

A look at the right to education through school restrooms

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Abstract

Teacher training in primary education takes place both in teachers' college classrooms and in elementary schools. Future teachers are gradually inserted in the practice of teaching during the eight semesters of the major. In the first semester they visit elementary schools in order to learn about the real conditions in which the children are educated, but mainly in order to raise awareness of the complexity of the teaching profession. Students visit different elementary schools and analyze critically the challenges they will have to face in their career path. Their first impressions are important because they awaken in them the concern to intervene and start doing something to contribute to the education of children and the fulfillment of the right to education, an issue addressed in this article through the students' impressions after a visit to the schools' restrooms.

Key Words: Children's right to education, restrooms, primary education, teacher training, observation.

Introduction

School bathrooms/restrooms/toilets are "essential goods" and part of the children's rights to an education and health, which should be of good quality. Restrooms are constitutive elements of schools and we all have to use them sometimes. The daily routine in elementary schools includes different educational spaces: just like classrooms, school yards, the principal's office or annexes, restrooms are part of a space in which education takes place. That the bathrooms meet the minimal conditions to serve the children is a challenge faced by every school, due to the difficulty of keeping clean and in good conditions this public space used frequently by many people in the school. Every elementary school takes care of its restrooms differently and that also includes, to a varying degree, the school's cleaning and maintenance staff.

Understanding the complexity of the challenge for teachers of attending to the needs of the children can only be done by putting oneself in the teacher's place, by "walking a mile in his/

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her shoes". Looking at the teacher's educational task from a comprehensive perspective is one of the aims of the initial training of elementary school teachers, not only in the current curriculum (2012): for decades, with the 1997 curriculum and even before, with the 1984 curriculum, teacher training has emphasized a progressive approach to the elementary school classroom, seeking to train future teachers *in situ*.

Every curriculum identifies that gradual approach, which begins with short observation periods and ends with a longer professional practice stay. The emphasis of this approach has changed with the different curricula, but what cannot be denied is the educational effect on first semester students of looking at an elementary school from a different perspective from the one they had when they were students there; that is, looking at it as future elementary school teachers and thinking of the challenges it poses them now and in the future.

Looking at a school as it is, without having prepared it for an official visit – as usually happens nowadays with the "approach" of educational authorities at every level – is a privilege for future teachers who enter it as just another member of the school staff. This look and this approach are possible thanks to the openness of the educational communities of elementary schools involved in the future teachers' education, who share with them not only the physical spaces, but also their experiences working with children. Thus, it is possible to identify in those visits the challenges implied in offering quality education when there are many factors involved in the teaching task that have an effect on the fulfillment of the students' right to an education.

Respect for schools and educational communities is a fundamental goal that future teachers learn as they become involved in the activities of elementary schools. A comprehensive view allows them to understand why schools are as they are now, but it also awakens in them a critical look at the actual possibilities we have in Mexico of fulfilling the mandate of Article 3 in the Mexican Constitution, as well as the right to quality education and health care for every child.

Approaching elementary schools without preconceptions is what observation activities aspire to, but it would be naive to think that the school and the way in which basic education is materialized in this country can be seen from an "objective" viewpoint, without any value judgment. One only has to imagine entering a restroom with your sense of smell first. First impressions awaken sensations and mobilize not just your thoughts but your whole body. Understanding how difficult it is, among many other factors, to have a clean restroom, without looking for culprits, is one of the aims of inserting first-semester students of the Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education in actual schools and having them visit their restrooms.

This text presents an experience of work with students and their first impressions in their activities of insertion into schools, as part of their training process. We reflect on the particular, "subjective" view of students of an aspect that called their attention in their activities for the class of Observation and Analysis of the Teaching Practice, plan 2012. The analysis is made ba-

sed on their “subjective texts” written at the end of the semester about many subjects, but for the case presented we selected those that focus on the issue of the restrooms.

Focusing on school restrooms is not a casual approach, because there are many factors that intervene to keep a restroom clean and in service. Looking at the right to quality education from a human rights perspective, through a “marginal”, tangential, space that is apparently not important because it is not considered an educational priority, is bringing to the foreground a space that is quite significant for children and, in this case, for future teachers. Restrooms are a link in a chain of conditions that is often in the background of schools, and the work conducted by our teacher college students tells of their fresh sensitivity to refuse to get used to restrooms that, almost like a natural fact, violate the rights of the children and anyone who, like it or not, has to use them.

The progress from the rhetoric of rights to education requires concrete interventions because “the notion of ‘quality’ goes beyond the material supplies for education and its academic products, encompassing a content and educational processes that are coherent with the principles and practices of human rights” (UNESCO, 2003, p. VIII).

