

THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PUBLIC POLICIES

La calidad de la educación en territorios rurales desde las políticas públicas

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to delve deeper into the concept of educational quality in the reality of the Mexican Educational System. As a problem, the asymmetry of results and realities experienced in the rural and urban contexts is assumed to question whether there is a common criterion about 'educational quality'. The concept of educational quality is explored in light of federal regulations that protect the right to education. On the other hand, it is explained the conceptual change that has taken place in the conception of rurality, becoming increasingly diverse. A specific section describes the Community School Model, which educationally serves to dispersed and underpopulated communities in Mexico. Methodologically, a hermeneutic reflection of three sources is proposed: the concept of education, the wording of Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution with its various changes and descriptions of the rural educational environment in that period, and the Multigrade Schools promoted by CONAFE as the system that reaches those territories. It is concluded that educational quality is delimited by the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States and the conditions in which it is developed, all framed by the following factors: (i) the dignification of the person, (ii) the legal terms described in Art. 3, (iii) contextualized in the geographical reality of the student.

Keywords

State and education, right to education, educational policy, educational quality, relevance of education, educational efficiency.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es profundizar el concepto de calidad educativa en la realidad del Sistema Educativo Mexicano. Como problema se asume la asimetría de resultados y realidades vividas en el contexto rural y urbano para cuestionar si existe un criterio común sobre la 'calidad educativa'. Se explora el concepto de calidad educativa cara a las normas federales que amparan el derecho a la educación. Por otro lado, se explica el cambio conceptual que ha habido en la concepción de ruralidad, volviéndose cada vez más diverso. En un apartado concreto se describe el Modelo de Escuelas Comunitarias, quienes atienden educativamente a poblaciones dispersas y con menos pobladores de México. Metodológicamente se propone una reflexión hermenéutica de tres fuentes: el concepto de educación, la redacción del Artículo 3 constitucional mexicano con sus diversos cambios y descripción del entorno educativo rural en dicha temporalidad y las Escuelas Multigrado impulsadas por el CONAFE como el sistema que llega a dichos territorios. Se concluye que la calidad educativa está delimitada por la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos y las condiciones en las que se desarrolla la misma, lo anterior enmarcado por los siguientes factores: (i) la dignificación de la persona, (ii) los términos jurídicos descritos en el Art. 3, (iii) contextualizados en la realidad geográfica del estudiante.

Palabras clave

Estado y educación, derecho a la educación, política educacional, calidad de la educación, pertinencia de la educación, eficiencia educacional.

Introduction

This paper gets deeper into the concept of educational quality in the reality of the Mexican Educational System. The asymmetry between the results and realities in the rural and urban contexts is assumed as the problem, to question whether there is a common criterion on 'educational quality'. It begins with a brief historical review of article 3 of the Cons-



titution (Art. 3) and its reforms; based on this, a contrasting framework is constructed that enables assessing to what extent the educational projects promoted in the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States (PCUMS) have favored the development of such territories, and to what extent the changes in rural intervention strategies have addressed projects and pedagogical visions, instead of fulfilling objectives exclusively related to the improvement of indicators of the various public administrations.

According to Hernández and Esparza (2018), changes in Educational Policies have been promoted in Mexico, lacking a pedagogical methodology in the construction of public educational projects. According to them, although there have been proposed public policies to improve the administrative, social and cultural conditions of educational institutions, for example: the structuring of the Secretary of Public Education -SEP- or the processes of rural intervention by the National Council for Educational Development —CONAFE—; the pedagogical factor that develops the potential of each student is not yet clear. Similarly, they argue that a good part of the changes incorporated this century— despite having as diagnostic reference international tests such as the report of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)— this has not translated into an improvement in the quality of educational practices.

Therefore, the central problem that constitutes the aim questions three aspects: How has educational quality been understood and defined in Mexico and under what parameters its level of achievement in rural territories has been evaluated? Is there a permanent quality criterion with which the performance of public education is evaluated or, on the contrary, should it be redefined according to the particular objectives of each federal government? Is there a reference example that enables studying the development of a true quality education and from which the objectives of this concept may be illustrated?

The work plan to address these questions is the following: a definition of the concept of educational quality is elaborated in the first section, from three aspects: philosophical, legal and historical. Then, section two explains how formal education has been conceived in rural territories through community courses that take multigrade education as their core methodology. Finally, the conclusions rescue those points that contrast the reality of education in rural territories with the compliance of educational quality parameters.

Philosophical, legal and historical definition of 'educational quality'

The concept of quality is one of the most subverted compliance parameters in recent times. However, the aim of this section is to explore the historical, legal and philosophical foundations of the definition of this concept; it is interesting to highlight the contextual meaning that has been given to it in rural areas. A pedagogical reflection will be made to unify these diverse points of view, in such a way that the interest is to study how the different definitions in the three aforementioned aspects have contributed to strengthen the best resources and teaching aids and their link with the learning processes. The general question to answer will be: How has educational quality been defined and founded in rural territories and what projects have been implemented to guarantee a meaningful learning process?

