

From quality to excellence? Hermeneutical-critical analysis of the concept of educational quality in the New Mexican School

¿De la calidad a la excelencia? Análisis hermenéutico-crítico del concepto de calidad educativa en la Nueva Escuela Mexicana

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to analyze the transformation of the concept of educational quality in Mexico, from the paradigm of standardized measurement to the notion of excellence promoted by the New Mexican School (NEM), in order to understand its foundations, tensions, and implications for academic management and institutional evaluation. Qualitative research of a documentary nature was developed, with a theoretical-argumentative design and hermeneutical-critical orientation, made up of normative documents, international declarations and academic literature on quality, excellence, professional autonomy of teachers, School Technical Councils and institutional self-evaluation. The categorical analysis made it possible to identify continuities, ruptures and gaps in the transition from quality to excellence. According to the results, the standardized quality provided useful information to diagnose gaps and guide educational policy decisions; however, it also reduced the complexity of the school experience to performance indicators. In addition, educational excellence broadened the training horizon towards social justice, inclusion and curricular contextualization, although it showed limits when it did not specify clear mechanisms to assess the progress of learning. Likewise, the professional autonomy of teachers and the School Technical Councils were recognized as relevant conditions, as long as they were articulated with evidence, collegial deliberation and institutional follow-up. It was concluded that the NEM partially exceeded the standardized paradigm, but did not solve the underlying evaluation problem by itself. Institutional self-evaluation emerged as a critical mediation between social justice and evaluative rigor, by allowing educational excellence to demonstrate what improved, for whom it improved, and under what institutional conditions that improvement occurred.

Key words: Educational Quality, Excellence, School Technical Advice, Professional Autonomy.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar la transformación del concepto de calidad educativa en México, desde el paradigma de la medición estandarizada hasta la noción de excelencia promovida por la Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM), para comprender sus fundamentos, tensiones e implicaciones para la gestión académica y la evaluación institucional. Se desarrolló una investigación cualitativa de carácter documental, con diseño teórico-argumentativo y orientación hermenéutico-crítica, integrada por documentos normativos, declaraciones internacionales y literatura académica sobre calidad, excelencia, autonomía profesional docente, Consejos Técnicos Escolares y autoevaluación institucional. El análisis categorial permitió identificar continuidades, rupturas y vacíos en el tránsito de la calidad a la excelencia. Según los resultados, la calidad estandarizada aportó información útil para diagnosticar brechas y orientar decisiones de política educativa; sin embargo, también redujo la complejidad de la experiencia escolar a indicadores de rendimiento. Además, la excelencia educativa amplió el horizonte formativo hacia la justicia social, la inclusión y la contextualización curricular, aunque mostró límites cuando no precisó mecanismos claros para valorar el progreso de los aprendizajes. Asimismo, la autonomía profesional docente y los Consejos Técnicos Escolares fueron reconocidos como condiciones relevantes, siempre que se articularan con evidencias, deliberación colegiada y seguimiento institucional. Se concluyó que la NEM superó parcialmente el paradigma estandarizado, pero no resolvió por sí misma el problema evaluativo de fondo. La autoevaluación institucional emergió como una mediación crítica entre justicia social y rigor evaluativo, al permitir que la excelencia educativa pudiera demostrar qué mejoró, para quién mejoró y bajo qué condiciones institucionales ocurrió esa mejora.

Palabras clave: Calidad educativa, excelencia, consejo técnico escolar, autonomía profesional.

INTRODUCTION

Ideas about the quality of education have constituted, during the last decades, one of the most persistent and disputed axes of the educational debate and public policy. Quality is not a neutral attribute or a technical fact that can be fixed once and for all; It is a historically and socially situated construction, linked to the national project, to economic development and to the expectations that each society places in its educational institutions. Therefore, reducing it to performance indicators impoverishes its pedagogical scope, since a school can show favorable results and, even so, reproduce practices that are not fair or exclusionary (Valdés & Ramírez-Casas del Valle, 2021). In this sense, the quality of education can be understood as a kind of utopia and successive approaches (Arrién, 1995), whose content is redefined according to the political priorities, the dominant pedagogical theories and the regulatory frameworks in force in each period. Understanding what is meant by quality at a given time therefore requires attention to the way in which the concept is enunciated in official documents, translated into evaluation devices and discussed in the specialized literature.

The installation of quality as a global imperative was not a spontaneous phenomenon, but the result of an international agenda that, since the end of the twentieth century, placed the improvement of learning at the center of educational reforms. The World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien in 1990, and the regional agreements that followed, such as those expressed at the PROMEDLAC IV meeting in Quito in 1991 (Torres, s.f.), consolidated the idea that access to school should be accompanied by the effective satisfaction of basic learning needs (Conferencia Mundial sobre Educación para Todos, 1990; Torres, s.f.). Years later, the follow-up report dedicated to the quality imperative reinforced this orientation by placing quality as an indispensable condition for the realization of the right to education (UNESCO, 2005). However, this same agenda tended to link quality with standardized measurement, comparable indicators, and international tests, which favored an instrumental reading of the educational phenomenon. The problem was not the production of evidence, but its conversion into the dominant criterion for defining the value of

school, teaching, and learning (Sandoval Flores & Rangel Mont, 2024; Díaz-Barriga & Jiménez-Vázquez, 2020).

