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Childhood, territory, and public policy: analysis and reflections on access to quality education in Puebla

Infancias, territorio y políticas públicas: análisis y reflexiones sobre el acceso a la educación de calidad en Puebla

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ABSTRACT

In a national and local context where social and educational inequalities persist, school transcends academic learning, it is also a space where children shape their emotions, their ability to relate to others, and the way they interpret and construct their social and cultural territory. Understanding these particularities can open doors to new ways of improving the educational environment, reflected in public policies that address real needs, creating bridges between the perception of the school environment and childhood development, which contributes to the reflection of other possibilities that contribute to the improvement and quality of life of children in Mexico. In this society-territory analysis, the perception of territory as an external environment translates into the social component that emanates from the conception, with processes, modifications, and transformations that take place there. This, in conjunction with children's social, cognitive, and emotional development, generates a rupture in the ontogenesis of human beings, who at an early age have other needs, motivations, and experiences that are constructed through exploratory and experiential learning, which will ultimately shape how they perceive and interpret the world. This work is part of ongoing doctoral research.

Keywords: Childhood; Education; Territory.

RESUMEN

En un contexto nacional y local donde las desigualdades sociales y educativas persisten, la escuela transciende en el aprendizaje de lo académico, es también un espacio donde niñas y niños modelan sus emociones, su capacidad para relacionarse con los demás y la manera en que interpretan y construyen su territorio social y cultural. Entender las particularidades puede abrir puertas a nuevas formas de mejorar el entorno educativo, reflejado en políticas públicas con alcance a las necesidades reales, creando puentes entre la percepción del territorio escolar y el desarrollo de las infancias, lo cual contribuye a la reflexión de posibilidades otras, que abonen en el mejoramiento y la calidad de vida de las niñas y niños en México. En este análisis sociedad-territorio, la percepción sobre el territorio como medio externo se traduce en el componente social que emana la concepción, con procesos, modificaciones y transformaciones que allí se suceden. Lo cual, en articulación con el desarrollo infantil en sus dimensiones social, cognitiva y emocional, genera una ruptura en la ontogénesis del ser humano, que en edad temprana tiene otras necesidades, motivaciones y vivencias que se construyen mediante el aprendizaje exploratorio y experiencial, que finalmente constituirán como perciben e interpretan el mundo.

Este trabajo hace parte de una investigación en curso de doctorado.

Palabras clave: Niñez, Educación, Territorio.

INTRODUCTION

This research project stems from an interest in further exploring one of the lines of study that originated during the development of the thesis[1]: "Educational spaces and social identity of children in the face of the COVID-19 contingency. Mexico and Colombia (2020--2023)", on the influence of school territories on child development and the differences between urban and rural contexts.

It proposes an analysis of the experiences of the "Raúl Isidro Burgos Primary School" in the auxiliary council of La Resurrección, located on the outskirts of Puebla, and the "Benito Juárez Primary School" in Santiago Xalitzintla (municipality of San Nicolás de los Ranchos) during the period of 2012--2026. This period was marked by significant transformations in the political and educational spheres, including the COVID-19 health crisis and the post-COVID-19 period. The former temporarily reconfigured educational spaces by moving them to cyberspace, allowing us to construct a scenario of the main recent changes and effects in the Puebla school context.

Advocating for the "school territory" as a complex space where multiple socioterritorial processes converge, which, beyond being an environment for academic learning, is a setting where meanings, symbols, signs, and dynamics are configured. Therefore, we propose an approach based on a socioterritorial and complex systems perspective, using narrative studies, to analyze the object of study in its entirety and multidimensionality.

In the articulation proposed in the *society-territory (school)* analysis, *perception* as an external medium that generates social transformations that go beyond previous conceptions and *child development* in its social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, there is a rupture in the ontogeny[2] of the human being at an early age. Notably, each stage has different needs, and this stage is characterized by unique motivations and experiences that are constructed through exploratory and experiential learning, which determine how they perceive and interpret the world, which differs from the adult world. Notably, this work corresponds to ongoing doctoral research.

DEVELOPMENT

Context

In the field of public education in Mexico, there is a gap in the official discourse that proposes guaranteeing the right to comprehensive education. This "comprehensiveness" is not fully achieved. Comprehensive education must consider not only academic content but also educational spaces as "school territories," recognizing them as spaces for learning and child development (social, cognitive, and emotional) in coordination with their environments (family

[1] Thesis completed during my master's studies in territory, tourism, and heritage, directed by: Dr. Virginia Cabrera Becerra. Codirector: Dr. Mónica Erika Olvera Nava. Advisor: Dr. Lilia Varinia Catalina López Vargas. External advisor: María Eugenia Ochoa García.

[2] According to the College of Psychologists, ontogenesis is a word derived from the Greek ontos, meaning being, and genesis, meaning birth or creation. In the context of psychology, it refers to the process of individual development of an organism, in this case human beings. Ontogenesis focuses on how individuals grow, develop, and acquire skills and characteristics throughout their lives. The factors that influence ontogenesis are: Genetics: Genes inherited from parents can influence an individual's physical, cognitive, and emotional characteristics. Environment: The environment in which a person grows and develops plays a fundamental role in ontogenesis. Environmental factors, such as upbringing, education, and culture, can influence how a person learns and adapts to their surroundings. Social interactions: These interactions can influence how a person learns social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

and community).