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Subject and context of educational quality

Two important issues are studied in this section: first, the concept of educational quality as an indicator circumscribed to the idea and foundations of the 'person', specifically to the most appropriate procedures for their training; based on this idea, it will be explained that educational quality will only exist within the compliance framework of the procedures defined initially. The second point to be detailed is the rural context to know what are the requirements that must be considered for fulfilling educational quality.

For John Cossio (2014) quality "refers to the universal and particular characteristics of something, and to the processes through which such characteristics are configured. The quality of something necessarily corresponds to it, and whose absence affects its nature" (p. 18). The interesting point about this concept is the link with the social environment and the positioning it makes of the nature of the individual it focuses on. In this way, the delimitation of the general principles depends on both external (social) and internal (anthropological) factors, in such a way that a delimitation implies both the recognition of the reality in which an educational practice is exercised, as well as the own structure of the individual being served.

This link between the form of the person and his/her context has been supported, among others, by the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1945). For him, humanity managed to consolidate various cultural resources through which it could ensure a place in the world; its main achievement was the development of a 'symbolic consciousness'.

The essential resource with which it was able to reach this stage was the capacity of the human species to unify the world of nature and the theoretical world; in this way, the human being is a being in continuous relationship with both his/her environment and with his/her own organic and psychological reality.

It is not possible here to go into much detail about the complex philosophical vision of the author, but in general some fundamental questions may be deduced: (1) for Cassirer, the world of culture is a world of unity whose center is human nature. (2) Placing the human being at the center establishes the need to, on the one hand, recognize the human being as a 'symbolic animal' and culture as a unit of symbols. (3) Cultural activity appears both as a form of knowledge (symbolic forms) and as a means to confirm true human nature. (4) When these ideas are applied to the thesis developed so far, it can be stated that: education is part of the world of culture and, therefore, the center of educational activity is the human being; education has as its goal the confirmation of human nature and, for this, it must integrate the diversity of cultural resources in favor of the human being.

On the other hand, Jürgen Habermas (2010) has stated the following:

Against the assumption that attributes only a retrospective moral load to human rights, we would like to defend the thesis that there has always been—although initially it was only implicitly—an internal conceptual link between human rights and human dignity (p. 6).

With this approach, it can be stated that the center of all human rights is the own individual. For this author, although there have been some cases on which practices based on codes that have supported slavery, territorial invasion, among other activities that violate the dignity of the person, have been established, it is from this transgression that the defense of rights calls out louder for the restoration of the core value of this concept. In general, for Habermas (2010), dignity "constitutes the moral 'source' on which all fundamental rights are supported" (p. 6).

Bringing together all the ideas, according to Cassirer it can be asserted that all cultural activity (in this case Law, Pedagogy and Public Policies) must be unified having the person as common center. In addition, Habermas (2010) emphasizes about dignity: any legal activity (and public administration activity) must be sustained by the unrestricted respect for the person, since its violation implies a claim and invokes a restoration of deviated actions to their essential principle. Finally, according

to Cossio (2014), quality assumes the universality of the concept of person; it is proposed to materialize it through resources that guarantee its operationalization, but always pursuing to confirm human nature, since the deviation of an action from the confirmation of its purpose prevents that such action is rated as 'quality'.

Once the concept of person has been placed as the 'who' of quality, it is now necessary to define the particular 'where' towards which the rest of the work will be oriented, specifically speaking about rural territories. In the geography of space, this environment is explained through the historical transition that rurality has experienced in front of education, going from a dichotomous conception to one that enables more possibilities. It is also explained how the urban and rural division has led the inhabitants of each of these territories to be isolated from each other; above all, in the case of inhabitants of communities or towns classified as rural, they have been undermined by the lack of access to information and basic rights.

As a first point, it is necessary to make a historical account of the term rural and its transition from 'rural education' to 'education in rural territories'. As stated by Ríos-Osorio and Olmos (2021), the change from one meaning to the other to refer to formal education imparted in rural contexts is more than a game on words; it is rather an invitation "to recognize persistence and transformations of the rural, which historically, [...] has been read from its dichotomous condition in relation to the urban" (p. 16). This has had negative implications for the equitable recognition of geographic spaces, since such dichotomy has translated into a hierarchical recognition of greater value for the urban to the detriment of the rural.

In the geographic space, objects and actions are inseparable. The idea of mixed realities about the notion of the nature-culture dichotomy, must refer to the meaning that the human being cannot be understood without the other, because we live in community; from this interaction it is understood that space is a mode of relationship inseparable from the individual. Based on this, Grammont (2016) writes that historically there has been a separation between rural and urban spaces "thanks to the concentration of industry and services in the city" (p. 51). This started dividing the conception between the two environments and such dichotomy permeates the access to basic rights. However, the author points out that this dichotomy has changed significantly in recent times.

