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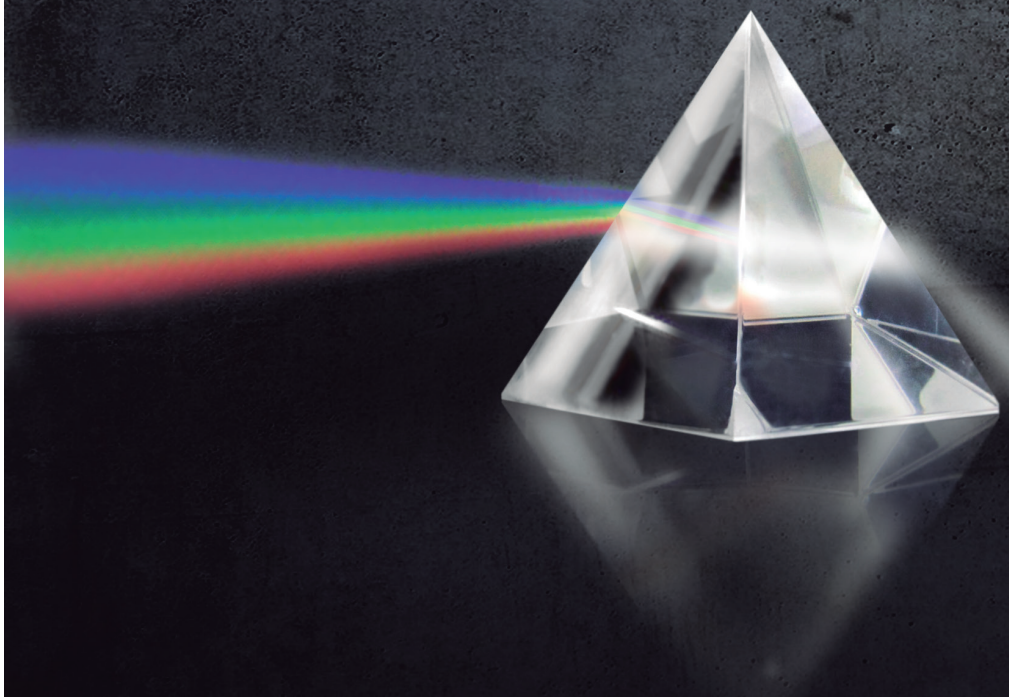

2nd anniversary

Special Report: Multi-Grade Schools

Local Building of a Federal Evaluation Policy
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With Computer Graphics and Texts in zapoteco, maya, mixteco, otomí y totonaca.

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Would you like to know more about multi-grade schools in Mexico? Read our infographic in the section *Así vamos*, on page (52) of this ***Gazette***.

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SPECIAL REPORT: MULTI-GRADE SCHOOLS
ARTICLE

Attending Diversity Through Multi-Grade Schools

"Students' evaluation in multi-grade schools should be re-conceptualized, with the aim of considering several experiences that not necessarily are measurable," says the author, responsible for the Rural Education Research Network, who talks of a socially debt generated by the way in which the services that reach localities are offered.

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Numerically important within the Mexican Educational System (Spanish acronym: SEN), multi-grade schools—namely, places where a teacher attends more than a single school grade—constituted 53% of the country's nursery schools, 51% of the primary schools, and 25.4% of the *telesecundarias* [TV-based distance learning] during the 2013-2014 cycle (INEE, 2015:305).

Just as specialized literature points out (Ezpeleta, 1997; Ezpeleta & Weiss, 2000; Fuenlabrada & Weiss, 2006; SEP, 2006; Juárez, 2016 and 2009; Juárez & Rodríguez, 2016; Juárez, Vargas & Vera, 2015; Taboada, 2014), a good portion of rural multi-grade schools in Mexico have insufficient or precarious infrastructure and equipment, besides being placed in locations with a high level of marginalization, which further complicates the teaching work and the learning processes on the students' side. Teachers working in those sites require to improve their processes of continuous training, with the goal of strengthening multi-grade work strategies in curricular planning and adjustment, teaching strategies development, collaborating work, as well as pertinent and contextualized evaluation, to mention some.

It is also necessary to improve the processes of management, administration, and school supervision to attend the particularities of multi-grade schools, where some teacher perform simultaneously executive and teaching tasks.

