

The concept of quality in education: its structure, dimensions and evaluation

Progress in Mexico

Ministry of Public Education, Puebla
PEEME liaisons in Hidalgo, Guanajuato,
Veracruz, Baja California and Durango
Educational actors in Mexico City,
Tlaxcala, and Baja California

Evaluation of the educational system

José Luis Gutiérrez
Marcela Gajardo
Department for the Evaluation
of Educational Policies and Programs, INEE

Voices from INEE

Sylvia Schmelkes
Teresa Bracho
Francisco Miranda
Harvey Spencer Sánchez

International experiences

Chilean Agency for Educational Quality
Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education
Cuban Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences
LLECE-UNESCO

Com textos traduzidos
para o português



The logbook

National Educational Evaluation Policy Gazette in Mexico

Year 4, no. 10 / March-June 2018

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This edition of the *Gazette* is devoted to the concept of quality in education: how is it constructed?, what are its dimensions?, how is it evaluated? The issue is extensive and exhaustive, and its importance cannot be exaggerated. Suffice it to say that the mere inclusion of the word "quality" in the constitutional text set the Educational Reform in motion and forced the State to transform the policy in the subject in order to meet the new demands in terms of pertinence, relevance, efficacy, impact, sufficiency, efficiency and equity. It is easy to say, but it implies a paradigm shift in the country's education and, consequently, in the kind of people who will inhabit and build it in the near future.

In "In our own hand", the Board of Directors of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE) enunciates a series of clear and concise actions that must be undertaken—in México, in 2018—to guide education on the progressive path of quality.

"Nautical letter," as is customary, updates us with respect to the current state of the INEE.

Our "Special guest" this time is Carlos Henríquez Calderón—Executive Secretary of Chile's Agency for Educational Quality—who writes about the admirable work carried out in that country. His collaboration is: "A system that broadens the quality horizon and strives to reach it".

The section "Voices from the conference" presents three articles. In "Definitions of educational quality used by the INEE", Sylvia Schmelkes del Valle makes a nuanced analysis of these guiding concepts, their sources, and interpretations. As well as describing what "quality based on the principle of ongoing improvement" is, the president of the Board of Directors of the INEE, Teresa Bracho, reflects on the subject, which gives meaning to the actions and changes of the Educational Reform. Finally, Patricia Vázquez del Mercado, then minister of Public Education in Puebla, talks about the strategies and approaches that were proposed in order to raise the quality of education in her state.

In the section "Roadmap," José Luis Gutiérrez addresses the challenges involved in the process of converting

evaluation results into tangible educational improvements, and the mediations that must be complied to get from one place to the other. From another perspective, Marcela Gajardo presents the role of the dissemination and use of evaluation results in the improvement of educational quality. On their part, Giulianna Mendieta, Magnolia Villarroel, and Itandehui Salmorán set forth the complexity of evaluating the educational policies and programs oriented towards quality.

The "Special report. Educational quality: how is it measured and understood?" starts with an article by Francisco Miranda, who proposes deriving an educational quality measurement program from its own regulatory concept. Second, public officials of Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Veracruz, Baja California, and Durango tell us about their experiences in implementing the State Educational Evaluation and Educational Improvement Programs (Spanish acronym: PEEME) aimed at reducing the main gaps in the subject in their entities. In the section's third part, Harvey Spencer Sánchez offers a deep and broad view of educational quality centered on human rights.

The article "The components of high-quality education," as is characteristic to "In the classroom," includes the point of view of teachers, supervisors, and principals concerning the subject.

This review closes with our "Dossier," which invites three experts to speak about "The evaluation of quality in Latin America". The experts are: Atilio Pizarro, general coordinator of the LLECE, Lilliam Mora Aguilar, director for the Promotion and Evaluation of Quality Education of Costa Rica's Ministry of Public Education, and Paul Antonio Torres Fernández, national coordinator of the LLECE and subdirector of the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences of Cuba.

We hope that the present issue of the *Gazette* contributes to the debate and exchange of ideas within the National Educational Evaluation System. €

Quality education in Mexico

BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE INEE

In a recent work—*Educación para la democracia y el desarrollo de México (Education for Democracy and Development in Mexico)*—, the members of the Board of Directors of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education assume a stance regarding the most relevant challenges in the current situation of education in the country, and clearly indicate the main “issues that require attention to guarantee everybody’s right to quality education” (Board of Directors, 2018: 10). These are the following:

Strengthening teachers’ schools. The country requires high-quality centers competent in basic teacher training.

Strengthening school centers. It is imperative that they become the center of the educational system, policies and actions.

Evaluation and review of study plans. Efforts in education must be long-term, with periodic evaluations and changes in the curriculum, providing sufficient support.

Educational research. Improving national education demands expanding the systematic knowledge of it, and this requires enhancing educational research and promoting the empirical research on teaching, teachers, and classroom activities.

Parental involvement. There should be specific policies in place for engagement between students’ parents and the schools where their children study.

Equitable educational services. Priority should be given to the attention of communities in vulnerable situations.

Education, productivity and work. It is essential to provide the student with the knowledge and skills needed for their optimal development in society and in the working world.

Educational autonomy. It is crucial that educational policy decisions are oriented towards the country’s wellbeing and the child’s best interests.

Material conditions. No policy is complete if it does not assign particular importance to the infrastructure and material conditions of schools and facilities.

Governance issues in the educational system. This situation is related to economic, social, and political factors that vary from region to region, and even between institutions, and that have a negative effect on the development of children, youths, and the system itself.

Financing education. Mexico invests public resources in education equivalent to 5.3% of the gross domestic product (GDP); however, expenditure per student is low. Higher efficiency is required in the use of educational resources.

Federalism. National misalignments are reflected in the institutional organization of education.

Single official database. A reliable and ample system is needed, based on registration data, complemented by context information, to optimize the management of the entire school system (Board of Directors, 2018: 11-12). €

BOARD OF DIRECTORS (2018). *Educación para la democracia y el desarrollo de México*. Mexico City: INEE.

STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS SO THAT THEY CAN IMPLEMENT THE 2016-2020 MEDIUM-TERM PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM

Within the context of the National Educational-Evaluation Policy (Spanish acronym: PNEE) and the 2016-2020 Medium-Term Program of the National Educational Evaluation System (Spanish acronym: PMP-SNEE), the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE) promoted the design of 170 State-level Projects for the Evaluation and Improvement of Education (PROEME) that are currently being implemented; 130 of the said projects fall under the purview of the local education authorities, 34 are national ones, and 6 are international ones.

Of the 130 PROEMES, 68% focused on carrying out new evaluations; 31%, on using and disseminating already existing evaluation results; and 1%, on carrying out intentions aimed at improvement, with all of them having the ultimate aim of reducing educational shortfalls in the 32 states, and thus helping to fulfill the right to a high-quality education.

During 2017, the INEE carried out actions to assess and strengthen institutional capacities via various types of support and training, which fall into the following three main categories:

1. *The creation and dissemination of technical-support guidebooks.* In order to guide and facilitate the actions committed to in the PROEME in 2017, the INEE designed guidebooks and shared them with the state-level technical teams in order to provide the latter with theoretical and methodological guidance so that they could draw up reference frameworks, create evaluation instruments, and design strategies for disseminating and using evaluation results and carrying out educational interventions.
2. *Advice and support.* This was developed and provided *ad hoc* to the people responsible for implementing the PROEMES in the different states. The Institute held national meetings with the state liaisons and the INEE's technical teams for the purpose of reviewing the progress made—and experience gained—in developing the evaluation-and-improvement projects, so as to plan strategies for pooling the results. Besides the national meetings, support visits were made to review progress; discuss the methodologies and procedures implemented in the aforesaid evaluation-and-improvement projects, and provide feedback to the state-level teams. In the course of 2017, fifty visits—broken down below in accordance with their purpose—were made to the different states in order to support their education authorities.
 - ◆ 35 visits aimed at following up on the PROEMES and providing technical advice and support.¹
 - ◆ 15 visits, involving the state authorities and the INEE, for the purpose of officially presenting the PROEMES.²
3. *Training in evaluation.* In order to promote and support the training of specialists in different areas of educational evaluation and implement evaluation projects on the part of the INEE—and, where pertinent, of the National Education System (Spanish acronym: SEN)—, various training and support programs have been jointly implemented by the INEE and higher-education institutions from both Mexico and abroad.

Between 2016 and 2018, the INEE has helped to train various government officials responsible for implementing the PROEMES. Via five institutions, both Mexican and

international, capacities have been developed and strengthened, over this period of two years, in order to help the states achieve the aims set forth in the said projects.

Undoubtedly, these efforts have led to the transferal, development and strengthening of technical capacities and other capacities having to do with organizations' social capital, by strengthening the evaluation areas in each state and creating institutional synergies in order to disseminate knowledge about evaluation. These aspects constitute a crucial tool for carrying out the actions planned for 2018 aimed at creating and piloting evaluation instruments and implementing strategies for the dissemination and use of results and achieving the goals set for 2020 in the PMP-SNEE. €

Reference and notes

INEE (2017). *Criterios técnicos para el desarrollo, uso y mantenimiento de instrumentos de evaluación*. Mexico City: INEE. Available at: <goo.gl/oXx3Ci> [Consulted on March 2018].

- 1 Baja California (2), Baja California Sur, Campeche, Colima, Chiapas (2), Chihuahua (2), Durango, Guerrero (2), Hidalgo (2), Jalisco (2), Michoacán, Morelos, Nayarit (4), Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tabasco (4), Tlaxcala, Veracruz and Zacatecas.
- 2 Aguascalientes, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, the State of Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas.

Table 1. Actions aimed at strengthening capacities, 2016-2018

Special program, diploma course or project	Institution in charge	Number of participants
Diploma course in educational evaluation	UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico)	282
Special course in evaluation policy and management	FLACSO (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences)	112
Classroom-observation project	ILCE (Latin American Institute for Educational Communication)	183
Diploma course in educational evaluation and management	IIFE-UNESCO	329
Course on developing educational-evaluation capacities	MIDE (Department of Research and Diagnostic Methods in Education)	61
Total number of participants:		967

A system that broadens the quality horizon and strives to reach it

In the following article, **Carlos Henríquez Calderón**, who holds a Master's Degree in Management and Public Policy from the Faculty of Physical Sciences and Mathematics of the University of Chile, gives us an update on the excellent work done in Chile by the Agency for Educational Quality, of which he is the executive secretary. He stresses the broad scope of the said organization's work and its emphasis on ensuring that evaluation clearly redounds in higher-quality education.

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Introduction

One of the most important reforms of Chilean education during the last 10 years involved the creation of a system aimed at ensuring that high-quality education is available and making good on the right of all Chilean children and youths to receive it, in compliance with the educational aims set forth in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which seek to "Guarantee inclusive and equitable high-quality education and provide ongoing learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2015).

The Agency for Educational Quality (hereinafter referred to as *the Agency*¹ was founded in 2012, and began operating in 2012, as part of the Quality Assurance System (Spanish acronym: SAC)², which was set up to evaluate educational processes and results, produce information for the school system, and provide guidance and support to those educational institutions that have the weakest performance, while taking stock of their students' socioeconomic context.

In recent years, the Agency has striven to *resignify* evaluation, stressing that its purpose is to serve as a bridge between teaching and learning so as to improve education. As part of the effort to achieve this, one of the strategic aims established for the said institution was that of moving towards a broader, more comprehensive system for the evaluation of educational results, capable of delivering more and better information in order help school-management teams and teachers in secondary and high schools. Part of this effort has consisted in promoting evaluation that focuses on guidance on school improvement, along with the accountability and assumption of

responsibility that are contemplated in the current guidelines, so as to raise the quality of Chilean education.

As part of these efforts to assign new meaning to evaluation and make it a useful school-improvement tool, the Ministry of Education and the Agency have come up with several initiatives aimed at reviewing and optimizing the national education system, in order to foster the use of the results it produces to improve the quality of education and make it more equitable.

Under the law currently in force, each year, educational institutions must be assigned one of four performance ratings—*high*, *average*, *average-to-low* or *unsatisfactory*—in accordance with a scale based on both academic and non-academic results, with the said ratings being adjusted in accordance with the socioeconomic characteristics of their students, on the understanding that socioeconomic level affects students' learning outcomes.

Such law stipulates that institutions that get *average-to-low* or *unsatisfactory* ratings must receive guidance regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their administrative systems, as well as recommendations about good practices aimed at improving their performance. It also mandates that they must receive support from the Ministry of Education, which provides the aforementioned services either directly or via an organization set up for the said purpose. The main aim is to assess schools and aid them to design mechanisms that help to improve their management practices, fostering educational leadership and collaboration so as to achieve better learning outcomes.

On the other hand, it also stipulates negative consequences, ranging from the sending of an official letter to those in charge of institutions that have received four consecutive *unsatisfactory* ratings,³ to the withdrawal of official recognition and eventual closure.⁴

Creating performance categories that serve as input for quality-insurance entails evaluating the educational performance mandated by law as a set of educational-quality guidelines. Once the performance ratings have been worked and divulged, the statutory evaluation of managerial practices is carried out in the lower-level institutions.

EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL RESULTS

An important part of the Agency's work consists in evaluating academic performance in key subjects such as Language, Mathematics and Science, for which purpose a System for Measuring the Quality of Education (Spanish acronym: SIMCE) was implemented in 1988 for strictly summative purposes. This test is a census evaluation of the learning outcomes stipulated at the different levels of the national curriculum,⁵ and is administered in accordance with a plan that is drawn up every five years. Census tests for students with sensory disabilities have been administered since 2013, and, in addition to the census tests, sample-based tests are administered to students in the different grades.⁶

Since 2014, the Agency has been evaluating personal and social development and reporting the results so as to move towards a more comprehensive education for all the country's children and youths. Four of the personal and social development

ratings, pertaining to *academic self-esteem, student motivation, conviviality in the school, participation, training for citizenship and healthy life habits*, are calculated using *Questionnaires on the Context and Quality of Education*, which are administered in tandem with the SIMCE test. Results for the other four, pertaining to *gender equity, attendance, continuance in school and graduation rates* for technical-professional lower-secondary education, are calculated using secondary data.

THE EVALUATION OF MANAGERIAL PROCEDURES

The Agency evaluates school-management procedures based on the so-called *Performance-indication Standards*, a set of benchmarks that constitute a guidance framework for institutions and those who run them. This test battery was created by the Ministry of Education, approved by the National Board of Education, and promulgated in an Executive Order.

The said evaluation is carried out as part of the *evaluation-and-guidance visit*—also known as the *comprehensive visit*—which is carried out every two years for institutions that are rated *unsatisfactory*, and every four years for those rated *average-to-low*. During these visits, a direct link is established with the institution, making it possible to take an in-depth look at four aspects of school management, i.e. leadership, teaching-learning management, training and conviviality and resource management. This observation enables the team to draw up a diagnosis of the institution's managerial practices, and this is followed by a guidance-for-improvement workshop that is custom-designed for each institution.

In this way, the Agency has made the transition from a system that only evaluated results to one that also evaluates school-management procedures, thus gaining more in-depth knowledge about the institutions' daily work, which fosters better guidance and the provision of timely input to educational-policy design, so that extra attention can be paid to the institutions that are most in need of help.

The concept of educational quality and innovations

The public policy implemented in accordance with the pertinent law is founded on a concept of educational quality that constitutes the basis for the evaluation that the Agency carries out and the guidance that it gives. Below, we present the three governing principles that inform current policy: a broad overview of quality, the idea that every institution can set improvement processes in motion if it receives the necessary support, and the central role that equity plays in creating high-quality education. These underlying principles are contrasted with the viewpoint of those involved in education, as manifested in a series of studies also carried out by the Agency,⁷ and, for each one of them, the main innovations that the latter has made in order to put them into practice and foster real improvements in educational quality are described.

Promoting quality based on a broad overview

Public policy has come up with a multivariate model of quality, adopting a broad view of its components, based on which the Agency evaluates different aspects, both academic and non-academic, of institutions' educational performance.

At the school-system level, it is widely agreed that the said broad view's inclusion of non-academic components in its concept of educational quality is germane. Our research suggests that those involved in education approve of these efforts to broaden the definition of quality.⁸ Furthermore, the definition of quality that the said educators have adopted stresses the affective links between the student and the teacher, as well as the importance of developing critical-thinking and self-directed-learning skills in students. They conceive of high-quality education as education that develops student skills that extend beyond the acquisition of traditional subject knowledge, which faces the challenge of understanding and observing institutions' efforts to inculcate the said non-traditional skills, determining which teaching abilities and parts of the curriculum cover them so as to identify needs and foster improvement.

The law governing the SAC requires institutions to provide suitable conditions for engendering the non-academic skills that educators believe should form a part of the definition of educational quality. Over the last few years, we have produced concrete information, and provided guidance, regarding the benchmarks used to evaluate personal and social development. One example of these efforts is the dossier pertaining to conviviality in the school, where each institute can find information about both students' and teachers' perceptions of specific aspects of the said level of conviviality. Also, a book entitled *Construyendo juntos: claves para la convivencia escolar [Building Together: Keys to Conviviality in the School]* (Arón *et al.*, 2017), which lists good practices for increasing conviviality observed in our institutions, was made available to the institutions evaluated in order to encourage them to come up with effective practices that suit each particular context.

Mobilizing for improvement

A second aspect relating to the concept of quality in public policy has to do with the idea that, with suitable guidance and support, institutions can improve the managerial procedures and results in accordance with which they are evaluated by legal mandate. This aspect is deeply rooted in the conviction that the institutions can, indeed, improve as a result of the pressure exerted by a system that obliges them to assume responsibility and mandates consequences for not doing so, as well as making their performance ratings public.

In effect, the Agency has concentrated its efforts on enabling institutions to come up with viable and effective improvement processes by: *a)* striving to enable schools to evaluate themselves (via evaluation visits, performance-based guidance, encouragement to use evaluation results in order to improve, and development of the ability to do this), *b)* endeavoring to achieve balanced evaluation by combining both formative and summative tools; and *c)* taking proactive steps to disseminate good practices so as to encourage institutions to come up with their own improvement plan.

ENABLING INSTITUTIONS TO EVALUATE THEMSELVES

In order to trigger self-improvement, institutions need to constantly reflect, using the available information, on the extent to which the processes they have set in motion produce

the desired results, as well as ascertaining whether the decisions they have taken about their managerial procedures are effective.

The evaluation-and-guidance visits provide an excellent opportunity for institutions with poor results to reflect on how effective their procedures are. Indeed, one of the purposes of the said visits is to help them to develop self-evaluations skills in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses and thus come up with self-improvement strategies. This implies that the institution can understand its results and plan and evaluate the most effective actions for improving on them.

The law governing the SAC deems the aforesaid information, and its use by the institutions, to be crucial, constituting an important tool for achieving improvement. In this regard, the Agency has concentrated its efforts on providing better information to the institutions, and this has often made it necessary to break down report contents and foster the development of new capacities in order to use them.

In the 2016-2020 Evaluation Plan, which was approved by the National Board of Education and is now in force, the amount of external evaluations to be carried out in schools was revised, with the evaluation grades and subjects evaluated being reduced from eighteen census evaluations per year to an average of nine. This enabled the Agency to deliver more detailed information, doing so, for example, via a separate report for each aspect of the Mathematics and Science results, thus helping the institution to identify its strengths and weaknesses in specific areas of each subject. Furthermore, since 2016, information on the gender gap has been included in the report provided to teachers and school principals, given the need to take stock of gender-related problems.⁹

The *Methodological Guide for Using Data [Guía metodológica para el uso de datos]*, issued by the Agency (2018a), which endeavors to foster full information-processing capacities, covers information gathering and interpretation, data-based decision-making, and evaluation of the extent to which the decisions taken achieve the initial goals that were set. The said guide, which was designed for use by support teams, school principals and teachers, uses simple language and concrete examples to explain the steps that need to be taken in order to use both the internal facts that the school produces, and also the external data that it receives. This guide helps institutions to decide which actions to take in line with the Improvement Plan and in keeping with the educational project.¹⁰ It should be stressed that it doesn't just relate to academic goals, but is also applicable to managerial ones, being a useful tool for helping the institution to reflect on the relationship between its processes and its results.

BALANCING EVALUATION OPPORTUNITIES

Various authors have asserted that formative evaluation helps a lot to improve students' learning outcomes, boost their motivation and reduce educational disparities (Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009; Black and William 2006; Heritage, 2010). The Agency understands that, although summative or learning-outcome evaluations such as the SIMCE, are useful for decision-making, they do not have the same scope and utility as formative tests

aimed at promoting learning. Unlike the former, the latter provide useful information about each student's performance so that the teacher can fine-tune the teaching-learning process to make it more effective.

Given this evidence, the Agency has endeavored to strengthen formative evaluations carried out in the school system, promoting not only system for measuring progress, but also a formative one, both of which complement the information yielded by SIMCE and lead to a variety of evaluation approaches and purposes.

Progressive evaluation equips institutions with an instrument for voluntary internal use so that teachers can get information that is useful, specific and relevant about progress in the development of Reading-comprehension skills by students in the second grade of elementary school and of Mathematics skills by ones in the seventh grade of the same study cycle. The said tool gathers information at three points in the school year and its main aim is to provide evidence that informs pedagogical decisions in order to improve students' learning outcomes. Progress-focused evaluation is based on the four principles of curriculum alignment,¹¹ willingness,¹² flexibility¹³ and cooperation.¹⁴ Unlike the standardized test, this instrument is available to teachers and school managers so that they may review texts and questions for pedagogical purposes, and it serves as a model for internal evaluations.

The results of the progress-focused evaluation are delivered immediately so that the schools can make decisions and take fast action in order to improve learning outcomes. Information (i.e. the average score and level accordance with the learning standards stipulated by the Ministry of Education) is supplied on each student, for each skill evaluated, and this helps to link the evaluation to the teaching-learning process.

