

Mexico

Final Report – First phase

1. Overview of Mexican context

In recent decades Mexico has made significant progress in advancing population access to education, notably increasing enrollment, average schooling and coverage rates across grade levels.¹ However, educational quality and equality in particular remain a severe challenge: studies show that low-income and indigenous students in Mexico are the most likely to not have access to schooling, drop out early, and receive a poor quality education.² Additionally Mexico also has one of the highest levels of socioeconomic inequality in its society – with a Gini coefficient of 48.1, the highest among the OECD countries³ – highlighting the need for social and especially educational policies that can diminish inequality.⁴

This country background stresses the importance of finding good practices at the school level in Mexico that can provide an inclusive education for all children, as inclusion is a precondition for a high-quality education for all children that diminish inequality. The study and replication of such school good practices can contribute to breaching the socioeconomic inequality witnessed at the country level.

In this context the Mexican team examined three schools in the metropolitan area of the northeastern city of Monterrey in order to study good practices in terms of educational inclusion. Although the schools were carefully selected, it is important to emphasize that none of them are completely inclusive in their practices. Each presents both specific strengths and weaknesses in terms of inclusion around different elements.

Though it is important that all schools keep advancing in order to truly embody inclusionary schools, their varied degrees of success in this endeavor provide rich material for case studies. In particular, these case studies stress that inclusion in some aspects of the schools does not imply inclusion in all aspects of the school, and conversely that good practices can be learned from certain aspects even if the entire school cannot be classified as inclusive.

2. Methodology and research process

The schools were chosen based on a three-part selection process.

First, all team did a cross-check of learning outcome indicators (specifically school results on the nation ENLACE achievement exam) and grade repetition/dropout rates for all schools in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico, identifying schools that have higher average learning outcomes and lower dropout and repetition rates than neighboring schools.⁵

¹ OECD (2013).

² INEE (2014).

³ Piz, Victor (2013).

⁴ World Bank (2012).

⁵ Data for ENLACE, grade repetition and dropout rates available publicly through the government website "Conoce tu escuela" found at <http://www.nl.gob.mx/servicios/conoce-tu-escuela>.

Given the lack of quantitative data on the social vulnerability of the student population within each school, the second step in the selection process was a consultation with state and district education leaders, focusing on identifying schools that attend a disadvantaged population.

These two steps yielded a total of ten preliminary schools. The Mexican team initiated phone conversations with the principals at all schools and conducted an in-person interview with the principal at each school, guided by the document “Indicator system for the identification of inclusive schools” in order to narrow down the school selection to three final institutions.

The three selected schools have varied contexts: the San Pedro school attends to middle class families in the affluent municipality of San Pedro within Monterrey, the Independencia school is in one of the most violent and vulnerable neighborhoods in Monterrey and the Apodaca school is in a semi-rural location.

3. General descriptions of the schools

The description of the schools includes elements that provide an idea of the main structure of the school. The following elements were observed through observation and data provided by the school: the context where the school is located, the schedule of the school, number of students, and infrastructure and particular characteristics of each.

Apodaca School

The Apodaca Primary School is a public state school located in the northern area of the metropolitan city of Monterrey. The school opened in 2008 to attend to a recent increase in the population due to families who have migrated from other Mexican states and even back from the United States. The school operates on an afternoon shift (12:30 PM – 5:30 PM), and another school team and students use the same installations during the morning shift.

Notably, the school has a high turnover level among students since it is common for new students to arrive throughout the year as well as unexpectedly exit mid-year. Given complex family and economic situations, parents see the need to travel to other places suddenly. The school attends mostly to a low-to mid income population.

The school has a total of 400 students divided in two classes per grade level. The school has eleven teachers, two secretaries, a principal and an administrative assistant, in addition to a special teacher for physical education and for English. The parents of the students pay for the physical education teacher’s salary because there is no physical education teacher assigned by the state. The rest of the teachers are assigned by the state educational authorities; most are graduates of the state’s public *normal* schools for teacher training.

The school has two buildings with classrooms, two shaded patio areas and one green area. Additionally the school has a very small building called the library, but it still does not have books for the students. In the classrooms of the upper grade levels there is a projector and a computer. The school also has a copy machine, which allows teachers to have access to a variety of lesson plans and to aid students who do not have books. The school lacks chairs and tables for teachers in classrooms and has problems with electrical voltage in the school in addition to other infrastructure deficiencies. Efforts by the principal and her team to improve infrastructure are complemented by the money collected through voluntary contributions by

families, given that the school (like most public schools) does not receive money from the state for the maintenance and improvement of its installations.

