

# Seeking Quality in Mexican Preschools

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## Introduction

In this presentation I will: 1) set the problem of working towards quality education in preschools in Mexico within the Mexican context and within current debates about educational quality as related to early development, 2) briefly describe the process followed in creating a method and instruments to look at the quality of preschool education in Mexico, 3) present selected results from two studies and 4) draw some implications from the findings.

Please note that the paper focuses on preschool education (ages 3 to 5) and the “quality” of preschool environments; it does not deal with developmental or educational outcomes.

## The Mexican context

Mexico has passed through a number of important changes in recent decades that have affected early childhood development in major ways. Among these are:

- Heavy rural-urban migration; 75%+ now live in urban areas (over 2,500)
- Increased temporary migration, internally and abroad (mostly US)
- Reduction in fertility rates (the absolute number of children under 6 is declining)
- A shift to a neo-liberal economic policy.
- Increased economic inequity and continuing poverty at high levels.
- A shift from extended to nuclear families and women-headed households (over 20%)
- Increased participation of women in the paid labor force (over 35%)

In addition, a much heralded “transition to democracy”, still incipient, is suggested by election in 2000 of a president from an opposition party for the first time in 70+ years. The studies that will be presented here were carried out during the period from 2002 to 2006 while this new government, headed by President Fox, was in power.

With the changing conditions and the arrival of a new party have come new needs, ideas and programs. Of particular interest for this presentation is the shift in the dominant discourse in the field of education which gives greater importance to improving “educational quality”. This change in discourse is evident in the National Educational Program for 2001-2006, titled, “Toward Education of Quality for All: an educational focus for the Twenty-First Century.” The new discourse does not, however, include a clear definition of what is meant by quality. Indeed, educational indicators continued to focus on enrolment, particularly at the pre-school level, limiting the scope of social accounting (another element given greater play in the new discourse).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, the definition of quality at other levels of the educational system has placed increasing emphasis on learning outcomes in language and mathematics.

A more general absence in Mexican national reporting systems of indicators of the well being of young children led a number of interested individuals to begin work, in an Inter-sectoral Project<sup>2</sup>, on indicators of both the condition of children (under six) and of their environments. As part of that project, one working group was charged with seeking out a definition of quality in preschool environments that could be expressed as a set of indicators to be used for monitoring and reporting. This required not only negotiating a definition but also creating a way to collect the information needed to make the indicators come alive and be useful. Some results of that effort are reported here.

## Defining “quality”

Trying to define quality is much like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands. Part of the elusive nature of the concept of quality can be understood by examining the tension between a “modern” view that treats quality as something inherent, universal, and independent of culture, place and history and a “post-modern” view of quality as constructed, relative, linked to specific values and influenced by culture, place and history.<sup>3</sup>

The modern view fits very well with most contemporary attempts to reach closure on quality. It fit well with the way in which the inter-sectoral project mentioned above was being conducted in Mexico. As part of that project, a group of “experts”, albeit an inter-institutional and interdisciplinary group, was trying to come up with a set of limited standards or criteria which could be applied to all preschools to see how well the system was doing with respect to achieving something called quality. Intentions were good, linked to accountability and policy and program improvement.

The post-modern view, however, offered an unsettling challenge to what the project was trying to do and to the process it was following. It seemed obvious, for instance, that parents and teachers and experts and politicians can have very different, and equally valid, views of quality. But then, if quality is in the eye of the beholder, how can it be captured by a set of indicators pertinent to all or most contexts? What business did a limited group of people have trying to establish such indicators? Should the concept of quality and the effort to define it in an operational way so that monitoring could be carried out at a national level be abandoned?

In another paper (Myers 2005) I have described the attempt to moderate, if not eliminate, the tensions and seeming contradictions between applying a modern view and a post-modern view to quality in constructing, applying, interpreting and utilizing a scale to describe broadly preschool quality. Briefly, this involved:

- Incorporating a variety of stakeholders in a negotiation process.

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<sup>2</sup> This project, initiated in 2001, involved people from various parts of the ministries of Education (where coordination was also located), and health as well as from Social Welfare, Universities and non-governmental organizations. Descriptions of the conceptualization of this project and of advances can be found in SEP, et.al. (2002) and SEP, et. al (2004).

<sup>3</sup> These tensions are discussed in depth and with sensitivity in a book by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) titled “Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.”

- Approaching definition from several viewpoints: what the literature says is important, the experience of practitioners, a discussion of the kind of society in which we want to live with its implications for the kind of education needed, identification of a set of principles that should guide preschool education.
- Including indicators and items that were agreed upon as important by some but not all participants.
- Making values explicit that underlie the final choices of items.
- Leaving the instrument open for local additions to the scale.
- Creating space in the instrument for observations, comments, doubts
- Inserting the scale in a broader process of evaluation.
- Using results to stimulate discussion and reflection, not for certification.