Furthermore, the Agency stipulates the ways in which the said information should and should not be used so as to ensure that the results are properly interpreted, it also makes suggestions as to how the evaluated skills should be developed.¹⁵

On the other hand, formative evaluation seeks to help teachers and students to set learning goals, lets them know the extent to which they have met the established aims, and tells them what they should do to close any gaps. This process entails gathering evidence on students' progress as they learn, and, based on the said evidence, providing feedback not only to the students on their performance, but also to the teachers about their teaching.

The Agency has set up a Web site for schools, with resources that enable them to set concrete learning goals and gather and interpret evidence, enabling them to support their students' learning. Having also provided tools for helping the student to play a more active role in the learning process, and fostering self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, it is has worked with a group of schools to promote the latter types of evaluation, piloting the aforementioned resources and receiving suggestions about the materials used and the particular needs of the said schools, in what has been a sort of product-improvement laboratory. Additionally, it has distributed videos of teaching practices that have served as models for using the tools, and both teachers and school principals have given

feedback about the importance of formative evaluation in their day-to-day work.

SYSTEMATIZATION OF GOOD PRACTICES

A third method used by the Agency to foster improvement in educational institutions has consisted in the systematization and dissemination of the good practices observed in our schools.

First, visits for learning purposes are made to institutions that have performed very well in their socioeconomic context.¹⁶ These meetings with the members of the school community enable us to systematize those practices that either directly or indirectly impact the development of the students and the improvement of the schools in the said context, providing them with realistic options for tackling the challenges that they face.

In these cases, the community is visited by a team of professionals from the Agency who get to know its *modus operandi* and, jointly with the school, define pertinent educational practices that are institutionalized and systematized. Meetings, interviews and observations of classes are held, and other school activities are carried out. Another outstanding feature are the workshops in which the members of the school community discuss their problems and systematize their best practices.

When systematizing each experience, we are interested in first recording the meanings, the achievements, the step-by-step interactions among the participants, the path followed, the facilitators and the ways in which difficulties were overcome and challenges faced in order bring about improvement over time. Then, we analyze the different experiences, so as to identify shared features without ignoring the unique nature of each one of them. The results of the said analysis are made available to the schools and the SAC institutions via face-to-face presentations, in printed form, and via audio-visual materials and the Internet, in order to foster improvements that encourage identification and analysis of problems in the areas being discussed and drive the design of new solutions that fit the context (Agency, 2016a; 2017).

A study agenda is also created to record good practices in the compilation of the performance benchmarks that are evaluated in accordance with the Law Governing the SAC. As result of this initiative, studies have been published on ways of narrowing the gender gap (Agency, 2016b), increasing conviviality in schools (Arón, 1917), and the creation of keys to educational improvement (Agency, 2018b), among other topics.

A third core aspect of the concept of quality that informs public policy has to do with the weighting given to the generation of equity. The Law Governing the SAC adopts a compensatory focus insomuch as educational evaluation is carried out taking stock of the student's socioeconomic context. As already mentioned, the results scale pertaining to the performance category is adjusted in keeping with the socioeconomic context of the students who attend each institution, as a way of compensating the disadvantages engendered by socioeconomic vulnerability and holding institutions duly responsible, on the understanding that the fact that providing education to vulnerable students is more challenging should be taken into account when evaluating the said students' performance.

There has been significant improvement in the extent to which public educational policy has managed to afford more opportunities to the most vulnerable students via compensatory initiatives such as the Law Governing Preferential School Subsidies, under which the performance grade is calculated based on the context, with the scale being adjusted in keeping with a series of socioeconomic variables.

Some final thoughts

Having striven to take more stock of educational processes and their results, the Chilean evaluation system has made some important progress in this regard. Since 2014, the country's school system has possessed a wider ranging quality evaluation that not only measures students' academic progress using the SIMCE tests, but also covers the aspects of non-academic training and development that were deemed pertinent to comprehensive education by the Quality Assurance System and are manifested in the benchmarks pertaining to personal and social development. Also, we are beginning to pay attention to the process that gives rise to educational results, taking a closer look at the school dynamics that foster quality and equity in the education system.

In its work, the Agency and the Quality Assurance System has opted for broadening the quality horizon, adopting a focus whereby each school is expected to be the creator of, participant in, and central agent of its own results. This approach entails paying attention to other aspects of education, such as the student's experience of school and the development of socio-emotional skills that will enable him/her to empathize with others and build a truly cohesive society.

The task is that of making our schools safe places where wellbeing, respect and appreciation of diversity are fostered. Ones where students can learn how to learn, create opportunities for engendering conviviality and respect, and exercise their right to build a more just and tolerant society, achieving the democracy that they want in this, the 21st century. €

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- 1 Also, in addition to the already existing Ministry of Education, a Department for the Oversight of Education was set up and new powers were granted to the Supreme Board of Education, which became the National Education Board. The institutions pertaining to the SAC are charged with furthering educational improvement in schools and achieving a balance between operator autonomy, control aimed at safeguarding the rights of participants in the school system, educational evaluation, the provision of support and guidance to schools, and need for accountability on the part of the schools themselves.
 - 2 This system was mandated by the General Education Law of 2019 (Spanish acronym: N°20 370 LEGE) in Law No. 20 529.
 - 3 This includes a list of the thirty nearest institutions comprised in the superior-performance category. awarded.
 - 4 The institution is actually shut down after being graded as 'unsatisfactory' in five consecutive years, or in six consecutive years when there has been a significant improvement in results during the period.
 - 5 Language and Communication (reading comprehension and writing); Mathematics; Natural Sciences; History; Geography; Social Sciences. It is administered to students in the fourth, sixth, and eighth grades of elementary school and the second grade of secondary school.
 - 6 Currently, these tests evaluate Reading in the second grade of Elementary school, English in the third grade of secondary school, and Training in Citizenship and Physical Education in the eighth grade of elementary school. The evaluation plan also contemplates a general-competencies test in secondary-level technical-professional education, to be implemented in mid-2020, as well as the administration of the test pertaining to the Program for International Student Evaluation (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Regional Comparative and Explicatory Study (Spanish acronym: ERCE), the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), all for the purpose of monitoring student learning outcomes and obtaining results data that are comparable with those of other countries.
 - 7 The book entitled *Tarea de todos hacia una visión compartida de la calidad de la educación*, published by the Agency for Educational Quality, contains a series of studies aimed at more closely analyzing the concept of 'quality' at the different school levels (Agency, 2018).
 - 8 See the study on the piloting of the Quality Assurance System (Spanish acronym: SAC), which reports that most of the schools that were surveyed either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with inclusion of non-academic factors when calculating the performance grade (Agency, 2016).
 - 9 The Agency carried out a study in order to detect and define good practices for narrowing the gender gap. One of the most pertinent findings was the failure to see any problems in this area. In fact, institutions are extremely blind to gender differences in learning and the practices associated with them, so that the first step is to make them aware of these phenomena.
 - 10 Operation-wise, the Agency provides the school with a set of working papers that includes a document setting forth the guide's conceptual framework.
 - 11 The tests administered as part of the progress evaluation evaluate the learning aims stipulated in the curriculum and their results are delivered in keeping with the national learning standards.
 - 12 The schools are free to decide whether, given the plans and programs already implemented, the progressive evaluation will help their teams of professionals to understand and put into practice the recommendations made. Around 70% of them—constituting 84% of all students who have graduated from the second grade of secondary school—have enrolled voluntarily.
 - 13 The schools can choose between the paper-based test and the computer version, according to the type of students that attend them.
 - 14 With the progress-based model, it is recommended that teachers, school administrators parents and guardians reflect together on the data. The educational community may make use of the tools provided by the Agency and decide how and when to carry out the evaluation (within an established time frame), analyze the results, and use the recommendations to initiate improvement processes.
 - 15 The progress-based evaluation is designed to provide teachers and school-principals with input for teaching. It is made clear that the said information should not be used to hold people to account, grade students, evaluate teachers or compare evaluated courses.
 - 16 In accordance with the law, the Quality Assurance Agency invites school communities that are willing to share their experiences—above all those that have heterogeneous or vulnerable student populations, are succeeding in implementing inclusion strategies, are making progress in the areas of personal and social development, improvement of learning outcomes, or are implementing improvement strategies—to visit institutions with high performance ratings.

Definitions of educational quality used by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education¹

The author of the following article presents and analyzes the definitions of educational quality that inform the INEE's activities and, based on them, proposes a working definition aimed at grounding theory in practical application.

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The following four definitions of educational quality are used in the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE):

1. Quality defined as relevance, pertinence, efficacy, equity and efficiency

The oldest, longest standing definition is featured in the INEE's 2007 Master Plan for Educational Evaluation. It was partially amended in Section IV of Article 8 of the General Education Law (Spanish acronym: LGE), which was amended in 2013 and is based on Carlo Muñoz Izquierdo's classic definition of educational quality as a complex concept consisting of the five components of relevance, pertinence, efficacy, equity and efficiency (Muñoz, 2008).

The INEE's definition of educational quality as: "Educational quality is a composite of pertinence, relevance, internal efficacy, internal efficiency, impact, sufficiency, efficiency and equity" (INEE, 2006). This definition has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Regional Bureau of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC-UNESCO) in its reformulations of educational quality in the region (2009).

Pertinence, relevance, external efficacy and impact are understood to stem from the relationship between the aims and products of the education system and the needs of the environment in which it operates. Efficiency is a product of the relationship between input or resources on the one hand and products or results on the other hand, while equity is a function of the proper distribution of educational resources and products.

In effect, the INEE holds that a high-quality educational system is one that:

- establishes a curriculum that satisfies both individual student needs (*pertinence*), and also the needs of society

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—i.e. its needs, not only for greater productivity, but also for democracy, respect for human rights, scientific development, environmental protection, and the safeguarding and fostering of cultural diversity (*relevance*).

- ensures that as many people as possible have access to schooling, remain in it until the end of the established program, and achieve the target learning outcomes by the time they leave it (*internal and external efficacy*).
- ensures that the students' learning outcomes are lasting ones that result in social behavior that is rooted in freedom, fairness, solidarity, tolerance and respect for others; so as to benefit both society and the individual, who will thus be able to develop fully as a worker, producer,

consumer, parent, voter, public servant, reader and television viewer, among other things—in other words, as a full citizen (*impact*).

- has the necessary human and material resources to achieve the aforesaid aims (*sufficiency*) and makes optimal use of the said resources without wasting or squandering them (*efficiency*).
- takes stock of the socioeconomic inequalities both among students and their communities, offering special support to those who need it, so that as many of them as possible can achieve their target learning outcomes (*equity*).

The Institute considers that high quality is a relative, mutable concept—relative because its estimation depends on the yardstick used, and mutable because it is never fully achieved, since it is always possible to aim higher.

Therefore, the most pertinent way of assessing educational quality is by comparing the past state of the education system with how we want it to be in the future; a high-quality education system is one that is constantly improving and is assessed using a predefined yardstick—i.e. a set of parameters, standards or aims.

Quality is not a product, but a process, consisting in an ongoing effort to achieve reasonable improvement that can only come from within the system that requires it, rather than being imposed from outside (INEE, 2006).

2. Quality as defined in Article Three of the Mexican Constitution

Amended in February of 2013, this article of the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (Spanish acronym: CPEUM), which also confers autonomy on the INEE and constitutes a compulsory touchstone for the evaluations that it carries out, reads:

The State shall ensure that compulsory education is equitable, so that there are suitable teaching materials and methods, adequate school organization and educational infrastructure, and suitable teachers and school principals, which guarantee optimal learning outcomes (CPEUM, 2013).

3. Quality as defined in the LGE

The amended version of Section IV of Article 8 of the LGE, which also adopts the above definition of high quality, reads:

[Education] shall be of a high quality, which is to say that the results and processes of the education system shall be congruent with each other in terms of efficacy, efficiency, pertinence and equity (LGE, 2013).

It bears pointing out that the said law also contains a section devoted to educational equity, Chapter 32 of which, among other things, states:

The education authorities shall take steps to bring about conditions that make it possible for each person to exercise

his/her right to high-quality, equitable education and truly equal opportunities to enter, and remain in, school. The said steps shall favor the most backward groups and regions, and those whose economic and social conditions place them at a disadvantage (LGE, 2013).

4. Rights-focused quality

When the INEE became autonomous in 2013, it adopted a rights-oriented approach, and hence one stressing the right to high-quality education as its basic touchstone. There were already antecedents for this in the Institute, whose framework for the Evaluation of Basic Teaching and Learning Conditions—i.e. the evaluation of schools—had already adopted Katherina Tomasevsky's four A's as a basis for measuring quality, sharing her position that these constitute an absolute minimal level, the achievement of which is progressive, as befits a dynamic view of quality, rather than a ceiling.

This approach conceives of education as an inalienable, inherent human right whose observance is crucial to the exercising of the other human rights; on the understanding that the right to education is the right to learn those things that one needs to live a decent life, hence being a legal entitlement.

It should not be forgotten that Article One of the Mexican Constitution was amended in 2011, and, since then, no longer refers to personal guarantees, but, rather, to rights and to the international treaties that render them constitutional ones.

The aforementioned four A's constitute an important part of the framework pertaining to the right to high-quality education, and hence of the INEE's evaluations.

Two of them pertain to the right *to* education, and stand for:

1. *Availability*: meaning that there must be enough schools, classrooms and teachers to provide education to those who are entitled to it.
2. *Accessibility*: meaning that there should be no physical, economic or other barriers preventing access to the said schools (i.e. no discrimination).

The other two pertain to rights *in* education, and stand for:

3. *Adaptability*: meaning that education must suit the different populations that receive it, above all, acknowledging, valuing and taking stock of diversity.
4. *Acceptability*: meaning, among other things, that the students must consider that the things they are being taught are useful; that there is no discrimination in their school; and that they feel safe and welcomed and perceive that their right to education is being respected, since lack of equity is deemed to be a failure to respect the said right to education.

In the INEE, the above four rights go hand-in-hand, complementing—rather than contradicting—each other.

Having defined the referential framework, we now need to provide a working definition of its components.

How the INEE measures educational quality

As mandated in the Mexican Constitution, the evaluations that are carried out by the INEE pertain to the components, processes and results of education, and should establish levels of student achievement, of suitability and performance of teachers and school principals, and of suitability of schools, policies and programs.

The benchmarks we have created for measuring educational progress take stock of:

1. *Context*. Though not explicitly mentioned in the previous definitions, it is assumed that educational quality is multifactorial, and that some of its basic determinants lie outside the education system. This benchmark takes stock of the context and its heterogeneous nature
2. *Agents and resources* (efficiency)
3. *Access and path followed* (availability, accessibility)
4. *Educational and managerial processes* (efficiency, pertinence)
5. *Educational results* (efficacy)

Furthermore, so as to define what is to be measured, the *evaluation of student achievement* takes stock of key learning contents—i.e. the things that the child or youth must learn regardless of where s/he lives. This has to do with pertinence and relevance, as well as consideration of the context—i.e. the environment, the family, the school—based either on contextual questionnaires or on data obtained from secondary sources. Equity is always taken into account, with results being presented for zones with different levels of marginalization, different types of school (and also according to whether the students belong to cultures other than the dominant mestizo one), and different levels of family income (including access to goods and services).

When evaluating schools, we take stock of the following seven areas (four pertaining to resources, and three pertaining to processes):

Resources:

1. Infrastructure that favors the students' wellbeing and learning: basic school services; sufficient, accessible study areas, basic security and hygiene.
2. Sufficient furniture and basic teaching-learning equipment: adequate furniture and pedagogical materials.
3. School staff: the professional profile of the managerial staff and teachers, in accordance with their post; whether there are sufficient members of staff, on an ongoing basis, during the school year.
4. Back-up teaching materials: whether curricula and teaching materials are available.

Processes:

5. Learning management: effective time management in order to cover the curriculum, learning-oriented teaching, follow-up strategies and support for teachers and students.

6. School organization: the existence of collaborative work, a shared vision of the school on the part of the teachers, parent participation, disciplinary practices that respect students' rights, and peaceful conflict management.
7. Conviviality in the school which favors personal and social development, harmonious coexistence, respect, trust and security, along with decent disciplinary practices that do not violate students' rights.

In other words, we in the INEE place particular emphasis on evaluating the components of availability, accessibility, efficiency and efficacy, above all with regard to language skills and mathematics, and have tried to measure conviviality and equity, which underlie everything.

We have made less progress in developing methodologies and instruments enabling us to measure the components of adaptability, acceptability, pertinence and relevance, and advanced very little in the areas of external efficiency and impact.

Whenever possible, we make diachronic comparisons, analyzing trends in keeping with the definition of quality as ongoing improvement. €

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- 1 Presentation given at the International Seminar on "Strategies for Fostering Educational Quality", held at the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education in Mexico City on December 1st and 2nd, 2017.

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Towards a definition of quality

The following article forms part of a profound, ongoing series of musings that **Dr. Teresa Bracho**, president of the Board of Governors of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, has been engaged in for many years. In her clear, attentively structured presentation, she sets out her carefully weighed thoughts about that key aspect of education, quality.

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Introduction

The International Seminar on Strategies for Fostering Educational Quality sprang from my desire, both as an academic and as a professional, to come up with the clearest possible definition of the components of the concept of *quality* in education—an endeavor that has involved not only Latin American ministers of education and educational-evaluation institutes, but also international experts in the said field.

I also have, in the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE), a working team that has striven to come up with a theoretical definition of educational quality, identify its components or dimensions, and create suitable benchmarks for monitoring it, based on the data available to our institution, while also proposing practical uses of the said benchmarks.

In the field of education, the concept of quality tends to be invoked spontaneously, and often uncritically, in a way that gives rise to confusion about its meaning, above all because it is a complex one that is open to various interpretations and has several layers of meaning, so that the different definitions that have been proposed for it are not always mutually compatible. In short, most references to educational quality are ambiguous and vague, oftentimes being divorced from the context in which they occur.

It should not be forgotten that the definition of educational quality not only poses a theoretical problem, but also goes far beyond strictly academic considerations, extending to areas such as policy-making and the administration of the education system and its schools, as well as having a big impact on the places where teaching and learning take place.



As explained below, the Educational Reform mandated in the 2013 amendment to the Mexican Constitution hinges, precisely, around the concept of “quality based on ongoing improvement” that has informed the changes and innovations that have taken place since then, including the granting of autonomy to the INEE itself.

In this context, we urgently need to define, as clearly as possible, what we mean by educational quality, in order to be able to specify which aims need to be achieved to make good on the right to universal high-quality education based on ongoing improvement.

Since the aforesaid task is not a simple one, it is worth advancing, step by step, towards a definition of quality that can help us to achieve the aims set forth in the Constitution. Hence, rather than seeking to fully solve the problem of how to define and measure educational quality, our work has focused on providing input so that the debate about the said phenomenon can result in a basic consensus as to how to define and monitor progress and backsliding in the said area.

Unlike what occurs with other kinds of benchmarks—e.g. economic ones such as gross national product, of which we have managed to establish common definitions and adopt shared methodologies—, no two countries use the same educational-quality benchmark or adhere to the same definition.

This situation arises from the very nature of the phenomenon being studied, given that quality is a *relative* concept, since it is deemed to exist or not exist in accordance with a given normative: an *axiological* one, since it is a value-based standard having to do with the meaning and coherence that values impart to actions aimed at improvement; a *subjective*

one, since its manifestation depends on the choices made by individuals (or by institutions that are managed by individuals) at specific times; and a *contextual* one, since it is inextricably related to the environment.

Despite the international consensus about the need to foster high-quality education, each person has a different understanding of what the said phrase means; so, a solution cannot be found based on individual reflection, no matter how profound it is, but, rather, must spring from a collective agreement that can be understood by all, and be based on an organized course of action adopted by all those involved in education.

Therefore, “any action in the area of educational policy that seeks to raise the quality of education must start by explicitly defining the concept of quality that is adopted in order to establish the aims that we wish to achieve, and thus enable us to talk about improvement in the said areas” (Bracho, 2009: 47-50).

Approaches to educational quality

As an example of how to go about defining and measuring a complex phenomenon, let us look at the concept of poverty. In 1990, the World Bank defined being poor as living on one or less dollars a day, establishing a yardstick that had to change quickly because, among other things, it did not suffice as a lower limit. From this we learn that, even though we know that poverty is a complex, relative, multifactorial and multidimensional phenomenon, we define and measure it using a yardstick that is based on a simple, concrete notion. Today, we have a much better understanding of the said phenomenon and can measure it more accurately.

In his famous work on social equality, Amartya Sen (1980) points out that, instead of defining equality in abstract terms, we should stipulate what kind of equality we are referring to, asking ourselves the two questions: “Equality of what?” and “Equality for what?”, before endeavoring to establish a benchmark. Likewise, abstract definitions of educational quality in a given country get us nowhere if we do not first clearly define the said concept.

Since such scheme is only useful so long as we first identify the areas or approaches to which the features observed in the subject of our analysis pertain, below we describe the model of educational quality that is used in our country in order to then talk about the approaches that can be adopted to study it.

The “multidimensional paradigm of educational administration” proposed by Sander (1996) has strongly influenced the way we, in Mexico, conceive of quality, and is undoubtedly a yardstick in the official definitions that are set forth in the law. The said model includes four elements: the economic component of efficiency, the pedagogic component of efficacy, the political component of effectiveness, and the cultural component of relevance. However, in the words of Carlos Muñoz Izquierdo, “It should be stressed that this paradigm was not intended to be directly applied to education *per se*, but rather to school administration” (2009: 24).

Rather than defining educational quality, the current laws—even the Law Governing the INEE—include

statements about some of the things that can have a bearing on the said quality, particularly mentioning school administration (efficiency and efficacy), the quality of the curriculum (pertinence and relevance), and how the resources devoted to education are distributed (sufficiency and equity).

While such aspects are undoubtedly necessary in any analysis of educational quality, several authors propose a more extensive set of components that enables us to come up with a definition that is more detailed and exhaustive.

