

# PEDAGOGIES FOR DIVERSE CONTEXTS

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**THINKING ABOUT PEDAGOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

ROUTLEDGE  


## WORKING FROM WITHIN TO HELP EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS EVOLVE

An experience with Indigenous Education  
in Mexico

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### **Educational quality; how it is (or can be) defined<sup>1</sup>**

The idea that education should be of good (or better) quality has grown in importance during the last two decades and is now an established part of the public discourse at both international and national levels. To illustrate at an international level, when the Educational for All (EFA) initiative began in 1990, the focus was on increasing enrolment in education; the word quality did not appear in the final report. Ten years later, the same EFA initiative rewrote its goals to include quality explicitly.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in 1989, when education was included as a right in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, no reference was made to educational quality, but over the years, the idea of quality education has been incorporated progressively into pronouncements dealing with that right.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to 2000, the educational research literature dealing with quality in education was thin; now it is extensive (for example, Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel, & Ukpo, 2006; OECD, 2013; Anderson, Raikes, Kosaraju, & Solano, 2017). At a national level within Mexico in the last two decades, the Educational Secretariat, the teachers' union, organizations of the civil society, business moguls, politicians and philanthropists - groups that often disagree about

educational goals, methods and organization – all seem to agree that something called the “quality” of education is important. As of 2013, the term “quality”, applied to education, appears in Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution which now says that:

The State will guarantee the quality in obligatory education in such a way that the materials and educational methods, the organization of schools, the educational infrastructure and the suitability of teachers and directors will guarantee the maximum learning achievement of students.<sup>4</sup>

Despite new interest, discussion and references to educational quality, what is meant by “quality” continues to be vague, slippery, elusive and debatable. The answers to key questions are not clear. For instance:

- What criteria should be used to judge quality?
- What, specifically, should be observed, described and measured to know that education is of quality?
- Who should be responsible for defining quality and determining how to measure it?
- How should the results of evaluations of quality be used?

Our approach to answering these questions and to defining quality has been influenced by the work of Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) who, in their book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, alert us to the tension between two paradigms for thinking about quality. They note that a “modern” paradigm continues to predominate thinking in which quality is viewed as “knowable, objective and certain truth waiting ‘out there’ to be discovered and described . . . through the application of scientific method that is systematic, rational and objective” (p. 93). From a modernist perspective, quality is tidy, value-free and transcends place, culture and history. This framework leads to standardized and technical definitions of quality based on the work of scientific “experts” and educational authorities.

By way of contrast, within a “post-modern” paradigm, quality is characterized as derived from multiple and changing truths and by uncertainty: quality is relative, diverse, messy, subjective, context-specific and embodies local knowledge. Accordingly, it is difficult to imagine one “true” definition of quality. Rather, quality must be defined

in context through a process of “meaning-making” involving dialogue and negotiation and recognizing the coexistence of different interpretations of the “same reality.” This process requires participation of teachers and directors and others who are, in context, also experts. It also demands that the values of all participants be made explicit (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; House & Howe, 2000; Stake, 1973).

A somewhat different and complementary way of approaching quality has been to identify attributes or principles that it is thought should characterize quality. For instance, based in large part on her analysis of early childhood curricula in Latin America, Peralta (1992) identified the following that she thinks should be reflected in any definition of the quality of programs of early childhood care and education (ECCE): an active child, an integral view of child development, participation, pertinence, cultural relevance and flexibility. In México, Muñoz Izquierdo (2000) has suggested that educational quality can be described in terms of five attributes: relevance (of the curriculum in terms of social values and needs); pertinence (appropriate content and methods for different social groups); equity (mainly in terms of access and permanence in the system); efficacy or effectiveness (if the proposed outcomes are realized); efficiency (organization and management of the system allowing proposed outcomes to be reached at least cost and within financial constraints).

If one focusses on the two attributes that are present in the lists of both Peralta and Muñoz Izquierdo – relevance and pertinence – the idea is reinforced that definitions of quality, to meet these criteria everywhere, must vary, related to the specific conditions in which people live as well as to different cultural and personal views about the world in which they would like to live. This is probably so even within contexts and populations that are relatively homogeneous. Again dialogue, negotiation and meaning-making appear necessary rather than imposing one definition of quality on all.