Independencia School

The Independencia School is a primary public state school located in the center of Monterrey, Mexico over fifty years old. The school used to operate on a morning shift (8:30 AM – 12:30 PM) but was recently switched to operate full-time (8:30 AM – 4:30 PM) and faces the challenges many schools that have undergone this change must overcome, which include a lack of proper infrastructure, personnel and curriculum in the early transition years to sustain the full-time schedule.

Notably the Independencia School is located in a highly marginalized zone within the city in terms of accessibility to public transport, green spaces, public spaces, and cultural and artistic offerings. Additionally the neighborhood is known for its high levels of poverty and violence. In particular the neighborhood has been strongly connected to organized crime and to the surge of violence in the state from 2009 to the present. Some parents of the children in the school are incarcerated and serving time for connections to organized crime. Additionally the school has been known since its opening as one that attends to the most vulnerable children of the neighborhood that have difficult or aggressive behavior and have been kicked out of other public schools.

The school has a total of 175 students and has one class per grade level. The school has a principal, six teachers, and special teachers for English, physical education, and general support, in addition to a part-time social worker, language teacher and school psychologist that are jointly called the support team. Finally, there is one person who functions as a secretary and groundskeeper. Most teachers have an average of five to eight years working at the school. Like at the Apodaca School, the teachers are assigned by the state educational authorities and are graduates of the state's public *normal* schools for teacher training.

The school has two buildings with classrooms, two patios, a resting area, a school library with five computers and ten bookshelves, a ramp for access to the second floor, and a multipurpose room equipped with a projector, screen and Internet. Notably the school also has a printer and a copier to which teachers have access. These advances have been done in the last seven years through work by the current principal and his team. When the current principal arrived, the school had no plumbing or drainage, limited electricity, deteriorated bathrooms, and constant vandalism of its installations, among other factors. Efforts to improve infrastructure are aided by the money collected through voluntary contributions provided by families, given that the school does not receive money from the state for the maintenance and improvement of its installations.

San Pedro School

The San Pedro School is a private school part of the network of the Sacred Heart schools, founded in France by Saint Magdalene Sophia at the start of the 1800s. This network of schools has since grown globally and today is present in more than forty countries. The school is located in San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, and it is approximately fifty years old. The school operates full-time (8:00 AM – 4:00 PM) and also has a middle school; most students stay on at the school to complete their secondary education there as well.

The school is located in the municipality of San Pedro. Though San Pedro is one of the wealthiest municipalities in Latin America, it also presents severe inequalities within its

population, and the San Pedro School was founded in part to provide quality private education to the most vulnerable families within the municipality at an affordable rate. Today part of the families come from San Pedro, but the school also attends to families from more vulnerable municipalities like Santa Catarina and García. All actors at the school are highly conscious of the social mission of the school of providing better educational opportunities for families who otherwise would not have access to them, and the school continues to provide generous scholarships to students whose families cannot pay the modest tuition fees.

The school has a total of 400 students divided in two classes per grade level. The school has a principal who is in charge of the entire school, and a principal specific for the primary school. Two coordinators serve under the primary school principal, along with twelve teachers, a school psychologist, a pedagogical coordinator and two administrative assistants. Most teachers have approximately 5-8 years at the school, with some up to twenty years of experience at the school. Teachers are recruited and selected through an internal rigorous selection process and most have undergraduate degrees in education or psychology from private universities in the state.

The school has three buildings. Additionally the school has one computer classroom, one auditorium for approximately 200 people, a library, a science laboratory, a play area, two shaded patios and two sport fields. It also has a small internal store that has been given as a concession to a school mother after a rigorous and impartial selection process where students can buy their lunch and snacks.

4. Main findings

4.1 School management: Frame for inclusion

Aspirational and democratic leadership from the principal

At all three schools, the principal is a key player who sets the tone for the entire school. All principals are admired and respected by their colleagues for their moral and professional leadership. More than any other actor they embody and live the vision of the school in all their interactions and encourage others to do so. In all three schools they were also recognized for their perseverance, with colleagues mentioning that they would make sure that things got done no matter what. At the same time, teachers across the three schools also emphasized that the principal was someone who knew how to listen and to whom one could go if something was wrong, highlighting the fact that their leadership is not viewed as distant or imposing but rather as natural, helpful and down-to-earth.