In this sense, Pérez (2001) points out that "the rural goes beyond agriculture" (p. 4), and should consider a diversity of cultural activities



and practices. Thus, the rural territories have been reconfigured by the new peasant economies, drug trafficking, regional conflicts, mobility and displacements, as well as by greater connectivity and cultural diversity. For Grammont (2016), the immersion in the globalized world made even more complex the dichotomies of rural and urban worlds, since the increase in the access to information technologies and the ‘cascading decentralization’ process caused that production services and processes are no longer exclusive to urban areas. This affected the activities and context of rural areas, which approached in a particular way to participate in the globalized world and enabled the growth of Non-Agricultural Rural Employment (NARE), both related to the connectivity to communication and transportation means and also as a possibility of migration due to the precarious conditions produced by agrarian crises. In this sense, Sánchez (2016) has stated that the phenomenon of migration and abandonment of agricultural activities has grown continuously, diversifying family relationships even in the poorest rural populations, where people are no longer essentially peasant and became salaried workers in informal sectors. In this line, quality in rural education involves the correspondence between specific realities and educational work.

The adaptation of quality educational processes to the different social changes experienced by rurality remains in doubt, since the contexts and situations are particular and diverse, in addition to the fact that there are rural populations in which mobility and migration have recently increased, typically as wage-earning employees in the city, without having the best access conditions to quality services, including education. In terms of educational reality, Enrique Bautista (2018) considers that: “There are material and resource deficiencies that may generate the perception that education for rural or indigenous communities is of ‘third quality’ or inferior to the one for urban or economically productive areas” (pp. 50-51).

Although the author establishes that these differences correspond to a perception, he starts from results that show the deterioration and carelessness of the organization of the schools in which he studies. In contrast to this reality, Lourdes Pacheco (2013) states that the rural school was created for two main reasons: first, to contribute to strengthen educational conditions in non-urban areas after the abandonment of the rural space by the *Porfirista* administration and, second, as a strategy to guarantee the same school conditions and access to education in Mexico. She emphasizes that rural schools were created as ‘schools of the place’, because their objective was to serve the “needs and regional characteris-



tics for the school to become the center from which community action was led to a better way of life” (p. 90).

Pacheco (2013) also considers that these objectives were achieved largely thanks to the responsible work undertaken by teachers in charge of fulfilling these duties. Such reality corresponds to the historical detail presented by José Vasconcelos (2002) about rural conditions in Mexico; in his work as secretary of education he proposed:

We required traveling teachers to leave established schools before sending us the report that there were none. To start, we designated new teachers with the name of missionaries, in honor of the true civilizers that the New World has known (p. 133).

This description shows how the abandonment of rural education in Mexico has been historically recognized, lacking a foundation that justifies such differentiation. Although there have been several projects proposed to remedy this reality, this does not imply that the differences have been resolved. It is true that the persistence of the projects proposed to tackle these dichotomies has been permanent, however, the fact that the gap between rural and urban areas persists indicates that the differences remain.

In short, it has been argued that educational quality is understood only to the extent that practices favor the dignification of the person. It was also noted that, despite this, the geographical characteristics in Mexico are a differentiation condition when serving needs. This discrepancy may be considered as discriminatory, since there is no philosophical foundation that enables substantiating the difference in school attention. Considering this limitation, the legal terms on which educational quality is based are studied in the following section, to similarly show that there is no parameter that enables justifying the difference in the attention to school needs between urban and rural contexts. This will enable asserting that, despite the existence of philosophical and legal clarity of the concept of quality, these criteria are not applied to the development of educational projects that promote a dignification of the person in rural areas.

Freedom, gratuity, secularism, and dignity.

Core values of educational quality

In Mexico, the education depends on the legal and administrative guidelines implemented by the Mexican State in collaboration with institutional bodies. However, this principle appears only up to the 2013 version of Article 3, which states the following: “the quality in mandatory education so



that educational materials and methods [...] guarantee the maximum achievement of student learning” (Art. 3, III, 2013)¹. In the current version this orientation has been derogated and replaced by “the honesty, values and *continuous improvement of the teaching-learning process*” (Art. 3, III, 2019. Emphasis added). Therefore, it might seem that the interest and definition of education in terms of quality was considered only in the period between 2013 and 2019; hence, an exploration outside of this period is meaningless. On the other hand, it is argued that the interest in educational quality has persisted since 1917 in the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States —PCUMS—. A brief description of which has been this delimitation is presented below, highlighting its applicability in rural territories.

According to Rockwell and Garay Molina (2014), the history of educational quality in Mexico is mostly about the history of education in rural areas, and especially multigrade education, a system that prevailed in Mexico for most nineteenth century. Therefore, the conception of what should be understood by educational quality is developed in the PCUMS. And this has been the case since its origins in 1917; To show this, the original constitutional wording can be reviewed, which stated that:

Teaching is free; but it will be secular the one taught in official educational institutions, the same for the primary, elementary and higher education that is taught in private institutions. No religious corporation, nor minister of any cult, may establish or direct schools of primary instruction. Private primary schools may only be established subject to official surveillance (Art. 3, I, 1917).