In Mexico, this rationality found fertile ground. Between 1985 and 2017, the predominant definitions of quality were articulated around external evaluation, accountability, and comparison of results. The construction of a system of indicators, together with the application of standardized tests such as ENLACE, EXCALE and, later, PLANEA, expressed confidence that quality could be objectified through periodic measurements and certifications (National Institute for the Evaluation of Education [INEE], 2015). The consolidation of INEE as an autonomous body represented the highest point of this paradigm, by providing the State with systematic information on the performance of the education system. The curricular reforms of this period, analyzed by García-Garduño (2013), were inscribed in a logic of efficiency and alignment between content, standards, and evaluation, in which academic management was subordinated to the fulfillment of measurable goals. However, pedagogical theory warned early on that quality could not be reduced to its indicators, since it is a relative concept, dependent on the history and educational purposes of each institution (Colom Cañellas, 1988; Gimeno Sacristán, 1995).

The paradigm shift occurred with the educational reform promoted from 2019 and with the publication of the Curriculum for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education 2022, a document that questions the curricular policy focused on an instrumental and utilitarian philosophy of knowledge and proposes, instead, an orientation based on excellence, the professional autonomy of teachers and the community context (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2024). In this framework, the New Mexican School (NEM) deliberately replaces the term quality with that of excellence, understood not as an external standard of performance, but as a process of continuous improvement aimed at the integral formation of students and social justice. This conceptual shift was accompanied by a significant institutional reorganization: the disappearance of INEE and the creation of a new agency in charge of continuous improvement modified the scaffolding of evaluation and, with it, the questions about how what was previously measured is valued today.

This transition poses a theoretical and practical problem of the first order. By replacing a concept with a strong tradition of operationalization, the quality associated with indicators and results, with another with broader and more normative contours, excellence associated with autonomy and context, the NEM runs the risk of strengthening the formative dimension of the educational project at the cost of weakening the mechanisms that allow for the monitoring of learning. The issue is not minor for the academic management of institutions, which require clear criteria to guide decision-making, or for teachers, who are largely responsible for translating professional autonomy into relevant pedagogical practices. Hence, it is necessary to carefully examine what this conceptual change implies, what continuities and ruptures it establishes with respect to the previous paradigm and what gaps it could generate in the field of institutional evaluation.

Consequently, the objective of this study was to analyze the transformation of the concept of educational quality in Mexico, from the paradigm of standardized measurement to the notion of excellence promoted by the NEM, in order to understand its foundations, its tensions and its implications for academic management and evaluation. The question that guides the inquiry is the following: does the transition from quality to excellence in the NEM go beyond the standardized measurement model or does it reintroduce a gap in the evaluation of learning? This question guides both the selection of the documentary corpus and the interpretation of the findings.

To answer it, the work is organized based on a documentary analysis of hermeneutical-critical orientation that articulates the normative documents of the reform, the declarations of international organizations and the academic literature on quality, excellence and school management. The argumentation advances through a dialectical device that confronts the thesis of standardized quality with the antithesis of its critique from equity and inclusion, to lead to a synthesis that claims quality with social justice. Finally, institutional self-evaluation is proposed as a strategy capable of consolidating professional autonomy without renouncing the rigorous evaluation of educational processes.

METHODOLOGY

Study Approach and Design

This work is part of a qualitative research of a documentary nature, with a theoretical-argumentative design and a hermeneutical-critical orientation. The choice responds to the nature of the object of study: empirical data or measurement results are not analyzed, but the discursive transformation of a concept as expressed in normative documents and in specialized literature. Documentary research is assumed as a qualitative approach technique aimed at collecting, selecting, and interpreting information from secondary sources to ontologically understand the object of study (Reyes-Ruiz & Carmona-Alvarado, 2020). The design is complemented by a dialectical analytical device with Hegelian roots (thesis, antithesis and synthesis), used to order the tension between the paradigm of external measurement and that of integral formation.