In recent years, studies on good practices displayed by diverse actors or institutions involved with the schools have taken root. However, and following Pieck (2012:41-42), we rather talk about meaningful experiences than good practices, since "practice can only be repetition without learning (...) Meaningful is related, in terms of response to needs, to adaptation to a context (…) Something is meaningful because it leaves something in those persons participating."

In the framework of two research projects, we tried to get to know better, and study, meaningful experiences developed in four rural primary schools in the states of Hidalgo, Veracruz, and San Luis Potosí; these were places where a single teacher attended all the existent school grades. In these schools we interviewed teachers, authorities, students, and parents, and we also watched their lessons. With the risk of simplifying complex and particular situations, down below we will try to review the key results obtained.

Following the proposals elaborated by several instances (like the *2005 Multi-Grade Educational Proposal* elaborated by the

Secretariat of Public Education), teachers approach contents by means of a common theme, generally a trans-disciplinary one, directed to all the students. Then, they develop strategies so that students, according to their own interests, ages, and/or grades may carry out activities of various levels of complexity, whether with the teacher's direct support or through autonomous work entailing research activities which imply using text books, library books, electronic tablets (wherever they're available), observation, or interviews to community members, to name a few. After that, spaces are opened to share and socialize the themes before grade, or group, fellow students, and even before parents.

For teachers, that implies an enormous strength in the area of class planning and a certain degree of flexibility, agreed with authorities such as supervisors and/or technical-pedagogical advisors, to allow them to approach the grades' contents in different time periods which not necessarily match those established in school calendars.

It needs to be stressed that the studied schools count with infrastructure, equipment, and learning materials which favor the development of activities. Its existence implied huge management efforts—both by teachers themselves and by parents—to obtain, manage, and demonstrate external resources stemming from diverse sources —essentially at state level, but also from foundations, and civil society organizations.

As we have pointed out in previous studies (Juárez, 2011), in many rural communities it is because of collective efforts that some public works and services reach and remain in those places. Thus, governmental actions orchestrated in rural zones do not account for the economic and social efforts their inhabitants have had to do beforehand so as to provide in their communities—and maintain—services (like schools, in these cases) or infrastructure (electric power or roads). This "social debt" (by forcing the poor to spend bigger resources for public services or works that are offered for free, or at a lower cost, in other contexts, mainly urban) keeps increasing since there have been no changes in the way services are offered in those localities.

Practically in every school observed, the so-called minimal normality was implemented. In other words, days established in the school calendar were observed, teaching personnel started promptly their activities, and time was fundamentally used in learning activities. That distinguishes these from other rural schools where specialized literature has identified a significant teacher absenteeism, besides not fulfilling the established working day.

Teachers' stability and commitment towards the students and the inhabitants of these localities was also a common element in the analyzed schools. On average, teachers worked in the same school center during five cycles, unlike the high teaching rotation that rural communities suffer, where teachers stay just one school cycle on average.

It must be emphasized that multi-grade favors what Santos (2011) names as "circulation of knowledges in the classroom," that is to say, the diversification of the educational practices through different and complementary proposals; that those knowledges flow in terms of complementarity or different deepening level starting from pooling strategies which allow the students "projecting what has been learned beyond its limits [...], start building bases for future learning [...]; for the students of superior grades, those approaches allow to resume contact with previously addressed knowledges, which enables to reinforce and consolidate bases for the appropriation of current ones" (Santos, 2011:90).

As it can be glimpsed, meaningful experiences developed in multi-grade primary schools combine a series of elements related with teacher training, which allows them planning and developing pertinent activities, contextualized and adequate for each educational level. This favors research and collaborating work, and the exchange of ideas between students, as well as teachers' responsibility and commitment before students and community members, with the aim of staying in schools for several school cycles, fulfilling the minimum normality and supporting external resources management for improving and sustaining the centers. This management has allowed counting with adequate infrastructure, materials, and equipment.

Some interviewed teachers have to face shared problems such as—they concur in pointing out—workloads that imply developing executive tasks simultaneously with teaching ones. There are proven experiences in other nations that discharge unitary teachers from management activities, like the roles of itinerant principals or the organization of several school centers depending of a central space, which provides a logistical support to settle the numerous administrative tasks. It is needed that Mexican educational authorities decide to confront and solve this situation.