As can be seen, the original text relates ‘education’ and ‘teaching,’ to highlight that educational quality is understood in the context of student needs. With the requirement of an ‘official surveillance,’ it was proposed the development of a ‘secular’ conception of the educational project. This wording also highlights the “free and mandatory” character. The underlying intention, beyond these statements, is to promote a unique perspective and in strict adherence to the values and principles that the Mexican state intended to promote. This is important in this context, however, to deepen what was understood by ‘official surveillance,’ José Vasconcelos (2002) would define it in the context of three major central cultural projects for Mexico: the construction and management of Schools and Libraries, as well as the promotion of Fine Arts:

Under the name of Schools it is included all scientific and technical education in its different branches, both theoretical and practical. The creation of a special Department of Libraries was a permanent need, because the country lives without a reading service and only the state may create and main-

tain them as a complement to school... The Department of Fine Arts took over, starting with teaching of singing, drawing and gymnastics in schools, all institutes of higher artistic culture, such as the former Academy of Fine Arts, the National Museum and the Music Conservatories (pp. 60-67).

These projects had the interest of constructing a common space with strategic projects that would equally enable the training of all those who lived in Mexico, to guarantee universal access to educational spaces. By 1920, according to Juárez-Bolaños (2009), 80% of the population in Mexico was illiterate, so for rural contexts the priority was the coverage, establishing schools in areas where they did not exist. The pedagogical postulates that would guide education within the aforementioned “official surveillance” began to be outlined with such coverage. Education would focus on learning for daily life, that would help inhabitants of rural territories to improve their daily living conditions. The foregoing manifested one of the contributions of Vasconcelos, who considered the complexity of rural territories in access to education. Juárez-Bolaños (2009) explains it as follows:

[...] a group of people who traveled throughout the country, settling in rural communities for a short time [approximately three weeks]. Its goal was to encourage people to prepare as teachers and to establish the *first rural schools* (emphasis added) as “*La casa del pueblo*” [...] Over time “the missions [...] instead of traveling [...] concentrated their activities in some communities” (p. 267).

In the cited text, it is highlighted that from the beginning of this vision of rural education, the aim was to integrally involve the person, considering not only his/her academic aspects, but also family and community development aspects. Proof of the above were the ‘Article 123 Schools’, small rural schools in farms that stood out especially in *Cardenist* times. In this way, rural teachers became fully involved in the life of the community, directly relating education to the social and political processes that took place in the rural territory.

In general, the aforementioned highlights the axes of educational quality in rural territories, making reference to inclusion and access to school. After this wording, the constitutional foundations have been updated eleven times through which the ‘official’ character has been redefined to guarantee better ‘surveillance’ mechanisms; the background, in theory, should be the compliance of the general ideals proposed by the Mexican state. Table 1 shows a summary of the main changes proposed to this general regulation and what happened at those same times to rural territories.



Table 1
Summary of Educational Reforms (ER) and the corresponding promoted Pedagogical Projects (PP)