Based on an extensive review of the specialized literature and the available research findings on the subject, it is possible to establish the following approaches to educational policy and the different aspects and topics stressed by them:

1. *The philosophical approach.* This includes debates about the pertinence, relevance and aims of a country’s education system, emphasizing axiological and pedagogical issues. It is no easy task to clearly state the ultimate values that guide education.
2. *The administrative approach.* This seeks to evaluate quality by analyzing how the resources devoted to education are managed, not only in economic terms (via efficiency analysis), but also in pedagogical ones (via studies of school efficacy). It examines how schools use human and material resources to enable their students to achieve meaningful learning outcomes.
3. *The rights-oriented approach.* This sets out to ascertain whether the State is fulfilling its obligation, as set forth in its laws and in the pertinent international treaties, to make good on its citizens’ right to high-quality education.

The basic principles of educational quality

Notwithstanding the wide range of academic and legal definitions of educational quality that exists, there are some consensuses about the following basic principles, which are included in our country’s laws and, in my view, lay the minimal foundations for ascertaining the progress made towards achieving educational quality and equity:

1. *The principle of universality,* whereby everybody should have access to schooling and continue receiving it until they complete compulsory education.
2. *The principle of equity,* whereby people should not have different degrees of access to, or continuance in, education or different learning outcomes that depend on their gender, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic level, nationality or any other feature.
3. *The principle of achievement,* whereby people should develop the same (or similar) competencies, to the same degree and in each part of the education system; regardless of the contents, knowledge or values that the said system sets out to teach.
4. *The principle of sufficiency and high-quality in the education that is available,* whereby the State is obliged to provide available education with enough trained human resources and suitable infrastructure.

Of the many theoretical frameworks, it is the aforesaid four principles that provide us with a first working definition that serves to guide our actions and provide a basis for evaluation, so as to enable us to ascertain the extent to which the State is fulfilling its duty to guarantee the human right to education.

Educational quality in the Mexican Constitution

In Mexico, the rights-focused approach is the one most capable of enabling us to come up with a working definition of educational quality, since our laws contain provisions that clearly define what is meant by the right to high-quality education, thus making it possible for us to create a set of benchmarks based on which we can ascertain whether the said laws are being complied with.

The Mexican Constitution clearly stipulates the essential features that our country's education must possess. Being Mexico's supreme law, the said document, whose provisions are mandatory, serves as basis for defining the high-quality education that the State is bound to provide and guiding the latter's actions.

A close reading of Article Three of the said Constitution reveals that the four principles set forth above are clearly and consistently defined in it, as follows:

1. *Universality or universal access*: "Everyone is entitled to receive education. [...] Pre-school, primary and secondary education constitute elementary education, which, together with lower-secondary education, shall be compulsory" (Paragraph One).
2. *Equity* "shall help to foster human coexistence, [...] ensuring that one racial group, religion, sex or person shall not be favored over others" (Section II, Subsection c).
3. *Achievement* (effective learning): "This shall be of high quality [seeking to produce] maximal student-learning outcomes" (Section II, Subsection d).
4. *Availability of sufficient high-quality education*: "The State shall assure the high quality of compulsory education so that there are suitable teaching materials, methods and teachers, good school organization, adequate educational infrastructure, and effective guidelines in order to ensure that students achieve maximal learning outcomes" (Paragraph Three).

To the aforesaid basic principles, the Constitution adds another one which, in my view, constitutes a step forward in the definition of educational quality:

5. *Ongoing improvement*: "[Education] shall be of a high quality based on ongoing improvement" (Section II, Subsection d).

Though the addition of the two words, "ongoing improvement", may seem inconsequential, it is far from being so. The requirement that there be "ongoing improvement" makes quality an open-ended attribute that is constantly growing and being renewed, so that it requires an open-ended

definition. It thus obliges the State to guarantee the availability of education that is increasingly broad and deep, the aims and accomplishment of which are self-improvement rather than the achievement of set standards in any of the areas that go to make it up—in other words, high-quality education that is adapted to, and rooted in, its own historical context, and fosters the improvement of every citizen.

Some final thoughts

As explained above, the Constitution mandates that education must constantly improve in order to be deemed to be of high quality; with regard not only to the knowledge that it imparts, but also to each of the principles that inform it. Hence, since providing high-quality education entails constantly increasing access, achievement and equity, as well as making more schooling available, we can assert that the principle of ongoing improvement is a basic touchstone of educational quality in Mexico.

The International Seminar on Strategies for Fostering Educational Quality in Mexico has been an excellent starting point for clearly defining the concept of educational quality, making possible the fruitful exchange of opinions and information among the different Latin American countries, with the result that we have discovered areas of common ground and learned about good practices that can be copied and/or adapted. The said forum has also served to increase the level of participation by experts from other parts of the world, via interviews and articles published in this Gazette.

We said at the outset that quality is the cornerstone of our country's recent Educational Reform. Now we can see more clearly why this is the case; with all due seriousness, our country has assumed the pursuit of educational quality as a direct, unavoidable obligation of the State, rooted in the legally-mandated rights-focused approach adopted by Mexico as part of its never-ending effort to achieve democracy, equity and learning—or, if you prefer, as part of its national mission. €

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VOICES FROM THE CONFERENCE

The origin, evolution and achievements of the State of Puebla's Attendance-Continuance-and-Learning Educational Model

In the interview transcribed below, **Patricia Vázquez del Mercado**, then Puebla's minister of Public Education and currently member of the Board of Governors of the INEE, who holds a Master's Degree in Comparative Public Policy from the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, talks about improving education in her state, and asserts that her management was oriented toward raising the quality of education via equity.

The starting point

Puebla's Ministry of Education began by identifying a series of challenges, says Patricia Vázquez del Mercado:

"When I took office, one clearly identified challenge was that of creating an accessible, high-impact model of our own which could be set out in simple, concise terms enabling it be understood by all the key players involved in education at the different levels. That was how we came up with what is now known as the State of Puebla's Attendance-Continuance-and-Learning Educational Model (Spanish acronym: MEP-APA).

It wasn't just a matter of coming up with a name for this model that would enable us to communicate with the people at the different levels of the education system, but also one of implementing it.

Also, it became increasingly clear that we needed to create a single chain of command for the different levels, ranging from pre-school education to upper-secondary education, which is why we created the Undersecretariat of Compulsory Education, stressing academic collaboration among the different levels.

Another challenge that we identified was that of school supervision, given that the school principals felt that their main job was to ensure compliance with norms and carry out managerial tasks, while their participation in efforts to increase educational quality was minimal, disjointed and sporadic; added to which, their involvement in teacher development and training was almost zero.

Moreover, we found that ongoing teacher training was being managed by the Department of Higher Education and



not based on any kind of diagnosis of the needs of the teachers working in the area of compulsory education. Furthermore, it was not linked to the front-line training efforts being made as part of the federal programs. In other words, a lot of training was going on, but in a vague, unfocused way that didn't serve to improve learning outcomes.

The last challenge we faced was that of turning the State-of-Puebla Committee for the Planning and Programming of Lower Secondary Education (Spanish acronym: CEPP-EMS) into a collegiate body empowered to foster the cooperation needed to tackle the problems of educational lag, low continuance levels, and inadequate learning outcomes.”

Guiding tenets and principles

As the entity responsible for triggering efforts to improve education in Puebla, the specialist in public policies places the main emphasis on quality:

“While quality is defined in terms of the results achieved on standardized tests, nevertheless it's crucial that its measurement be directly tied to that of equity. One central policy that governs all our efforts concerns the tackling of educational lag; which means not only putting an end to dropouts, but also fostering continuance in school and doing something about the lack of opportunities for learning, that causes students to lose interest and hampers their development of learning skills, ultimately leading to dropout and scant continuance. Hence, in Puebla, our educational policy has focused on sustaining quality by fostering equity.

To this end, the guiding principles we adopted in our efforts to promote continuance consisted in:

- raising our state's aspirations, rather than just being contented with achieving the average national scores.
- designing the MEP-APA, in order to:
 1. ensure the continuance in school of everybody between the ages of three and seventeen;
 2. assure everybody's continuance in school until they complete upper-secondary education, as a minimum; and
 3. guarantee that all students achieve the basic learning targets set forth in our state's syllabuses and study programs.
- adopting strategies to guide our actions, and coordinate our resources and programs, so as to raise quality by fostering equity.

I should add that our state has assumed the federal Educational Reform as its own and linked it to its own educational policies.”

Strategies and aims

Once the guiding principles governing the efforts at improvement had been established, strategies were put in place, and aims established, in accordance with the Educational Reform. Vázquez del Mercado says:

“When the Service for Providing Technical Consultancy to Schools (Spanish acronym: SATE) came into existence as

part of the Educational Reform, we decided to work with the school principals, who constitute very good touchstones for gauging real impact and ascertaining the extent to which our educational policies are actually being implemented.

Since it was clear to us that it would be difficult to implement a given measure in our schools and classrooms if the school principals weren't convinced that it was relevant, we set up the Service for Providing Technical Support to Schools in the State of Puebla (Spanish acronym: SATEP), using strategies that included the implementation of the State of Puebla Academy of School Principals' (Spanish acronym: APS) training path for school supervisors, and the provision of regional support by turning the Teachers' Centers into the current Centers for the Provision of Technical Support to Schools in the State of Puebla (Spanish acronym: CATEP).

For the sake of clarity, I'll list each strategy. One of them consisted in improving school supervision: the SATEP—which was initially a part of the Undersecretariat of Compulsory Education—assumed control of the funding of the Program for Professional Teacher Development (Spanish acronym: PRODEP) and also of the staff of the Teachers' Centers. In this way, ongoing training was focused on the two priorities of supporting the schools that got the worst scores in the former National Evaluation of Learning Outcomes in Schools (Spanish acronym; ENLACE), which is now the National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning Outcomes (Spanish acronym: PLANEA), and of helping the teachers to be evaluated.

Likewise, we involved the SATEP in professional teacher development, taking advantage of the platform for ongoing teacher training, as suggested in the guidelines issued by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE).

Another strategy consisted in replacing the Teachers' Centers that focus on schools and coordinate training.

Also, the APS, which is formed by the best School Principals in all the school levels from the preschool to the higher-education ones, provides training to all the state's school principals and advises the Puebla Ministry of Public Education about matters having to do with school management.

Another strategy consisted in the founding of the Strategic Association for Compulsory Education, with teachers chosen from lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools. This organization devotes itself to identifying opportunities for improvement in the lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools that it focuses on, and making proposals aimed at improving the learning outcomes of their students.

Likewise, as part of the SATEP, we set up an Internet site that is mainly used by school principals and supervisors, at www.escuelapoblana.org, to disseminate the statistical data that the Ministry possesses.

We also designed and produced the Report on Attendance, Continuance and Learning, which compiles customized information from the different schools so that it may serve as diagnostic input on which the School Technical Committees can base their decisions. This report includes

official statistics, the PLANEA scores, the names of those students who have dropped out and are at risk of dropping out due to a combination of low grades, absenteeism and placement in a class level outside their age bracket.

With regard to links among institutes, Puebla aligned its state-level regulations with the provisions of the new Law Governing the Professional Teaching Service, being among the states that have achieved such alignment, with the help of the National Union of Educational Workers (Spanish acronym: SNTE) and the state Congress.

A department for overseeing the Professional Teaching Service was set up, ensuring that it complements, rather than overlaps with, the areas responsible for personnel and evaluation at the different school levels.

Last but not least, we designed and implemented the Intensive-Support Service, with funding granted by the Ministry of Public Education (Spanish acronym: SEP) on a competitive basis. This service focuses on the two hundred primary schools, two hundred secondary schools and one hundred preschools with the worst results on the ENLACE and PLANEA tests, providing high-quality training to their teachers and principals, and running summer courses to ensure that all the students who complete the primary and secondary education cycles can read, write, and do simple sums”.

Achievements

Vázquez del Mercado, who, between 2011 and 2015, was the general director for Educational Innovation and New Technologies, the academic coordinator for Higher Education and the undersecretary for Elementary and Lower-Secondary Education, as well as helping to set up the Undersecretariat of Compulsory Education, comments:

“As for results, starting in the first year when we began to evaluate our teachers, we resolved to provide full academic support to all the examinees and ensure that they all participated in the different stages of the evaluation. We managed to do this uneventfully, and later helped the SEP to evaluate teachers in other states, as well as providing support to teacher-training-college candidates so that they could take the entrance examinations.

Moreover, all the funding for teacher training under the federal programs, and the PRODEP are devoted, with the help of the SATEP, to courses and workshops that accord with the pertinent operating rules and with our state’s priorities.

For the very first time, Puebla placed first in academic performance at the upper-secondary level in the 2015 PLANEA test, repeating this result over the next three years and then going on to place first in the PLANEA test at the lower-secondary level.

We are especially proud that our municipalities with high and very high levels of marginalization have obtained the highest performance scores of all the schools in those categories”.

Educational vision

Though Puebla’s progress in the area of education has been outstanding, Vázquez del Mercado asserts:

“In the field of educational policy, it’s essential to safeguard the continuity, consolidation and improvement of the lines of policy that have been established, as well as ensuring that the children and youths in our state attend school, remain there, and learn. It’s also important that we provide suitable education to those adults who haven’t finished their elementary schooling, so that they can all receive the personal and professional training that they need. In other words, we’re trying to ensure that the MEP-APA extends to each and every one of our state’s educational institutions.

It’s also crucial to align the official organizations and the available resources with concrete lines of action in order to optimize our education sector’s efforts based on an implementation plan to which all those involved are committed and which focuses on the students, schools and regions that are most in need of support.

Above all, we must guarantee our people’s right to education. And it’s precisely on one of the state’s still unrealized goals—i.e. the achievement of the 2030 sustainable-development aims—that our future policies will focus, by:

1. ensuring that all our children attend preschool and go on to, and finish, the upper-secondary cycle;
2. providing education to vulnerable groups (migrants, students with special-education needs and speakers of indigenous Mexican languages); and
3. promoting education with a gender-equity emphasis.

Puebla now has a Unit for Promoting the Right to Education, which is endeavoring to set up a mechanism for overseeing compliance with the right to education, whereby the State, via its education authorities, will become a guarantor of the aforesaid right”.

Conclusions

Vázquez del Mercado concludes:

“Currently, our state has a governor, José Antonio Gali, who has made compulsory education his top priority, with the result that we’ve successfully implemented improvement programs at all the different school levels. We’re happy, but still not satisfied, with our achievements. We wish to have one of the best education systems in Mexico—one that can favorably compare with the best education systems worldwide.

We have teachers who are committed to high quality and equity, and also to improving themselves via ongoing training. Parents everywhere want their children to receive the best possible education in order to be able to live good lives through their own efforts. We’ve made a good start in our endeavor to achieve our aim of raising quality by promoting equity. €

Problems and challenges in the use of educational evaluations

The disconnect between the design of evaluations, the adequate dissemination of their results, the delivery of the right information, the contextualized use of multiple sources, and the proper use of the data produced is not conducive to educational improvement. The author of the following article looks at the reasons for the said disconnect and the people responsible for it.

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In the discussion about educational evaluation, the use of the latter is sometimes rather eclipsed, which is surprising, given that such use is associated with the ultimate purpose of evaluation, i.e. to foster improvement.

In effect, all evaluation systems are based on the premise that the knowledge they yield will be used to improve what is evaluated, and, indeed, an evaluation is deemed to be successful to the extent that the gathered information is used.

In the case of Mexico, the purpose of evaluation is stipulated in the Constitution and also in the Law Governing the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: LINEE), in both of which mechanisms are contemplated for forging links between evaluation results, decision-making and educational improvement (INEE-LXII Legislature, 2015: 50-51).

For the sake of clarity, we should explain what is meant by the word *use*, which Teresa Bracho, president of the INEE's board, defines as:

[The] deliberate actions, taken by the different users of information, who, to different degrees and for different purposes, use the results, methods or ideas of evaluation as pertinent input on which to base the decisions and actions they take so as to foster improvement in their particular spheres of action (2016: 38).

Several parts of this definition—which makes it clear that there are many possible uses and users of evaluation—are worthy of note: only deliberate actions are deemed to constitute use; users are not only high-level decision-makers (i.e. those who design public policies), but also a wide range of



protagonists, operating at different levels of the system and able to take actions aimed at improvement; evaluation is just one among various types of input, but it must be relevant; and not only the results, but also the components, of evaluation can be used.

Depending on their purposes and consequences, one can identify the following four basic uses:¹

1. *Informative* use, which affects how those involved in education identify and study a problem from certain conceptual and methodological angles. Such use leads to learning and can heavily influence the extent to which the said people change their perceptions of given problems and adopt a different posture towards the latter, but its immediate effects are intangible.
2. *Legitimizing* use, which stems from the political exploitation of evaluation. Such use does not serve to review, correct or improve education, but rather to justify decisions or actions that have been taken.
3. *Consultative* use, which exploits the information yielded by evaluation as input for academic studies and technical reports or other documents, that, however, do not lead to significant actions aimed at bringing about change or improvement.
4. *Instrumental use*, which results in specific actions *vis-à-vis* different aspects of the subject or area evaluated.

Without downplaying the importance of the informative uses of evaluation, it is clear that evaluation is used, *par excellence*, for instrumental (in the broadest sense of the term) purposes. Those evaluation institutions that are characterized by what Pedro Ravela calls the *agent-centered* approach² devote a lot of their efforts to achieving this sort of impact.

However, even such institutions—which do not solely concern themselves with dissemination, but rather focus on fostering certain uses—have still not completely eschewed the somewhat ingenuous, but surprisingly widespread, belief that there is a direct linear relationship between evaluation, decision-making and educational improvement. According to this way of thinking, there is a natural, spontaneous line that connects the evaluator's needs, interests and competencies on the one hand, and politicians, technical teams and those directly involved in education on the other hand.

People forget that, rather than waiting for academics and evaluators to tell them what to do, politicians, being agents subjected to diverse, usually contradictory, pressures, who have their own interests and motives for behaving in a given way, and possess disparate, fragmented information stemming from a wide range of sources, must choose between different courses of action that seldom depend on the quality of the information provided by evaluators, or the technical recommendations made by the latter, no matter how sound these may be.³

Failure to take stock of these factors, and of the complex relationship between evaluation and decision-making, leads to not very effective strategies for fostering the use of evaluation. In the end, what we find is an enormous gap between the

amount of information produced and the quality thereof, as well as scant use of the said information that does not necessarily lead to the improvement of education—a problem that is not limited to Mexico, but also occurs in other countries.

Among the impediments to the forging of adequate links between evaluation and its use are the characteristics of the parties involved, the structure or *modus operandi* of the education system, sociocultural factors, and the evaluation institutes themselves.

The types of disconnect between evaluation and its use

The deficiencies that can be attributed to key players in education, including the education authorities, are:

- mistrust of evaluations, that are seen as inspections which findings might have negative consequences of various kinds.
- the political pragmatism of officials who distrust anything having to do with research and the academic world.
- the lack of political, economic, professional or symbolic incentives or motives so those responsible for the policies and programs that are evaluated can promote innovation and change.
- a lack of the technical competencies needed to use the results for purposes of policy planning and design.

The deficiencies that can be attributed to the organization and the *modus operandi* of the National Education System include:

- public-sector inertia *vis-à-vis* planning and budgeting.
- the segmentation—and even fragmentation of—policies and programs, and hence of the competencies, responsibilities and capacities of the institutions, diminishing their ability to cope with the recommended changes; while each official is only responsible for a given area, the problems may be on a large scale and extend beyond administrative boundaries, thus giving rise to recommendations that require coordinated action by different departments.
- the lack of institutional spaces and mechanisms for taking on board and carrying out the recommendations that stem from evaluation. The same sort of problem arises when different types of institution have to heed recommendations made by government entities charged with safeguarding human-rights.

The deficiencies that can be attributed to sociocultural factors of a more general type include:

- the precarious nature of the evaluation culture, which is seen as a tool for punishment and control.

The deficiencies that can be attributed to the evaluation institutions themselves include:

- the overproduction of technically sound information to the detriment of the user and his/her purposes when using it.

This phenomenon arises because the evaluation institution takes it for granted that the recipients of the information are interested in and ready and motivated to use it, so that all the said evaluation institution needs to do is make it available to the potential users.

- the belief that use of the results will be fostered merely by disseminating them, as if it were a mere matter of formats and language.
- the evaluator's pretension that it/he/she alone knows what to evaluate and how to do so, which leads it/he/she to make smug, unilateral decisions. This turns those involved in education into passive objects unable to talk about the interesting aspects of their work, which should be taken into account when designing and administering the evaluation.
- the baseless supposition that the authorities and key players possess, by definition, the technical competencies that will enable them to understand the evaluations.

Bridges and interlocutors

The specialists highlight the following five main problems associated with the scant or inappropriate use of evaluations by those directly involved in education:⁴

1. *Lack of synchronization.* The evaluations are carried out at the wrong time —e.g. when a program is about to end—, or their results are divulged when some aspects of the program evaluated have changed and the information has partially ceased to be relevant.
2. *Limited empowerment.* The recommendations made by the evaluation institute are not heeded because they exceed the powers of the education authority or go beyond the bounds of the program or policy that is evaluated.
3. *Lack of clarity.* The reports use technical language that cannot easily be understood by non-specialists, make general or ambiguous recommendations, or lend themselves to misinterpretation (e.g. rankings whose scope and limits are not stipulated).
4. *Lack of resources.* The recommendations are not heeded because the authority or program evaluated lacks the necessary funding or materials.
5. *Lack of viability.* The recommendations stemming from the evaluations are not heeded because of unforeseen political or environmental factors.

Given the above, it is clear that, since the expected uses will not occur automatically or spontaneously,⁵ it is necessary to create the conditions or intentions that are needed for them to happen.

Those who have systematically analyzed these topics consider that the following four general conditions must be satisfied in order to foster the use of evaluation (Pérez, 2016: 84-86):

1. *Legitimacy.* The key players must acknowledge the importance of evaluation and accept it is a part of government management, which implies promoting a new educational-evaluation culture and fomenting traditions of transparency, accountability, responsibility and

public-service assessment based on the pertinent standards.