### **A Scale for Evaluating the Quality of Preschool Centers**

Along the way to creating a scale several basic decisions were made by the working group that shaped it:

- It was decided to divide the scale into two parts, one of which is applied at the level of the center and the other in classrooms.
- Four main “dimensions” of quality were identified:
  - The availability of resources, material and human
  - The educational process
  - Educational management
  - Relations with families and community

Within, or crossing, these dimensions are indicators of health and nutrition conditions, of the treatment of children with special needs and of the work climate.

- To help evaluators value indicators, guiding statements or affirmations were established for each indicator, laid out along a continuum (rather than use a “yes-no” format when observing and interviewing). The 5-point continuum established is follows:
  - (1) Inadequate (2) Incipient (3) Basic (4) Good (5) Excellent

The “basic” category in the continuum provides a kind of minimum that it is hoped all centers will be able to attain on all indicators. Using a continuum makes the scale similar in format (but with important differences in content) to scales such as ECERS (Harms and Cryer 1999).

An example of an item follows:

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

<b>Inadequate</b> 1	<b>Incipient</b> 2	<b>Basic</b> 3	<b>Good</b> 4	<b>Excellent</b> 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

Observations:

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To give the reader a better feel for the content of the scale, a quick overview (in Spanish) of all the indicators included in the third version of the scale is attached as Appendix 1.<sup>4</sup>

## Two studies and some results

### 1. A research project in a sample of 40 preschools

As part of the process of creating and trying out the quality scale, a study was carried out in a sample of 40 preschools in four Mexican states. The schools were chosen for their diversity (urban/rural; Spanish/indigenous cultures; privileged/poor; variation in models and administrative responsibility). A team of trained researchers visited each of the 40 preschools shortly after the start of the 2002-3 school year and again toward the end of the school year, each visit lasting 2 or 3 days. During the visits, the quality scale was applied, directors, teachers, parents and children were interviewed and a developmental test was administered to a sample of 4 children from each school.<sup>5</sup> Researchers kept a field diary.

Focusing on information obtained from the application of the quality scale we see (Table 1) that in 2003, at the end of the school year:

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<sup>4</sup> The scale is now in a fifth version, each version incorporating adjustments based on what was learned from applying the scale previously and as a result of a continuous dialogue with the intersectorial working group. In its first version the scale had 40 indicators (and corresponding items); in the third, 45 and in the present version 54. Along the way, four additional dimensions were distinguished: accompaniment, health, and children with special needs, and the work climate. The main increase in the number of indicators was in the dimension of the educational process giving it more weight in the scale.

<sup>5</sup> The test, titled “*El Test de Desarrollo Psicomotor, 2-5 Años (TEPSI)*”, was developed and normed in Chile. It was selected because no similar test had been developed and normed in Mexico.

**Table 1:  
Average scores on the Scale of Educational Quality for Preschools\*,  
at center and classroom levels, by quality dimensions, in  
urban and rural settings and by type of program**

Dimensions	Totals	Rural			Urban	
		Totals	Indigen- ous	Com- munity	General	
<b>Total</b>	2.9	2.6	2.3	2.9	2.8	3.1
<b>Total Center level</b>	2.9	2.4	2.2	2.8	2.7	3.5
<b>Resources</b>	3.2	2.7	2.6	2.9	2.8	3.8
<b>Educational Process</b>	3.0	2.6	2.3	3.0	2.8	3.5
<b>Ed. Management</b>	2.7	2.1	1.7	2.7	2.5	3.4
<b>Rel. w familias/com</b>	2.7	2.3	2.0	2.5	2.7	3.2
<b>Total Classroom level</b>	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.9	2.7	3.0
<b>Resources</b>	2.9	2.9	2.7	3.0	3.0	2.9
<b>Educational Process</b>	2.9	2.6	2.5	2.9	2.9	3.0
<b>Ed. Management</b>	2.5	2.0	1.6	2.7	2.1	2.9

\* Each of the 48 items that comprise the Scale was judged on a continuum from 1 to 5 with the intermediate point, 3, established as the minimum it is hoped that all schools should achieve. Items are grouped into major categories that include: availability of resources, educational management, the educational process and relations with family and community. Quality is also differentiated at center and classroom levels.