Shared vision common to all school actors

All three schools also have a vision unique to them that is socialized and shared by all school actors. For the San Pedro school, this vision is connected to its religious nature and its social purpose of attending to a vulnerable population within an otherwise affluent municipality. In the Independencia School, all school actors recognize their importance in the lives of children who face very difficult social and economic conditions and embody and work under the belief the transformation through education

is possible. The Apodaca School's vision is oriented towards excellence and ensuring that everyone does their best possible to get things done the right way.

Equally important as having a vision is that in all three schools all school actors also *recognize, can articulate and understand* the vision that unites them. Indeed in all three schools, the vision is almost palpable in the sense that it feels "lived" every day at the school.

Adequate spaces for alignment and cultivating a staff sense of belonging

All three schools, and especially the Apodaca and the San Pedro schools, underscore the importance of having time and space set aside for face-to-face time between all team members. Most public schools in Mexico work in afternoon or morning shifts and teachers often have to rush to a second turn at another school, limiting the time in which they can meet with their colleagues, share lessons learned, align themselves to the school's vision and analyze advances towards yearly goals. Both the Apodaca and the San Pedro school actively cultivate the monthly meetings of the Technical School Council (one day a month) as a valuable space to do these activities, check-in with the entire team and create a stronger sense of a team between staff members. At both schools these sessions are carefully planned in order to ensure the best use of time, and teachers claim that it is a valuable space to them in order to remind themselves they are part of a team, discuss specific cases of students, analyze strengths and weaknesses and understand progress toward school and grade level goals.

4.2 School climate

All school actors part of a team

The teachers and administrative assistant(s) at each school comment that they feel like part of a team where they are welcomed, appreciated and valued as professionals. The way each principal and school creates this feeling varies. At the San Pedro School, teachers mention that they feel the school is an enjoyable place to be and that its mission and vision match their own personal values, so it is a way to live out their beliefs and life goals. At the Apodaca and Independencia schools, principals focus on this as part of their responsibilities, mentioning that they constantly check-in with teachers as part of their team to ensure that they feel at home, and follow different strategies to make everyone feel part of the group.

Cultivating a strong sense of belonging and identity at the school for teachers, students and families

The principals and teachers at all three schools also mention the importance of ensuring that parents, families and students also feel like part of the school. Schools employ a variety of techniques to create a feeling of belonging and identity at each school. The Independencia School principal emphasizes the importance of simple elements like a slogan and school motto, school celebrations, and improvements in school infrastructure that promote the school's sense of pride. The San Pedro School principal emphasizes the value of involving parents in both classroom and school activities for this end. The Apodaca School principal focuses on the importance of always being willing and available to receive parents during the school day who want to speak to her.

Focus on school and classroom climate as an end in itself

The San Pedro School focuses on school climate as an end in itself, not only to increase academic learning. The school is known for its application of programs focused on peaceful relations such as “Aulas en Paz” (Classrooms in Peace) that involves teachers, families and students. It is also known for its use of programs such as Aprender a Participar, ¡Participando” that promote the active participation of children in their own learning and in solving important issues for the school.

4.3 Teachers: Everyday models for inclusion

Selection, training and promotion of teachers

The San Pedro as a private school differs from the Apodaca and the Independencia schools, where teachers are assigned by the state and the school has no autonomy over its staff. The San Pedro School has a rigorous teacher selection process that ensures that only those teachers with the right profile are at the school. An equally rigorous promotion and development process where teachers are constantly accompanied, given feedback and supported in order to continue improving their teaching abilities follows this. It is important to note that teachers have constant access to their supervisor for help and that the school also cultivates important spaces like the Technical School Council in order to provide time for teachers to share their experiences, learn from each other and continue their professional development.

The Apodaca and Independencia School, by contrast, comment that it is important to ensure that there is a climate of hard work and professionalism from all teachers. Given that it is difficult to fire teachers who are doing unsatisfactory work, the principals comment that ensuring a hard-working team makes it easier for newcomers to assimilate into the school culture and do good work as well.

Use of a variety of learning techniques in order to guarantee learning for all

All three schools distinguish themselves because especially teachers comment that they believe all students can learn, not just students who already or typically do well. This belief in the potential of all students – and subsequently the responsibility of teachers to unleash this potential in all students – translates into schools using a variety of techniques and tools in order to make learning accessible for all students. Teachers at all three schools mention concrete classroom techniques like explaining concepts in different ways the second and third time in order to help struggling students grasp new ideas, using a variety of pedagogical material, engaging in project-based learning, and using methods like student tutors (so that some students review while others learn from them, ensuring that no student gets left out of classroom activities), in addition to using the aid provided by support teachers. Additionally, none of the schools examined use streaming policies within a grade level.

