002) these students are more likely to complete high school than students whose parents are not involved in their school. Findings from the current study support the views of Nandlal (2002) as majority (71%) of the teachers agreed that children of parents who spend quality time with them are able to achieve greater success in their academic work (See Table 10).

Table 10: Parents spending quality time with children leads to better student achievement

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	91	71.1
Agree	32	25.0
Disagree	5	3.9
Total	128	100.0

Parents are often cited as a key determinant of student outcomes and they represent an important perspective that policymakers need to understand in the design, articulation, and implementation of quality-focused education initiatives. In a study undertaken in the United States of America revealed that vast majority (96%) of the parents cite parental involvement together with teacher quality as very important factors that contribute to the quality of a student's education (Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013). Parents together with supportive home environment reinforce students' interest and motivation towards achieving excellence in academic life.

However, findings reveal that quite often parents as well as teachers are left behind and not consulted in educational decision making and the reforming process. Majority (83%) of the teachers agreed that there was a lack of parental involvement in higher level decision making and even they were not aware of the many education reforms that have been implemented in the school system (See Table 19). Literature in this regard state that unprecedented, sudden and hasty reforms leads to lack of ownership and rejection by the stakeholders. According to Lestyanszky (2015), massive opposition and demonstration was held in Hungary when the authorities tried implementing a series of

education reforms without proper consultation and discussion. There was huge demonstration by parents and students and were also supported by the teachers. Further evidence for in support of this position can be found in the findings of a survey of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) as part of its response to a Scottish Government consultation on education reforms. Findings reveal that many of them were not included in the debates and decisions regarding the implementation of new education reforms that led to lack of acceptance and rejection (Kerr, 2017).

Findings from the interviews also support the argument that most of the decisions and reforms are generated at the higher levels with minimal or even nil consultation with the teachers, parents and students. This seems a parody as though the intentions may be fine, the very people affected by the planned innovations and reforms are not considered in the planning stages. There is abundance of literature supporting the view that parents are often not considered in higher level decision making and crafting of new educational reforms that directly affect the teaching and learning process of their children. Evidently, Hallgarten (2000) strongly maintains that parents should have a greater say in the way schools are run as power relations between education services and their users appeared to have remained remarkably static. It is important not to over emphasize the shortness of stakeholder involvement as in the current study some (13%) of the teachers believed that ample consultation was taking place a few (4%) were unsure about the level of the consultation process. No matter what the situation may be, the involvement of the parents and the family in the learning process are no doubt vital to the success of the students in our schools.

### **COMPLEXITIES AND IMPLICATIONS**

Having considered the many attributes gives a sense of comprehending the many complexities (biases and benefits) associated with quality education. The World Bank also argues that educational quality concerns are very real for developing countries and cannot be ignored since they are crucial to excel economic returns (Adhikary, 2014). The first and foremost complexity, according to the interview data is concerned with contextualizing what actually entails quality education. The multi-faceted nature of quality education entails that one should know that there are many attributes of quality education and they all contribute towards achieving quality education in a holistic way (Colby & Witt, 2000). Then there are complexities within each of the attributes like the elements that make up the attribute. Another contributing factor to the complexity is when one stakeholder starts believing that it has the domination power and can overrule and dictate terms to

others. The dilemma of what actually entails quality in education is a complexity in itself (Belcastro, 2015; Berry & Bogale, 2011; Odhiambo, 2008). The system needs to require consensus on a set of “universal” attributes or standards of a quality educational experience where the focus should be on the learner rather than the institution, and the entire process should be open to a much broader group of stakeholders (Pond, 2002).

The complexities are further compounded by new educational and pedagogical practices using electronic media and blended approach to learning and teaching. The education systems worldwide have started adopting pedagogies incorporating the needs and aspirations of the so called ‘digital natives’. This new paradigm creates great opportunities for both educators and learners in terms of accessibility and flexibility in learning and this epitome has implications for establishing quality in education (Pond, 2002). This transition has happened due to the explosive growth in the number and diversity of today’s students, and the impact of technology present challenges for ascertaining quality education. Based on the need to having a broader understanding of the concept of quality education, UNICEF in concurrence with pertinent empirical literature took a rather bold step and emphasized that programmes should “encompass a broader definition involving learners, content, processes, environments and outcomes” (Colby & Witt, 2000, p. 2).