- The average score for all centers was slightly below the designated minimum.
- In general, average quality scores at the level of the center are above those of the classrooms and the average score for availability of resources is above that for the educational process, educational management and relations with family and community, a result consistent across sub-systems.
- Preschool centers from the indigenous educational system have consistently low scores; educational management and the relation with family and community are particularly weak.
- From more specific items in the scale we find, for instance, that:
  - The style of teaching in preschools was predominantly instructive, even among those teachers who said that children learn by constructing their own knowledge.
  - There was no relationship between the number of children per teacher and other indicators of quality; the relationship was confounded by urban/rural differences.
  - The formal qualifications of teachers and courses taken did not correlate highly with other variables of quality, in part because variation was relatively small.

## 2. An Evaluation of the national Schools of Quality Program (PEC)

This voluntary program has emphasized improving school autonomy and management with increased social participation by parents as main avenues to improving quality. Modest funding (from the Federal government matched by states) was provided to individual schools in response to proposals the schools presented based on self evaluations or *diagnósticos*. In 2006, approximately 5% of all Mexican preschools were participating in the program, most of which were concentrated in urban areas with predominantly low income families. However, some rural and indigenous preschools have also been incorporated.

The evaluation was carried out over a period of three years using two samples:

Sample 1 (S1) consisted of 4 preschool centers in each of 26 states, with most chosen from urban areas but with some rural and indigenous schools also included.<sup>6</sup> Evaluation visits were made to schools at the beginning and end of the 2003-2004, school year and at the end of the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years (three years).

Sample 2 (S2) added 2 more centers from each state to the evaluation. Visits occurred at the beginning and end of 2004-2005, and at the end of 2005-2006 (two years). This sample picked up more schools from rural and indigenous areas giving it a different tone and starting point from Sample 1.

As in the research study, visits of two or three days were made to each school during which the quality scale was applied, and directors, teachers, parents and children were interviewed. A field diary was kept and photos were taken (and in some cases videos made). The data collection was carried out by a team of three people in each state, one from the Quality Program, one from Preschool Education and one from the Pedagogical University. This novel arrangement brought together people from different parts of the educational system who do not usually communicate with each other.

Interpreting the results of this formative evaluation study is complicated by the fact that an accompaniment component was built into the study. Each state level team, in addition to sending data to the center for an overall assessment, analyzed results and wrote a report for each school in their state sample(s) and fed the information back to the school. This led, during the period of the study, to discussion, to changes of plans and to new activities in the school. Accordingly, it is difficult to say whether the results found in the evaluation are due to the program in the form it was operating or to use of the results of the evaluation at school levels to provide accompaniment.

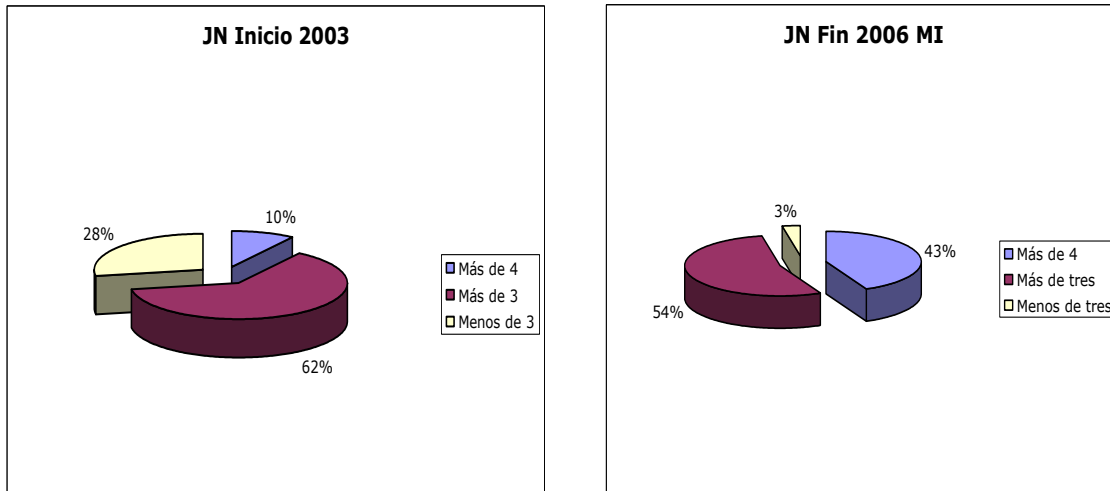
Evaluation results:

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<sup>6</sup> Schools were chosen by each state according to the following criteria: Two of the four centres had to be located outside the state capital. In the 11 states where indigenous preschools were part of the program, one center was to be an indigenous center. In other states, at least one center should be a rural center.