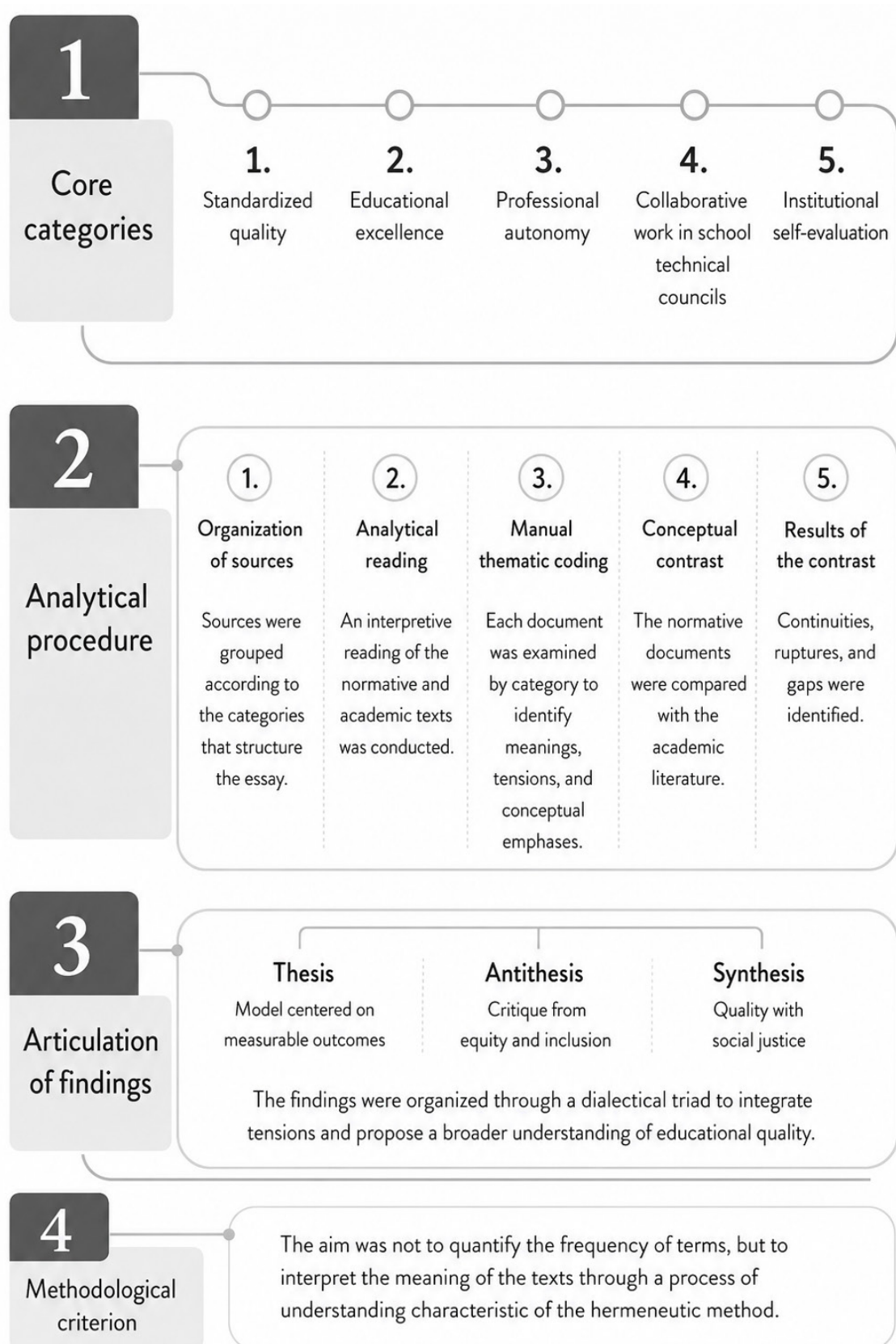
Documentary corpus and selection criteria

The corpus was made up of three types of sources: official normative documents (the Curriculum for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education 2022 and the General Education Law), declarations and reports from international organizations (Jomtien, PROMEDLAC IV and UNESCO) and academic literature on quality, excellence, school management and professional autonomy. The following inclusion criteria were established: direct relevance to the conceptualization of educational quality or excellence in Mexico; verifiable official, institutional or academic origin; and coverage of the time span that allows tracing the evolution of the concept, from the previous definitions (1985-2017) to the 2022 Reform. Exclusion criteria were considered to be sources with no explicit link to the object, non-specialized opinions, and documents that mention the reform without discussing its foundations. The temporal amplitude is deliberate and obeys the purpose of reconstructing a conceptual displacement, not a claim to bibliometric exhaustiveness.

Organisation and analysis procedure

Figure 1.

Hermeneutic procedure of organization and documentary analysis



According to Figure 1, the sources were organized around the categories that structure the essay: standardized quality, educational excellence, professional autonomy, collegial work in school technical councils, and institutional self-evaluation. The analysis consisted of an analytical reading, a manual thematic coding by category and a conceptual contrast between the normative documents and the academic literature, in order to identify continuities, ruptures and gaps. The findings were articulated through the dialectical triad: the thesis of the model focused on measurable results, the antithesis of the critique from equity and inclusion, and the synthesis of quality with social justice. The aim was not to quantify the frequency of terms, but to interpret the meaning of the texts, in a process of understanding typical of the hermeneutical method (Fuster Guillén, 2019; Finol de Franco & Morillo, 2024).

Criteria of academic rigor

Rigor was based on the traceability of the sources, the thematic relevance, the contrast between the scientific literature and the normative documents, and the internal coherence between the objective, the question, the corpus and the categories of analysis. The interpretation was conducted from a hermeneutical-critical perspective, as the essay does not intend to summarize documents, but to understand the

political, pedagogical and social meaning of the passage from quality to excellence. Finally, the limits of the study are made explicit: as it is a theoretical-argumentative analysis, its scope is interpretative and not empirically generalizable, and the proposed self-evaluation model has an argumentative character, not validated through fieldwork.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The documentary analysis allowed the findings to be organized into five central categories: standardized quality, educational excellence, professional autonomy, collaborative work in School Technical Councils, and institutional self-evaluation. These categories were not treated as independent units, but as moments within a broader tension between external measurement, holistic education, social justice, teacher autonomy, and institutional management. From this perspective, the discussion contrasts the normative documents of the NEM with the academic literature, international references, and previous educational policy frameworks to assess whether the shift from quality to excellence goes beyond the standardized paradigm or introduces new gaps in the monitoring of learning outcomes.