Another essential element that would benefit unitary schools is providing them with canteens that would offer balanced food to the students for free. This action is basic to address the child malnutrition lived at rural disenfranchised locations, besides attending school absenteeism and dropout.

As for training, teachers pointed out the absence of courses, workshops, or seminars specifically developed to facilitate their work in multi-grade classrooms. In this sense, the international experience also indicates that opening spaces so that rural teachers share they own experiences and practices, added to qualification in specific aspects like multigrade planning and evaluation, encourage the development of meaningful experiences.

Specifically, in terms of students' evaluation, we concur with Santos (2011:89), who points out the difficulty of rendering account of the knowledges learned:

> Evaluation mechanisms measure the distance between knowledge taught and knowledge learned, although they are not particularly effective to verify the nature and characteristics of the latter. They even have many difficulties to find the most adequate and dependable learning indicators, resorting to those of applicability and transference, for example. This has the effect that, in general, the evaluation mechanisms are conceived departing from a fantasy which makes them say more than they can say.

Thus, students' evaluation in multi-grade schools should be redesigned and re-conceptualized to consider various experiences, happening both inside and out of schools, which are not necessarily measurable or quantifiable, such as traditional evaluations have been conceived.

As we have pointed out in previous works, the development of actions centered in the schools is not enough. This must be reinforced by health, alimentary, labor, and economic policies that aim to provide a greater social equity and equality in terms of income and social welfare. As long as the

Mexican State focuses its efforts in what happens inside classrooms, it will leave out issues related with the teaching-learning processes that do not necessarily have the school as their stage, but are related with social contexts where equity and social inclusion must be the goals of governmental actions. €

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Know more about the Rural Education Research Network:
http://www.rededucacionrural.mx/

SPECIAL REPORT: MULTI-GRADE SCHOOLS
CHRONICLE

Educated in Nature: A Multi-Grade Experience in the Veracruz Mountain Range[1]

With this collaboration from Jay Griffiths, an English writer who narrates her visit to the Center of Indigenous Arts in Papantla, Veracruz—included in UNESCO's World List of Best Safeguarding Practices for Intangible Cultural Heritage—the *Gazette* opens up its pages to the voice of chroniclers in order to observe schools from a different perspective. Today, with multi-grade education historically linked to schools from Italian, English, Hindu, and Latin American indigenous cultures.

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On October 12th, 2015, I was invited to the Center of Indigenous Arts (Spanish acronym: CAI) in Papantla, Veracruz, 300 kilometers east of Mexico City. The Center was celebrating the tenth anniversary since its foundation and promoting decolonized indigenous education.

Hundreds of people, mainly Totonac, a pre-Hispanic civilization, were gathered in a circle covered with flowers with a lit candle. From young children to the elderly, they were all dressed with the care needed for a celebration: Men wearing white cotton trousers and robes, and women in white dresses with flowers embroidered on them. All colors have meaning: white symbolizes purity of thought.

Copal incense weaves the breeze. Banana resin is used to paint shooting stars and flowers on the pottery, which I am told is a sacred work because it comes from Mother Earth. "Every object is charged with hundreds of years of knowledge," says Salomón Bazbaz Lapidus, founder of the CAI.

At the center of the circle, flowers are drawn in a mandala—or path—that explains what education aspires to be. A path of huge, waxy banana leaves links exhibits of each Traditional Home-School —traditional medicine, storytelling, pottery, dance, painting, theater, cotton, carpentry, and even communication media and tourism. Seen as a whole, it represents the path of education "because we are following a long path which has not been conquered."

The day began with a great blessing and continued with speeches of confirmation and celebration of the work at CAI. The path of education must be walked, as they say, little by little: Each step involves community participation, "imbued in dialogues and ceremonies;" every word articulates its own *cosmovision* (world view). "The path is followed with paused movements, listening intently to the grandfathers and grandmothers," says Humberto García García, the Totonac educator.

It took eight years to develop the educational ideas that are now symbolically drawn at our feet. Each item has its meaning: The

green circle represents the natural world, the center of all things. The stars represent each person's special gift. The well rooted trees show us that knowledge must not disappear. And the circular designs illustrate the way in which knowledge is constructed through dialogue, which is also circular. The seeds show the importance of putting concepts into practice —planting an idea for it to grow into a reality.