2. *Quality.* The key players must agree that the evaluations are valid and reliable, that the data produced are robust, and that high technical standards are being adhered to in general.
3. *Credibility.* The key players must understand that the evaluation is unbiased and that the process has been transparent from beginning to end. Credibility correlates positively with independence on the part of the evaluators. In this regard, the INEE's bylaws, which establish it as a constitutionally autonomous entity, work in its favor.
4. *Participation.* The key players must be involved in the evaluation, starting with the identification of the information needed and the problems to be solved before the evaluation is designed. They should also know what the purpose and scope of the evaluation are, be informed about its results, and be able to analyze them and draw conclusions together with the evaluation institutions. Of the above four requirements, participation is the most decisive one, since, without it, the possibilities of exploiting evaluation are reduced.⁶

In addition to these four general conditions, there are other actions that can help to foster different uses of evaluation. These include:⁷

- implementing a policy that tackles the problem of scant or defective use of the evaluation and resignifies it, stressing its role as a tool for “public-policy intervention”, rather than a merely communicative one (Bracho, 2016: 39).
- identifying the expected and desired uses of evaluation, beginning at the design stage. This will make it possible to identify the type of information that needs to be produced, its possible uses, and the problems to be solved, so that the results are able to be correctly channeled using formats and language that accord with the above definition.⁸
- ensuring that the areas evaluated are familiar with the *modus operandi*, scope and limitations of the public-education sector and its officials.
- identifying the responsibilities of those charged with providing guidance and making recommendations.
- having forums available for meeting, interacting and providing support, where the evaluation institutions and the education authorities can analyze the evaluation results and explain the implications and scope of the recommendations that are made. While the Law Governing the INEE (Spanish acronym: LINEE) provides some of these —the National Educational Evaluation System (Spanish acronym: SNEE) and the Conference that that forms part thereof (LINEE, art. 12, 2013)—it is recommended that others be established in order to deal with one-off issues.
- making recommendations that are technically feasible and politically viable.⁹
- striving to make the education authorities and other key players see evaluation as a tool that helps them to achieve the aims that have been set.



- creating evaluation-generated products in media types, language, and formats that suit each type of user. To do this, it is necessary to take stock of the said users' position within the system, and of their areas of competency, traditions and culture.

My last point merits a section of its own, but it bears pointing out here that, within the context of the abovementioned agent-centered approach, the tasks of social communication, dissemination, promoting the use of results and fostering an evaluation culture are crucial to ensuring that evaluation helps to improve the National Education System. They constitute the main points of contact between the production of information and decision-making by the key players, so that, if they are not addressed, evaluation will have no real impact.

In this order of ideas, where the key players in education are not only the subjects of evaluation, but also privileged participants in the dialogue with the evaluation institutions:

- *disseminating* evaluation results entails producing information that is meaningful, focused, timely and pertinent to key players. Some practical recommendations in this regard are as follows:
 - ◆ When results are provided, their context should be explained in order to give an idea of the process involved, i.e. the recipients should be told what was evaluated and with which instruments.
 - ◆ It should be made clear that large-scale external evaluations are an information source that needs to be combined with others and with information provided by the school itself.
 - ◆ Findings that are the product of analysis and interpretation should be presented, rather than raw data.
 - ◆ The exclusive or predominant use of mass-communication strategies should be avoided. It is essential to furnish targeted information via a strategy that provides direct, structured support to schools.
- *fostering the use* of the said evaluations entails taking an interlinked set of actions aimed at encouraging the schools and key players to develop capacities that will help them to understand, interpret and properly use the evaluations in order to improve education. Some practical recommendations in this regard are as follows:

- ◆ It is important to directly and immediately link the results that are presented to improvement. The development of capacities and skills serves as a link between the former and the latter.
- ◆ It is essential to develop capacities for interpreting the results and making hypotheses about the reasons for them, and also to design viable interventions with clear aims in order to bring about improvement and monitor the said interventions.

- *promoting an evaluation culture* implies laying a foundation of legitimacy, reliability, trust, credibility and perceived usefulness, so that educational evaluation may be accepted, appreciated, and even required by society in general, and, above all, by key players in the area of education. Given that these tasks are ongoing ones and can only have any impact in the mid and long terms, it is worth offering the following practical advice:

- ◆ We need to legitimize evaluation for it to be deemed valid, germane to education, and useful.
- ◆ It is preferable that external evaluations, which are generally perceived as having nothing to do with the school's day-to-day activities, be presented as input that becomes meaningful when combined with the experience-based contributions of the school principal, the teachers and the pedagogical advisor.
- ◆ We need to portray evaluation as an activity that deserves to be trusted for two reasons: first, because it is carried out by an autonomous entity, and hence impartial and not used for unconstitutional purposes; and second, because it is carried out by people who possess ample expertise and enjoy wide public recognition.
- ◆ Due to people's widespread mistrust of government institutions, rather than to any signs of bias or manipulation, we need to ensure that the results are credible.
- ◆ Above all, key players in the area of education should see evaluation as a practical tool that can provide reliable evidence and serve to identify problems and trigger innovation and change.

Given the above, it is crucial that dissemination be suitably coordinated, and that the use evaluation and the fostering of the evaluation culture be promoted in order to help ensure

that evaluations lead to educational improvement that will make good on the universal right to high-quality education, which is the ultimate aim.

In the words of Teresa Bracho:

[...] in order for the promise that evaluation will serve as an instrument for improvement to be fulfilled, we need to ensure not only that it is rigorous, fair and timely, but also that it is effectively used by all those who are involved, each at the pertinent level, for the explicit purpose that it may serve as guidance and evidence for the making of decisions aimed at achieving improvement in every sphere of action [...]. We who provide it have very significant leeway to foster greater, more thoughtful, demand (2016: 42)

However, it is clear that, even if we improve evaluation, promote use, and foster an evaluation culture, we will only be able to achieve improvement if:

1. the key players in education have institutionalized incentives to bring about innovation and improvement. These incentives do not necessarily need to be economic, but may take the form of social recognition and professional development.
2. direct, structured support mechanisms are developed to enable key players and schools to develop their own capacities.
3. schools are provided with the resources that they require in order to implement consistent improvement processes, especially those most in need of them. €

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- 1 This classification was proposed by Pérez Yarahuán (2016: 84).
- 2 According to Ravela, this refers to an agent-centered approach: "If evaluation sets out to ensure that key players do things to improve education, the first thing we must do is to recognize the said key players (teachers, students, parents, authorities, decision-makers) and become familiar with their *modi operandi* with regard to education, their perceptions about it, their interests, and the type of decisions they can make, so as to conceive of evaluation and the handling of its results in the terms of the use that they make of information [...]. It would no longer be a matter of we, the evaluators, ensuring that recipients use the information that we provide them with, but, on the contrary, of our striving to produce information that is relevant to the different kinds of things that the key players do, and the sundry decisions that they normally make as part of their activities within the education system." (Ravela, 2012: 134).
- 3 See the enlightening text by Reimers and McGinn, *Diálogo Informado*: "The political problems faced by policymakers lack the precision required in systematic research, which can specify all the pertinent variables in advance. The problems faced by decision-makers, when weighing options, have pedagogical, economic, legal, bureaucratic and other dimensions. While highly specialized experience is useful when subjecting problems to logical analysis and identifying solutions, by definition, such analysis simplifies the various aspects of the problem. Hence, the options should not be subjected to the simplifying analysis carried out in the researcher's office, but rather weighed in the real world, where flesh-and-blood people and groups express their manifold interests" (1997: 51-52).
- 4 See Cejudo, G. and Abarca, F. (2016: 79). These authors mention four factors, to which I have added a fifth one, i.e. lack of viability.
- 5 Generally, the uses that occur spontaneously are unsuitable ones—e.g. the use of rankings to measure educational quality in schools, education systems or countries.
- 6 However, it is important to maintain a balance between involving key educational players as subjects of evaluation and/or potential users of its information on the one hand, and maintaining the independence of the evaluating entity on the other hand.
- 7 Part of this list is based on the proposal made by Cejudo, G. and Abarca, F. (2016: 80).
- 8 Based on an analysis of the National Evaluation of Learning Outcomes in Schools (Spanish acronym: ENLACE) and the Examination pertaining to Educational Quality and Achievement (Spanish acronym: EXCALE), the team coordinated by Martínez Rizo recommends that the tests be based on a logical, conceptual and empirically documented model that specifies: "(a) the uses contemplated based on the needs of different groups of users; (b) clear contexts and criteria vis-à-vis the resources that are needed and available, the test-development, test-administration and results-dissemination process and the capacities of the users, among other things; (c) the effects and consequences that are expected in mid and long terms; and (d) the follow-up mechanisms and criteria to ascertain the extent to which these contemplated uses actually occur" (Martínez, 2015: 85-87).
- 9 The INEE's model for the creation and issuing of guidelines contemplates a process of dialogue with the authorities and expressly includes feasibility as a criterion for weighing the possibilities of complying with the guidelines issued by the Institute (INEE, 2015: 41-42).

ROADMAP

Dissemination and use of evaluation and study results: a key policy for improvement in educational quality

The subject of how public policies can improve teaching, leadership, and social involvement in schools, with the aim of raising educational quality, has been a constant in the present debate on the issue. This is also proposed in the book *Mejorar las escuelas: estrategias para la acción en México* [*Improving the Schools: Strategies for Action in Mexico*] (OECD, 2010), which includes a chapter called “Condiciones para el éxito de la Reforma Educativa” [“Conditions for Success in Educational Reform”], summarized in this article by Marcela Gajardo J., INEE technical consultant specialized in the field of dissemination and use of evaluation results for educational quality improvement.

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Countries with high-performing education systems show that improvement is possible, and it can even be achieved in relatively short periods of time, that quality and equity are not exclusive, and that obtaining excellent results is feasible for practically all students.

Also, educational research has demonstrated that progress in human capital is closely linked to productivity, economic development, and social wellbeing; that one additional year of education can contribute to an annual increase of 0.58% in the gross domestic product per capita, and that educational policies can have a great impact on the improvement of school results. It has also been proven that beyond a certain basic level, student results do not appear to be related to the national level of spending on education. Furthermore, the studies sustain that it is not very likely that public policy measures, whichever they may be, will produce the desired effects alone, and suggest that a real improvement in results depends on comprehensive strategies which take many aspects into consideration simultaneously. For example, while efficient teaching practices alone may be the most important element for achieving better results from students, these



practices are influenced by leadership, curriculum, facilities, school autonomy, governance system, school culture, accountability, and professional development of teachers, among other aspects. It is impossible for any country to take all of these conditions into consideration simultaneously, but attention should be given to each one at some point.

These findings have raised the level of exigency for all countries and have highlighted the importance of correct decision-making in face of the different public policy options. Considering the data from international studies, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the comparative analyses of public policy and practice carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other organisms, as well as the results from standardized tests and research ranging from case studies to quantitative analyses of large databases, it can be discerned that there is already solid knowledge of how countries can improve their educational performance.

Two warnings should be added to this: first, that it is equally important to define correct public policies as it is to possess well-developed tools, needed to bring these policies into practice in a large number of schools; and, second, that it is only on rare occasions that public policy gets it completely right in its first attempt, and therefore, implementing reforms must include feedback stages to permit adjustments based on the lessons learned and on new circumstances.

Guiding principles of high-performing educational systems

The first step taken by successful systems is essential, and it entails defining a small number of clear, measurable objectives of the highest priority, focused on student results, because attention is focused, and reference points are provided for progress. These objectives should be related to students' results, and not just the amount of resources or processes, and should be referred to in terms that are accessible to the public and resonate with professional educators. For example, the objectives could be: to increase the number of students who finish secondary education by a certain percentage; to improve national exam results, or to significantly reduce some of the disparities identified in students' results. These objectives should be broadly disseminated within the educational system and in the public opinion, in order to build a common commitment towards improvement.

The improvement objectives must be centered on quality and equity, with the commitment to ensure that all student groups progress continuously.

Objectives are important, but they are not enough on their own. To be achieved, educational systems must develop a global strategy that takes into account all the relevant aspects over time. According to circumstances, changes in legislation, financing, curriculum, systems of accountability or public reports may all be needed. However, the starting point should always be centered on changes in teaching and learning, as this will be reflected in improved results for students and will allow changes to continue to be made in other variables.

One danger of the multifaceted strategy is the perception that there are too many initiatives without connection between them, and that the involved actors do not have sufficient indications regarding priorities. For success, the main elements and actors of the educational system have to follow a coherent line and support the global strategy. This includes aligning curriculum, selection criteria, assignment of positions, evaluations of teachers and school principals, accountability systems, financial schemes, and the roles of the different actors involved.

The organizational culture must be congruent in its discourse. No matter how much we insist on the student's performance, it will cease to be a priority if the real pressure felt by leaders is focused instead on complying with the rules or solving problems. High-performing education systems are intensively focused on student performance, and all resources and actions are aligned to support public policies and programs that reinforce learning in all students.

Resource allocation is a particularly important element, and it is often forgotten in this alignment process. If the budget does not reflect the priority of offering better teaching and learning, the message to the entire system is that those areas don't matter very much. For example, an aspect that is often neglected in the allocation of resources is the appropriate distribution of personnel, which would have the most skilled personnel work where they are most needed.

From the point of view of student learning, in every scenario, improvement requires selecting, hiring, educating, training, developing, and supporting educators. High-performing systems take into account the growing amount of international evidence that supports what most parents have always assumed—that teacher quality is the most important parameter regarding student learning at school level. Therefore, strengthening teacher skills is the most important aspect of a school improvement program.

This implies, among other things, that teaching must become an occupation that attracts young people with high qualification levels, and that solid professional training programs must be created throughout the teaching career, because teaching mastery is an objective that is achieved in the long term. For these programs to be efficient, they must be involved in the daily work of a school; giving a one-time development workshop will have little effect on subsequent practices. Developing specific teaching standards is one of the main paths to establishing a clear commitment and reaching teaching excellence, as they give a specific shape to the desired proposals.

For large scale improvements to be made, institutional structures and capacity are required. If new procedures are not applied, it can be due to a lack of determination, capacity, or both. To change the determination and capacity of large organizations, a continuous effort must be made. Thus, the disposition of the Ministry of Education and associated organisms becomes relevant in reinforcing comprehensive improvement.

The publication of a given official directive, or providing one type of professional development, are insufficient

measures. Hence the need for an infrastructure on various levels—central, regional, by district, etcetera—and for increasing the capacity of all of these, including, when required, changes in the culture of leadership and organizational structure.

Successful systems recognize the need for commitment from all the actors involved in the creation of improvement. The possibility of achieving sustainable and long-term improvements in education systems is greater if a political consensus can be reached between the involved actors regarding the need for reform and the specific nature of the reforms that need to be introduced. Also, for the proposed reforms to come to fruition, public policy has to progress in a specific direction over a number of years, and even through changes in government.

To achieve this, multiple spaces are needed for dialog and communication between all the parties: all levels of government, teachers, school principals, union officials, students, parents, and other key civil society groups.

Different countries have developed various means for this kind of political compromise, implying generally a structure that incorporates all the social partners in an open discussion on the proposed educational policies, practices, and reforms, such as the Boards of Education in many European countries, or special consultation commissions on specific problems or reforms. These strategies guarantee that various points of view have been examined, and have been heard respectfully not only during the public-policy creation process, but also during their application, allowing for necessary adjustments.

School systems are associations of multiple levels. Each school, as each of its classrooms, is a key site of formal teaching; but the success of each school also depends on the existence of appropriate support and monitoring schemes. This means that school systems must achieve an appropriate balance between local initiative and central efforts for concrete improvement. The correct model is not an authority system applied vertically, nor is it one that delegates all decisions to the schools. Local initiatives and knowledge are vital, and systems that impose too many controls on individual schools can suffocate that enterprising spirit.

It is important to make sure that every school has good performance, that lack of vision may not have the wrong influence, and that excessive competitiveness between schools does not undermine the improvement of the system as a whole.

The PISA results indicate that schools with greater autonomy in some key areas tend to have higher performance levels, but only when accompanied by measures of accountability. In opposition, greater autonomy requires greater support, so that schools can function correctly. This implies, on one hand, providing school support and, on the other, taking the necessary measures when schools cannot do it alone for any reason.

Different countries employ various structures to create this balance, i.e. by involving municipal governments in school management and operation, or strengthening school networks in order to work together, without the bureaucracy.

Improving any system or service requires good data on real performance levels. For schools, this implies establishing accountability and information systems that help achieve the objectives, and provide professional and public information about the results, without discouraging teachers or creating unfair comparisons between schools.

In this vein, there is interest in using multiple data sources and inviting the different parties to carry out an analysis and draw their conclusions. When different data and analyses obtain similar results, there is greater confidence in these.

It is also paramount to ensure that any intervention or sanction for poor performance is based on various measures, including an informed judgment. In this way, low performance can and should be a cause for further investigation but should not be, in itself, the cause for sanctions.

Leadership in schools and at the system level must be a key component of any effort for improvement in education. Regarding teachers, developing leadership implies much more than careful selection and hiring, or a lengthy professional development scheme; it must instead be incorporated into every aspect of organization. Leadership also needs to be considered as a role extending to a larger number of people, and not only to those who occupy an official position. Another important element in this aspect is the existence of a strong sense of collective responsibility, where individuals assume a commitment that goes beyond their specific role.

Other elements of the system must support these central priorities. For example, it is important to have a high-quality curriculum with appropriate standards to guide teaching and learning. However, on their own, curriculum and standards do not result in improvement in teaching; there is a lot of evidence that such instruments are largely ignored in classrooms, unless they are reinforced by additional elements such as professional development, good materials, and the incorporation of standards in the monitoring and accountability systems.

Finally, it is important to mention the role resources play. *Global expenditure on education is not enough to predict students' performance levels.* In education, little attention has been given usually to the relation that exists between resources and results. Generally, resources are used following conventional ideas about how a school system should work, and not following the evidence showing where they are truly useful. It is clear that resources are important, and therefore it is essential to have a deeper understanding of how to use them better.

Lessons from practice

Accomplishing significant improvements in educational results is a task that requires multiple strategies involving the main components of the system. On its own, no element is sufficient for progress. However, it is important to remember that the inclusion and possibilities of offering equal opportunities of access, continuity, and results for everyone requires policies and practices that focus on improving teaching and learning; this includes good teaching skills, dominance of the curriculum, strengthening educational leadership, and evaluating achievements in school performance and contents.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize and group together some of the postulates that educational research has found to be key in informed decision making regarding educational policies that search to raise teaching quality, strengthen educational leadership, and promote social involvement in schools. They also highlight the vital importance of having the correct public policies, with the appropriate means for their implementation in the entire, formal and informal, educational system.

Finally, it should be stressed that school level public policies are a crucial factor. It is important to pay attention to the characteristics that make each school an effective place for learning for all students, because, most definitely, the work educating children and youth is conducted in the schools and classrooms. This complies with the indications by researchers in charge of analyzing the principal elements of school efficacy, which—as those identified in 1995—are still valid to this day. €

Table 1. Basic postulates

The analysis of the public policies and practices of high-performing countries reveals that there are some basic postulates that can guide governments aiming to achieve a real, lasting, and efficient improvement. They can be grouped as follows:

- Clear goals—that have the support and understanding of society—related to student results, based on quality and equity, led by a global strategy that aligns the necessary elements, resources, and levels of governance they seek.
- Special attention in hiring, training, and retention of excellent individuals in the system; this implies promoting leadership which contributes to increasing the capacity for strategy, teaching, and learning.
- Institutions and infrastructure that support improvement; this implies processes and institutions that involve all the relevant actors in the dialogue for improvement, an appropriate balance between central management and local flexibility, and an infrastructure at all levels that supports improvement throughout systems and schools.
- A system for accountability and reporting to support the objectives and provide professional and public information about the results, without discouraging teachers or making unfair comparisons between schools.

Source: *Mejorar las escuelas: estrategias para la acción en México [Improving Schools: Strategies for Action in Mexico]* (OECD, 2010).

Table 2. Effective schools. Keys to promoting their strengthening

Research about efficient schools has revealed a set of characteristics that need support from public policies at the system level, as they are also focused on the quality of teaching and learning in each school and for all students. Procedures at the system level and school level must be aligned and mutually reinforcing. The following keys to promoting efficient school strengthening stand out in the available evidence:

Leadership	
	With intention and firmness
Professional leadership	Focus on participation
	Professional management
High expectations	High general expectations
	Expectations of communication
	Provides intellectual challenge
Shared vision and objectives	Unity in objectives
	Consistency in practice
	Collegiality and collaboration
Learning organization	Personnel development based on the needs of the school
Learning environment	An atmosphere of order
	Attractive work environment
Teaching, learning and evaluation	
Focus on teaching and learning	Maximizing teaching time
Purposeful teaching	Academic emphasis
	Focus on performance
	Efficient organization
	Clarity of purpose
	Structured lessons
	Adaptable practice
Performance follow-up (accountability)	Follow-up of student progress
	Follow-up of school performance
Students and parents	
Positive reinforcement	Clear discipline and fair feedback
Students' rights and responsibilities	Increase in student self-esteem
	Positions of responsibility
	Work control
Home/school relationship	Parental engagement in children's learning

Source: Sammons, Hollman & P. Mortimore (1995). *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A Review of School Effectiveness Research*. London: Institute of Education and Office for Standards in Education.