Figure 2.
Standardised quality: measurement, indicators and accountability

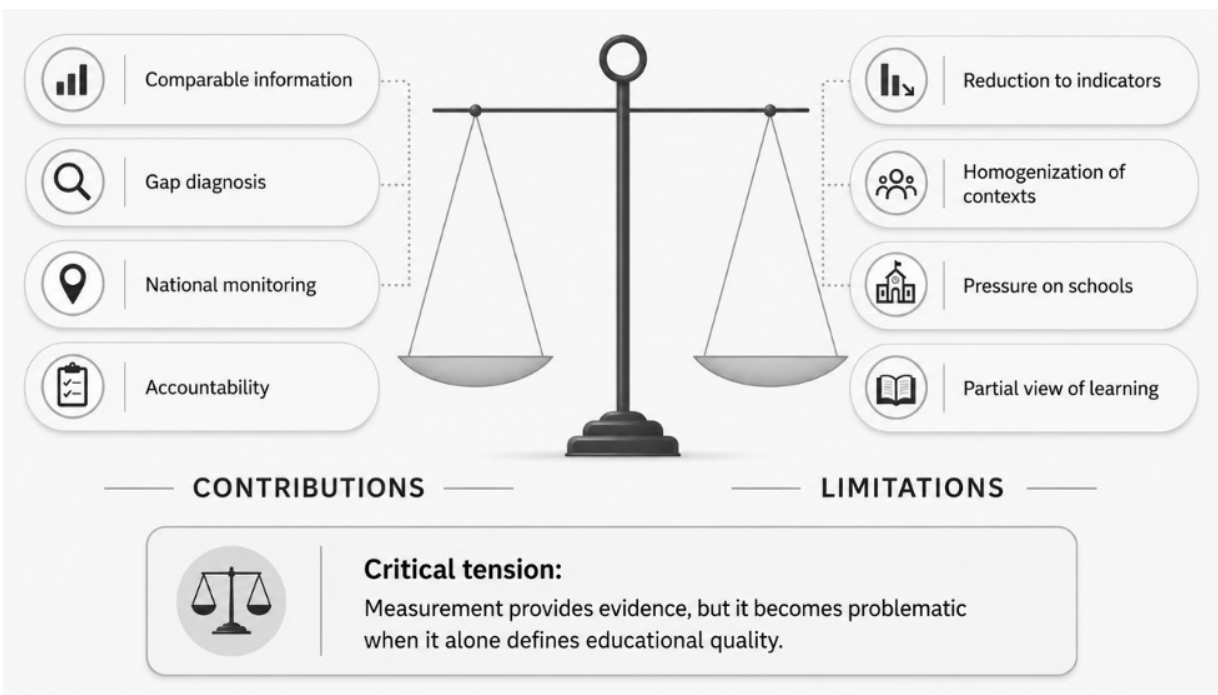


Figure 2 explains the paradigm that shaped a significant part of the educational reforms prior to the NEM. Within this model, quality was associated with indicators, external evaluations, terminal efficiency, certification and the comparison of results. In Mexico, instruments such as ENLACE, EXCALE and PLANEA, together with the role played by INEE, configured an evaluative architecture aimed at producing systematic information on school performance. This infrastructure made it possible to identify learning gaps, compare results between states, and generate national diagnoses of the education system (INEE, 2015; OECD, 2023).

For its part, the contribution of this paradigm should not be dismissed out of hand. Standardized assessment produced useful information for public policy and helped to make visible inequalities that, without comparable data, could have remained hidden under general discourses about educational improvement. Its limit appears when evidence ceases to guide decisions and begins to replace pedagogical reflection on what really happens in the classroom (Barragán & Marcelo, 2023). Along the same lines, the OECD (2023), through PISA 2022, maintains the importance of having internationally comparable information on learning in reading, mathematics and science. UNESCO (2024) also argues that evaluation data can contribute to better educational planning and monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal 4, provided that such data is used to guide decision-making and not just to rank performance.

However, the limitation of standardized quality arises when measurement ceases to be an input and becomes the dominant criterion for defining

quality. Díaz-Barriga & Jiménez-Vázquez (2020) warn that curricular reforms in Mexico were progressively articulated with an efficiency-oriented pedagogy focused on standards, results, and the alignment between curriculum and assessment. SEP (2024) addresses this critique by pointing out that the discourse on quality reduced student education and teachers' work to instrumental criteria of pedagogical and school efficiency. From this perspective, the problem was not the evaluation itself, but the subordination of the complexity of schooling to performance indicators.