Educational reforms 1934-1993	Educational reforms 2002-2016
<p>1. Art. 3 - 1917. The PP starts from a social need. National unity is sought through school literacy. Popular and regional education is emphasized. In rural territories, coverage is promoted as the first aspect, <i>Las Casas del Pueblo</i> and Cultural Missions begin as itinerant and end up consolidating the basis of rural school (Juárez-Bolaños, 2009).</p> <p>2. Art. 3 - 1934. The RE proposes a socialist education with a popular character; primary education is mandatory. The PP promotes knowledge as a means of development, rejecting religious education. In rural territories, a boost is given from the curriculum to deal with political and social concerns of the rural population, such as the distribution of ejidos (Juárez-Bolaños, 2009). In 1936, the SEP unified the departments of rural and urban education in territories and states, eliminating the difference in the programs between one and the other (Rockwell and Garay Molina, 2014). Art. 3 - 1946. The RE returns to the secular nature of education and proposes the harmonic development of human faculties. PP. It is crystallized The Eleven Year Plan, which seeks national unity, teacher training and the creation of the free textbook; these actions were aimed at fighting school dropouts. During these dates, the education in rural areas begins to be homogenized with the education in urban areas. The Casas del Pueblo are no longer community centers and became traditional schools as a result of the promotion of urban growth. In 1948, the first National Rural Education Congress was held, where rural teachers had an active participation (Rockwell and Garay Molina, 2014).</p> <p>3. Art. 3 - 1980. RE autonomy is granted to universities and their functions are delimited. The coordinating and administrative role of the State in Education is confirmed. PP. The decentralization of education begins through SEP delegations by state. The purpose was to serve regional needs. In 1971, education began to be offered to children who lived in rural micro-localities, through the CONAFE, seeking universal teaching (Bolaños, 2009).</p> <p>4. Article 3 - 1992/1993. RE. Primary and secondary education become mandatory. Scientific progress is established as the guiding criterion for education. The general criteria of education are also established (democratic, national, promoter of human coexistence, respect for human dignity). PP. The National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education is promoted, the purpose was to favor the administration of state education. The paradigms of modernization of education focus on international standards which increase the educational gap, focusing on compensatory educational policies for rural multigrade schools (Rockwell and Garay Molina, 2014).</p>	<p>1. Art. 3 - 2002. RE. Preschool education becomes compulsory. PP. PISA recommendations about education focused on skills and competencies are included. It is not until 2005 when pedagogical work begins on specific materials for rural multigrade schools, even so, there is little specialized information on the matter (Juárez-Bolaños, 2009). Art. 3 - 2011. RE. The criteria of education are expanded: respect for human rights and awareness of international solidarity, in independence and justice. PP. It was offered a curriculum that enables the maximum development of professional skills. Rural teachers are young high school graduates who serve as guides without major training, due to the lack of budget to hire graduate educators (Juárez-Bolaños, 2009).</p> <p>2. Art. 3 - 2012. RE. Upper Secondary Education (USE) becomes mandatory. The education criteria promote preventing any form of discrimination. PP. The USE is organized under the scheme of competencies. The diagnoses show that, until then, there is a lack of teacher training that enables the translation of such model to the classroom.</p> <p>3. Art. 3 - 2013. RE. Quality it included as a criterion of education; in addition, administrative control of education and professional teaching service are claimed. The National Institute for the Evaluation of Education –INEE– is created. PP. The evaluation of teachers is promoted as an organizational criterion. The National Project for Educational Evaluation and Improvement of Multigrade Schools (PRONAEME) was born from the Conference of the National System of Educational Evaluation; this project included 28 entities, the INEE, CONAFE and the National Institute of Educational Physical Infrastructure (NIEPI) (INEE, 2017).</p> <p>4. Art. 3 - 2016. RE. The regulation of the process of admission, permanence and promotion of teaching service is delimited. It should focus on the stipulated by the INEE. PP. It is promoted the design of a New Educational Model that will pursue to strengthen the “Key Learnings”, although competencies are maintained. Recently, with the collaboration of research works carried out by the now dissolved INEE and the creation of Research Networks such as the Thematic Network for Research in Rural Education, the attention has been diversified, slightly expanding the degree of academic involvement; this in turn impacts public policies. In addition, the internal regulations of CONAFE have been modified in reference to the change in the profile of the Community Educational Leader and infrastructure support, with <i>La Escuela es Nuestra and Héroes de Acero</i> (Hernández, 2021).</p>

Source: Esparza and Hernández, 2019, p. 202 with modifications made by authors.

In the scheme above, when distinguishing between ‘educational reform’ and ‘pedagogical project’, it is asked if the materialization of the various projects has answered to a pedagogical structuring of the re-

sources that are required to promote an educational process. At the same time, the general status of education in rural territories is added, where the educational reforms and pedagogical projects that stood out did not impact them. The development of a project not only implies the articulation of the foundations that guarantee the operational legality of an educational activity, but it is also necessary that, after constitutional reformulation, such task is articulated in a scientific project that guarantees the means, resources and daily operation mechanisms for all.

Bonifacio Barba (2018b) states that the corresponding values for each reform of Art. 3 respond to a process promoted by the ruling federal administrations, to crystallize the objectives proposed in each version of the PCUMS. For the author, the following have been the common guidelines to pursue in terms of education: (I) harmonic and integral development of the student, (II) scientific knowledge, (III) democracy and (IV) love for the nation. For the author, the main value contained in Art. 3 with its different reforms is democracy, despite the historical impact and interests. However, it can be said that the democratization of education in rural areas has been lacking, since it has not shown the quality indices that are promoted more vigorously in urban contexts.

Bonifacio Barba (2018a) has also studied some of these implications in Article 7 of the General Education Law (GEL), which refers to: (1) integral development of the individual, (2) acquisition of goods and values, (3) strengthening nationality and sovereignty, (4) knowledge and practice of democracy, (5) justice, (6) scientific knowledge, (7) solidarity and human dignity. With this analysis, the values collected from Art. 3 are recognized with those proposed in the GEL. The same author highlights that “human dignity is the basis of the right to education and of the legal goals/values that concur” (p. 309). Detached from the above, the value of freedom is seen as a consequence of the search and respect for dignity. Despite the variations in vocabulary between Art. 3 and the GEL, a unity in values is perceived since the ultimate goal is the promotion of life in democracy and the recognition of the dignity of the person as a fundamental basis of education. In this way, Art. 3 and its foundation in respect for human dignity ties with other foundations and values embraced by the PCUMS, especially what is stipulated by the 2011 version of Art. 1, which states:

In the United Mexican States, all persons will enjoy the human rights recognized in this Constitution and in the international treaties subscribed by the Mexican State, as well as the guarantees for their protection, the exercise of which cannot be restricted or suspended, except in the cases and under the conditions established by this Constitution (Art. 1, I, 2011).