The evaluation of educational policies and programs and the right to quality education for all

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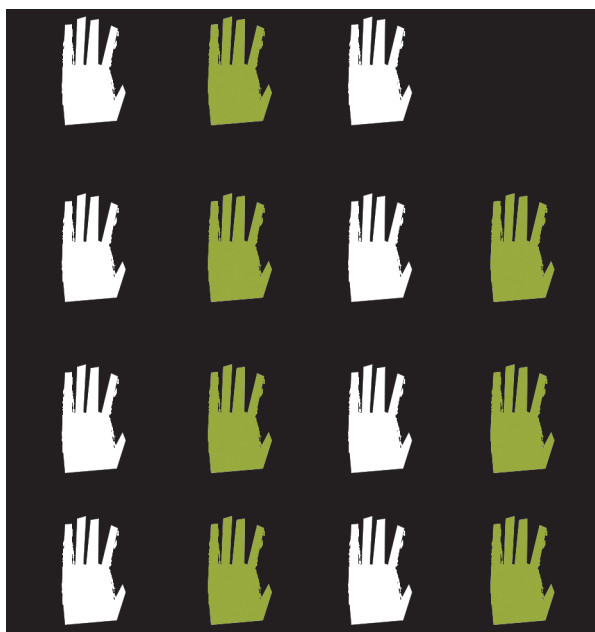
Introduction

The Educational Reform, enacted in Mexico in 2013, positions the right of everyone to receive quality education with equity at the core of the national objectives, it also places evaluation as a central mechanism to advance in its compliance and grants constitutional autonomy to the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: INEE), an organization that acquires new attributions with which it seeks to promote and make effective the relationship between evaluation and educational improvement.

Among them are the design and implementation of measurements and evaluations of educational policies and programs included in the Law Governing the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (LINEE, Article 25, 2013), which must be ruled by the technical criteria of objectivity, validity, and reliability (LINEE, Article 26, 2013). This task highlighted the need to define the reasons and the ways to evaluate educational policies and programs, which represented a major challenge for the Institute.

This article describes the purposes pursued by the INEE through the evaluation of educational policies and programs, and their relationship with improving the quality of education. For this, the frame of reference that supports such type of evaluations is presented, as well as the concept and dimensions of the quality of education that guide its elaboration. Its relationship with the improvement guidelines for education issued by the Institute is made to stand out, along with the criteria that guide the formation of the agenda of these evaluations and the route to carry them out.

Finally, the evaluations carried out on the subject to this date are presented, and so is a set of learned lessons that increase the potential of subsequent evaluations of educational policies and programs to improve the quality and equity of education.



Frame of reference for the model of evaluation for educational policies and programs: the approach of the right to quality education

The evaluations of educational policies and programs developed by the INEE take as a frame of reference the approach of the right to quality education with equity because, within the scope of its new functions as an autonomous constitutional body, the Institute has repositioned the conceptual, methodological and ethical perspectives of education based on human rights as an integrating and guiding axis for the development of its tasks.

From this perspective, the purpose of the evaluations of educational policies and programs carried out by the Institute is to identify the advances and gaps between the ownership of the rights of girls, boys, adolescents, youths and adults; and the compliance with the ownership of the Mexican State's obligations to promote, respect, and guarantee the students' right to receive quality education; based on the best interests of children, in accordance with Articles 1, 3 and 4 of the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (LINEE, Article 2, 1917).¹

The ownership of the right to education raises the need to ensure: *a)* the right of access to education; *b)* the right to stay in school and to have trajectories without lag; and *c)* the right to achieve meaningful and relevant learning for the present and future life of people. On the other hand, from the ownership of obligations, the definition of strategic orientations and public policies, aimed at solving educational problems of high priority and social relevance, stand out; so does the public expenditure invested in said interventions, the human and material resources destined to its execution, as well as the organizational and management components.

At INEE it is understood that the evaluation of educational policies and programs is the assessment of action—both systematic and causal—that the State implements to respond to a public problem in education. In this evaluation, processes, contextual factors, and chain of results are examined in order to determine and understand achievements, or the absence of these; and a value judgment is made about their adaptation to a set of criteria that represent an accepted value, as a basis for taking timely decisions that affect the improvement of the problem that brought up the intervention.

The function of the evaluations of educational policies and programs is two-way: comprehensive and of improvement. With the first, it seeks to increase the understanding of the public problem that initiated the policy in question, as well as the knowledge of the complexity of the implementation of public action. With the second, it seeks to identify the gaps, advances, and areas of opportunity in the conception, nature, design, management, processes, and results of the policy, with the aim of proposing feasible routes of improvement that contribute to guarantee the right to an education of quality for all.

The concept of quality that guides the evaluations of educational policies and programs

The development of educational policies and programs evaluations takes up the concept of quality established in Article 3 of the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (Spanish acronym: CPEUM), which establishes the right that every person has to receive education, and the responsibility of the State to guarantee quality in compulsory education, so that educational materials and methods, school organization, educational infrastructure, and the suitability of teachers and managers guarantee the maximum learning achievement of students (CPEUM, 1917). Likewise, it places evaluation and educational improvement as parts of the response to this constitutional requirement, by decreeing the creation of the National Educational Evaluation System (Spanish acronym: SNEE), whose coordination is in charge of the INEE.

In addition to this, educational authorities must take the corresponding measures to generate the necessary conditions in order to strengthen educational equity, so people who belong to groups and regions with greater lags can exercise this right fully.

Consequently, from the theory of change proposed in the constitutional text, five dimensions of educational quality that guide the evaluation of policies and programs carried out by the Institute are derived: *a)* educational materials and methods; *b)* school organization; *c)* educational infrastructure; *d)* suitability of teachers and managers; and *e)* evaluation and improvement.

The evaluation of educational policies and programs carried out by the INEE raises an assessment of the achievements and deficits of public action deployed by the State; oriented to the improvement of educational materials and methods, school organization, educational infrastructure, the suitability of teachers and managers, as well as the actions aimed at the evaluation and improvement of the National Educational System (Spanish acronym: SEN), taking into consideration the equity as a transversal axis of said valuations.

The main purpose of these evaluations is to be a key input for the foundation and construction of guidelines; to redirect decision-making for the improvement of education by educational authorities; and, thus, to contribute to ensuring the full exercise of the right to education of girls, boys, adolescents, youths and adults in Mexico, in a framework of quality with equity.

The evaluation of public action as a central element in the construction of guidelines for the improvement of educational policy

After the educational reform of 2013, the INEE is responsible for evaluating the quality, performance, and results of SEN in pre-school, primary, secondary, and middle-high education, for which it must: *a)* design and carry out the corresponding measurements to the components, processes or results of the system; *b)* issue the guidelines to which federal and local educational authorities will be subject to carry out the evaluation functions that correspond to them; and *c)* generate and disseminate information and, based on it, issue guidelines that are relevant to contribute to decisions aimed at improving the quality of education and its equity as an essential factor in the search for social equity.

In this sense, the guidelines seek to be the bridge that connects the evaluation and the use of its results with the improvement of the educational policy and, consequently, with that of the components of the SEN. These are recommendations proposed by the INEE to improve educational policies aimed to gradually advance towards the fulfillment of the right to education of all girls, boys, adolescents, youths, and adults in the country. They are elaborated based on the evidence provided by evaluations and educational research, as well as the review of government action in this area. For its construction, social and educational actors are consulted, including teachers, school administrators, public officers, academicians, representatives of civil society organizations, students, and parents.

The constitutional attribution of the INEE to issue guidelines that are relevant to contribute to decisions aimed at improving the quality of education and its equity as an essential factor in the search for social equity (CPEUM, Article 3, Subsection IX, Section c, 1917) has represented an innovation at national and international levels by virtue of which, although systematized information existed for its formulation, no recognized technical regulations and norms were identified for the construction of educational policy guidelines. For this reason, fulfilling this constitutional mandate has represented a major challenge.

The result of the process of analysis, research and construction is reflected in the *Model for the construction and issuance of guidelines for educational improvement* (INEE, 2015), where it is recognized that a fundamental aspect in its formulation is the comprehensive understanding of the problems that it seeks to address, as well as of the actions that the State has undertaken to contribute to its solution. With this, the evaluation of educational policies and programs becomes a core element of the guidelines issued by the INEE.

This approach derives from the strength of the evidence that can be built in this way to make improvement decisions. It is based on the consideration that it is not possible to propose public intervention routes that are more relevant and effective if the analysis and assessment of public action is not carried out in order to know and understand which interventions have been implemented, how they have been implemented, as well as what results, effects, and impacts have been obtained and for what reasons.

The agenda for educational policy and program evaluations

This agenda is directly aligned with the guidelines issued by INEE, and it is defined based on transversal issues relevant to education policy, strategies derived from the Educational Reform, population groups facing vulnerable conditions, and educational levels of the system. Therefore, the agenda for evaluating policies and programs is expressed, first, in the definition of a set of priority public problems; based on a sectoral assessment of the relevance and magnitude of educational problems; the priorities of governance; and a political and ethical commitment that implies defining, from the Government Board, the order of the thematic areas to be evaluated and, consequently, to attend them in terms of issuing guidelines for improvement.

The focus of interest of this type of evaluations is on areas, themes, and problems of high priority level for educational policy; educational attention to population groups that face conditions of greater disadvantage for the full exercise of their rights, substantive policy strategies within the framework of the educational reform; levels or educational modalities of SEN; policies and programs that operate through innovative policy instruments; and policies or programs with greater budget or public expenditure.

Route to carry out evaluations of educational policies and programs

The development of INEE policy and program evaluations consists of seven phases for its execution: *a)* characterization of public action; *b)* methodological design of the evaluation; *c)* development of information-gathering instruments; *d)* data collection; *e)* information processing and analysis; *f)* preparation of final report; and *g)* diffusion of the results of the evaluations.

The first step is the characterization of the action that the Mexican State designs and implements to address a public educational problem in order to know, in depth, the evaluation object—this is essential to define with precision the design of the evaluation. This phase involves the realization of at least five activities: *a)* delimitation, description, and analysis of the evaluation object; *b)* definition of the public problem to which the policy to be evaluated responds; *c)* characterization of the target population; *d)* identification and analysis of the action that the State has designed and implemented to address the problem; and *e)* explanation of the route of change of public intervention.

The definition of the route of change is a distinctive element of the evaluation of the INEE's educational policies and programs, since it is assumed that all public action must clearly

establish the problem it seeks to address, the change it wishes to generate, as well as the route and the causal mechanisms to achieve it.

The second phase of this process is the development of the methodological design of the evaluation, which is made up of three key components: *a)* benchmarks for improvement; *b)* policy cycle; and *c)* evaluation criteria. On the one hand, the benchmarks for improvement of the evaluation represent the situation of desirability with which the findings of the evaluation are contrasted in the design, implementation, and results phases of the policy or program evaluated. These referents constitute what that public action ought to be and are built based on the evidence derived from educational research and evaluation, as well as on national and international experiences successfully instrumented in the subject, the national and international regulatory framework that governs the policy in question, and the design documents of the policy or program evaluated (rules of operation, guidelines, among others).

On the other hand, the criteria are conceived as the articulating mechanism of the evaluation, since—at its core—is the evaluation component of the educational policies or programs that are to be examined. In these exercises, emphasis is placed on the assessment of relevance, coherence in politics and between policies, and the equity and effectiveness of public action from a rights perspective. Each of the selected evaluation criteria is associated with the cycle of the policy or program in its phases of design, implementation, and generation of results.

Based on these three components, an evaluation design matrix is elaborated, a scheme that analytically details the dimensions, categories of analysis, observation units, methodologies and information-gathering techniques, sources of information, and guiding evaluation questions. Its main objective is to provide coherence, articulation, and validity to the design of the evaluation, as well as to the analysis of the documentary information and the information collected during fieldwork. It should be mentioned that this matrix is dynamic in nature and can receive feedback during the evaluation process.

The last activity of the methodological design, once defined the methodology to be used—quantitative, qualitative or mixed—is the definition of the subset of individuals, groups of individuals, cases, or institutions selected to carry out the collection of information.

This action is followed by the development of evaluation instruments, which must be fully aligned with the methodological design matrix. Subsequently, the information is collected, in accordance with a fieldwork plan that specifies the times foreseen for its realization, the number and professional profiles of the people involved, the mechanisms that will be used to contact and summon the informants, as well as the expected dynamics to gather information. Finally, information is processed and analyzed, the evaluation report is prepared, and the results are disseminated.

Advances in the evaluation of educational policies and programs

To this date, the Institute has carried out five evaluations of the following educational policies and programs: *a)* educational

attention directed to children of families of migrant agricultural day laborers; *b*) educational policy directed to the indigenous population in basic education; *c*) the policy to attend drop-outs in upper secondary education; *d*) implementation of tutoring to newly admitted teachers in the 2014–2015 school year; and *e*) design of continuous training within the framework of the 2016 Professional Teaching Service. The results of these evaluations have constituted key inputs for the construction of improvement guidelines related to these problems.

In 2018, there are six additional evaluations in progress: *a*) the Special Certification Program Based on Acquired Learnings, equivalent to the primary and secondary levels of the National Institute for Adult Education (Spanish acronym: INEA); *b*) multigrade education; *c*) the Escuelas al CIEN program and the Multiple Contributions Fund; *d*) the policy of social participation in education; *e*) sectorial educational programs; and *f*) educational policies within the framework of the Mexican Educational Reform.

Final thoughts

A little more than four years after the enactment of the Educational Reform and the implementation of the corresponding actions to comply with the constitutional mandate to evaluate educational policies and programs, several lessons learned can be identified.

The first one is related to the opportunity in the emission of evaluations results. It is clear that further work is needed to align the time required for the evaluations of policies and programs with the time of execution of the educational policy; specifically, with regard to the programming and budgeting of the federal and state public administrations, which would make it possible to incorporate the proposals for redesign and adjustments to the implementation derived from the evaluations.

Likewise, it is confirmed that the realization of educational policy and program evaluations is indispensable for the construction of guidelines, since comprehensive assessments of governmental action and policy recommendations with the same character are required.

However, this task has faced difficulties related to the availability and timing of the necessary information during the evaluation process; either because it is not publicly available at the level of disaggregation that is required—for example, access to disaggregated data on issues related to public expenditure or with the characteristics of the subjects of law served—or because the entities that possess the information decide not to provide it or do it partially, following a tradition of opacity and concealment of information.

On the other hand, it is necessary to develop assessments which are flexible in relation to the context and take into account the multicausality of the problems that the educative public interventions attend. In this sense, we must not lose sight of the complexity that surrounds what we want to evaluate—the organizations and actors involved, the definition of the processes and their adaptation to different contexts, and the logic of the causal chains to change the *statu quo*, among other aspects.

Finally, since there are several instances that perform, or participate, in the evaluation of educational policies and programs at the federal level—National Council for the Evaluation of the Social Development Policy (Spanish acronym: CONEVAL), Ministry of Public Education (Spanish acronym: SEP), Superior Audit of the Federation (Spanish acronym: ASF)—it is essential to identify spaces of concurrence and complementarity of actions that contribute to the construction and strengthening of an integrated educational policy and evaluation system that—within the framework of the National Educational Evaluation Policy—also includes the articulation with the evaluations carried out by local educational authorities from the scope of their competence. €

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- 1 According to Serrano and Vázquez (2013), the perspective that conceives people as holders of rights understands obligations as state conducts and not as transferable assets. In both cases, special emphasis is placed on the development of skills (aptitudes, resources, abilities, responsibilities, authority, and so on) both to enable right holders to access information, claim, participate, propose and obtain repair for non-compliance of law, and to strengthen the State's capacity to comply with these rights.

The challenges [...] of universalizing initial schooling, and facing the permanent formation that the information society demands, will only be efficient and have meaning if they are carried out from a perspective of *quality*.

The OCDE (1995) defines quality education as that which “ensures all young people the acquisition of knowledge, capabilities, skills, and attitudes necessary to equip them for adult life”.

However, [...] it's not the same [...] to educate accepting without question the current model of society than considering the possible construction of a better world for all.

From the sphere of values, an educational system of quality is characterized by:

- Being accesible to *all* citizens.
- Facilitating personal, organizational and material resources adjusted to the needs of each student so that *all* can have the opportunities that will promote, as much as it may be possible, their academic and personal progress.
- Promoting change and innovation in the schooling institution and in the classrooms (which will be achieved [...] by making shared thinking possible [...]).
- Promoting active participation on the part of the students, [...] within a frame of values where *all* feel respected and valued as persons.
- Attaining participation of families and community insertion.
- Stimulating and facilitating the development and well-being of the [...] professionals who work at schools.

SPECIAL REPORT. EDUCATIONAL QUALITY:
HOW IS IT MEASURED AND UNDERSTOOD?

Educational quality: from the normative concept to an agenda for its measurement

On the basis of the legal framework generated in the last reform to the 3rd Constitutional Article, the author delivers a normative framing of the concept and the possible strategies to measure educational quality. The objective is not an exhaustive conceptual or methodological development; but, rather, to offer a line of work that contributes to the processes of continued assessment and improvement of the components of the National Educational System.

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Introduction

One of the great contributions of the current Educational Reform was to grant a constitutional character to the right to a quality education for all, which amounts to establishing that good educational results have to be guaranteed for the whole of the population independently of their social, cultural, geographical, ethnical, religious, or any other type of condition. Although the constitutional text indicates, in its 3rd Article, that education “Will be of quality, on the basis of a constant improvement and the maximum academic achievement by students” (CPEUM, 1917), in the secondary laws other dimensions are added to the concept. Thus, in the General Educational Law (LGE, 2013) it is indicated that education “Will be of quality, understanding by this the congruity between objectives, results, and processes of the educational system, according to the dimensions of efficacy, efficiency, pertinence and equity,” inasmuch as in the Law Governing the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (LINEE, 2013) it is established that quality of education means “the property of an educational system that integrates the dimensions of relevance, pertinence, equity, efficiency, efficacy, impact, and sufficiency.” Although these definitions carry the substantive constitutional approach of maximum academic achievement, what is true is that they incorporate diverse dimensions that make the measuring of quality a complex matter, which is why I consider it convenient, as a first methodological approach, to refer to the constitutional term both



because of its more specific content and its higher normative hierarchy.

Based on the concept of educational quality that stems from the 3rd Constitutional Article, which alludes to the students' learning and the interaction it has with the rest of the components of the educational process, I specify some aspects that need to be taken into consideration in the measuring of quality. Thereafter, I outline some theoretical and methodological questions that seek to give rise to lines of analysis to deepen the study of this initial proposition. I conclude with the preliminary formulation of some indicators for the measuring of quality and the proposal of information sources to account for them. Thus, I seek to offer a path for the measuring of improvement in education, providing elements for reflection on its components and on different educational actors on which it is necessary to focus our attention in order to trigger and stimulate quality education for all.

How should the concept of quality in education be defined?

The definition of quality is made on the basis of an exercise in legal interpretation of the propositions that the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (Spanish acronym: CPEUM), offers, because this is the higher hierarchy instrument within the normative body established in Mexico.

As I indicated, the Constitution establishes that: "Education will be of quality, on the basis of constant improvement and maximum academic achievement by students" (CPEUM, 1917). In line with this approach, and with what can be considered a theory of educational change, in the Third Paragraph of the 3rd Constitutional Article it is stated that:

The State shall guarantee quality in the mandatory education in a way that the educational materials and methods, the organization of schools, the educational infrastructure and the adequacy of teachers and management guarantee the maximum achievement in students' learning (CPEUM, 1917).

By virtue of the above, educational quality can be defined as a function of improvement of substantive educational components in a relation of process-and-result interaction. Meaning that it can be thought of as a function of improvement of the academic achievement of students, result that depends on the improvement of, at least, four components or processes: *a)* the materials and educational methods; *b)* the organization of schools; *c)* the educational infrastructure; and *d)* the adequacy of teachers and management.

What are the aspects to be considered in measuring quality?

If quality is the result of a function of a constant improvement of the above-mentioned components, then, a first relevant dimension is improvement itself. This improvement is conceived as a relation of advance or progress of an x component between a t_1 time and a t_2 time, since the establishing of

a previously-set reference for the improvement¹. The minimal condition of this advance can be assumed as the difference in component x between t_2 and t_1 , which always has to be superior to zero; this means that the situation of component x at a time t_2 must show an increase in relation to its situation at time t_1 .