The discussion with Colom Cañellas (1988) and Gimeno Sacristán (1995) expands on this criticism. Both authors agree that educational quality cannot be defined as a sole, absolute or exclusively technical attribute, since it depends on the curriculum, teaching methods, teachers, available resources, institutional project and educational purposes. Therefore, measuring learning can provide relevant evidence, but it does not exhaust quality assessment. Educational quality is always historical, situated and multidimensional; therefore, it is insufficient to define it solely in terms of external results.

This contrast reveals a first tension for the MEN. If the new model rejects the reduction of quality to standardized measurements, its critique is pedagogically relevant; However, if such criticism weakens all forms of systematic monitoring, the education system may lose its ability to identify laggards, inequalities and progress. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between measurement and holistic education, but to redefine the place of evaluation within a broader conception of educational justice.

Figure 3.
Educational excellence: conceptual displacement and evaluative tensions



The second category is educational excellence, a notion introduced by the NEM as an alternative to traditional quality language. This shift is not merely terminological, since it implies a modification of the pedagogical horizon of educational policy. While standardized quality was linked to performance, indicators, and comparison, excellence is associated with holistic education, critical thinking, inclusion, community, and continuous improvement. In this sense, the NEM proposes an understanding of education closer to social justice than to the instrumental rationality of performance (SEP, 2024).

However, the concept of excellence also entails ambiguities. Its strength lies in broadening the meaning of education, but its limit appears when it does not specify how the formative progress it promises will be evaluated. At this point, excellence can become a normative aspiration if it is not translated into institutional criteria, situated evidence, and decisions for improvement (Castillo Vergara, 2025).

UNESCO (2005) argued that quality is a condition for the effective realization of the right to education and therefore cannot be limited to access or measurement of outcomes. Similarly, the World Declaration on Education for All adopted in Jomtien (1990) and Torres (s.f.) stressed the need to address life-relevant learning, the development of individual capacities, social participation and the improvement of living conditions. From this point of view, the

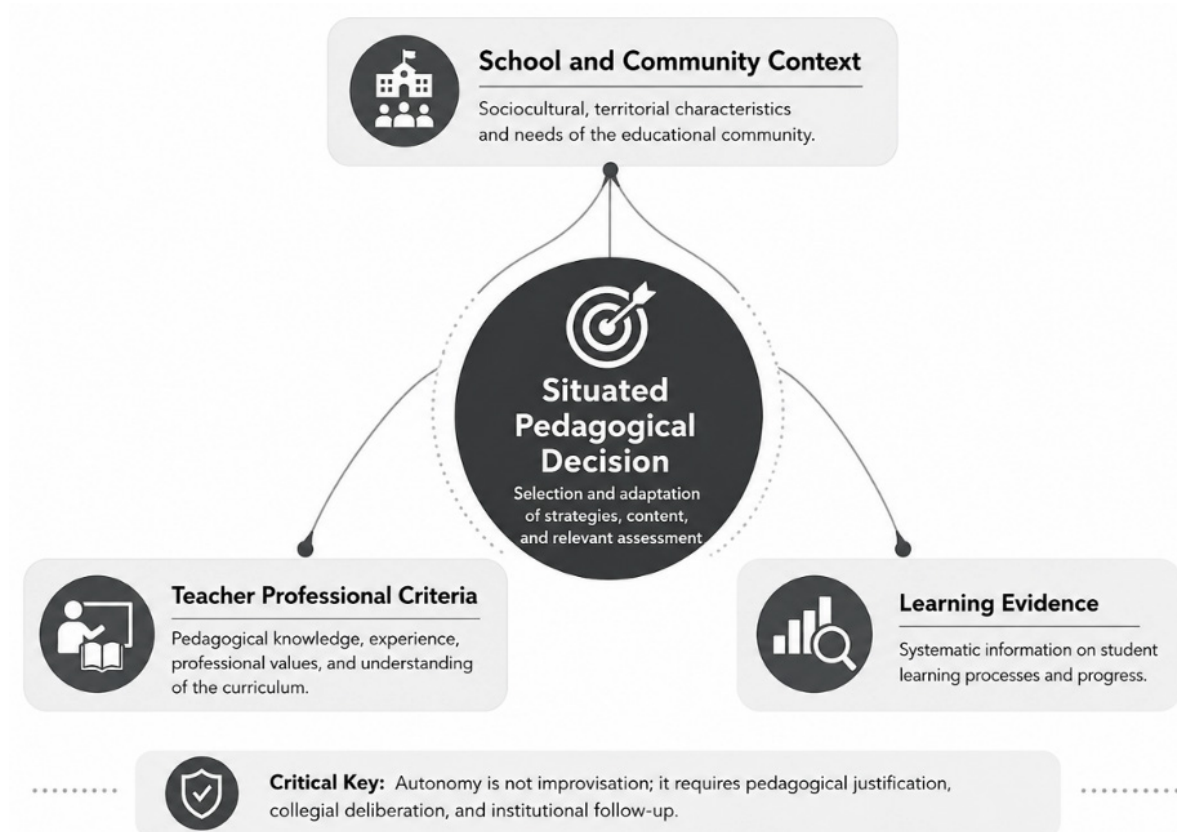
educational excellence promoted by the NEM recovers a tradition that understands education as a social, cultural and emancipatory process.