- The percentage of schools in Sample 1 with below minimum quality scores was reduced from 28% at entry to 16% at the end of year 1, to 12% at the end of year 2, to 3% at the end of year 3. Schools rated as of good quality (4 or above) increased from 10% to 23% (end of year 1) to 31% (end of year 2) to 41% (end of year 3). Figure 1 shows percentages at the beginning and end of the evaluation.

**Figure 1. Quality scores at the beginning and end of the evaluation of PEC preschools, Sample 1.**



- Changes observed over the three years (again for Sample 1) were greater at the level of the center than in the classrooms. Table 2. Thus, improvements at the center do not automatically transfer into equivalent improvements in the classroom.

**Table 2.—Average scores for preschools at the beginning and end of the evaluation, by center and classroom levels and by dimensions of quality.**

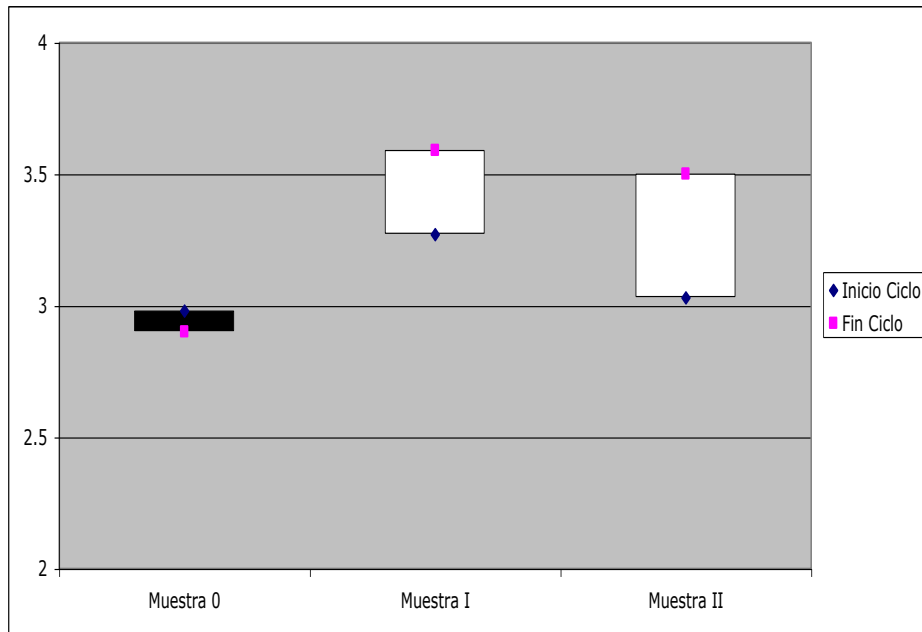
	Begin 2003-4	End 2005-6	Difference
Total	3.27	3.91	+ .64
Center	3.34	4.15	+ .81
Resources	3.27	4.16	+ .89
Ed. Process	3.35	4.18	+ .83
Ed. Management	3.41	4.23	+ .82
Family/community	3.34	3.85	+ .51
3 <sup>o</sup> Year classroom	3.12	3.80	+ .68
Resources	3.20	3.70	+ .50
Ed. Process	3.19	3.86	+ .67
Ed. Management	2.97	3.58	+ .61

Comparing scores presented in Table 2 at the beginning of the project with the scores of the sample of the 40 preschools reported in Table 1 suggests that schools in PEC

were already of higher quality than a broader sample at the time of their entry into the program.

- Most improvement occurs in the first year of participation in PEC but gains were maintained or increased during subsequent years. Figure 2 shows improvements during the first year for Samples 1 and 2. These are compared with results from the earlier research study in which it was found that, on the average, the 40 preschools (shown as sample 0 in Figure 1) did not improve during the year but, rather, declined slightly.

**Figure 2. Quality scores shown at the beginning and end of the first Year of participation in the Schools of Quality Project, for Samples 1 And 2, compared with results from a sample of non-participant schools**



- Although there was general improvement as a result of participation in PEC, the gap between preschools with the highest and lowest quality scores at entry into the program remained large. Only in the third year of the study did the gap begin to close slightly. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