Following this logic, we decided rather early on in our process of searching for a definition of quality that a main attribute should be that educational environments should be “consistent with and promote values and characteristics of the world in which we (the participants) want to live.” If, for example, we would like to live in a democratic, just, peaceful, non-discriminatory, participative world in which diversity is respected (the reader can substitute her or his own descriptors) the infrastructure, curriculum, management styles, pedagogical processes and the behaviours of teachers should mirror these characteristics. Evaluations should include indicators that try to pick

up these dimensions of educational processes and should not simply concentrate on educational outcomes defined too often by standardized tests measuring language and mathematical learning. This is not only because certain educational processes are more successful in producing the desired standardized outcomes, but also because what happens in the interaction between teachers and students becomes part of a hidden curriculum. And, desired social and emotional outcomes – rarely evaluated by standardized tests – bear a relationship to these actions. In our view, if a teacher manages to see that his or her student scores well on a test of language or mathematics, but does so by using psychological or physical abuse, that teacher (and school) cannot be deemed to be of quality. Against this background we turn now to a specific project in Mexico that tried to apply elements of a contextualized approach to quality.

#### The Mexican context

Mexico is a diverse nation marked by large cultural, economic and social inequities. Of the approximately 130,000,000 inhabitants, more than 10% speak at least one of the 62 Indigenous languages still used in Mexico, and another 3% define themselves as Indigenous even though they do not now speak an Indigenous language. Income inequality is high; the richest 10% of the population earns 20 times more than the poorest 10% (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017). Almost 60% of the population is employed in the informal sector (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas Geográficas e Información [INEGI], 2017). Although official statistics indicate that 78% of the population is “urban”, living in settlements of 2,500 or more, a very large number of communities continue to have less than 500 inhabitants and are often difficult to access. Poverty is widespread, estimated at up to 50% , depending on the criterion applied and is often associated with discrimination, rooted in a history of conquest, nation-building, urbanization, and a degree of racism (Presidencia de la República, 2017).

#### Education

Within education, despite efforts to moderate differences, inequality and discrimination are evident in access to services as well as in the content provided, the quality of educational processes, the way

students are evaluated and the form of participation by Indigenous people in these services. The educational system continues to be controlled to a large degree from the center which retains the power to set curriculum and set evaluation standards. Nevertheless, within the larger educational system a special department for Indigenous Education is present at national and state levels and functions with a degree of independence from the general system. The work to be reported here was carried out with the Indigenous Education Department in the state of the Yucatán.

### Preschool education

Inequity and discrimination in education begin at the lowest levels of the system. By the time Indigenous children reach primary school they have already been subjected to unequal and culturally biased treatment with unequal and culturally biased results. Since preschool education in Mexico was declared obligatory in November 2002, enrolment for all groups of children, including Indigenous children, has increased and narrowed the attendance gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.<sup>5</sup> However, the prevailing tendency is for Indigenous children to be admitted to programs of consistently lower quality than those attended by non-Indigenous children (INEE, 2017). Thus, although relative enrolments have increased, expansion has sometimes led to reinforcing inequalities rather than eliminating them.

### Educational inequality in Mexico

In a study carried out by ACUDE in a sample of preschools and applying a quality scale running from 1 (inadequate) to 5 (excellent), Indigenous preschools scored an average of 2.3 as compared with 3.1 in urban general education centers (Martínez, Linares & Myers, p. 49, 2003). In 2010, an analysis of EXCALE<sup>6</sup> data for natural science in 3rd grade showed that children in Indigenous schools averaged below 450 as compared with an average for urban schools of 525 and of 575 for private schools (INEE, 2010). A more recent study of conditions in preschools also identifies worrisome differences between rural Indigenous centers and others (INEE, 2017). Using an index of the physical environment of preschools, the study found that 47% of the Indigenous schools were “deficient” as compared

with 4% of the private/ non-Indigenous schools, or with 23% of the urban/non-Indigenous schools. Whereas only 15% of the private schools had more than 20 children per group, approximately 55% of the Indigenous preschools were in that category.

The quality gaps that exist at the preschool level reinforce the general conclusion that many Indigenous children are entering primary education less ready to learn than their non-Indigenous peers. With this brief discussion of educational quality and the variation among educational contexts within Mexico as background, we now describe and present results of a particular project designed to improve the quality of preschools serving an Indigenous population in one Mexican state.