Therefore, the tension should not be framed as a simple opposition between standardized quality and educational excellence. The first provided evidence, although it tended to restrict the pedagogical meaning of education; the latter broadens the training horizon, but requires clear monitoring mechanisms. Consequently, educational excellence only acquires institutional consistency if it can demonstrate how, it improves learning, reduces inequalities, and strengthens the school experience of specific communities. Without such mediation, it risks becoming a discursively powerful but evaluatively weak category.

The current debate on PISA 2022 reinforces this tension. International assessments should not define education policy alone, but they do provide signals about learning and inequality that cannot be ignored. The OECD (2023) shows that education systems still need comparable data to discuss gaps, achievement, and school conditions. Therefore, the NEM should not reject all forms of measurement, but rather resignify them within a broader understanding of excellence, where external data dialogue with school evidence, formative assessment and institutional self-assessment. Evaluation should not be equivalent to classifying, but to producing useful information to understand learning and guide teacher intervention (Díaz-Barriga, 2026).

Figure 4.

Professional autonomy of teachers: curricular contextualization and pedagogical responsibility



The third category is the professional autonomy of teachers. Within the framework of the NEM, this autonomy is presented as a condition for contextualizing the curriculum, resignifying the content, and adapting the assessment to the social, cultural, territorial, and educational realities of the students. However, autonomy only acquires pedagogical meaning when it is based on professional deliberation, knowledge of the context, and shared criteria for intervention (Sánchez-Olavarría, 2025). SEP (2024) argues that teachers must appropriate curricula through contextualization processes linked to the specific conditions in which teaching is carried out. This position moves away from closed curricular models in which teachers appear mainly as executors of external prescriptions.

The relevance of this category is reinforced by Gimeno Sacristán (1995), for whom the curriculum is not exhausted in the official document, but is materialized in pedagogical practice. From this perspective, teachers are not mechanical transmitters of content, but mediators who interpret, select, adapt and give meaning to the educational experience. Therefore, professional

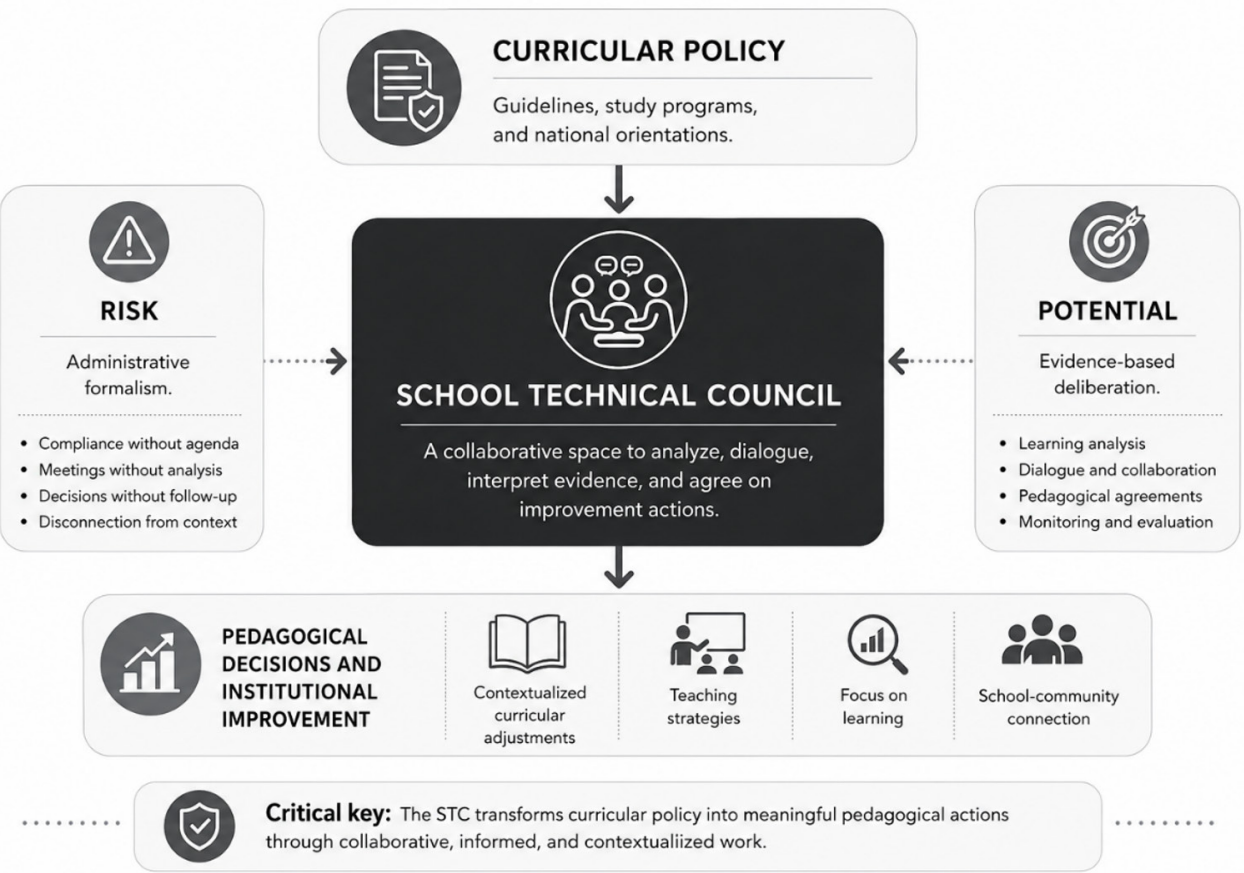
autonomy can be understood as a condition that allows the national curriculum to dialogue with local contexts, community knowledge and the real needs of students.