The basic conditions of schools

The children’s right to quality education has as many nuances as factors are involved in its fulfillment. The material factor *par excellence* of quality education is the school’s physical infrastructure. In 2013, Mexico’s Ministry of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*), through the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI), conducted a Census of Basic and Special Education Schools, Teachers and Students, with the aim of “providing the Educational Information and Management System with information”.¹ The results were published in 2014 and are still available at their website, <http://www.censo.sep.gob.mx>.

The census included the subject of restrooms in item II.10 “Buildings housing schools built by an administrative federal entity, according to maintenance and availability of restroom or toilet (*Inmuebles con escuelas construidas por entidad federativa de administración, según sostenimiento y disponibilidad de baño o sanitario*)”.² 171,851 schools were reported nationwide, and 7,663 in the state of Jalisco. Jalisco’s public institutions that have the “Service of bathroom or restroom” were 7,406, representing 96.6% of the state’s total number.

Around 3.0% schools in the state do not have this service, and 8.9% nationwide. Rural schools are the last to have the complete infrastructure expected since the census. How are restrooms being added to those schools that do not have them? An illustrative experience is the one presented by Torres (2000, p. 120):

1 <http://www.censo.sep.gob.mx/index.php/objetivo>, consulted in January 2017.

2 Source: <http://www.censo.sep.gob.mx> consulted in January 2017.

Rural schools, with their semi-urban patterns of architecture and coexistence, leave rural children suspended between two worlds: they give children the toilets that they do not have in their homes, but do not give them toilet paper and or the traditional resources – plant leaves, corn husks, a water container nearby – that they have and use every day at home and in their environment.

Much besides building restrooms is required in this transition; just having them is not enough. Although having restrooms in schools is indeed some advancement, it does not in and of itself solve the problem of quality care for the children. Other factors must be taken into account. As physical infrastructure, restrooms bring with them other demands such as water, paper, and cleaning, which if not met are once again a violation of the children's right to an education, as well as their right to good health. Having restrooms is an opportunity to teach through the children's hygiene and health, and thus attend to their basic needs as part of the State's duties.

Since all the schools visited by our teachers' college students are urban schools, we will address only schools that do have restrooms. The census reports 96.6% schools in Jalisco that have restrooms, but we only need to think back and remember some of the school restrooms we have used to know that they may have a similar layout, but many things that make them different. Schools are as they are, and our aim is to identify what is common and what is different in our visits and thus sensitize future teachers.

As for what we know about elementary schools, in 2014 Mexico's National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE) began its Basic Conditions for Teaching and Learning Assessment (ECEA),³ a large-scale evaluation: "assessments conducted by the INEE allow us to learn how the system operates, what works well and what does not, why some results are achieved and others are not, helping to identify possible ways of improving it" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 2).

This Assessment has been conducted in several stages and with a long-term program, from 2014 to 2023. The INEE has been reporting about its features and results through the collection *Cómo son nuestras escuelas*, which can be consulted and downloaded at its website, <http://www.inee.edu.mx>. The results of this assessment are used to make decisions in order to orient improvements. The ECEA's starting point is the right of Mexican children to an education: "to learn about the degree of fulfillment of this right it is not enough to evaluate their learning: it is also necessary to know the conditions in which they are learning" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 3). If the elementary schools that children go to do not meet the basic conditions for learning, their right to an education, as well as other associated rights such as the right to good health, is being violated.

3 <<http://www.inee.edu.mx/index.php/proyectos/ecea>>

The assessment of these conditions includes seven indicators:

Resources:

1. Infrastructure for the students' learning and wellbeing
2. Furniture and equipment required for teaching and learning
3. Educational support materials
4. School staff

Processes:

5. Learning management
6. School organization
7. School coexistence for personal and social development (INEE, s.f.a, p. 7).

The first resource, which this paper addresses, features three dimensions and several basic conditions:

Basic school services: continuous and plentiful water supply during school hours; working sanitary infrastructure for student and teachers; electric power during school hours. Basic security and hygiene conditions: minimization of exposure to accident hazards; signaling and adequate supplies for emergencies; clean classrooms and restrooms (INEE, s.f.b, p. 5).

As can be observed, the data collected by the ECEA provides additional information to complement the information obtained by the census: "on the one hand, they define the basic aspects for the schools to operate, and on the other they help inform on how they do it" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 6). With this assessment we will not only learn if school have restrooms, but also the conditions of the restrooms to be used by the children, thus identifying cases in which their rights are violated "due to the precariousness of the conditions in which students are being educated" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 5).