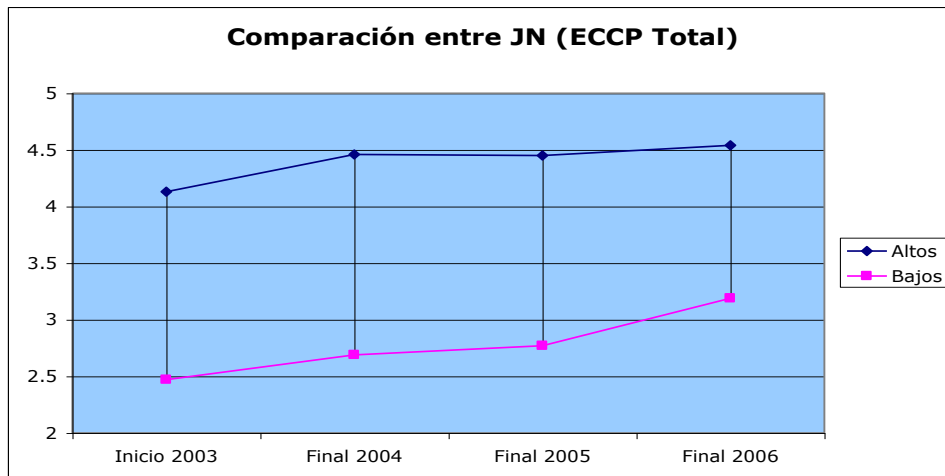


Figure 3 also shows that the schools of lesser quality at entry and at the end of the first two years were, on average, below the “basic” level; only in the third year did they cross the threshold. These schools were almost exclusively rural and indigenous preschools.

## **Implications**

The results from these studies suggest that much greater attention is needed to quality than has been given in the past, particularly for schools in the indigenous educational system.

The problem of changing practices in classrooms seems to be at the heart of this matter. The common policy and program antidotes for poor quality (more resources, a better curriculum, more courses for teachers, fewer children per teacher) do not necessarily translate into the changed practices desired.

An element that seems to be important and that is lacking in most programs is accompaniment of teachers to help them improve practices.

The Schools of Quality evaluation shows that it is possible to improve the quality of preschools through a program of modest financial support and with accompaniment. However, the most difficult part of improvement continues to be in classroom practice. In addition, despite improvements, major disparities in the system remain that require more concentrated attention, again to rural and indigenous preschools.

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Appendix 1: An overview of indicators included in the Quality Scale, version 3

<b>Centro Educativo (Primera parte)</b>			
<b>Insumos</b>	<b>Proceso educativo</b>	<b>Gestión Educativa</b>	<b>Relación con el entorno</b>
A.1 suficiencia de aulas, mantenimiento, luz y ventilación	B.3 Detección de necesidades de los niños(as)	C.1 Procedimiento de canalización oportuno	D.1 Detección de expectativas de la familia
A.2 Servicio sanitario	B.4 Detección de habilidades de los niños(as)	C.2 Diagnóstico del centro	D.2 Comunicación y participación permanente con la familia
A.3 Equipo y procedimientos de prevención de desastres	B.5 Registro de necesidades y habilidades de los niños(as)	C.3 Plan anual administrativo del centro	D.3 Participación activa de la familia en el proceso educativo
A.4 Espacios de aprendizaje exteriores	B.6 Formulación escrita de misión	C.4 Proceso de mejora continua de calidad	D.4 Evaluación se satisfacción familias
B.1 Currículum integral	B.7 Planeación de actividades académicas	C.5 Acompañamiento	D.5 Participación de la comunidad en actividades conjuntas
B.2 Currículum promoción salud	B.8 Proceso colegiado de planeación	C.5 Acompañamiento	D.6 Participación comunidad en mejora del servicio
	B.9 Evaluación y seguimiento de desarrollo		
	B.10 Registro de evaluación		
	B.11 Higiene y valor nutricional de los alimentos		

<b>Aula (Segunda parte)</b>		
<b>Insumos</b>	<b>Proceso educativo</b>	<b>Gestión Educativa</b>
A.1 Suficiencia, mantenimiento, luz y ventilación	E.1 Detección de intereses de los niños	I.1. Acompañamiento
B.1 Áreas de trabajo	E.2 Planeación de actividades del aula	
C.1 Materiales suficientes, ordenados y al alcance	F.1 Jornada consistente	
C.2 Materiales que reflejan la diversidad cultural	F.2 Actividades equilibradas (indv/grup)	
D.1 Proporción educador/n niños	F.3 Actividades iniciadas educador/niño	
D.2 Entrenamiento del educador(a)	G.1 Niños y educador(a) involucrados en actividades de aprendizaje	
	G.2 Act. Propician el aprendizaje activo	
	G.3 Estrategias de conversación	
	G.4 Uso de diversas formas de comunicación	
	G.5 Atención al aula	
	G.6 Sistema efectivo de solución de conflictos sociales	
	G.7 Relaciones afectivas y respetuosas	
	G.8 Equidad	
	G.9 Interacción positiva entre niñas(os)	
	H.1 promoción de la salud en niños y niñas	