However, autonomy also requires critical debate. If it is understood as individual freedom without shared criteria, it can lead to pedagogical dispersion, poorly documented decisions or practices that are difficult to evaluate. For this reason, teacher autonomy cannot be confused with improvisation: it requires training, accompaniment, and institutional conditions to turn curricular contextualization into a real practice and not a formal procedure (Castillo Vergara, 2025). Professional autonomy does not mean the absence of regulation or didactic improvisation. On the contrary, it implies reasoned responsibility, knowledge of the context, pedagogical mastery and the ability to justify the decisions made. On this point, Rentería Castro (2005) is relevant in linking teaching quality with professional responsibility, participation, collaboration, and well-executed work.

Formative assessment helps prevent autonomy from turning into subjectivism. UNESCO (2024) has noted that learning assessments can support improvements in teaching when used to produce relevant information about what students know, what they are capable of doing, and what they need to strengthen. Similarly, Mejoredu (2024) argues that diagnostic, formative and comprehensive assessment should address three priority areas: student learning, teaching practice and school conditions. This means that the autonomy of the teacher needs proof, not merely pedagogical conviction.

For this reason, professional autonomy must be understood as situated responsibility. Its contribution to educational excellence does not lie in freeing teachers from a common framework, but in recognizing them as subjects capable of making contextualized and justified pedagogical decisions. NEM strengthens the professional role of teachers by recognizing their interpretive capacity; however, this capacity must be articulated through continuing education, collegial deliberation and institutional supervision. Only in this way can autonomy become a source of improvement and not a factor of fragmentation of the system.

Figure 5.
Collaborative work in the School Technical Councils: institutional mediation for improvement



The fourth category is collaborative work in the School Technical Councils. This dimension allows professional autonomy to be articulated with the institutional management of improvement. If autonomy is reduced to individual decisions, its impact may be limited; however, when it is exercised in collective spaces, it can become shared pedagogical knowledge. Thus, the School Technical Councils emerge as spaces of mediation between curricular policy, teaching

experience, learning analysis and decision-making at the school level. Its contribution is not in meeting, but in producing pedagogical deliberation capable of transforming individual autonomy into institutional agreements for improvement (Sánchez-Olavarria, 2025).

The manuscript highlights the need to go beyond the concept of the individual teacher to the broader notion of teaching as a collective

practice, understanding that quality does not depend only on individual performance, but on the ability of teaching groups to analyze curricula, contents, and teaching-learning processes. This idea is consistent with Rentería Castro (2005), who places participation, collaboration and collegial work at the center of quality academic management. From this perspective, the School Technical Councils should not be considered as secondary administrative bodies, but as strategic pedagogical bodies.

SEP (2024) also recognizes the value of collaborative work, dialogue, and the participation of school actors. Within the framework of the NEM, the connection between the school and the community requires spaces where teachers can discuss real contextual problems, review their practices and build agreements. However, this orientation only makes sense if the School Technical Councils function as spaces for pedagogical analysis instead of meetings aimed at the formal fulfillment of agendas. Collegiality is not defined by the mere act of meeting, but by making well-informed decisions.

Here, the Mejoredu model (2024) – Diagnostic, Formative and Comprehensive Assessment Model – establishes that assessment must provide information on learning, teaching practice and school conditions and processes, prioritising a formative approach to avoid classification or stigmatisation. This approach strengthens the role of School Technical Councils: councils can become spaces where tests are interpreted, learning problems are identified, strategies are agreed upon, and decisions are monitored (Mejoredu, 2024).

The central tension in this category is that School Technical Councils have a high potential, but also a high risk of bureaucratic formalization. If they work without evidence, they may be reduced to administrative compliance spaces; if guided by situated information, they can become instruments for institutional improvement. Therefore, the NEM needs to strengthen the School Technical Councils not only as expressions of collective work, but as structures capable of sustaining analysis, supervision and pedagogical accountability from within the school itself.

Figure 6.
Institutional self-evaluation: a synthesis between social justice and evaluative rigor



The fifth category is institutional self-evaluation, which is the synthesis point of the analysis. If standardized quality, privileged external evaluation, and educational excellence shift the emphasis toward holistic education and social justice, self-evaluation appears as a necessary mediation between the two approaches. Its role is not to naively substitute for any external evaluation, but to strengthen the institution's ability to know, interpret and improve itself on the basis of its own evidence.