### Improving educational quality in the preschools of the Indigenous Education system in the Yucatán, Mexico

#### *Antecedents*

Our work on educational quality in Mexican preschools began in 2002 as part of a project to create indicators of the well-being of children under five years of age. Drawing on an ecological model of early development stressing the interaction of a child with his/her surrounding environments and noting that, increasingly, one of these environments is the preschool, we tried to identify indicators of the quality of preschools in Mexico. Finding very little,<sup>7</sup> we decided to form an interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial group to explore how preschool quality (a good education) might be measured.

In addition to consulting the general literature about quality, we located and carried out an analysis of indicators being used in scales of quality in 25 countries (Myers, 2004) and consulted with educational officials as well as school directors, teachers and parents to obtain their opinions about quality. In an attempt to take a contextualized approach to quality, we also sought out characteristics of the ideal world toward which Mexican education should be oriented by examining official documents such as the Constitution and national and educational plans. The results helped us define what one should observe in preschool centers. It represented an effort to operationalize "relevance" and "pertinence" and to include indicators that we felt reflected our evolving definition of quality, namely that *an educational environment is of quality if organization and educational*

*processes are consistent with and promote an agreed-upon vision of the world in which one would like to live.*

A concrete product of the indicators project was the creation of a method and the first version of an instrument to be used to describe and evaluate the quality of Mexican preschools. The instrument, called the Escala de Calidad en Centros Preescolares (ĒCCP) (Proyecto Intersectorial sobre Indicadores de la Primera Infancia, 2007), grouped 50 indicators in four categories: available resources, school organization and management, the educational process and the relation of schools to families and the community. To gather needed information in each category, observations were required both at the level of the school and in particular classrooms complemented by interviews with teachers, directors and parents. Subsequently, we applied the method and the scale in a series of research and evaluation projects carried out between 2002 and 2009 (Martínez, Linares & Myers, 2003; Martínez & Myers, 2006). These experiences not only produced knowledge about Mexican preschool quality and inequality, but also led to several modifications of the scale. In addition, we discovered that, using the results of the scale to provide feedback to schools as part of their planning process could result in improvements to the quality of the preschools.<sup>8</sup>

### The Yucatan Project

In 2009 we began a new project in the state of Yucatán, working with authorities, supervisors, directors and teachers and within the sub-system of Indigenous Education with the aim of improving the quality of their preschools.<sup>9</sup> As we did, it became obvious that by consulting national documents as part of our process of defining quality we had not adequately taken culture and context into account; Mexico is composed of many Mexicos. Moreover, we had been applying uniformly “our” instrument to all contexts. Accordingly, we decided to begin the Yucatan Project with participants from Indigenous Education by asking them to describe their vision of the world in which they, ideally, would like to live. One characteristic of that world was a world in which the Mayan culture would be preserved, strengthened and respected. Based on this reflection, the group then began to determine what they thought they should observe in their preschool centers that would not only be consistent with that world but help to promote it. This process resulted in the creation of their own version of a scale of quality to guide observations, using their own categories and indicators thought to be “pertinent.”

The reader will see from a glance at Table 12.1 that the categories identified were very different from those of "our" scale.

The most notable difference from the adjusted ECCP scale we had been applying was the explicit inclusion of indicators related to their vision of creating an intercultural world. Rather than using the technical categories organizing the ECCP, categories were set with reference to the characteristics of a desirable world, including a characteristic as abstract as a "happy world."

At the same time and despite the apparently major differences between the ECCP and the Yucatan scales in the names of categories defining quality, there were many areas of specific agreement about what should be observed in a preschool. For example, within the category of a school that promotes a "happy world" the Yucatan participants thought children would be happy if they could participate in decisions about themes to be discussed and could choose materials of their own things they would like to do, play, choosing from among an assortment of good materials (see Figure 12.1). This area of agreement made easier negotiating agreement on the content of the scale.

After negotiating and agreeing on the scale and methodology, the next step was to provide supervisors with training and experience with the application of the scale in order to: 1) determine what each school was doing well and to identify "areas of opportunity"; 2) organize discussions about the results leading to agreement on actions that would be carried out to improve quality; and 3) serve as a basis for accompaniment of the process by the supervisors.<sup>10</sup> To do so required supervisors to rethink their role and relationship to the schools they were asked to supervise.