Use of technology to provide better learning for all students

The San Pedro school distinguishes itself for its use of technology in helping teachers ensure that all students learn. The school uses the “SISTEMA 1” program and other iPad software that helps teachers have individual diagnosis per student, providing appropriate exercises and helping teachers give adequate and personalized follow up to

everyone. Teachers stress the value of this technology in helping them identify students who are falling behind, communicating advances regularly to parents in a way that promotes parents' involvement in students' learning and having assessment tools at their ready disposal, liberating teachers' time to work directly with students.

Close monitoring and follow up of individual student learning

All schools use some system that allows them to closely track students' individual learning. It is interesting to note that across all three schools, teachers comment that it is difficult to make sure that they are actually paying equal attention to each student, though they try to, simply because of the number of students per teacher. Therefore teachers across all three schools value systems that allow to have an objective sense of where each student is and ensure that they do not overlook anyone. At the San Pedro School, teachers focus on the value of the electronic software "SISTEMA 1" to do so. At the Apodaca and Independencia Schools, teachers emphasize the importance of having monthly diagnostic tests across key subjects that allow them to get a clear sense of students' learning.

4.4 Students and student-teacher relations

Focus on the integral human development of the student

The San Pedro School focuses on the integral human development of the student, not only to achieve better academic results, but because its vision of a successful education is one that attends to all aspects of the child, holistically. All school actors are in tune and aligned to this vision and ensure that the way teacher treat students and in turn that the administration manages the school follows from these principles. Students receive psychological help when needed from the school psychologist. All teachers seek to create personal bonds with their students in order to understand where they are emotionally, not just academically.

Focus on the dignity of the student in a context of high vulnerability

The Independencia and the Apodaca schools' staff are highly aware of the socioeconomic students that they serve and the difficulties at home that they face. Instead of ignoring this context or of wishing to do their work "in spite of it", the schools embrace the possibility of using that context to provide better services for children. Indeed in both schools the teachers believe part of their role is to treat each student with love and respect that is particularly essential because they may not be receiving such treating at home. Especially at the Independencia, this is also translated to a restoring of a dignity of each student, instead of viewing a student with pity, rather seeking to empower and return agency to each child in regards to his or her future.

4.5 School-parent relationships

Inclusion of the family in activities at the school

All three schools actively promote the inclusion the family in activities, including assemblies and celebrations, but also in the learning processes of students. All three

schools invite parents to events regularly, including ceremonies, assemblies and celebrations. Additionally to different degrees schools open their doors to parents who wish to participate in students' learning. For example the San Pedro School asks parents to participate in a reading program where they come in to classrooms and read to children. The Apodaca and Independencia schools ask for parents' support for student learning by keeping track of learning goals and homework, and also inviting parents to open classes.

Transparency in use of financial resources with parents association

The Apodaca School, like most public schools, asks for voluntary donations from parents in order to be able to get school materials and basic necessities. In order to encourage more cooperation, however, the school regularly reports in finances to all parents and makes its budget completely transparent so that everyone can access and consult it. This inspires trust and cooperation on behalf of families as well as they feel more involved in school decision-making and policies.

An empathetic vision: We are in this together

The Independencia and the San Pedro school teachers both comment that they struggle to get adequate participation from parents for a variety of activities, including voluntary monetary contributions for the school, help and follow-up with student homework, and basic activities like ensuring that students are fed, bathed and with shoes and clothes on for a full day at school. But instead of seeing parents and families as a kind of enemy that makes their job harder, teachers at both schools stress that they understand the difficulties that families face – tiring and time-consuming jobs, absent parents, financial stress – and that parents and teachers are working towards the same goal.

4.6 School-community relationships

The school is a place where we all learn

Both the Independencia and the San Pedro schools go beyond activities that just involve parents in students' learning or in school activities. They both promote activities where parents are actively invited to attend the school to *learn* as well, underscoring a common vision of the school as a place for the community's learning, not just for the students. This is a first step in the school truly opening its doors to the community and reflecting and responding to its needs as well.