Within this frame, the concept of *quality-education gap* emerges, indicating the difference or distance that exists between the reference of the achievement of an indicator—for instance, the level of educational achievement goal or the net schooling rate—and the situation that presents itself at a given moment, or the distribution of values of a variable depending on certain distribution criteria (the level of educational achievement based on the condition of being indigenous, rural or urban condition, or the level of marginalization). In this sense, at least two spheres of comparability expressed in terms of gaps or distances emerge:

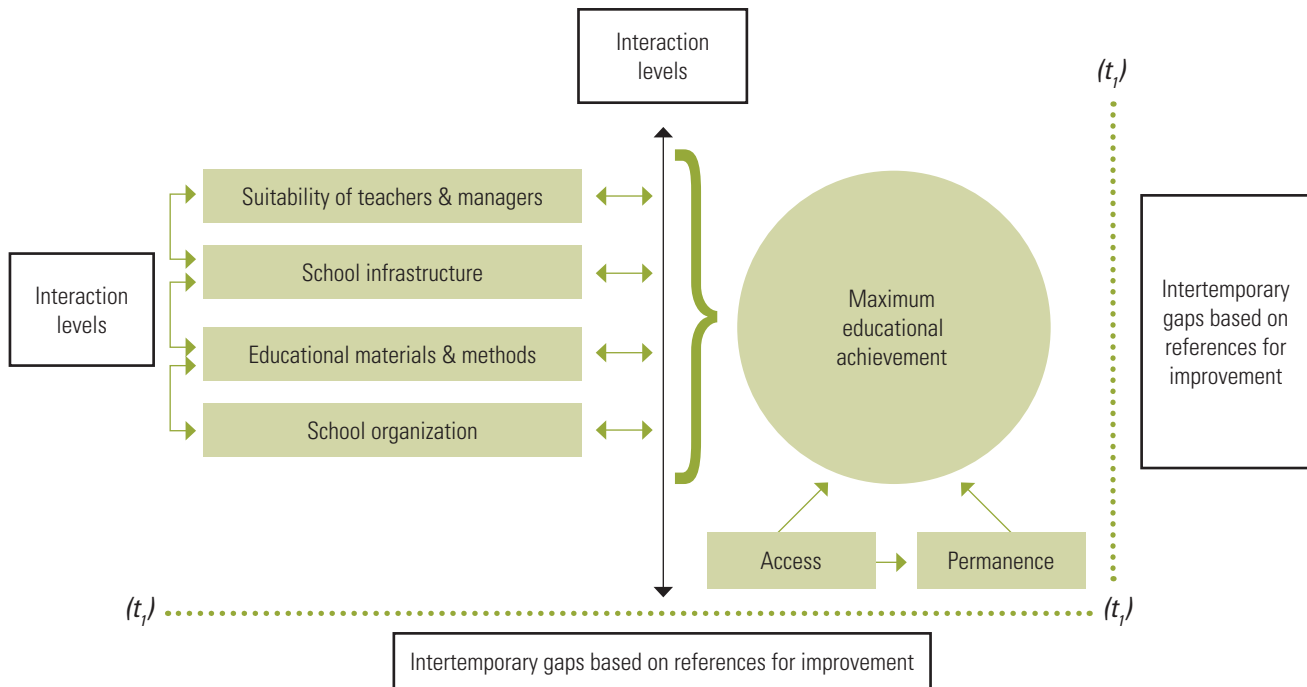
1. *Gap or distance in relation to an improvement reference.* An example of this is the result of the learning achievement in Mathematics that is expected to show improvement as time goes by. Thus, we could establish as an improvement reference the decrease in the percentage of students that are still at an *insufficient* level in the standardized assessments for that school subject in primary education. That is, if the proportion of students that were at insufficient level was 60.5% in 2015 (time t_1), it will have to be compared with the percentage of 2019 (time t_2). If in this year the proportion were less than the one observed in 2015, we would say we have a relative improvement. If, on the contrary, the percentage were to remain equal or superior to the one observed in 2015, the situation would have become worse.
2. *Gap or distance of the improvement reference considering conditions of contexts or types of service.* Following the example of educational achievement in Mathematics, this one is differentiated by the type of service. For instance, the proportion of students who obtained an insufficient level of achievement in public primary schools in that subject (level 1) is 83.3%, three times greater than in private primary schools (25.9%). By level of exclusion and size of the locality, it is observed that when the latter is smaller and the level of exclusion is high, the educational achievement in Mathematics is more unfavorable. That is, seven out of ten students who attend primary schools located in areas with high and very-high levels of exclusion—as in villages with less than 2 500 inhabitants—do not master the key learnings of the curriculum (level 1). In such a case, the observed gap would be of approximately 20%, considering the students from primary schools located in areas with low levels of exclusion and urban areas.

These spheres can be integrated to the analysis of each of the improvement processes and, undoubtedly, will account for their track record. The achievement of the learnings must be installed at the center of this measuring process; that is, establishing the incremental schemes or gaps in

inter-temporary terms for the academic achievement must, likewise, include the measurements of improvement of the different components of the educational offer, like school infrastructure, educational materials and methods, organization, or the adequacy of teachers and management. For instance, establishing—besides a measuring of quality in terms of educational achievement—different correlated measurements of the components that contribute to that purpose (Graphic 1).

The above opens a discussion on the importance or relative weight of the substantive components with respect to their contribution to the improvement of students' learning achievement: *a)* how much of the improvement of a component contributes to the improvement of learning achievement?; *b)* how much of the improvement of a component contributes to the improvement of the others?; and *c)* how much do the cumulative, processual or interactive effects between components contribute to learning achievement?

Graphic 1. Components & interactions of educational quality



Source: Made by the author.

Although the search for answers will deserve different analytical efforts, that doesn't contradict the need for basic information records. Therefore, the initial step consists in deciding on the components that are to be used in the monitoring of educational quality and improvement, its concepts, its indicators, and its measuring criteria and information record.

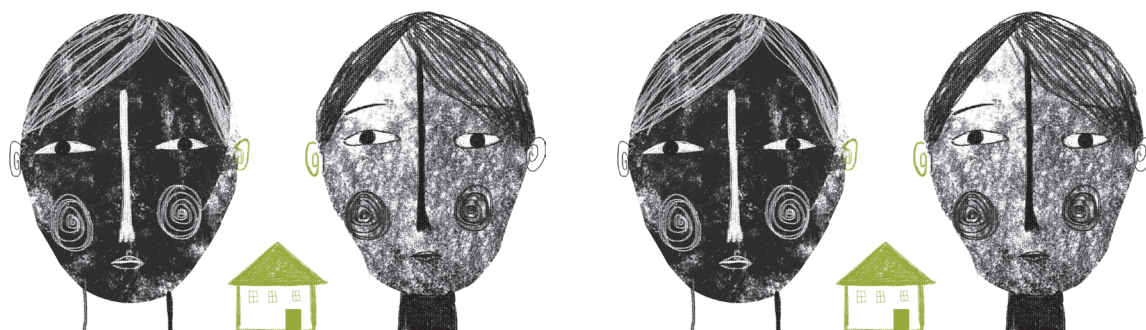
Which are the specific indicators that must be used to measure educational quality in Mexico?

For the measurement of quality derived from the above conceptualization, some fundamental indicators are specified in an initial approximation:

- *Learning achievement.* Results obtained in available standardized assessments, like the National Plan for Learnings Evaluation (Spanish acronym: PLANEA) at

the national level, and the International Program for Students Assessment (PISA) at the international level.

- *Materials and methods.* Existence and sufficiency of classroom libraries, textbooks, and study programs. In this field, I suggest thinking of an indicator associated with real assessment methods in the classroom.
- *School organization.* Complete occupational structure, organization of the Technical Assistance Service for Schools (Spanish acronym: SATE). Even an indicator of school autonomy could be considered.
- *Infrastructure.* Schools with basic services (water, lighting, electricity), classrooms with sufficient furniture and equipment, among others. At this point I believe it's indispensable to build a set of elementary conditions in relation to basic services, physical structure, equipment and furniture



that can account for the conditions in which schools are operating.

- *Adequacy of management and teachers.* Results of standardized adequacy tests in terms of admission or adequacy of professional performance.

In order to implement the measuring of the proposed indicators it is convenient to resort to the information sources of INEE (PLANEA, ECEA), the Ministry of Public Education (Census of Basic Education and Secondary Education, Information and Educational Management System, statistics derived from the 911 format), the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (Spanish acronym: INEGI), the National Population Council (Spanish acronym: CONAPO) and the National Council for the Evaluation of the Social Development Policy (Spanish acronym: CONEVAL). However, in the near future it would be convenient for INEE to be able to develop an *ad hoc* measurement, considering the group of indicators selected to measure educational quality. This instrument would be capable of combining basic conditions of teaching and learning, associated factors, and other elements that intervene in the achievement of the component. That would imply making measurements (probably three times a year) within a single strategy of implementation in schools, with controlled operatives.

What can be expected of this monitoring exercise for educational quality?

Some measurement elements are derived from the legal interpretation applied to the concept of quality, but there are also elements for the design and implementation of educational policies that contribute to the improvement of each of the components and processes. For instance, in the improvement processes it is possible to identify inequity gaps that exist between population groups of greater vulnerability: indigenous people, migrants, rural sectors, or marginalized urban sectors. This doesn't only allow to establish the added values of improvement that are necessary and expectable for them, but also to outline lines of action that lead to said improvement.

On the other hand, it's possible to associate the improvement of the aforementioned components with other concurrent factors of improvement as are coverage, permanence, school failings, and terminal efficiency. Presumably, the improvement of the four process-components would also have a positive effect on the attention to demand and the reduction of the educational lag.² However, due to the fact that these can also depend on deliberate decisions of the educational policy, it will be necessary to include in the analysis the dimensions of growth, pertinence, and equity.

From the experience accumulated during recent years stems this proposal of a line of work that poses the transition from a normative concept to the construction of an agenda for public policy that contributes to an education which is inclusive, of quality, and equitable, promoting learning opportunities for all.

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- 1 Article 6 of LINEE establishes that: "The evaluation referred to in the present Law consists in the action of emitting value judgments that result from comparing the values of a measurement or observation of components, processes, or results from the National Education System with a previously established reference".
- 2 My intuition is that the educational lag can be a sixth component for improvement, with respect to which we would have to analyze with greater care the type or degree of relation that it would have with the other five components of quality improvement. €

SPECIAL REPORT. EDUCATIONAL QUALITY:
HOW IS IT MEASURED AND UNDERSTOOD?

How educational quality is conceived of in the states of Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Veracruz, Baja California and Durango

In the interview transcribed below, education officials from the states of Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Veracruz and Baja California talk about their conceptions of educational quality and explain how they set up projects, and established goals in order to remedy the main educational shortfalls in their states via their State Evaluation and Educational Improvement Programs, also commenting on their respective contexts, the diagnoses that were carried out, and the solutions that were found.

The concept of educational quality

José Luis Álvarez Fuentes, the State Evaluation and Educational Improvement Programs (Spanish acronym: PEEME) coordinator for the state of Hidalgo, explains that the authorities in the latter state believe that the education provided there should be inclusive and of high quality, endeavoring to develop the knowledge, attitudes, competencies and values that are needed in order to face both local and global challenges, by fostering systematic critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration and decision-making.

David Raúl Uribe García, director for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and Processes for the state of Guanajuato, asserts that education should pursue the aims set forth in the Law Governing the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: LINEE), which defines the quality of an education system as a combination of relevance, pertinence, equity, efficacy, impact and sufficiency. Adhering to these principles, the state's education officials have come up with a strategy entitled Commitment, Responsibility and Efficacy in the School (Spanish acronym: CREE), aimed at ensuring that the conditions that are essential for promoting maximal student progress exist.

Patricia Iris Viveros Acosta, head of the Department of Programs and Schools of the Department for Evaluation and Schools of the Ministry of Education of the state of Veracruz affirms that the said state considers that maximal student learning outcomes depend on a combination of infrastructure, equipment, teaching materials, strategies, school management and intervention, and asserts that her state adheres to the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education's



(Spanish acronym: INEE) definition of educational quality, which must be complied with in accordance with the current human-rights focus.

In Baja California, everybody who seeks education receives it, says Emma Sandoval Godínez, who is responsible for implementing the PEEME in keeping with the National Development Plan, the Federal Sectorial Program and the 2014-2019 State-level Development Program. Hence, the aforementioned state seeks to provide comprehensive education with the relevance and pertinence that society demands, and to create the conditions needed to achieve broader educational coverage marked by equity and inclusion.

In Durango, Guadalupe Madrigal Olivas, the coordinator of Teacher Updating and Training in the Primary Education Department of Durango's Ministry of Public Education, and also the state-level coordinator of the "School at the Center" (Spanish: "La escuela al centro") program and the liaison for the State-level Evaluation and Educational-Improvement Program and the National Project for Evaluation and Educational Improvement in Multi-level Schools (Spanish acronym: PRONAEME), asserts that, as well as the components of educational quality posited by the INEE, it is also important to consider the criteria of availability, accessibility, adaptability and acceptability, so as to be able to measure progress, and identify difficulties in the endeavor to provide high-quality education.

Fostering educational quality

The Government of the State of Hidalgo held public consultation sessions and operated a virtual platform via which different social sectors have identified problems and made various proposals for solving them, which gave rise to a consensus on the direction that education should take there.

The concept of educational quality adopted by Guanajuato was based on a participatory vision, stemming from the establishing of the scope of each of the components of the CREE. “This effort focused on fostering high-quality teaching,” says David Raúl Uribe García.

It has taken decades to define educational quality in Veracruz. Patricia Iris explains: “In the last few years, based on the results of the standardized evaluations, our efforts have aimed at improving education, focusing on the professional training of teachers and school principals and the improvement of teaching conditions, as well as on fostering dialogue about academic matters so as to review the educational process and reorient it in line with the benchmarks”.

Emma Sandoval says that Baja California first consulted its population in general and also the educational community, including experts on pedagogy, for which reason she considers this northern state to be the ideal place for achieving high-quality education.

Guadalupe Madrigal comments that the authorities in Durango analyzed Article Three of the Mexican Constitution, the General Education Law, and the lines of action set forth in the 2013-2018 National Development Plan, the National Educational Evaluation Plan and the 2016-2022 State-level Development Plan. They also reviewed the educational model and the proposed curriculum for compulsory education.

Diagnosing education

In 2015, the yardsticks used by the Education System of the state of Hidalgo revealed weaknesses in the teaching there. The average time spent in schooling was 8.7 years, which is less than the national average, and a total of 234,385 illiterate people was detected, most of whom lived in eleven mainly indigenous municipalities with high poverty levels.

The state of Guanajuato uses the evaluations of student learning outcomes, teachers and educational programs and projects of the National System for the Evaluation of Education (Spanish acronym: SNEE) as a basis for diagnosing the performance of its education system.

In 2016, the state of Veracruz had a coverage of 64.3% at the pre-school level, 95.8% at the primary level, 83.7% at the secondary level, and 58.1% at the secondary level. The results on the evaluations pertaining to the National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning Outcomes (Spanish acronym: PLANEA), administered in the state in last few years, were the same as the national average and showed improvements in the areas of Language and Communication and Mathematics. Furthermore, Veracruz is outstanding in that 85% of its teachers obtained at least satisfactory results in the norm-referenced evaluations of the National Teaching System (Spanish acronym: SPD), while over 50% of its teachers and school principals are taking part in training in order to improve their performance.

In the state of Baja California, pre-school coverage was 71.3%, primary-school coverage was 100%, and secondary-school coverage was 91.9%. In the 2016-2017 school year, there was a disproportionate growth in the demand for education at the upper secondary level, which was addressed through the services provided by the state. “Due to the population bubble that has occurred from 2013 on,” says Emma Sandoval, “coverage increased by 5.4% over the previous school year, i.e. from 74.7% to 80.1%”.

When talking about the quality of education in Durango, it should not be forgotten that 64.5% of the state’s population is concentrated in three municipalities, while the rest is scattered throughout the said state. On average, students complete 9.2 study levels. Illiteracy stands at 2.6% in Durango, where 82.9% of all students, 82% of all teachers and 95.1% of all schools pertain to the elementary level. The PLANEA results for the state show significant shortfalls: 91.6% of all primary-level students in rural areas are at achievement levels I and II for Language and Communication, as opposed to 82% of all primary-level students in urban communities. The differences between the state’s public and private schools are evident; for example, public schools have a dropout rate of 16.9%, while the rate for private schools is 7.9%.

Challenges and progress in the area of educational improvement

According to José Luis Álvarez Fuentes, the state of Hidalgo is seeking to strengthen student learning outcomes; achieve greater access to, continuance in and graduation from higher education; increase the number of scholarships it provides; diminish inequity; continue setting up links between schools and companies, and promote an evaluation culture. Among the state’s outstanding achievements have been the founding of state-level academies to raise educational quality, the setting up of technical boards to improve teacher training, and the improvement of teaching methods and organizational systems.

Uribe García considers that there are areas of opportunity in the state of Guanajuato to consolidate coverage in compulsory education, boost continuance in school by lowering failure and dropout rates, further consolidate the key learning aims for each school levels, so as to link them to those of the following levels, and make education a driver of socio-economic change and mobility.

One of the big, urgent challenges facing Veracruz is that of providing education that is both pertinent and equitable, given that it has seven multi-ethnic regions, in which fourteen indigenous languages are spoken. In order to achieve this, the state is identifying the different needs of its students and fostering meaningful learning within a framework of inclusion and social justice. One of its achievements in this regard has been the development of a Single System for Providing Information about Teaching and Learning Conditions, consisting of a Web platform that will enable teachers and school principals in 17,563 schools to gather information.

The main challenge in Baja California continues to be that of satisfying demand at the pre-school and upper-secondary

levels, which is still inadequate. “At the pre-school level, we are keeping a close eye on the educational policy aimed at encouraging first-grade enrolment,” says Emma Sandoval, who is responsible for monitoring the PEEME in her state.

Guadalupe Madrigal says: “The biggest challenges in Durango are those of narrowing the gaps between rural and urban schools and providing education to marginalized communities, as well as lowering dropout rates and achieving greater efficiency in upper-secondary education. We’ve made progress in improving education in multi-level schools in sparsely populated regions and designing and implementing the State-level Programs for Evaluation and Improvement of Education (Spanish acronym: PROEME)”.

The path pertaining to the State-level Programs for Educational Evaluation and Improvement

The implementation of the PEEME in Hidalgo sprang from the need to involve all those who play a part in education in the planning, evaluation and improvement of the education system, for which purpose an expert technical team was formed to analyze the state’s educational program. After the necessary changes and updates had been made, an ongoing cooperation-and-coordination plan was drawn up, thus coordinating the structures and practices of the different protagonists in order to disseminate and make use of results so as to improve education.

Guanajuato faced a similar challenge. “We needed a coordinated process of ongoing reviews that required agreement among the various areas of the Ministry. The methodology designed by the INEE enabled us to design evaluation policies aimed at identifying shortfalls, and set the standards for establishing lines of research, identifying problems, and fine-tuning and focusing evaluation in the area of education,” says Uribe García.

In Veracruz, an interdisciplinary team of people trained in policy design and experienced in the design of projects and programs in the areas of elementary and secondary education, evaluation and benchmark-creation was formed. Based on the findings yielded by the proposed methodology, we concluded that we couldn’t make generalized correlations between the schools, based on their type or level, the educational services they provided, the support they received, their location or their degree of marginalization, and the results they achieved. The operating conditions of the schools varied a lot and the amount of resources they received wasn’t based on principles of equity and justice.

Baja California implemented its methodology in four steps, in the first of which it carried its state-level diagnosis in accordance with twenty-three benchmarks pertaining to different aspects of access, coverage and learning outcomes in order to identify the important shortfalls. In the following stages, it decided which State-level Projects Pertaining to Educational Evaluation and Improvement it would set up. This analysis helped us to gather useful information about the way in which the schools functioned in order to plan actions that would lead to improvement in accordance with the principles of equity and social justice.

“In Durango, we were able to identify problems, design projects, establish aims and plan actions and follow-up processes using the methodology proposed by the INEE, all in keeping with the principle of providing high-quality education,” says Guadalupe Madrigal.

Planning the Projects Pertaining to Educational Evaluation and Improvement

When designing the PROEME in Hidalgo, we decided to strengthen the aforesaid strategic aspects because they were closely linked to the students and to the possibilities of carrying out effective interventions that would raise the quality of education via teachers, school supervisors, principals, technical boards, and technical-pedagogical consultants.

The main criteria for defining Guanajuato’s PROEME were educational level and the two components of the CREE that needed most attention: school management and educational achievement. Statistics were gathered per sex and per regional government district, thus making it possible to ascertain the differences between these two factors.

In view of the wide range of cultures and languages, and the scattering of the population throughout Veracruz, the analysis took stock of the type of area and the degree of marginalization. After these had been established, the most important disparities in the state were ascertained and the PROEMES defined.

Baja California planned its PEEME projects based on a diagnostic study of its Educational Program and the aim of raising overall quality for all its students, for which purpose the state’s benchmarks pertaining to coverage, completion, continuance, dropout and educational equity were used.

In Durango, the data provided by the National Institute of Geography and Information Processing (Spanish acronym: INEGI) were analyzed, along with the results of those internal and external evaluations that take stock of the criteria of adaptability, acceptability and availability. In the words of Guadalupe Madrigal: “Four projects were planned: two for elementary education (pertaining to assessment of the education sector and the dissemination of the results of the PLANEA exams and the Evaluation of Achievement in the National Education System [Spanish acronym: ELSÉN]), and two for lower-secondary education (pertaining to the evaluation of the teacher-training program and the dissemination of the results of the evaluation of teacher performance)”.

Educational-improvement aims

Hidalgo aims to strengthen its teachers, set up programs for the prevention and elimination of violation in the school, increase coverage and matriculation in secondary and higher education, reduce dropout rates, offer education that is inclusive and equitable, improve school premises, and adopt an intercultural and bilingual approach in its teaching programs.

For its part, Guanajuato hopes that its Stay, Learn and Continue program (Spanish acronym: QAC) will result in an evaluation that makes it possible to reduce student failure rates and to disseminate results among those involved in education and encourage the latter to use them in order to come up with better proposals and solutions. The Module Pertaining

to Secondary-level Evaluation (Spanish acronym: MEVIMS) sets out to foster the proper use of the tests that form part of the PLANEA in order to encourage schools, subsystems and the different areas of the Ministry of Education to become familiar with the said evaluations and use them in their work in order to trigger improvement.

In Veracruz, the authorities and staff in every school are expected to identify which conditions are required in each area of education, to enable them, with the help of advisors, so as to make informed decisions aimed at improving education. It is assumed that the improvement of teaching-learning conditions will improve learning outcomes, and that the use of evaluation will help to ensure high-quality teaching.

Based on the PLANEA results, the current government of the state of Baja California has set itself the aim of ensuring that 25% of the students presently in grades I and II move up to grades III and IV, on the assumption that “we can achieve change together”. Though the state’s authorities know that it will be hard as it is to achieve this goal, they are also aware that it is easy to remain in one’s comfort zone if aims are not set.

Durango’s education system is focusing on designing an intervention plan in order to improve its PLANEA and ELSEN results at the secondary level and also its results in the evaluation of lower-secondary-level performance. In the area of school organization and learning management, the said state is seeking to design an intervention plan aimed at improving its educational services, and also to foster the use of results and create a plan for improving the teacher-training-and-updating program.

Strategies and those involved in their implementation

José Luis Álvarez Fuentes comments that the state of Hidalgo is trying to give the necessary input to key players so that they can evaluate and improve their daily practices by honing their educational-evaluation skills, since it is only in this way that the PEEME will have a real impact on schools, making them the main agents of the transformation that is required.

In Guanajuato, the strategies and the people responsible for implementing them are specified in the PEEME plan. Raúl Uribe comments: “Those of us in our state’s Ministry of Education drew up our own table of aims and those responsible for achieving them, using some aspects of project-design methodology”.