Educational coverage remains partial. High demand in public schools leads to overcrowded classrooms, which are far from conducive to the comprehensive development of children. This contributes to the fragmentation of educational processes and limits the quality of learning.

Furthermore, children cannot be conceived of solely as recipients of information, ignoring the fact that they are social subjects with rights who construct, are appropriate, and reproduce their spaces according to their own way of living in the territory and seeing the world, encountering challenges in their territories (violence, exclusion, child labor, drug addiction, among others) that affect their development.

According to the above, the problem lies in the fact that the hegemonic and adult-centric conception of the school space as an exclusively academic environment fragments the learning experiences and perceptions that affect child development. This reductionist view ignores the fact that the school space is actually a dynamic school territory, where complex socioterritorial processes converge: power relations, cultural dynamics, structural inequalities, etc. This is compounded by the invisibility of children and standardized public policies that do not address the real needs of girls and boys in Puebla.

At first glance, Raúl Isidro Burgos urban primary school appears to be in high demand, as it is the only public school in the area. There is another public school nearby, but it is an indigenous school, which means that each grade consists of groups of 35 to 40 children in classrooms that do not have the infrastructure to accommodate large groups. In addition, with only one teacher in charge, it is inclusive, but this depends on the teacher. It does not have the necessary adaptations for children with disabilities. These precarious conditions are addressed by the mothers, fathers, and guardians themselves in conjunction with the teachers.

The Resurrección area has problems such as insecurity, alcoholism, and drug addiction. The families of the children experience violence and dysfunction (frequent changes of partners). There is no library, and the one that does exist is very precarious and has been set up by the educational community itself.

For the Benito Juárez rural primary school, located in Santiago Xalitzintla, the community is dedicated to agriculture and commerce—charcoal making. Many mothers, fathers, and guardians work in Mexico City. At the school level, each group ranges from 26-30 children in the classrooms. Another public school in the area, which is inclusive but does not have trained staff for this type of care, relies on support from the city council (public schools in Mexico operate within this framework of inclusivity). It is a quiet community where everyone knows each other and even warns of the arrival of strangers, but they have problems with alcoholism and drug addiction.

In turn, the residents generally have a close relationship with the Popocatépetl volcano, personified as “Don Goyo,” representing a symbol of identity that brings the locals together. Ritual activities and offerings are carried out there, which constitute their worldview. Owing to this historical relationship, there is a tendency to minimize the risk of being on the slopes of the volcano, as the nature surrounding the area inspires a sense of tranquility. Fathers take care of repairs to the school infrastructure, and mothers take turns preparing food for the school cafeteria or cooperative.

In constructing the research problem, the starting point has been to understand this socioterritorial phenomenon as a complex unit, which involves establishing strategic links that have been developed since the first study. Therefore, the analysis takes a socioterritorial approach based on complex thinking and systems, which is enriched by the epistemologies of the South.

Anchoring complexity and public policy

In the scientific field, where a paradigm shift allows us to question and reconstruct what was previously considered "truth," children's perception of the school territory must be seen as a phenomenon in constant transformation, far from positivist approaches that seek to reduce it to simple variables. Likewise, it is essential to consider the concept of childhood the epistemological and social relevance it deserves, bearing in mind that children are socializing agents who actively cohabit, appropriate, and construct the territory.

In this context, it must be clear that there is a latent emergency in relation to this issue. It is necessary and urgent to redefine the concept, put it into practice, and promote a change in thinking, broadening the view of the complexity of childhood, the perception of the territory, and child development. This is the latter where children's experiences have a direct effect.

According to Kuhn (1962), a paradigm can be transformed only when the accumulation of "anomalies" makes clear the need for a new way of understanding phenomena. Similarly, perceptions of the school territory, when understood from a complex perspective, become "anomalies" that challenge the traditional paradigm and require a new interpretive approach. This "new way of understanding"[3] can be transformed into real practice in the school environment and in educational management. When observed from a complex perspective, perceptions of the school environment constitute an anomaly in relation to traditional models of analysis that attempt to simplify reality through quantifiable variables. This anomaly challenges prior knowledge and opens the door to a new interpretative framework on the basis of complexity.

However, this paradigm shift transcends theory; it must be materialized in the design of public education policies adjusted to realities. The "New Mexican School" model has attempted to incorporate changes; however, various challenges remain, including the setbacks faced in the post-COVID-19 stage. For example, in the articulation of the 2025-2030 national development plan and the 2025-2030 sectoral education plan, there is repeated mention of "child development" and "comprehensive" development. A humanistic and participatory approach is proposed, but the invisibility of girls and boys continues to be present. In this study, of the six objectives set out in the 2025-2030 Sectoral Education Plan, only one objective of the National Development Plan is clearly targeted, and the strategies outlined are very general.