In 2010 the INEE published a study of the basic conditions for teaching and learning in preschool, in which besides learning whether schools had restrooms they also explored "if the restrooms they have are adequate for the children's height" (INEE, 2010, p. 53). Results nationwide show that "only two thirds of the schools with restrooms have toilets that are adequate for the children's height" (INEE, 2010, p. 55). This kind of approach enriches the information available on the quality of attention regarding the specific characteristics of age and height. The report also includes information on the adaptations to restrooms for children with some kind of motor disability; only 2.3% of adaptations are reported in preschools.

Approaching schools from the perspective of a census or evaluation of the effects of education is one of the issues covered in the training of new elementary school teachers. Students

analyze the results of these assessments to start learning about schools through what has been written about them, which is known as a second degree observation (Comas, 2008). The complement of the future teachers' initial training is what takes place in elementary schools, where students are inserted in schools and classrooms as another member of the staff that works in the school and takes care of the children, an issue explored in the next section.

The training of future teachers *in situ*

The initial training of future teachers, regardless of the curriculum, involves them progressively in a gradual approach to the real practice of elementary schools. They are trained *in situ* by first assisting teachers and gradually taking charge of classes. This insertion into the reality of teaching allows them to learn what they can only learn in an elementary school, since the sensibility required to deal with children can only be developed through direct contact with school groups.

The Professional Practice Path (*Trayecto Práctica Profesional*) of the Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education, plan 2012, establishes two semesters of observation activities with the "aim of having students develop their abilities to observe and analyze educational and school practices" (SEP-DGESPE, 2012, p. 10). The subject of Observation and Analysis of Teaching Practice is studied in the first semester, with the aim of "bringing the future teacher closer to elementary education socio-cultural contexts and institutions" (SEP-DGESPE, 2013, p. 5).

The first-semester group I worked with, and which I refer to in this article, visited two different elementary schools. The group was divided in teams of eight to ten students. The first visit was made on two consecutive days to schools A and B, as we identified them. The students were present at the time the schools opened, during the recess, and when the children left school. Between the time the schools opened and the recess they went out of the school and explored its surroundings. After observing the recess they saw the school facilities, conducted some interviews, and took photographs when they were allowed to.

The students observed the educational activities conducted in the schools without observing classes in classrooms, as part of the goals of the first semester. They saw the physical infrastructure, had contact with the different actors in the school, and also saw the interaction between actors in regard to the different aspects observed, including the restrooms. They took brief notes *in situ* and then systematized the information in order to analyze it. Based on the analysis of the first visit an observation guide was made for the second visit, trying to fill out gaps in the information and answer questions arising from the analysis. The second visit followed the same plan as the first. After the visits, the students made a report that they shared with their school community as an activity to close the semester.⁴

⁴ The results were presented in an exhibit documented in the Boletín Informativo Normalista (BIN) that can be accessed at <<https://issuu.com/escuelanormaldejaliscobycenj/docs/enero00>>

The students visited general elementary non-multigrade schools, defined in the ECEA classification as follows: "Public schools in which at least one teacher teaches one group of students of only one grade, generally located within urban areas" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 10). In Carvajal's (1997) classification they are known as fully organized (*de organización completa*). The students themselves applied for permissions to the schools, and the only selection criterion was that they were permitted to visit them in a normal workday.

Although the aim of these visits is to have students learn about actual elementary schools, the most important part is that they become more sensitized to the profession. To achieve that they also study a number of subjects in the teachers' college that enable them to understand the complexity of an educator's work, so they can comprehend the reality they are observing in schools. As an individual evaluation activity, I asked the students to write a "subjective text" with the aim of engaging all their senses, knowledge, feelings, and beliefs, as a way to feel in the teaching profession.

To give the students some ideas about the narrative text they would have to write, they were encouraged to read texts from Rosa María Torres's book *Itinerarios por la educación Latinoamericana*, which reflect a sensitive and critical approach to the reality of schools in Latin America. Some of the texts recommended were "Convocatoria a reunión de padres de familia" ("A Call for a Parents-Teachers Meeting"), "Una educación que no valora el propio esfuerzo" ("An Education that does not Value One's Effort"), "El orgullo de ser maestro" ("The Pride of Being a Teacher"), "Manipuladores de alimentos, manipuladores de textos" ("Manipulators of Food, Manipulators of Texts") and "Madre Tierra" ("Mother Earth"), a text that makes a reference to a school restroom, from which the quote above was taken.

The approach of the class was to look at "the common and the different". Every school is different, some more different than others, but in the case of the schools we visited they all had restroom services, albeit in very different conditions. The subjective text was written as the final assignment of the semester, and included in the *classroom* platform we used in the school a sample text with some recommendations. The students were asked to write a "free text", which created unrest in some students who asked for a text "scheme": an introduction, development, conclusions, etc. But the instructions explained that there could be no scheme, because it was a subjective text. They would have to select the topic, and how they addressed it.