Thus, the search for universal recognition of the person based on the set of individual guarantees appears as a basic and primary need in all constitutional articles. However, Article 3 itself, as it has already been seen, explicitly guides the search of training and respect in all educational actions promoted in Mexico. Until now, a historical tour of the versions of Art. 3 has been given, highlighting the main Educational Reforms with their corresponding pedagogical proposals, an in turn highlighting what was happening with respect to attention to education in rural territories at the time of such educational reform.

The intention in action of all of the above is the search for educational quality in our NES. In the process, it has been presented the existing gaps between the educational effort in urban territories and the little attention that has been given to rural territories and the specificity of their educational models. It was explained how the only system that deals with basic education in small and dispersed localities is less than 50 years old. The recognition of the maximum constitutional values and of the GEL itself should be reflected in every school system in the country, regardless of whether it provides service to 5 or 500 children and adolescents. The following section shows some efforts that have been made to recognize the value of rural contexts, as well as some of the programs that have been implemented to strengthen the dignity of the person, rather than the satisfaction of an administrative indicator. The advantage that will be seen in the following example is to show that educational quality is not in the implementation of a strategic plan, but in the true strengthening of the corresponding skills and competencies, in this case, of the subjects of the rural contexts.

The educational quality in Multigrade Schools

It must be remembered that the development framework of the term educational quality in Mexico began in 1993 when, by recommendations of international organizations, a quality approach is implemented to ensure high academic standards. According to Esparza (2018), from 2000 the competency-based approach acquires more strength; the application of the PISA test occurs for the first time in Mexico. At the same time, school attention begins to focus on the academic achievement of students, having the standardized evaluations as the main metric.

Although the search for educational quality from its comprehensive vision is the basis and guide of education in Mexico, it is in the Con-

stitutional Reform to Art. 3 in 2013 that the word ‘quality’ appears in the official wording for the first time. Although for some authors this was an important step to promote learning excellence in all students, for others it meant a redundancy and a partial vision, since the inclusion of the term followed economic objectives based on the results of international tests and recommendations from external organizations. As explained by Trujillo et al. (2018), in this last view the inclusion of the term quality was:

Subject to four components: educational materials and methods, school organization, educational infrastructure and competence of teachers and managers. It reduces the indicators to their minimum expression by determining as a unit of quality measurement the maximum learning achievement of students and consequently the educational policy turned to take as main reference the results that students achieve in the standardized evaluations (p. 82).

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For Trujillo et al. (2018), the reference made to the term quality is reductionist and lacks pedagogical foundations, since it simplifies the measurement of quality to high student learning, reflected in standardized tests. In other words, it refers to the first and third conceptions of quality mentioned in previous paragraphs. On the other hand, the previous conception of quality was aligned to the National Development Plan implemented by such government, focusing on teaching practice as the main means of obtaining quality processes for students to achieve the necessary learning.

Considering the complexity of relationships in economic activities, mobility and access to goods and services, it is now important to point out that education in rural territories encompasses more than one type of school system. Rurality presents gradients that identify each community as unique according to its own characteristics; thus, rural communities refer to a diversity of contexts that vary in economic activities, geographical contexts and cultural characteristics, which are usually categorized by unsatisfied basic needs. The following is what Lucila Galván (2020) writes about this situation:

It seems that Rural Education is not only relegated or invisible from politics, but also from research. There are several factors or circumstances that may be contributing to this disregard or postponement: the strong and increasing level of urbanization in Latin American countries, the little importance that governments have given to rural education in recent decades, the ambiguity of the definitions of rural and urban and the tendency to define rural as ‘negative’, which is not urban; the pre-

curiousness of the statistical registration systems in education of their countries does not enable us to differentiate between rural and urban schools, teachers and students (p. 9).

This does not mean that agriculture no longer exists, but rather that such context has been recognized as a geographical reality, but has not received enough attention in terms of fulfilling needs; however, the interest should not be placed on the approach of the material resources that are lacking, but on the importance of serving social and cultural processes that enable to achieve the central objectives through systematic projects. By recognizing that there have been various proposals aimed at promoting quality education in rural areas, it is considered to establish a perspective of the processes that must be taken into account for the full compliance of a quality education.