In the Independencia School, this is translated to activities like “Working mornings” where parents come to the school and learn with their students. These activities go beyond just informing parents of students learning processes; rather, they seek to really make the parent a part of that learning process. Notably, the school also sometimes offers educational activities for the parents as well, as it does when parents are illiterate and the school aids in also giving literacy classes to them during these same mornings.

In the San Pedro School, this involves workshops around topics that are of interest to both parents and students. Workshops first have a session only for parents, then only for students, and then a final session where parents and students come together, in order to highlight the fact that parents are also learning about the given subject, and that families can learn and grow together.

Connecting to relevant institutions around the school to get help when needed

Especially the Apodaca and Independencia schools that face more vulnerable conditions within their student populations ensure that they have adequate channels and access to relevant public institutions in the neighborhood, including hospitals, social workers and other public social institutions in order to get help for kids when needed. This is due to both principals actively creating and consolidating these links with these institutions and then encouraging parents to use these resources when needed. Even so, there is an opportunity to do this more intensely and in a more coordinated manner to provide more adequate support.

5. Conclusions

Success ingredients in the schools and challenges for inclusion

The schools analyzed in the Mexican context offer good practices for further study and possible replication in terms of inclusive education:

- ***Strong principals*** who have relevant leadership experience and who internalize, consolidate and effectively communicate and spread the school's social vision to all relevant school actors lead schools. School principals in all three schools set the tone for the school climate and ensure that the school lives out its social purpose and that all school actors also live up to this shared vision.
- All school actors ***take the time and space to hold team meetings*** in order to communicate key information, align all activities around a common shared vision, understand advances towards the school's yearly goals and reconnect as a team. This is often done through well-planned Technical School Council sessions that provide relevant and valuable to teachers as well as administrators.
- Inclusive and firm leadership that ***fosters a welcoming environment*** for all key school actors, from teachers to secretaries to the principal and his or her assistants. School actors feel welcomed, appreciated and valued at the school and treated as professionals.
- Committed teachers view their job to ***develop the potential of every student*** in whatever ways work the student; teachers internalize their responsibility of engaging students differently and of connecting to each student personally.
- Teachers use a variety of resources in order to engage each student individually and also ***attend to different levels of learning within the classroom***, and are supported by principals and support teachers in this endeavor. Classroom teachers use a variety of resources for this end, whether through technology, with support teachers who work with students individualized, or through techniques like mentoring and tutoring between students to ensure that all learn and no one stays behind.
- ***Ensuring a healthy, safe and peaceful classroom and school environment*** for all students, either through specific programs focused on creating a healthy school climate or through specific teacher and administrator actions focused on the same goal. Ensuring such an environment is viewed as an end goal in itself, not only useful as an intermediate goal to achieve better academic results.

- ***Parents are involved in school activities*** like celebrations and school-wide campaigns, but also ***directly in student learning*** through attending open classes, workshops and collaborating with students through specific homework activities. Additionally providing activities where both parents and children come to the school to learn, stressing the view that the school is a place for everyone's learning.
- ***Transparency in the use of school resources and constant communication*** with the families regarding school priorities in terms of budget in order to promote voluntary contributions to the school from families. Additionally principals often search other resources (both private and public) in order to get the necessary infrastructure and materials for school operation and to enhance the school's capacities.

Challenges and aspects to improve

The study also identified common challenges and aspects to improve across all three schools (to different degrees) in terms of promoting a fully inclusive education to all children:

- Attention of the principal to pedagogical topics, more than to just school management issues, is often not possible because of the great needs of each school in terms of management and the lack of administrative support, but should be encouraged.
- Frequency and structure of teacher class observations and opportunities for feedback from colleagues and the principal or a pedagogical leader on teacher practices and techniques can be higher and can be promoted more strongly at all schools.
- Teacher training and opportunities for professional development are often limited or not connected to the school and local context or the needs of the teachers and the school environment.
- Inclusion of parents in the school, not only through activities, but also in actual school decision-making, is not witnessed very strongly in the three schools.
- Inclusion and connection with the surrounding community around the school, beyond the families of students attending the school, and learning that uses the local context as a learning tool for children, is not witnessed very strongly in the schools.
- Infrastructure and management practices beyond the school's jurisdiction: the lack of necessary infrastructure for student learning, the lack of sufficient teachers to cover all groups or the lack of school psychologists, support teachers, etc., in addition to classrooms of over 35 students.
- Better networking and connections with outside public institutions that can support students, especially in contexts of high social vulnerability such as foster cares, social services, and health agencies, in order to more quickly link students who need these services with appropriate institutions.

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