What does the restroom service have to do with teacher training? Sensitization comes in through all the senses, and restrooms mobilize several of them. The point of the subjective text is to make students connect with themselves:

A significant part of what happens in them [the schools] also has to do with the affection of those who spend time in the, with the exchange of feelings, meanings and values, with their past, present and future life of the people who walk through them, with their circumstances, stories, illusions, and projects (Suárez, Dávila and Ochoa, 2011, p. 1).

I was interested in stressing the importance of a subjective view of the school *vis-a-vis* objectivity as the only way to analyze the educational process. A comprehensive view of what happens in schools necessarily includes what is perceived subjectively in order to acknowledge it, analyze it, and never to deny it. Denying subjectivity is looking at a fragmented reality: recognizing how our subjectivity is involved in our observation is a way to achieve objectivity, paradoxical as it seems.

The subjective text was assigned as the final activity of the semester, and the recommendations can be summarized as follows:

1. Read Rosa María Torres.
2. Reflect on an issue that called their attention and that they want to share with their classmates: an issue that was felt (that they felt), something that moves them. No issue is right or wrong, as long as it is something that moves them in their mind and in their heart as future teachers. It could even take them back to their childhood and their experience in elementary school. It should be a text that put them in contact with themselves.
3. The issue had to be based on their observations.
4. Be careful not to take a “should be” approach.
5. Mind the formal aspect of their text.

The students wrote about different issues, but the influence of reading Torres (2000) cannot be denied. We will now analyze their texts.

First impressions

As pointed out above, our students went to two elementary schools twice, and selected the issue they would address in their subjective text. The first semester group I refer to consisted of 35 students of the class Observation and Analysis of the Teaching Practice. Out of the 35, four female students addressed the issue of the restrooms. One of the characteristics of the texts was that the name of the schools would remain anonymous to preserve the confidentiality of the data. For this reason, it was not possible to know if they visited the same schools.

The students mention different reasons why they chose the issue of the restrooms: “The day I visited the schools I found it impossible not to compare the state of the restrooms” (AG).⁵ In another case: “I think that this is an interesting and complex issue because it is a fundamental part of a school, a biological need of human beings” (OC). A student calls it a taboo subject: “The issue of the restrooms is without a doubt something that must be discussed” (FL).

⁵ The initials identify the student who wrote the text.

Clean restrooms are reported as follows: "In one [school] they were clean and smelled good, the girls brought their little basket and soap bar and, although it may seem odd, they went to the restrooms by themselves" (AG). And also "The restrooms were in good conditions because no bad smell emanated from them, the floors and mirrors were clean, each toilet had a trash can, and all the doors worked properly" (FL). Dirty restrooms are described thus: "In the other [school] it was unpleasant to walk in because they were dirty, the walls had things written on them, and as soon as I set foot in them I felt that I could not breathe" (AG). Also "It was sad to arrive and have children tell you that what they did not like about the school was the restrooms because they smelled ugly" (OC). In that regard, the INEE (2016b, p. 18) reported conditions related to hygiene as follows: "Students perceive more cleanliness in their classroom than in the school restrooms".

Experiences have been reported from the everyday life of schools, such as in Torres's account (2000, pp. 119-120) of a restroom in a rural setting:

And then, when it was least expected, calamity struck. When we were about to leave, I asked to use the restroom. The principal rushed to offer me, from her desk drawer, a roll of toilet paper. When I entered the restroom, the smell made me dizzy; there was shit smeared on every wall of the restroom. Lacking toilet paper, or some equivalent, the children evidently manage any way they can. There are some sinks outside where they can wash their hands.

What happens to children in these restrooms? It has been mentioned that in a clean restroom girls brought a little basket with everything they needed for their hygiene, but in a dirty one "children prefer not to use them and only play to make them dirtier" (AG). Or "It is worrisome that children hold their pee in or prefer not to drink liquids to avoid going to the restroom" (OC). When discussing the right to an education and the right to good health one cannot help thinking about how these rights are violated when the experience of going to the restroom becomes so unpleasant for the children that they prefer to avoid it.

That the schools have water is a necessary condition to keep the restrooms clean. The INEE (2016b, p. 26) recognized in its first results that:

Having water in the school guarantees that the restrooms (toilets) remain clean and that the health of the students and other members of the school community can be preserved. Nationwide, principals reported that 88.9% of the schools have water for the restrooms, either directly from the water grid or using drums or other containers.