Then, the education provided by the National Council for Educational Development (CONAFE) is taken as an example. The task of CONAFE is complying the right to education for children and adolescents that live in communities with less than 2,500 people, and that regularly belong to rural, indigenous, or migrant populations, without this meaning that the other systems or subsystems are outside of what is exposed here. The schools belonging to this system are multigrade, that is, they group together in the same classroom several school grades with students of different ages. According to Hernández (2021) and supported by data from the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education -INEE- (2019a), by 2019 26.5% of children and adolescents at basic education age lived in rural communities, of which about two thirds are constituted by less than 100 inhabitants. The dispersion and remoteness of these locations makes it difficult to access goods and services, making it even more difficult to achieve the appropriate degree of excellence or quality. At this time, it is necessary to refer to the aforementioned link between quality and equity established by the INEE (2019b) highlighting concepts addressed here, when it explains in its report about Mandatory Education in Mexico:

Quality in relation to the right to equity in education refers to all the components of the right to education being a tangible reality for all subjects entitled to it, at any of the levels and modalities of the National Educational System (p. 102).

This reinforces the idea of educational quality as compliance with the provisions of the highest regulation of education. In particular, for CONAFE community courses, where, from the middle of the past centu-



ry various academics have raised their voices to highlight the gap that exists in educational quality in rural territories compared to urban spaces. This is manifested to a greater extent in multigrade schools, which are in communities with few inhabitants and which, in addition, have mostly high and very high rates of social marginalization; this has repercussions on the student's personal stability, his/her nutrition and development. According to the INEE (2019b), complying with the values and rights set forth in the GEL and in the PCUMS itself is complicated under these conditions. Hernández (2021), Rockwell and Garay Molina (2014) and López-Salmorán and Santa-Polanco (2019) agree that the actions aimed at improving education in the CONAFE Community Courses from the 1990s have been compensatory, focusing on material support such as school supplies, scholarships, financing for infrastructure, furniture, and school supplies, but rarely to the pedagogical vision that encompasses the inclusion and relevance of the paradigms that guide instruction.

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In the same way, framed in the context of the current administration, it has been established from the National Development Plan (NDP) 2019-2024 to improve the infrastructure of the country's schools in order to dignify them. With this in mind, the Operating Guidelines for the Program *La Escuela es Nuestra* were published in the Official Gazette of the Federation (OGF) at the beginning of October 2019. Such guidelines emphasize:

That the general objective of the program is to improve the infrastructure and equipment of public basic education facilities, beginning in a first stage with those located in areas of very high and high marginalization and localities with indigenous populations, through the contribution of a direct economic subsidy to school communities for the maintenance, rehabilitation, equipment and/or construction of educational spaces (OGF, point 10).

La Escuela es Nuestra also includes the program *Héroes de Acero*, which focuses its efforts on changing the profile of the Community Educational Leader who serves as a teacher in community courses. In addition, there has been little in terms of public policy in rural territories, specifically for community courses. CONAFE continues to emphasize material issues, as it has been done since the 1990s, despite the recommendations issued by specialized organisms, although now extinct, such as the National Institute of Evaluation for Education in 2019.

In the recommendations of the Institute, after recognizing the social and infrastructure barriers that make the situation more complex, curricular and pedagogical issues are highlighted that include teacher

training, oriented to academic improvement, but also to the higher well-being and development of the rural communities to which the students belong. INEE (2019b) points out that educational materials lack inclusion because they are presented in only one language, which excludes students whose mother tongue is other than Spanish.

The INEE (2019b) points out that any process that seeks to raise educational quality in CONAFE multigrade schools, must consider a thorough review of teaching practices and recognize the strategies that have emerged from the teachers themselves. This implies, to a certain extent, a decentralization of decision-making and a greater investment in evaluation processes and local and personalized training. According to Joaqui Robles and Ortiz Granja (2017), the issue of the other in education implies an in-depth reflection on the meaning of the other. To explain the above, the author points out that:

An individual materially participates in the same species that includes other human beings, but, formally, it is unique, indivisible, and unrepeatable; hence, it can be said that there is *per se* the possibility of speaking of a self, but also speaking of another formally different from oneself (p. 197).

This enables to speak about the recognition that educational authorities have given to the uniqueness of person of the child or adolescent who lives in rural contexts. This implies a recognition of the diversity of its rural territories, although it implies a larger investment in all senses. For students of CONAFE multigrade schools, the principle of individuation makes them unique in their context and in their own existence, which derives in the recognition of their dignity. On the other hand, the relationship of the self with the other is an ethical commitment. In this sense, the person as a concrete and real self, but always in an ethical relationship with the other, has particularities that do not override universal rights, but demand from them an adequate response to their own uniqueness.

The above is related to what Vera (2019) states, when she explains that:

An authentic rural school must be positioned in its territory, which is nothing more than the area within which the rural community lives and develops a history, a specific way of living reality, manifests a set of values, traditions and expressions of the sociocultural, as well as ancestral ways of producing and carrying out daily work, for which it must turn its look towards these players, and rediscover with them that history-nature relationship that gives meaning and identity to community life (p. 310).



With these ideas, it can be stated that the analysis of educational processes and quality parameters given in rural contexts, needs to study power relations, but not in administrative terms, but as a strategic situation given in a defined context; the purpose should be to study the way in which an institution operates as a force for producing desired consequences for a few (those who have power) and undesired for others. Starting from the conceptual procedure about the contextual meaning of the term quality, to have educational quality in Mexico is to comply with the maximum regulation that establishes the highest standards. Such standards are focused on the care of the person and on the full compliance with the distribution of school educational services.