"The worst thing you can do is to impose," says Domingo Francisco Velasco, a renowned teacher, "that is the main problem of humanity." The word in Spanish *imponer* ("to impose") carries heavy significance and a harsh history. The imposition of the cathedral symbolizes it perfectly —the subjugation of a continent, the imposition of what I call an intellectual apartheid.

Students per three-year period at the Center of Indigenous Arts

Year	Students
2009	423
2012	630
2015	785

Source: CAI, 2016

Current population at the Center of Indigenous Arts

Students	Teachers
541	97

Source: CAI, 2016

Francisco Velasco mentions two regions that knowledge comes from: the great within and the great outside. The language of the land will teach the mind that listens, if we are willing and wise. "Knowledge is here," he says with his hand on his heart, his face shining, shy and assured. "You have to search deep within yourself to find it, there is already much knowledge in our minds, in our hands, and in our heart," although the natural world is master and guide. Domingo speaks the language of the river; clean, constant, clear. "In nature there are places where you can find your moment and revitalize it."

This idea of education goes far beyond the importance of the respect for the culture of indigenous societies: It aims to transmit its unique cultural heritage for future generations. It reaches the very heart of the relationships between humanity and the natural world in order to properly align the relationship between people and nature. We are not speaking of "environmentalism" as a trend or pastime, but as an issue of survival.

The expression of rejection to the imposed imperialist education has a long history. At the start of the 20th century, Rabindranath Tagore established Shantiniketan —an experimental school that is the Visva-Bharati University today, in Bengal—as a protest against the British colonialist education. Classes were taught outdoors, the natural world honored as a teacher. Stories, music, and art were incorporated into learning, not exams. Neither was the business world.

These teaching ideas echo the Forest Schools in the Reggio Emilia system, an educational experience born in Italy in 1945, acknowledged globally as one of the best educational proposals for early childhood, and in the many young radical schools which emphasize the importance of nature and art, and value moral education and teaching of meaning as much as academic work. Meanwhile, the educational philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti, Hindu writer, manifested his repulsion of the ways in which typical education of his time served nationalism and the economy, so he taught ethics —human kindness.

Radical education has often focused on similar issues: from Devon to Sierra Nevada, from Bengal to Veracruz, people speak of a common sense of learning of the body and mind that serves all.

The colonized indigenous cultures are not the only ones that know this —not only countries that have suffered from imperialism or slavery, but also any human being who has felt educational stress, cruelty, deficiency, or marginality. The "Dominant Society," say Arhuaco people of Colombia with true bitterness, "knows little about the world of nature, but a lot about how to destroy it." At the chore of Arhuaco education there is the sacred duty of keeping the balance of life —protecting nature.

If this is the desired end of the educational path, what steps must we take if we think that each child is unique and unrepeatable? It is a matter of the gift each one has, say the Totonacs —the seed that must be discovered and nurtured from childhood. Effectively, they say, as do many talented educators of the Domi-

In the Home-Schools of the Center of Indigenous Arts, working as multi-grade schools the lines of Totonac identity are transmitted, the practices which shape their world vision —"Kantiyan" (Home of the Wise Grandparents), World of Cotton, Pottery, Painting, Representation Art, Music, Proper Words, Art of Healing, Heart of Wood, Traditional Cooking, Community Tourism, Communication Media and Broadcasting, the Earth, Traditional Dance, and four Schools for Children Voladores in the region's communities.

Student ages at the Center of Indigenous Arts

	Women			Men			
	6 to 12 years of age	13 to 17 years of age	18 to 59 years of age	6 to 12 years of age	13 to 17 years of age	18 to 59 years of age	60 or more
Attendees at the CAI	54	60	76	59	34	34	17
In the communities*	5	36	43	2	37	51	66

* Classes are given not only at the CAI, but also in nearby communities within the Totonac area.

Source: CAI, 2016

nant Society: We must not ask if a child is talented, we must ask which is his or her talent.

According to Totonac tradition, Grandmothers in the sky joyfully throw stars to the children, and the ones that "stick" are their gifts. This idea of the gift is so important that it is inherent to the word "Totonac," which means "three hearts". They explain it thus: We need three hearts to know our own gift, to receive it, and to put it to the service of the world. The Totonac tongue is perfumed with metaphors: "Our speech is covered with flowers," they say.