Given the complexities in comprehending quality education, it is predictable that there will be certain impinging limitations. One needs to take into consideration the background of the students and teacher quality to truly establish quality education. Conversely, the Government, the curriculum, pedagogy and practice together with parental and stakeholders views needs to be considered whenever any changes and innovations are brought about in the education system. In the final analysis, the whole education system revolves around the students as such there are emergent and germane implications upholding and highlighting the needs and concerns of the students. We must, therefore, focus on what outcomes we desire from educational experiences, not the means by which they are delivered taking into consideration the attributes and potential stakeholders of quality education. In face of such pressing implications, it becomes obvious for conceptualisation of pertinent directions and recommendations for consideration and future implementation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper was not intended to be a comprehensive study of the quality of education as it purposely investigated only a single aspect of quality education. Admittedly, taking the views of only students who are practicing teachers form a single facet of the equation in establishing quality education and this may limit the applicability of the results. As such, suggestions for extending the scope of the study and including the views of other teachers, parents and stakeholders may be considered for further research. Despite these limitations, findings from the triangulation of survey and interview data do speak volumes about the need for conceptualizing quality education in a holistic and more encompassing manner. Having considered the complexities and implications of quality education it is recommended that:

- Relevant authorities in consultation with the stakeholder communities and with support from empirical data should reach a consensus on a universal definition of quality education so as there is better understanding and application of the concept;
- The relevant authorities together with all education stakeholders including the teachers, parents and students should have a say in establishing what constitutes quality education;
- The entry requirement into teacher education programs should be strengthened so that only the best candidates can be enrolled in teacher education programs after rigorous enrollment procedures;
- Universities and teacher training institutions should have dynamic teacher education programs that prepares teachers holistically towards meeting the needs and aspirations of the millennials as well the new industry demands;
- That the curriculum that are designed for the students are developed in consultation with all the stakeholder communities and see that the contents have industry relevance and contribute towards holistic development of students;
- The curriculum should be well designed so that they can be delivered in a given time frame and empirical data is needed to support the directive to the covering of curriculum in two terms in a three term academic year;
- Teachers should be well supported and their workload should be revisited so that there is minimal paperwork enabling teachers to use more productive time with the students and in delivering better prepared and planned lessons;
- The role of parents should be acknowledged and their contribution and feedback should always be sought when new reforms and innovations are being

designed and implemented for better understanding and cooperation.

- While the reason behind implementing new reforms may be in the best interest of the education system, all interested stakeholder communities should be consulted during the drafting to implementation stages for better understanding and ownership by all;
- The administration needs to acknowledge all the attributes of quality education and not unduly emphasize anyone as the sole determinant of quality education;
- That more awareness of the different attributes of quality education should be created so that complexities are reduced resulting in a better understanding of the concept of quality education;
- The views and aspirations of students should be considered in planning new reforms and innovations and may think of developing a student's forum so that the very ones who are affected by the reforms have a say in what and how they would like to learn- after all they are the digital natives and they would not like the terms and conditions dictated to them but would like to be active learners and take charge of their own learning.

Quality education is not an easy concept to qualify however this paper establishes that it is through understanding the different attributes of it that a better concept can be derived. At a time when we are discussing quality education for all our learners it is important to take time to understand this concept.

This paper entails quality education as one that addresses and supports the holistic development of all students and connects academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal learning in a coherent way with authentic real-world experience. Education systems worldwide must consider education as one that should allow children to reach their fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities. The learner should always be at the centre of the educational experience, in a context also characterized by respect for others and for the environment. It implies that the learning experience should be not simply a means but also an end in itself, having intrinsic worth. The world has become a global village and at one touch of the button we are connected with the planet. In a robust democracy and quality public education, I implore all stakeholders to re-think the fundamental meaning of quality education as it has implications for educators, researchers, and policymakers for the realization of a truly knowledge based society.

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