Rentería Castro (2005) defines self-evaluation as a process of institutional introspection aimed at evaluating the mission, objectives, strategies, programs, strengths and weaknesses in order to make decisions for continuous improvement. This definition places self-evaluation beyond the mere measurement of results, but also beyond simple subjective reflection. Self-evaluation requires criteria, information, participation and systematicity. Otherwise, it can become a declarative exercise without a true capacity for transformation.

The discussion with UNESCO (2024) reinforces this idea. The use of assessment data can improve educational planning and contribute to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, provided that such data are interpreted in relation to specific contexts and decisions. Along the same lines, Mejoredu (2024) proposes a diagnostic, formative and comprehensive evaluation that does not classify or stigmatize, but rather informs and provides feedback to the education system. Both references support the argument that institutional self-evaluation should not oppose evidence, but appropriate it in a positioned way.

This category allows us to overcome a false dilemma. The point is not to return to the paradigm of standardized quality, focused on external tests and comparison of results, but it is also not acceptable to support educational excellence without oversight mechanisms. In this sense, institutional self-evaluation offers a middle way: it allows schools to evaluate learning, teaching practices, school conditions, community participation and management processes from within the institution. Its value lies in avoiding two extremes: uncritical dependence on external evidence and the defense of excellence without evidence of improvement (Sandoval Flores & Rangel Mont, 2024). In this way, you can integrate

quantitative and qualitative data, performance evidence, collegial deliberation, and contextual interpretation.

From a hermeneutical-critical perspective, institutional self-evaluation can be understood as a practice of collective understanding. The school interprets its processes, recognizes tensions, identifies shortcomings and agrees on ways to improve. However, this understanding must be rigorous: it requires documenting the evidence, contrasting it, analyzing it, and translating it into pedagogical decisions. This requirement prevents self-evaluation from being reduced to voluntarist introspection and turns it into a resource for academic management.

Consequently, the transition from quality to excellence in NEM partially goes beyond the paradigm of standardized measurement, because it questions its technical reductionism and recovers formative, community and inclusive dimensions. However, it does not completely overcome it unless it establishes institutional mechanisms for monitoring and self-evaluation. Educational excellence needs situated evidence in order not to remain a normative aspiration. It is not enough to declare inclusion, community or social justice; the model must show what it improves, for whom it improves, and under what institutional conditions that improvement occurs (Díaz-Barriga, 2026; Valdés & Ramírez-Casas del Valle, 2021). Therefore, institutional self-evaluation, articulated with the professional autonomy of teachers and collaborative work in School Technical Councils, constitutes a way to build quality with social justice: a form of quality that does not depend exclusively on external tests, but that does not renounce the need to understand whether learning improves, for whom it improves and under what conditions.

Limitations

The study assumed a theoretical-argumentative and documentary scope, so its results are oriented to the critical interpretation of the conceptual transition from quality to educational excellence, without pretending to empirical generalization.

Contribution to knowledge

The main contribution of the study shows that the criticism of standardized measurement is pertinent, but insufficient if it is not articulated with institutional monitoring mechanisms. In

this sense, self-evaluation appears as a middle way between social justice, teacher autonomy, collegial work and evaluative rigor.

CONCLUSIONS

The transition from educational quality to excellence in the New Mexican School represents a necessary critique of the reductionist use of indicators, external tests and standardized comparisons. However, this conceptual shift does not in itself solve the underlying problem: to demonstrate whether the new educational framework improves learning, reduces inequalities and strengthens the school experience. Excellence broadens the pedagogical horizon of quality, but it runs the risk of remaining a normative category if it is not translated into institutional criteria for monitoring, deliberation and improvement.

The analysis developed in this study allows us to argue that the problem does not lie in evaluating, but in making evaluation the only criterion of quality. From this perspective, external measurements showed evident limits when they subordinated curriculum and teaching to comparable results; however, they also made visible learning gaps that cannot be addressed only through discourses of inclusion, community or social justice. For this reason, the NEM should not close the evidence, but rather relocate it within a formative, contextual and institutionally situated logic.

In this direction, the professional autonomy of teachers and the School Technical Councils are relevant conditions, but not sufficient. Its value depends on pedagogical decisions being justified, documented, and contrasted with evidence of learning. Likewise, autonomy without shared criteria can lead to discretion; Collegiate work without analysis can be reduced to administrative formalism.

Finally, institutional self-evaluation emerges as the most consistent mediation between social justice and evaluative rigor. Its contribution does not consist in replacing all external evaluation, but in building an internal capacity to interpret evidence, recognize tensions and make decisions for improvement. In short, the NEM partially exceeds the standardized paradigm; This improvement will

only be sustainable if excellence can demonstrate, with situated evidence, what improvement, for whom it improves and under what institutional conditions that improvement occurs.

AI Use Statement

The use of ChatGPT Plus is hereby declared for linguistic revision, translation of the abstract into Spanish, and manuscript proofreading, as well as DALL-E 3 (integrated into ChatGPT Plus) for image correction. These tools were used solely as auxiliary support and do not replace the author's intellectual responsibility, as the author critically reviewed and validated the final version.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that have influenced or affected the results of this research.

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