García García realized his gift was teaching. His first school, he says, was the Totonac culture, including what he learned from the elders in their ceremonies, pottery, and medicine. He went to university and continued on to postgraduate studies in education, and was invited to collaborate in this initiative for rethinking education. He smiles, half sad and half proud: "I have had to unlearn what I learned in university. All my academic qualifications were insufficient when facing what I had to do here." He speaks of sadness, confusion, and fear, but also of how the collective pain became a journey of discovery to open up their truth to the world. With the intention of letting in the glimmering words, he says softly: "What we share is at once reality and metaphor."

There are few more dramatic examples of the teaching of mystery than that of the *mamos* (priests) of Tairona, in Colombia's Sierra Nevada. The Kogi, Arhuaco, Wiwa, and Kankuamo peoples are descendants of the Tairona civilization, and their *mamos* are educated for this role from early childhood. Young apprentices are taken to live in a dark cave and are not allowed to see the light of day or the full moon. They are taught songs, myths, and the ancient ritual language of the *mamos.* Nine years go by.

Then the deeper training begins: Another nine years in darkness, learning the knowledge written in stones, forests, lakes, and mountains, hearing about the Great Mother, studying divination, meditation, and the sacred duty of maintaining the balance of the natural world. They develop their insight at the price of sight. The gift of vision is given in darkness. The inward eye intuiting the mysterious before seeing the material.

But the Arhuaco people realized their material world was being stolen as *mestizos* repeatedly cheated them in transactions that resulted in the Arhuaco losing their land. They decided their education needed something extra. Training in business, accounts, purchases, sales. So, in 1915, the Arhuaco asked the Colombian government to send them teachers for learning Math and written Spanish.

The government infamously twisted the request, sending in Capuchin friars who prohibited indigenous language, called their cultural heritage "devilish" and "heathenish," and enclosed children in a school that was called "the orphanage." Friars fined the children for every word they spoke in their own language (the price was 10 cents a word, in the 1930s) and taught the children, the Arhuaco say, "nothing of value". The Arhuaco rid themselves of the friars only in 1982, literally drumming them out, surrounding the mission buildings, singing and dancing with accordions and flutes so the priests couldn't get a wink of sleep. When the Capuchins left, the Arhuaco set about transforming their education system.

What do you get if you decolonize education? The best of both hemispheres, it seems. One Arhuaco initiative, the Indigenous Educational Center Simunurwa, set up in 2007, includes numeracy and literacy in its syllabus. They use mobile phones and radio stations to communicate with international human-rights organizations. They use their own language, stories, art, rites of passage, spirituality, music, and law. The input of the elders is vital, and rivers and fields are classrooms. Indigenous cosmology is taught alongside Western philosophers, while certain plants are considered teachers, as they are across the Amazon, in diagnosing sickness as well as treatment, and Arhuaco mamos are grief struck because certain plants have "vanished without even leaving us traces of their knowledge, of their teachings, of their healing properties."

Back in Papantla, in Mexico, Lapidus sweeps his arm protectively around the CAI —which has been awarded a UNESCO award and is included in the List of Best Practices in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. The plaque itself is decorated with vanilla stems.

The Center of Indigenous Arts has professors such as Juan Tiburcio, a poet, visual artist, potter, and embroiderer. His book, *Xlatamat Jun / La vida del colibrí* (Life of the Hummingbird), published by the CAI, earned the Ostana Award in 2015 in Italy, in the category "Mother Tongue Literature". On her part, Martha Soledad Gómez Atzin cooking teeacher, is a member of the Diplomatic Corps of Chefs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SER). Among the students, there are cases such as Víctor García Castaño, a *volador* with a degree in Education, who earned the State Youth Award 2015 and is Coordinator of the project State of Social and Economic Development of the Totonac Region (Spanish acronym: EDESRT), which is conducted together with the National Autonomous University of Mexico; and Zaira Simbrón Vázquez, teacher of the House of Pottery for seven years and participant in international residencies.

When the healer Francisco Velasco speaks of the best kind of education, he applies it widely: "This wisdom is not just for indigenous people but it should be universal." "There is a reason why we live on Earth," says the teacher García García, "because each of us has a service to perform, a gift to develop in life to reach the light and to give it as an offering. It is blessed." A green thought in a green shade, true education reflects qualities of life itself —it is generous, generative, diverse, and creative.