In order to develop the Veracruz PEEME, an interdisciplinary team, each of whose members has specific responsibilities, has been set up to monitor and follow up on the actions taken. The In-School Technical-Support Service will help with this task, above all when it comes to overcoming the challenges inherent in evaluation and the use of its results.

All those responsible for managing the state of Baja California’s education government have been involved in the PEEME. The priority is to support each of the services provided. Each educational level has a support strategy based on the use of evaluation results in order to supply teachers with the information that they need so as to achieve improvements in the most problematic areas, i.e. the ones where students have had the most difficulty.

In Durango, the strategies for improving education consist of the dissemination of results and the carrying out, and following up of, the actions proposed. Guadalupe Madrigal comments: “All the key players in education are involved in this joint effort to overcome the challenges that arise”.

Evaluation and the use of its results

In the opinion of Álvarez Fuentes, Hidalgo’s PEEME coordinator: “Evaluation and the use of its results are the keys to enhancing the quality of education, since they enable us to observe and measure the progress achieved by the different systems and identify impacts, positive practices and opportunities for improvement. The use of results enables all of those directly involved in education, and all of us on its periphery, to engage in, and promote, deep reflection on day-to-day processes so as to design specific improvement strategies”.

Uribe, who is the Director for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and Processes of the Ministry of Education of the State of Guanajuato, says: “Evaluation leads to the dissemination and use of results in order to bring about improvement via evidence-based intervention, plan refocusing and the proposal of more effective actions aimed at impacting education. As for the progress achieved, two projects are established in the PEEME: one called QAC, for evaluating a program that prevents lower-secondary-school students from failing and/or dropping out and helps those who do fail and/or drop out, and another one having to do with the way in which the PLANEA results are disseminated and used in upper-secondary education”.

In Veracruz, evaluation is seen as a very useful tool that yields useful information to inform decision-making aimed at improving learning outcomes. Patricia Iris Viveros says: “This administration’s state-level education program stipulates that decisions regarding the management and assignment of resources and support must be taken based on evaluation results, and this constitutes significant progress in our state’s use of evaluation”.

For her part, Emma Sandoval asserts that Baja California has been working hard, for many years now, to foster an evaluation culture. “One often hears school principals talking about the results achieved via large-scale evaluations such as the PLANEA, which they use to trace out their School-improvement Paths. However, it’s important that we make the qualitative transition leap from theoretical knowledge to the use of results as an improvement tool”. The challenge, she says, is that of achieving equity and of providing education to the most vulnerable groups, such as indigenous people, migrants and disabled children, which is why Baja California is striving to comply with the guidelines issued by the INEE, based on the commitment of the areas and institutions involved.

Guadalupe Madrigal, the PEEME liaison in Durango, asserts that, since evaluation is closely linked to educational improvement, the use of its results should serve to identify the strengths, difficulties and challenges facing the education system, and the opportunities that the said system has, in order to design intervention strategies. €

Equity: the focal point of educational quality

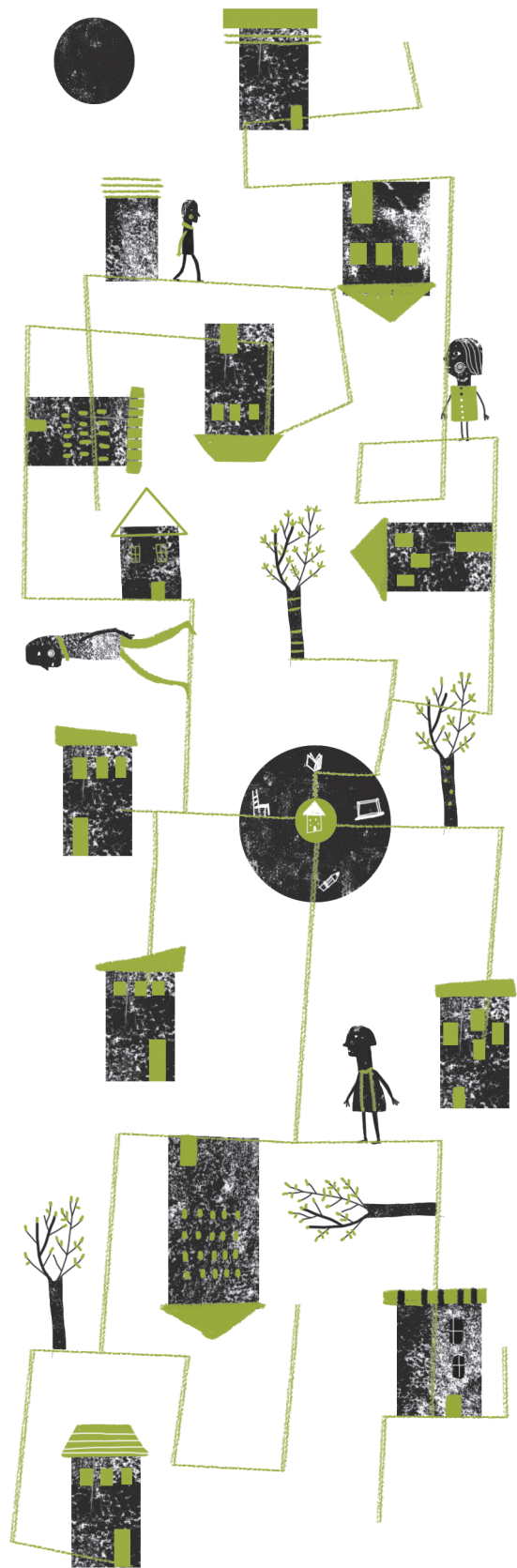
The author's ample experience as the founder of Ecuador's National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, a member of the Global Salzburg Seminar, and also of the respective technical boards of UNESCO's Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education and Mexico's INEE, among other high-level positions, renders him eminently qualified to provide us, in the following article, with a broad in-depth overview of human-rights-centered educational quality.

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Throughout history, education has always been a twofold process that has managed to both emancipate and alienate large numbers of people. This scenario has been repeated time and again all over the world: for much of their lives, millions of children, youths and adults attend schools every day in order to receive education, doing so in the belief—not always well founded—that learning will lead to better lifelong opportunities, and that the best education is to be found in schools, it being assumed that education fosters mobility and the provision of equal opportunities (Huerta, 2012), a conclusion that is beginning to be vigorously questioned.

The modest progress made by countries in achieving their social aims, and the enormous inequalities that have arisen among the different population groups, have also resulted in formal education ceasing to be the main agent of change, which, in turn, has made people highly suspicious of all reforms and made the gap between social learning and school-based learning appear almost unsurmountable.

Denoting a social asset, the word *education* is an abstract verbal construct that does not, and cannot, *per se*, possess a single meaning or a sole referential framework. Though the said word has no single definition, it would seem feasible to define it as a set of concepts, definitions, practices, customs, ends and means aimed at developing mankind and making it more prosperous. Article Three of the Mexican Constitution (1917) states that “the guiding principle of education is that it should pursue progress based on scientific findings, diminish ignorance and its effects, and combat servitude, fanaticism and prejudice”.



Besides having to live up to these ambitious aspirations, government officials face the challenge of providing a working definition of the aforesaid aims and of the public policies to be implemented in order to achieve them. Hence, every action that is taken in the realm of education must be purposeful, which implies providing detailed descriptions of all the educational services that need to be provided, as well as their objectives, the agents that must be involved in their pursuit, and the processes and resources that are needed to achieve them.

Defining the intentions and aims of an education system leads to both technical difficulty and political commitment, above all because such explicit enunciation entails the acceptance and fostering of human, social, pedagogical and economic practices that shine a light on the legality and legitimacy of public policy, both past and future. Notwithstanding such definition, it is an indispensable act of honesty in order to show the possession of the minimal talents required to face the challenge and thus develop the political leadership that is needed to transform the sluggish systems of the Latin American countries

Educational quality

The concept of 'educational quality' is a value-based one, referring to a system's ability to develop the qualities of human beings in the context where education occurs. Its definition is, of course, historically and socially conditioned, above all because its articulation is based on the philosophical, pedagogic, sociological, psychological and productive ideologies that hold sway in a society that is delimited by a specific, socio-emotionally charged moment in history.

Since the aim of education, thus seen, is a collection of archetypes, the evaluation of its quality is heavily dependent on the social validity of each of the parts of the said collection. Therefore, it is possible to place the degree of fit between the prevailing social project, and the educational project that operates within, on and behind the latter, at the center of the concept of educational quality. So, it is more appropriate to talk about the quality of different education-related aspects—i.e. *the quality of teaching, the quality of learning outcomes or the quality of infrastructure*, to name just a few—, in our endeavor to describe the aspect being dealt with in a less ambiguous way.

In order to enable the different interest groups to interpret the results of evaluations of the given qualities of education, it is useful to start with a function that includes at least three components, i.e. *a)* the context in which education takes place, *b)* the functional definitions of the archetypes that are present in the framework education, and *c)* the distance that exists between the ideology-dictated standard and the 'educational reality' observed.

In Mexico, over four million children and youths do not receive any formal education, while over a third of those old enough to receive upper-secondary education do not do so (UNICEF, 2015), and this constitutes a systematic violation of their rights. Since the ideology strives to realize itself via the aims of the education that has been defined, any definition of quality must, at the very least, have at its core the universal

right to learn, and not just the right to do so of those who enter the education system and remain in it. The focal point of education must be equity, and the authorities must understand that the latter is not an ancillary aspect of education, but rather a central part thereof, so that any measurement of quality must be expressed as a direct function of the measurement of equity (Sánchez, 2014; Barba, 2018).

Given the above, one can assert that, in a high-quality education system, the leaders in the teaching-learning process help to foster the all-round development of the competencies and values pertaining to the archetypes of society in all the members of the latter, with the said leaders concentrating their efforts on optimizing the exploitation with equity of educational resources and becoming strategic agents who intentionally ensure the availability of enough resources and equipment to engender a respectful, fraternal, positive, dignified atmosphere. Furthermore, in such a system, the target learning outcomes must be achieved, the cultural codes understood, and democratic coexistence fostered, all in accordance with a plan based on social consensus and cultural and linguistic relevance, for the sole purpose of producing self-reliant, productive, satisfied citizens who can go on learning throughout their lives.

Of course, special care must be taken to include social constructs at the core of this definition—i.e. the *sine qua non* condition that people must see education as something that is alive. Hence, we need to have several mechanisms to ensure that everybody has the same opportunities, taking stock, from the outset, of the person's identity, including his/her particular physical, cultural, psychological and sociological characteristics. For example, in countries such as Mexico, one of whose greatest riches is its ethnic diversity, inclusion and non-discrimination should be considered two features that safeguard a single human right. Inclusion safeguards people's right to have free, untrammled access to education, while non-discrimination safeguards people's rights once they have entered the education system.

The improvement spiral

One of the momentous challenges, the overcoming of which yields great benefits for society, is that of debunking the myth that every action taken in the realm of education is, *per se*, virtuous and noble. As a central part of their governance models, countries should create education systems that are capable of self-organization, as expressed via strategies and actions that are increasingly subject to public scrutiny. Of course, the more consensus there is about the aims of an education system and the more transparent the records of the said aims are, the greater will be our chances of becoming familiar with the qualities of the said system and the more likely citizens will be to demand that public policies are founded on evidence-based knowledge.

As mentioned above, while exercising their right to education, people should also exercise their rights as participants in it, and hence evaluations of quality can be designed based on the extent to which the rights to enter the education system and remain in it are safeguarded, while the rights that the

said system represents and safeguards are exercised. Since the right to learn must be an ongoing one, quality should also entail the steps and conditions that ensure that each member of the population can fully exercise his/her rights, and, as a core aspect, that s/he can go on exercising the right to learn throughout his/her life.

Everyone would seem to agree that unrestricted access to information and knowledge are the common denominator of democracy and crucial to the exercising of citizens' rights. Regardless of the temporary details or the time and resources that are available, we need to follow the pre-evaluation-development-impact-evaluation cycle (Sánchez, 2016). By analyzing the impact of educational policies, programs and practices, we can systemize follow-up on educational results and learn from experience, and this can lead to an improvement spiral based on virtuous circles that ensure the flow of ideas and solutions among the agents involved, the people in charge and the beneficiaries. This point of singularity tends to lead to a new cycle with a new set of archetypes.

Urgent educational policies

The lack of high-quality education in most Latin American countries is closely associated with:

1. The plethora of short-term programs relating to *quality improvement*, covering different interest groups that are fed up of so much fruitless effort.
2. The inflexibility of public policies that have led to institutional sedimentation.
3. The lack of autonomous evaluating institutions able to disseminate results so as to analyze public policies and make recommendations based on scientific evidence.
4. The failure to develop human talent—above all, pedagogical leaders—which has led to high levels of stress and vulnerability in teachers and school principals, who have to deal with fast-paced social, scientific and technological change.
5. The inability of governments to make equity and learning top investment priorities.

These five factors have caused the system's agents to react negatively when faced with changes of direction in public policies, with the result that any action aimed at overcoming educational inertia fails to garner support, regardless of its nature and no matter how positive it is. Although the two mainstays of human talent, which are vital for raising the quality of education, are teachers and school principals, over the last few decades they have played a secondary role in defining archetypes, identifying problems, and seeking solutions to the latter. This has led to superficial and extremely inflexible interactions, which, in turn, have rendered all educational policies more fragile.

As a result of this gap between theory and practice, teachers are also becoming the targets of quality assessment, rather than allies in the struggle to improve quality, which is the system's declared aim. This is why some teachers and school principals have begun to oppose change.

Furthermore, the vast majority of educational planners and administrators have concentrated their efforts on designing

the most robust and enduring systems and processes possible, mainly for the purpose of keeping order in stressful situations, and this has diminished their ability to react and adapt. For example, instead of being adopted in order to support learning, the new technologies are meeting with resistance, and access to new information and learning media is being restricted rather than facilitated.

Given that lack of equity in education hampers people's development and prevents them from becoming productive members of society, if a single person is unable to exercise his/her right to education, or to have his/her rights respected while participating in education, then the State is failing to fulfil its responsibility to safeguard a crucial prerogative. If rights are not fully exercised in a society, then a 'handout' culture springs up which not only affronts human dignity, but also operates selectively and on a massive scale, endeavoring to be legitimized as the only possible response to poverty. However, in order to achieve equity, it is essential to adopt policies that take stock of the gaps that need to be closed in all the areas that can be identified, using transparent scientific evaluation systems that are not biased so as to serve the interests of educational administrators.

Finally, it is important to avoid succumbing to the smug temptation to relativize the goals and achievements of educational policies according to population group. The new strategies adopted by Latin American governments so as to raise educational quality must be based on sensitive day-to-day practices and eschew the sophistic language typically used by government bureaucrats. In other words, in order to achieve high-quality education, it is not only necessary to make a public commitment to equity and learning, but also show that all the system's efforts and resources have been devoted to ensuring that good is made on the right of all those whose inalienable *birthright* is to have access to such learning. Nothing less is acceptable in a society that seeks to ensure that its new generations bear fruit. €

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The components of high-quality education

In the interview transcribed below, teachers, supervisors and school principals from Mexico City and the states of Tlaxcala and Baja California, who form part of Mexico's National Education System (Spanish acronym: SEN), share their views about what constitutes high-quality education, the people who should foster it, the progress achieved and challenges to be faced, and their own contributions, as well as suggesting how educational evaluation can be improved.

High-quality education and its components

The educational actors agree on a concept of quality education that promotes the full development of students to face the challenges that arise in a society that evolves at great speed. The dimensions they consider range from the pedagogical, to the ethical, socio-emotional, economic, and political, without neglecting effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, and equity.

Evelyn Valencia Mora, the principal of the Doctora María del Carmen Millán Primary School in Mexico City, considers that “high-quality education is education that enables students, regardless of the school level they are in, to become well-rounded people and acquire the knowledge and skills that they need in order to survive in a changing society. Such education concerns itself not only with conceptual knowledge, but also with humanistic development and ethics, environmental issues, socio-emotional capacities, and artistic, technical and other skills that promote comprehensive human development”.

In the opinion of Manuel Zavaleta Suárez, a teacher at the Autonomous University of Baja California (Spanish acronym: UABC), high-quality education is “a process that endows students with the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that they need in order to face the challenges of everyday life. It should include social, institutional and strategic elements; the first of these require parents to be involved and keep an eye on their children, the second ones entail government involvement, and the third ones have to do with overseeing and analyzing institutional plans and programs”.

Jesús Adrián Medina Sánchez, an advisor at the State of Baja California's Colegio de Bachilleros (i.e. senior high school), asserts that “the concept of high-quality education is a complex, multidimensional one that involves aspects such as values, aptitudes, teaching competencies, inclusion, human rights, peace, social development and human rights, all of which are linked to efficiency and effectiveness. Its components should be political, pedagogical, ideological, sociological, organizational, administrative and institutional”.

Margarita Concepción Euán Vázquez, a supervisor in the Undersecretariat of Lower Secondary Education (Spanish acronym: SEMS) of the state of Tlaxcala says: “It's education that

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HOW IS IT MEASURED AND UNDERSTOOD?

develops the competencies that students need to satisfy the needs of a society that is developing in leaps and bounds”.

Maribel Macías Olmos, a teacher at the Micaela Ortiz de Rosales Rural School in Tlaxcala, opines: “It's education that imparts knowledge and develops values and attitudes that all converge in the competencies that satisfy the student's needs and meet his/her expectations. The components that it should include are relevance (i.e. meaningful learning), pertinence (i.e. student-centered learning), equity (i.e. the same levels of development and learning regardless of social class), efficacy (i.e. the fostering of maximal learning), and efficiency (i.e. the responsible use of funds)”.

Verónica González Martínez, the technical director of the Micaela Ortiz de Rosales Rural School in Tlaxcala believes: “High quality consists in satisfying the underlying needs that exist in the context while adhering to the ideas, methods and philosophy propounded by the Mexican State”.

Actors responsible for high-quality education

According to those interviewed, society in general must be involved in the process to improve the quality of education, although the responsibility of educational authorities, managers, teachers, and parents, as key actors to actively contribute in this process, stands out.

Evelyn Valencia Mora asserts: “The education authorities, school principals, teachers, parents and the community in general need to play a part. It's a matter not only of the teacher-student relationship, but also of infrastructure, the availability of materials and access to them, teacher training and professionalization, school management, leadership, and curricula”.

Manuel Zavaleta comments: “The protagonists are parents and teachers, but we also have to include the education authorities responsible for designing educational policy and the school principals, since it's up to them to properly implement the said educational policy”.

In the opinion of Jesús Medina: “The main parties responsible are society in general, government and non-government organizations, and teachers, all governed by the same educational policy and belonging to an interlinked body of institutions”.

Margarita Euán comments: “The main agent is the teacher, who makes the decisions in the classroom, and also the school's administrative staff—i.e. the principal, the assistant principal and the heads of the different departments and offices—, who should be committed to providing high-quality education, as well as the education authorities who are responsible for policy formulation”.

Maribel Macías says: “The protagonists are the teachers, since they have direct contact with their students and should implement pertinent strategies in order to foster meaningful learning, as well as the school principals, who head the schools. For its part, the Ministry of Public Education (Spanish acronym: SEP) is responsible for providing courses

and workshops aimed at updating teachers and supervising school management. Last, but not least, families should help with their children's schooling”.

Verónica González says: “The protagonists are the school principals, teachers, students and their parents, guided by a supervisor who forges working relationships with the support of the SEP. We also need to ask the government and the companies that are fostering social change to play a part”.

Values and principles that allow high-quality education

In general, the vision of the educational actors involved in the interview revolves around the importance of ethics and service vocation; although it is not ruled out that respect, inclusion, and tolerance by all actors involved are also indispensable in the teaching-and-learning process. It is also considered that, in order to achieve quality education, work and commitment are not to be left out.

Evelyn Valencia comments: “In the first place, I think we need to assign more importance to the role played by the teacher and acknowledge that s/he is the person who can motivate his/her students to achieve their aims and realize their dreams”.

In the opinion of Manuel Zavaleta: “The main values are ethical ones, as well as a vocation to serve. The teaching-learning process should also be characterized by respect, inclusion, tolerance, and innovation and applicability of course contents to the student's environment”.

Jesús Medina asserts: “The main values are ethical ones, along with respect and a service vocation. We need to promote the creation of universal norms and ideals so as to help satisfy our society's real needs and enable our country to achieve sustainable development”.

Margarita Euán opines that the necessary values are: “Recognition that you are responsible for producing well-rounded human beings, leadership, commitment, freedom and respect; while the key guiding principles are equity, equal treatment for all, solidarity and non-discrimination”.

Maribel Macías says: “The main values are responsibility, respect, justice, tolerance and honesty”.

For her part, Verónica González Martínez comments: “The principles should be a commitment to universal high-quality education, teamwork, acknowledgment of the immediate school context, non-discrimination and ongoing learning. While the values needed are solidarity, tolerance, respect, a sense of justice and respect for freedom.

Advances and challenges in high-quality education

The representatives of the educational system of Mexico City, Tlaxcala, and Baja California consider that the greatest advances in educational quality are the implementation of autonomy in management, the incorporation of technological progress in pedagogical processes, the decentralization of educational functions, as well as teaching and administrative professionalization, including the increase in enrolment and the evaluations applied to teachers to condition their income and permanence.

Evelyn Valencia asserts: “One step forward has been the “School at the Center” (Spanish: “La escuela al centro”) strategy proposed by the SEP, which acknowledges that all those involved should focus on satisfying the school's needs; another has been the grating of autonomy to schools under Decree number 717, which empowers them to make decisions based on their problems and needs”.

Manuel Zavaleta Suárez says: “We, in higher education, are constantly working to develop and consolidate human capital, by first enabling our students to realize their potential and hence that of society. We've striven to achieve the ongoing improvement of teaching processes and the regular use of the information and communications technologies as part of our efforts to foster all-round, high-quality education. I believe that one of the challenges we face is that of overcoming the ongoing reluctance of some teachers—who stubbornly continue to stress memorization and mete out punishment—to embrace the new processes”.