In addition, educational spaces continue to be designed according to globalizing economic processes such as capitalism or neoliberalism, since "everything has value," and children are increasingly constrained in their spaces, depending on their socioeconomic environment. There are no clear public policies that guarantee spaces for children. Finally, all these policies are conceived from an adult-centered perspective without the full participation of children, which means that their real needs are neglected. Thus, quality education focused on "comprehensive child development" becomes an empty category, a reductionist view based on the lack of

[3] "A new way of understanding" refers to a paradigm shift, a transformation of the traditional positivist view, which involves recognizing that educational phenomena (in this case, the school environment and children's perceptions) cannot be understood in a fragmented or reductionist way, or explained using linear or quantified models.

guaranteed access to education.

We are facing an epistemological crisis in the field of education and the study of territory, where traditional, linear, and objective explanations are no longer sufficient to understand the complex realities of schools in different settings. The perception of school, understood as a dynamic and subjective phenomenon, requires an approach that accepts complexity, as proposed by Morin (2009) and Zemelman (2000). This approach must be a radical change not only in public policy but also in academic thinking and everyday practice.

It should be clarified that complexity[4] is not completeness, as it is implausible to arrive at complete knowledge. The purpose of complex thinking is to arrive at a multidimensional understanding through interconnected knowledge that articulates multiple dimensions of the phenomenon rather than a simplistic view that fragments reality. In accordance with Zemelman (2000), reality involves not only these observable aspects but also their changing nature and the ways in which subjects interpret and transform it.[5]

METHOD

This project proposes an exploratory qualitative research method that uses narrative studies as a qualitative tool.[6] According to Arias and Alvarado (2015), narrative studies constitute a methodological strategy that is oriented toward the collective construction of scientific knowledge, focusing on the experiences and stories of individuals to understand social, cultural, and economic realities. Through personal stories, narrative studies allow us to enter individuals and territory into everyday life from the voices of the subjects.

In agreement with the authors and other authors such as Bernasconi (2011) and Clandinin & Connelly (2000), among others. The narrative study empowers children not only to describe their reality but also to become narrators of their own experience, providing a holistic view of the school territory as a social and cultural space. This methodology facilitates the construction of meaning, from their own voices and perspectives, allowing for a rich and detailed interpretation of the socioterritorial phenomena that influence their development.

DEVELOPMENT

During the course of this ongoing research, critical reflections have emerged, seeking tension between the traditionalist frameworks of childhood, perception, school, territory, and comprehensive child development. These reflections are not conclusive; in contrast, they are preliminary, with the aim of continuing to open up avenues for analysis and rethinking these categories, above all, to carry out effective action in the area of childhood and public education policies.

Accordingly, the category of childhood from a political perspective highlights that girls and boys are subjects of rights with the capacity for agency, resistance, and meaning-making in their territories. Even so, public policies generally reduce them to a vision of "protection" and a kind of passive object. According to this view, children do not fully participate, especially

[4] By this I mean that thinking in complex terms involves seeing the world and phenomena in a more integrated way, recognizing their multiple dimensions and how they interact with each other, and understanding that solutions are neither simple nor one-dimensional. It is an approach that values diversity, uncertainty, and interconnection, which is key to addressing complex issues such as perception, childhood, and school environments.

[5] It is necessary to make one point: human beings must conceive of and recognize themselves as an intrinsic part of nature, not as a separate entity—they are nature. From this perspective, the processes and development that occur within them emerge from their very nature, which, in essence, demands to be free and spontaneous. However, there is a dissociation from our own nature, as if we were denying who we are because of modern evils.

[6] It is important to note that the central axis is qualitative, however, auxiliary quantitative techniques (frequencies and Likert scales applied in socialization workshops) as well as statistics will be used to complement the interpretive depth.

in regard to citizen participation. However, the Mexican constitution itself determines that men and women who meet certain requirements are considered citizens, the first of which is being 18 years of age, which already creates legal impediments that render them invisible. In this way, everything related to childhood is designed from an adult-centric logic. An education policy that does not consult them or fully considers them perpetuates the gap between the discourse of comprehensiveness and the fragmented reality that children experience.

The schools studied, both urban and rural, are not isolated cases; they reflect the contradictions that exist in a wider territory. Institutional precariousness, inequalities, violence, and cultural richness turn them into a battlefield but also a field of power where symbolic struggles are waged. The context where social hierarchies are naturalized or questioned is far from being a neutral space for learning. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing meaningful interventions that address structural roots.

Likewise, the post-COVID-19 period represented an "illusion of a return to normality," but rather exposed the profound inequality, the harsh situation faced by children, and a precarious Mexican education system, making it a challenge to transition to the New Mexican School while dragging along shortcomings or leaving them behind.

Addressing multifaceted phenomena such as school, territory, childhood, perception, and child development requires a broad perspective and a certain intellectual humility to accept that there is no single answer and that children's subjectivities are as valid as hard data for understanding reality. In conclusion, this research reveals that the idea of access to quality education extends far beyond enrollment.

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