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy strongly influences Schumacher College in Devon, UK, and visiting there recently I met Martin Shaw, its mythologist-in-residence. If I played Fantasy Cabinet, I would make Shaw my education secretary. He calls himself a storyteller, although I would call him a story-doctor, using myths to heal. "Stories are a sharp knife," he says. Stories are revered as teachers of true stature all over the indigenous world; when encoding ecological knowledge or ritual significance, they can caution and deftly caution, stirring conscience without causing shame, and they can also comfort.

He mentions the Gaelic tradition where educational stories were called the "swan-feather cloak," and "every moment of your life should have you clothed in stories." Without this, children feel unsupported and isolated. "What I see around me is children with a colonized imagination. They don't suffer an attention deficit," says Shaw, "but a deficit of images that arrest the soul. Once you provide them, you are in the business of real and true education."

"Name something", I ask, "that is important for children to learn." He responds: "Manners." I smile, leaving a broad pause.

"They need to learn to be valiant. The kind of education I want results in affecting their relationship, as adults, with the earth, so that in time we move from a society of taking to a culture of giving, a society of relatedness. I want them to believe that if they don't say an inventive prayer, the Moon may not come out. That they know they are a little part of an ecosystem that, for a few years, glimpses itself through human eyes. Inventiveness is innate in children—it is not hard to provoke a courting culture, to speak Firebird language.

I hear it. I know it. I honor it.

The furious sensitivity of Romanticism is here, fiercely kneeling in the presence of the natural world; not as a rose-colored moment in cultural history, but as a perennial and necessary aspect of the human psyche. And children are great Romantics. "Romanticism is activism," says Shaw. "And in children it is essential, it is not an indulgence. This kind of education is so basic, it's like rediscovering fire."

Meanwhile, in the Sierra Nevada, after 18 years of creating a world in darkness, through the imagination alone, one morning the young *mamo* is led out to see his first sunrise. The image he had painted in his mind, no matter how bright, will be dimmed by contrast. The world of his thoughts, no matter how generous, will be meanly bleak in comparison. The picture he had made will be sad and poor beside the spiraling, splendorous world, its transcendence finally and truly contemplated. The shock of rapture. Dazed by beauty and amazed by light. This is a sight whose splendor leaves him awestruck for life: To see the radiance of the divine Earth and to know it holy. ∈

[1] With information of the Center of Indigenous Arts (CAI) of Papantla, Veracruz

This text was developed based on its original publication: *Schooled in Nature, Aeon Essays* as a contribution of the writer for this special report: https://goo.gl/AQA9pc

To learn more about the Center of Indigenous Arts: https://goo.gl/xt1YL2

https://goo.gl/wHLJOx

To read more about Jay Griffiths: http://www.jaygriffiths.com/

SPEAKING ALOUD

Specialization in Policies & Management of Educational Evaluation: Development of Institutional Skills for Evaluation

The development and promotion of a culture that takes evaluation as a fundamental decision-making tool is a necessary condition for educational improvement, hence the need to initiate a collaboration which allow to strengthen the capabilities of those who participate in the National Educational Evaluation Policy. Gómez-Morin and Rubio Almonacid explain the strategy.

The 2013 Educational Reform, which marked a departure point for the consolidation of an educational evaluation culture in Mexico, generated the emergence, modification, or ratification of players. Also, since that same year, the Latin American Social Sciences Institute (FLACSO) in Mexico has collaborated with the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEE) in several research projects. This initial cooperation developed a national inventory of institutions and organizations dedicated to educational evaluation. A year later, the evaluation of institutional capabilities in those areas responsible for educational evaluation in state governments took place. The results of this work made visible the existence of institutional deficits to confront the challenges of the reform, especially in terms of educational evaluation. One of the most critical gaps in this area encompasses the management capability of all actors and evaluation processes (students, schools, teachers, educational materials, syllabuses, and system), as well as the design of intervention strategies for improving educational quality.

These findings, together with other international and national studies, required designing a strategy to promote and strengthen the qualification and professionalization of the National Educational System (SNE). This was consolidated in one of the two transversal axes of the National Educational Evaluation Policy Guiding Document (PNEE), "Strengthening of

National Educational Evaluation Policy Gazette in Mexico