Jesús Medina comments: “In the area where I work, which is lower-secondary education, teaching has been decentralized, leading to inclusive schools that are managed efficiently and effectively. Also, our teaching and administrative staff have become more professional”.

Margarita Euán says: “I think that Mexico has improved the Professional Teaching Service (Spanish acronym: SPD) by introducing evaluations for entry and continuance. One of the challenges is to afford more access to teacher-training colleges, and also to tighten access to the SPD at each level. Another challenge consists in improving performance evaluation, since, though a new teaching system has been created, we still have to go a long way in order to raise educational quality”.

Maribel Macías asserts: “One problem is the lack of committed teachers, added to which we're still failing to satisfy the needs of our changing society. The state of the infrastructure is not very good either and we need to do something about it. One improvement is the increase in student enrolments and the inclusion of more children with special needs”.

Verónica González says: “In the area where I work, the improvement that has been made is the increased professionalization, which has enabled us to better satisfy our students' needs and introduce a culture where students and teachers work together”.

Proposals for educational improvement

Among the proposals for education improvement by educational actors in Mexico City, Tlaxcala, and Baja California, the following stand out: the need to constantly assess and train the actors involved in the educational process, the urgency of implementing a public policy that matches the real needs of social context, the improvement of the infrastructure, and the involvement of the parents.

Evelyn Valencia asserts: “We need to create more mechanisms for the expert training and updating of teachers and school principals, and it's also important that human and financial resources and materials are more fairly distributed among the different schools”.

Manuel Zavaleta says: “We need to build a comprehensive educational policy that identifies the specific needs of the different areas of education and simplifies administrative procedures in order to satisfy them. Also, we need to create a hiring system like that of the private sector, constantly evaluating teaching posts and teacher performance”.

Jesús Adrián Medina Sánchez proposes that: “We need public policies that meet the real needs of society, based on a governance of the education system that generates public value with a humanistic approach. We also need to implement management for results in the area of education to make it more efficient”.

Margarita Euán asserts: “The first improvement that I would make to education would be to create a model for entry to—and continuance in—the SPD that ensures that our schools have the best teachers, and the second one would be to ensure that training and professional development are taken into account when promoting teachers”.

Maribel Macías says that we need to “make teacher training and updating compulsory, above all so as to attend to children with special educational needs and improve the infrastructure of all our schools”.

Verónica González comments: “I’d propose meeting with parents to explain what the aims are for each school year. I’d also establish learning goals with them to help them to understand what’s happening in the classroom. Likewise, I’d propose making the management of the materials received during each school year more transparent and linking their apportionment to learning outcomes”.

Contributions based on professional experience

The contributions that the interviewed teachers, managers, and supervisors can make from their professional experience and individual scope are important for the improvement in the quality of education. Among their contributions, they mention: the generation of knowledge in order to create public strategies and policies; the reevaluation of commitment, responsibility, leadership, and solidarity; the formation of an analytical sense in the students, which allows them to participate in substantiated discussions; and the construction of a diagnosis that helps meet the particular needs of students.

Evelyn Valencia says: “I can help by increasing the quality of my work so that teachers will be motivated to do the same”.

Manuel Zavaleta remarks: “In higher education, we would train our students in analysis so that they can develop a strategic vision, as well as affording them opportunities to engage in reasoned discussions”.

Jesús Medina asserts: “What I could contribute is knowledge that makes it possible to come up with less complicated public policies and strategies for decentralizing the education service”.

Para Margarita Euán says: “As a teacher, I can offer personal commitment, responsibility, leadership and solidarity in order to provide high-quality education, which entails ongoing professional training. I don’t expect everything to change, but I hope I can do my part”.

Maribel Macías Olmos comments: “My contribution would be to carry out a good diagnosis of my group in order to satisfy my students’ needs by contextualizing the contents of the different subjects so that they apply them to their everyday lives”.

Verónica González says: “I help by working to implement my school’s plan, monitoring the use of materials and time, which impacts human resources, and continuously evaluating what we do”.

Evaluating educational improvement

The comments of the interviewed educational actors emphasize the importance of evaluation following up on the educational improvement process; of an evaluation of performance that should be applied to all the actors involved in the educational process; on the relevance of building a system of indicators that allows access to the information needed to implement improvements; as well as on seeing evaluation as a permanent process that also encourages self-evaluation.

Evelyn Valencia says: “We’d have to continuously evaluate each protagonist in accordance with the his/her sphere of activity—e.g. to continue with the current process for evaluating the performance of teachers and school principals, and the different tests administered to students”.

Manuel Zavaleta says: “We should have a system of benchmarks that provides the information needed in a holistic way; one that evaluates the teacher’s training, student learning outcomes and skills development, how comfortable the school premises are, and whether resources are properly managed”.

Jesús Medina believes that it’s important to “implement a system that evaluates not only the performance of teachers, but also that of school principals and administrative staff. We also need to produce concrete benchmarks capable of measuring progress in program implementation and show our teachers how much social impact they’re having on the education system”.

Margarita Euán says: “To evaluate educational improvement, I propose that we set up a monitoring-and-support system that detects the areas of opportunity in each school, as well as carrying out a comprehensive evaluation of each state’s different areas, in order to share information about achievements and challenges. Of course, we’d have to acknowledge that its purpose is to foster ongoing improvement”.

Maribel Macías Olmos asserts: “We could evaluate educational improvement by creating a state-level examination covering each subject. Evaluation has a decisive influence, since its results serve as input for detailed analysis. That way, we could give feedback based on the identified shortfalls”.

Verónica González Martínez comments: “We’d have to monitor the implementation of the actions that need to be carried out, using a set of categories and supporting the process with an evaluation of the educational protagonists. Evaluation is a process of ongoing support, and, as a school principal, I have to carry it out. Additionally, I have to evaluate myself in order to identify strengths and areas of opportunity for fostering a change of culture”.

Evaluation and educational quality in Costa Rica and Cuba. Diagnosis of the evaluations of the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education, progress, challenges and strategies

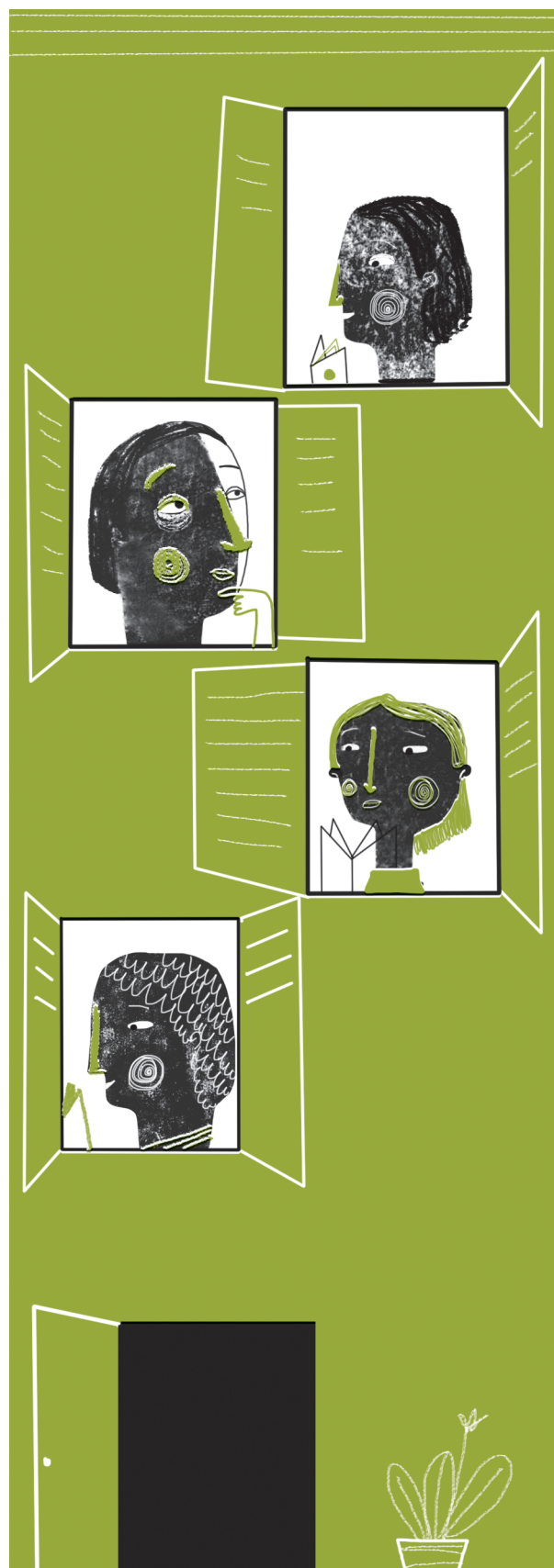
Atilio Pizarro, the general coordinator of the Latin LLECE, **Lilliam Mora Aguilar**, the general director for the Promotion and Evaluation of Quality of Costa Rica's Ministry of Public Education, and **Paul Antonio Torres Fernández**, Cuba's national LLECE coordinator and the subdirector of his country's Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, talk about the progress achieved, and challenges faced, in the area of educational quality in Latin America, and the role played by evaluation in the improvement process.

The LLECE in Latin America

In order to place the interview transcribed below in context, Atilio Pizarro, the general coordinator of the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (Spanish acronym: LLECE), explains the concept of educational quality at the institutional level, the diagnosis carried out in the Latin American region, the contributions that the LLECE has made towards the achievement of the 2030 UNESCO Agenda, and its recommendations regarding the role that evaluation should play in fostering high-quality education.

HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION AND ITS FEATURES

In the context of the international commitment set forth in the Universal Education Agenda signed by over 140 countries in the year 2000, UNESCO set out to define the definition of quality that is to underpin not only the normative frameworks, programs, teacher training programs and curricula, but also the evaluation systems. Once defined, the said definition, which acknowledges that educational quality is multidimensional, consists of equity, efficiency, efficacy, pertinence and relevance, and develops over times, was finally approved in 2007, at a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean Ministers of Education in Argentina.



Pizarro comments: “This comprehensive definition reaffirms that education should be humanistic and places special emphasis on relevant learning that prepares people for citizenship in today’s world, going beyond basic skills and stressing teamwork, problem-solving and the creation of fully participating members of society who can help their countries to develop”.

THE LLECE DIAGNOSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LATIN AMERICA

In accordance with the aforesaid definition of quality, and based on the LLECE evaluations, the diagnosis for Latin America poses some important challenges:

“We’ve carried out three regional comparative and explanatory studies on the third and sixth primary grades, which strongly focus on Mathematics, Spoken and Written Language and Science. The results show that the region’s biggest challenge is to reduce the high percentage of children who get low performance gradings. While these high percentages have dropped over the three evaluations, they’re still very hard. We’ve been trying to find out what the said low scores are due to, and making recommendations, in the series of books entitled *Contributions to Teaching* (Spanish title: *Aportes para la enseñanza*), aimed at helping teachers improve in these areas”.

The aim of the Laboratory is to guide decision-making in educational policy so that evaluation results in the latter area can be used to strengthen the areas that diagnosis has found to be weak. Since, according to the LLECE, the classroom teacher plays a key role in fostering educational improvement, a series of strategies has been developed to improve teaching. In addition to this, Pizarro asserts that the experiences of countries such as Chile, that has played a leading role in increasing educational quality, have been taken into account.

THE LLECE’S CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA

In accordance with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four, which states that there is a need to achieve inclusive, equitable, high-quality education, the LLECE has proposed more all-round, comprehensive evaluations that can better analyze the aforesaid components of education, to which end innovation modules, such as the ones respectively devoted to teachers and socio-emotional skills, have been developed in order to fully comprehend student learning processes.

In this regard, Pizarro says: “We need to study the XXIst-century skills—the socioemotional ones that are indispensable in our rapidly developing world in which students need to be able to adapt quickly on a wide range of fronts. Our strategy consists in gradually adopting the comprehensive approach proposed in the 2030 Agenda”.

EVALUATION AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

The LLECE sees evaluation as playing a key role in the fostering of educational quality. On this subject, Atilio Pizarro comments:

“Evaluation provides feedback for policy-making, curriculum, teacher training, programs and reforms, and national strategies, ensuring that they all concern themselves with quality. In this regard, it bears stressing that evaluation is not an end in itself, but, rather, part of a broader process for promoting educational quality.”

He continues: “The LLECE evaluations aren’t only based on the definition of quality that I mentioned earlier, but also on the formative curricula of the countries in the region. Having analyzed the contents of the said curricula, the Laboratory is now looking for the shared features that will enable it to create a general curriculum that will serve as a basis for test design”.

Although, as Pizarro points out, the Laboratory carries out other types of evaluation that set international educational standards, the only way to make contextualized recommendations is by studying the realities in each region. Since, this is, indeed, the Laboratory’s main contribution, below we look at the realities of Costa Rica and Cuba.

Evaluation and educational quality in Costa Rica and Cuba

Costa Rica and Cuba have done various things to increase educational quality. In 2004, the former country started to implement a self-evaluation system in all its schools, while the latter has stood out by occupying first place in all the parts of the curriculum evaluated in the first two LLECE studies that were carried out in 1997 and 2016 respectively in all the levels evaluated.

THE DEFINITION AND COMPONENTS OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Lilliam Mora, the Costa Rican Ministry of Education’s Director for the Promotion and Evaluation of Quality, says that, in order to define educational quality, her country asked the different members of civil society—parents, students, teachers, educational administrators and officials, and entrepreneurs—what they understood by the said concept so as to come up with a comprehensive definition.

“Quality is seen as satisfying the educational needs deemed of the individual, of the community and of civil society in general in a way that fosters human development and strengthens national identity while ensuring equity. Our 2017 educational policy establishes quality as a core principle that serves as a hub for other key principles such as inclusion, equity, respect for diversity, multiculturalism and pluriculturalism, gender equity, sustainability, resilience, solidarity, and other educational aims that foster development for life by skills, abilities, competencies, attitudes and values, in line with the SDG and the 2030 Agenda”.

Paul Antonio Torres Fernández, the national LLECE coordinator and the subdirector of Cuba’s National Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, explains that, while his country’s efforts to increase educational quality stem from the 2030 Agenda, one of the basic aims of current Revolutionary Economic and Social Program is that of “permanently increasing the quality of education”:

“We don’t just consider the enrolments in—and graduations from—the education system, but also its contexts and products. In this regard, we agree with various European proposals—especially with those made by adherents to the scholastic-efficacy school of thought”.

CHALLENGES FOR ACHIEVING HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION

“The main challenges faced by the Costa Rican education system are the growing gap between rich and poor, gender inequity, educational exclusion, the need to foster conviviality in schools, and discrimination, as well as problems relating to the achievement of educational goals and education for life. However, since 2017, we’ve been changing our curriculum in order to produce a new kind of citizen,” says Lilliam Mora.

Regarding the challenges inherent in permanently increasing educational quality in Cuba, Paul Antonio Torres comments:

“There are a lot of challenges. We have to strengthen the teaching not only of values and ethics, but also of science, aesthetics, health, the environment, physical education and training for the workplace, as well as improving in the areas of emotional development and control; in short, we need to strive to fully develop the student’s personality”.

Mora believes that Latin America faces the same challenges, and Torres agrees with her, though he points out that there are differences regarding the stress placed on certain components of educational quality, depending in each country’s interests.

STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION

The strategies employed in order to face the aforesaid challenges and increase the quality of education in Costa Rica hinge around evaluation. According to Lilliam Mora:

“As part of the effort to foster educational quality, we’ve made the use of Model for the Evaluation of Educational Quality in Costa Rica (Spanish acronym: MECEC) mandatory; based on a process of self-evaluation and familiarization with the school environment, the said Model enables the test manager and the education authorities to promote improvement in the school”.

Torres remarks that a wider range of strategies is used in Cuba:

“Above all, the government must be committed: we devote between 9% and 13% of our modest gross national product to education, and we have the lowest student-teacher ratio in the region. Also, all our teachers operate in accordance with a common national theoretical base and receive solid teacher training, in addition to which we have a well-structured, effective national education system, extensive family involvement in the school and in the teaching that occurs there, and a long school cycle, consisting of ten levels”.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION IN PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

As mentioned above, evaluation plays a crucial role in the fostering of educational quality in Costa Rica. Lilliam Mora explains:

“Evaluation enables the authorities to diagnose, understand, engage in dialogue, learn, and increase the quality of teaching-learning. It should be used to improve teaching practices and be based on a universal commitment to knowledge and reflection. Being a process of systematic dialogue, it should have an impact on the way of thinking of teachers, students and the community in general”.

Although Cuba was one of the LLECE’s founders, along with Mexico and other Latin American countries, the regulation of its education system has not been based only on evaluation, but also on the supervision of schools and on a widespread debate about educational improvement in national congresses presided over by students and teachers, and supported by ongoing interest on the part of the country’s political leaders. Nevertheless, Paul Antonio Torres comments:

“Periodic educational evaluation aimed at rationalizing the use of both material and human resources, and, above all, the effective use of its results—which are not used to penalize teachers and school principals—is crucial to optimizing educational quality. However, to achieve this, its results must be linked to educational improvement and, where necessary, to the improvement of educational policies”.

PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

As part of the new educational policy that was adopted in Costa Rica in April, 2017, leading to the approval of new study programs, a new set of rules governing the evaluation of learning outcomes was published in keeping with the said new programs. Mora points out that these measures entailed new challenges:

“One of the biggest challenges consists in accompanying evaluation with equity in areas such as the improvement of infrastructure and basic services such as transportation, nutrition and scholarships in order to achieve all-round improvement based on a holistic vision, rather than merely quantitative improvement in the scores obtained in national or international tests”.

For his part, Paul Antonio Torres asserts that progress in educational evaluation in Cuba has been associated with that country’s participation in the Iberoamerican Line of Research into School Effectiveness (Spanish acronym: IIEE), thanks to which the Cuban System for Evaluating Educational Quality (Spanish acronym: SECE) was designed.

He explains that Cuba has made progress in developing technical capacities via its Provincial-Group Quality Program. The function of the groups participating in the said program, which exist throughout the country, is to turn evaluation results into improvements in schools, and research has also been carried out into educational evaluation aimed at raising the quality of education.

“The challenge is to conserve everything that’s useful from that period; time has gone by and a lot of those capacities have been lost, so we need to renew them. At the same time, we need to foster an evaluation culture, which we didn’t manage to do at that time either”.

The LLECE evaluations: what Costa Rica and Cuba have learned

Costa Rica has learned a great deal and developed a lot of strategies thanks to the LLECE evaluations. Mora says that the national evaluations have improved and their results been taken stock of when designing educational policies, while Torres explains that, even though important lessons have been learned from the aforesaid evaluations, Cuba has followed a more independent path:

“Both the LLECE and the IIEE have helped us a lot; without them, it would have been very difficult for a country like Cuba to profit from these experiences and scientific techniques. However, it was on our own initiative that we began to make educational evaluation a part of everyday teaching practices”.

OTHER EDUCATIONAL-EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Both countries have their own evaluation tools. Costa Rica has its National System for Evaluating the Quality of Education (Spanish acronym: SNECE), which uses twenty-eight criteria to evaluate academic aspects, infrastructure and school management. Lilliam More explains that evaluation pertaining to the said criteria is carried out in different stages:

“In the first stage, the school evaluates itself, and the key educational players there decide which improvements to start making over a period of one or two years. In the second stage—i.e. the *audit* stage—we, the authorities, help the school to determine whether it has managed to make the said improvements and, if it still has weak points, the cycle starts again”.

“The length of these cycles varies depending on the school’s needs and how they are to be satisfied. The schools can even decide how many aspects to improve, since they aren’t obliged to tackle all twenty-four of them at the same time, and they begin to address other ones once they’ve started to tackle the ones they chose first”.

Besides the SECE, which it is now trying to rescue and re-introduce, the Cuban education system has other evaluation instruments. Torres says:

“Our Ministry of Education (Spanish acronym: MINED) has its own set of quality benchmarks, broken down into key areas and basic processes. These benchmarks are systematically evaluated; each year, during the preparatory seminar for the next school year, a presentation about their performance is given to the top MINED authorities and the provincial and municipal directors”.

ACTIONS, PROTAGONISTS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ACHIEVING HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION

Mora and Torres talk about the concrete actions for achieving a high-quality education system, the people who should be involved in the process, and, in the case of Cuba, the motivations that the latter should have in order to make high educational quality a reality.

In Costa Rica, besides implementing a system both for self-evaluation and also for evaluating the teaching practices

in each school, it has been crucial that these processes be mandated in laws that govern the education system, since only in this way will changes, that have taken ten years to achieve, survive successive changes of government at the national and regional levels.

Regarding the key players in the quality-improvement process, Mora comments:

“All the protagonists should be part of the quality-improvement process. The quality culture must become ingrained in the schools and the key players involved. It requires a commitment to ongoing change by everybody in the Ministry of Education”.

On the subject of what is being done to achieve high-quality education in Cuba, Torres says:

“While the LLECE was previously the main driving force behind educational evaluation, we now have to face the new challenges posed by the 2030 Educational Agenda. As I mentioned earlier, we’re only just starting to redevelop capacities and reorganize our technical resources. We recently carried out a *National Diagnostic Study of Primary Education* using the instruments from the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (Spanish acronym: TERCE), and are now fully embarked on the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (Spanish acronym: ERCE)”.

He asserts: “The Cuban Education System is setting out to strengthen education in every school via two basic lines of action: by means of greater support from the family, which implies training parents so that they can help their children at home or in *study houses*, and via *development education*, which—contrary to education that stresses memorization—promotes creative, independent learning”.

“It’s a battle in that all of us must fight: governments, makers of educational policy, teachers, community leaders, parents and the students themselves. Too much is at stake for us to stand on the sidelines”.

Finally, he sums up the reasons why we must go on striving to achieve inclusive, equitable, high-quality education:

“What motivations or values must we have? The loftiest ones! The ongoing improvement of educational quality is of prime importance; without high-quality education, our species will disappear from this Earth that is so full of dangers of every sort: military, hegemonic, environmental, etcetera”. €