Table 12.1 Comparison of categories to organize two scales of educational quality

<i>ECCP (version 5)</i>	<i>Yucatán, scale of quality for Indigenous Education</i>
Available resources	A school that promotes an intercultural world.
Gestión	A school that works to create a natural and healthy world.
Proceso educativo	A school that creates a happy world.
Relación con padres y la comunidad	A school that promotes an organized and simple world.
	A school that establishes a world of living together in harmony.
	A school that represents a just world.

Inadequate	Incipient	Basic	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5
The teacher: -chooses the theme, activities and materials. -does not accept suggestions or variations.	The teacher: -chooses the Theme, activities and materials. -sometimes accepts suggestions or variations.	There are moments during the day when the teacher proposes the theme and the children choose the activity and/or materials.	There are moments during the day when the teacher and children work together to choose the theme, activities and materials.	The teacher fosters and helps the children to choose the theme, activities and materials to be used throughout.

Observer Comments:

*Figure 12.1* Indicator: The process fosters and permits children to choose topics, activities and materials and to put in practice their own ideas

### Results of observations

Tables 12.2 and 12.3 present results of observations of preschool centers carried out in 2014 and 2015.

From Table 12.2, the reader can see that the level of overall quality as judged by the supervisors improved markedly in one year. In 2014, 28% were deemed of good (mostly) or of excellent (few) quality, compared with 47% in 2015. However, as Table 12.3 shows, even though improvements were made in all the dimensions of quality, and although the centers in the main seemed to promote harmonious living amongst happy children in a relatively organized and healthy environment, they also suggest that the dimensions of justice and interculturality continue to lag.

### Results at the level of the Indigenous Education sub-system

In this brief chapter it is not possible to describe in greater detail the effects that the project has had on the way teachers, directors and supervisors seem to have changed. Based on field notes, interviews and observations by the staff of ACUDE, however, we feel confident in reporting the following outcomes (Hacia una Cultura Democrática, 2016).<sup>11</sup>

The project helped to:

- Consolidate a collegial mode of working among supervisors in the Department of Indigenous Education which, in turn, led to increased agreement regarding directives and actions.

Table 12.2 General results from the application of the Yucatan scale of quality\*

Quality category, Average, including all indicators	2014 %	2015 %
Excellent	5	10
Good	23	37
Basic	36	32
Incipient	21	13
Inadequate	15	8
Total	100	100

\* Based on observations using a scale of quality with a range of 5 levels of judgement in which "excellent" represents the highest level.

Table 12.3 Results from the application of the Yucatan scale of quality, grouped by dimensions of quality

Categories/Dimensions. A school representing a world that is:	Excellent %	Good %	Basic %	Incipient %	Inade- quate (%)
Intercultural					
2014	4	21	32	22	21
2015	6	33	31	18	12
Organized					
2014	10	22	36	22	10
2015	8	38	32	16	6
Living together in harmony					
2014	7	30	42	16	5
2015	16	44	28	10	2
Healthy and respects nature					
2014	8	23	34	21	14
2015	12	34	34	14	6
Just					
2014	2	18	30	19	31
2015	5	27	31	17	20
Happy					
2014	4	24	38	22	12
2015	12	43	30	9	6

\* Based on observations using a scale of quality with 5 levels of judgement in which Excellent represents the highest judgement

- Strengthen a cultural component. Describing the world in which one would like to live as a key element in the process of seeking better educational quality led to the strengthening of an almost non-existent intercultural and bilingual component in programming planning and educational actions.
- Strengthen the work of school and regional councils, with respect to their analysis and reflection about the problems facing the system of Indigenous Education, and particularly its intercultural and bilingual nature. It became easier to arrive at specific plans to improve quality.
- Improve supervision and teachers' practices. Supervisors not only participated in the process of defining quality and elaborating instruments to evaluate it, they also designed procedures to accompany centers based on indicators of teachers' practices with respect to an intercultural and bilingual focus. They found new ways to help teachers improve those practices.
- Provide continuing development and training (formation) for supervisors. The majority of supervisors strengthened their professional capacities needed to implement the model of accompaniment based on evidences.