Considering the beginnings of education in rural territories with the 'Casas del Pueblo', their objective was to integrate community life with school, provide setting to the context and seek the development of students in a holistic way. This situation started changing with the homogenization of rural schools with those of urbanized contexts, the particularities of each territory, inhabitants, needs, desires and characteristics, were no longer seen. The dichotomy and the reductionist vision developed around the conception of intellectual and social inferiority of rural territories, progressively widened the gap between educational services, academic research and educational public policies implemented for rural contexts. Only the form began to be equipped without accompaniment from the background, from any angle, neither the contextual nor the ideal.

The above indicates a deficit in the application of the values and principles founded in the PCUMS that would guarantee a quality education in Mexico, including rural territories. This is explained by the following reasons: (1) For more than a century, it has been seen that educational public policies aimed at rural territories have been remedial, without an integral interest for the territory, it is seen as a transitional education; it is expected that a community that remains rural at some point 'overcomes' its status and become urban. (2) The foregoing has been disturbed by the growing number of small localities that are increasingly dispersed throughout the national territory, and whose economic and social characteristics diversify widening their context and complicating their homogeneous understanding. (3) More than an order that stipulates the specific guidelines for improving education in rural territories, it is necessary a personalized approach, adapted to each territory to know its characteristics and base on them the orientation of the educational policy.

Thus, educational quality goes beyond compliance indices in infrastructure, invested monetary capital and results in standardized tests, but



rather involves a series of prior processes that include the preparation of rural teachers to highlight national values, and provide an education that takes into account the maximum value, the human dignity of each student.

Conclusions

This paper has delved deeper into the concept of quality, achieving three important results. First, defining quality in relation to the reality of the person and his/her dignity, it was highlighted the value of this reference concept to assess to which extent educational activities are aimed at the development of the human being. It was proposed that the center of any educational action should guarantee strengthening the abilities inherent to the nature of the people who live in a specific culture. In this sense, the importance of the geographical environment was recognized as one of the reference sources, to refer to the contextual and social needs that educational activity should focus on; for the purposes of this paper, the reality of the rural environment was specified and it was shown that it has been historically disregarded, considering that the center of the value of educational quality is in the attention to the urban context, to the detriment of marginalized areas. Although outstanding efforts are recognized at different times, such as the educational missions of Vasconcelos, it was remarked the fact that there is no a continuous systematic project that points out to the permanent organization of pedagogical processes.

The second result pointed to the legal conception on which the educational activity in our country is based (Article 3 of the Constitution). The objective was to recognize to what extent pedagogical interventions for the rural context have been 'educational missions' promoted in isolation by some outstanding personality. In the review of these foundations, it was shown that the call for a universal education is a necessary attribute, to which all public administration (and educators in general) must aim. In this sense, the general effort must focus on the development of projects that simultaneously guarantee the difference between spaces (in this case, rural and urban) since they are different contexts, but which must have a common general basis. With this result, it was possible to determine that the various outstanding projects throughout history have been efforts to implement a conception of quality established in Art. 3, but that this has not always been developed successfully.

The third result was achieved in the context of the brief study of the Multigrade Schools promoted by CONAFE. This showed how the



structuring of these programs, on one hand, is supported by a legal basis that validates that the structure of our PCUMS establishes the development of the dignity of people in their particular geographical contexts. In addition, the existence of programs whose center of operation is not oriented to the fulfillment of a numerical indicator (without disregarding it), enables to recognize the central spirit of 'educational missions' implemented by the Secretary of Public Education; although several of the administrative and pedagogical support aspects of multigrade schools can be improved, centrally focusing on the development and dignity of each of the people they serve in rural contexts, enable to maintain that the deep meaning of educational quality is based on the degree of dignity it promotes through the socio-educational programs that are implemented.

Although the administrative measurement and the relationship with a standardized measurement process is always necessary to quantify the degree of progress and achievements, it will be necessary to understand as 'progress and achievement' those factors that can be translated into at least three terms: (1) the recognition of the reality of the student, as well as the fulfillment of the needs that derive from it, (2) the shaping of the individual own skills, in order to influence the geographical reality in which the subject lives and develops and (3) the link that these first two maintain with the objectives and values described in Art. 3, and with the general strategic project of Mexico.

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Note

- 1 The Mexican Constitutional Article 3 throughout its history has had 10 Constitutional Reforms that have been reflected, among other aspects, in its wording. Since an analysis of its most important changes will be carried out, it seems necessary to clarify which constitutional version we are referring to; to distinguish them we propose the following way of citation: Art. 3, paragraph number (I, II, III...) and the year of publication. the edition of the article being cited (1917, 1934, 1946...). All references come from (PCUMS 2021).

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