### Conclusions

Based on the above, and as reported in the final report of the project we are convinced that:

- 1 The system of school supervision can contribute to improving the quality of educational centers by participating actively in a model designed to use results of periodic evaluations to provide evidence that is shared with schools and becomes a basis for accompanying an agreed upon process of improvement.
- 2 The actual system of Indigenous Education does not offer a full and complete intercultural and bilingual education.
- 3 A model of "accompaniment based on evidence" allows a more pertinent and profound discussion of cultural identity and intercultural education than an administrative model of inspection or even "supervision."
- 4 The work of supervisors who see their role as one of accompaniment (instead of as inspection or even supervision) can contribute

- to strengthening teacher practice with an intercultural and bilingual focus.
- 5 Applying the model of accompaniment based on evidence requires a set of abilities and professional capacities that teachers in the Indigenous Education system in Mexico need to develop in a sustained manner.
  - 6 Many of the programs and activities proposed for developing professional capacities (principally, formal course work, based on a universal and "modern" approach to improving quality), have not been pertinent or effective and tend to distract supervisors and authorities from a hands-on process of strengthening the quality of programs and projects at the state level and in sub-systems such as Indigenous Education.
  - 7 Our work helps to support the idea that projects carried out by outsiders who nevertheless work "from within" the system, and that involve accompanying educational actors (authorities, supervisors, directors and teachers) as they participate directly, actively and in context to evaluate their ways of working, can be effective in helping to move systems toward change because: participants learn during the process; they know how the evaluation results were arrived at; and are in a position to apply what they have experienced and learned.

#### Notes

- 1 We recognize that the term "quality," as applied to education, is not a term that is congenial to everybody; for many, quality has an unsavory ideological origin in the world of buying and selling products and/or a link to universal standards that products should meet. Accordingly, if the reader would prefer to substitute the idea of "a good education" for "quality education", please do so. We continue to use the term "quality" because in Mexico the term, applied to education, appears in the National Educational law as well as in the last three national plans and has become part of the Mexican Constitution.
- 2 In Dakar, in 2000, a specific goal dealing with quality was added to EFA: (*Goal vi*) "Improving all aspects of the *quality of education* and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" (emphases added). Quality is also mentioned specifically in goals dealing with discrimination and gender (*Goals ii and v*).

- 3 For example, in human rights-based discussions of education, frequent reference is made to the idea that governments should guarantee, gradually and over time, not only *Availability* and *Accessibility*, but also *Acceptability* and *Adaptability*. Within these four “As” are included elements often used to describe quality as well as the idea that diversity should be taken into account (Tomasevski, 2004).
- 4 In Spanish: “El estado garantizará la calidad en la educación obligatoria de manera que los materiales y métodos educativos, la organización escolar, la infraestructura educativa y la idoneidad de los docentes y los directores garanticen el máximo logro de aprendizaje de los educandos.” This addition to Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution was officially decreed in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* on February 26, 2013 (Gobierno de los Estados Mexicanos, Secretaría de Gobernación, México).
- 5 In 2017, statistics show enrolment rates of 84% for five-year olds, 91.5% for four-year olds, and 47.5% for three-year olds. (Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Presidencia de la República, 2017, p. 267).
- 6 EXCALE is a standardized achievement test created in Mexico.
- 7 At the time, at the system level, the only, and less than satisfactory indicators were the average number of students per preschool teacher and the formal educational level of the teachers. At the school level we discovered that a potential source of indicators, the “inspection form” used by supervisors, was extremely limited, concentrating on administrative and material conditions.
- 8 In particular, this occurred when we were asked to carry out a 3-year national evaluation of the Schools of Quality Program. As part of this evaluation we experimented with direct involvement by educational authorities in collecting information about the participating schools and feeding back the results to inform a school planning process. Our analysis of results showed that, after three years, all schools improved, that improvements were greatest with respect to resources and management and less with respect to teaching methods or relations with families and the community.
- 9 This Project received support from the Interamerican Development Bank and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The project involved the participation of the 30 supervisors who work within the system of Indigenous Education in the Yucatán in a total of 276 preschools attended by 19,483 children.
- 10 A set of workshops was designed around such themes as: constructing a problem tree, how to interpret the information obtained, how to facilitate reflection with participants in the educational community. ACUDE accompanied the supervisors. Supervisors, in turn, accompanied the director and teachers.
- 11 For additional information the reader can look at our web page ([acude.org.mx](http://acude.org.mx)), or send us an email at: [elmundoquequeremosvivir@gmail.com](mailto:elmundoquequeremosvivir@gmail.com).

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