In preschools the data presented points to lack of water: "Two out of every ten schools do not have running water (18.9%), which puts the health and hygiene of children and teachers at

risk" (INEE, 2010, p. 54). Any figure that shows scarcity is a red light that must be attended to in order to guarantee proper security and hygiene conditions for the children.

At first sight, the restrooms are also shocking: "Something that really called my attention was that the restroom doors were full of scribbles made by the students: small drawings, obscene words, a thought or even love notes for students of other grades" (OC). Another student points out that: "Inside, the facilities left a lot to be desired, the toilet doors were scribbled over, some with offensive messages for other girls and others with somewhat indecent proposals. The space between toilets was very small, as well as the space on the wall" (FL). A space in disrepair invites the children to participate in its deterioration. It might seem that one more scribble on the doors is scarcely noticeable, but just as they participate in the scribbling they also participate in helping or not helping to the care and maintenance of the restrooms.

Some of the people involved in this issue are the school principals: "The principal showed concern for the hygiene of the restrooms and made repairs such as fixing the floors, painting the doors, etc." (AG). In another case "This school's principal showed no concern for any area; in fact, he seldom left his office" (AG).

There is also some mention of teachers who do not share the children's restrooms: "I still don't understand why in some elementary schools the teachers keep their restrooms locked, maybe the last one or a separate one. I think they may be hiding something, or perhaps they are in better conditions" (OC). In another case:

All my life I have heard students complain of bad smells, lack of toilet paper, toilets without seats and no mirrors, and on the other hand the teachers' restrooms are clean, have toilet paper and soap, and are locked so only teachers can use them. And that's where the controversy starts: the teachers do not complain about the restrooms because theirs are clean, and some claim that the students' restrooms are dirty because students don't take care of them (AG).

It is noteworthy that female students identify themselves with the children rather than the teachers, because in these cases they do not justify that teachers' restrooms are in different conditions and locked. I would venture to say that, having just started to study at the teachers' college, they are still more concerned about the children's higher interest, one of the fundamental principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2006). The challenge for their training is that they stay the same and always look after the children.

Janitors play a very important role in the maintenance of the restrooms, a student points out, "Because even when they exist the restrooms are dirty because they pay no attention to them or for other reasons" (CA). It is an unpleasant task sometimes seen as a punishment, cleaning the filth, as opposed to keeping a place clean. One of our students points out: "Janitors only clean [the restrooms] once or twice a day, even if there are two shifts. How are the restrooms

supposed to stay clean all day?” (AG). Our students place the responsibility of cleaning on the janitors, but they also wonder about the reasons and think about the responsibilities: “I think it is curious and important to speak about the restrooms. They are a potential focus of disease for students and usually the most neglected area in the school, but who is to blame and who is responsible for taking care of the restrooms?” (AG).

Rather than looking for culprits, our students reflect on the need of having clean restrooms, which is linked to the right to good health and the hygiene conditions that should be maintained in schools, as they say:

It is clear to me that, if we follow proper hygiene norms, we will have a clean and healthy school, as well as healthy students. It is an issue of the utmost importance, to which we must pay attention because if it is not faced in due time children may develop bad hygiene habits, and even bad quality of life. They may catch diseases that could be difficult to treat and could even threaten their health, because even washing their hands is important to avoid bacterial contagion when eating. A good image says a lot about a person in society, and we must warn elementary school children about the bad effects of not having good hygienic habits, which is why we must have good habits ourselves (CA).

One can clearly perceive the criterion of acceptability proposed by Tomasevski (in INEE, 2016a, p. 10), that: “Encompasses a number of quality criteria for educational services, from those related to security and health in schools to the characteristics they must have to reach their educational goals”. Health and hygiene are priorities, but sometimes it seems that they do not go beyond official rhetoric.

The subjective texts speak of the students’ own experiences:

I could not help remembering when I was in elementary school and the many adventures I had with my friends when we asked permission to go to the restroom and made wet paper balls that we flung to the ceiling, or wrote the name of the boy we liked on the wall. To begin with, we could not go alone. We had to go in groups of three: who knew which of the ghosts that appeared there could catch us? The first toilet was always locked and the others were dirty. How can I forget the awkward positions I had to be in to use the toilet without touching it, or to avoid seeing the obscene scribbles on the doors? (AG).

Or: “I remember that in my elementary school at the recess we had to stand in line to use the restrooms. It moved slowly because we entered one by one and you had to wait a long time” (OC). In both cases our students, seeing themselves as children, speak of their trips to the restroom as a natural condition to which they seemingly adapted themselves to the point of trying

different positions to avoid contact with the toilet bowl. It did not seem to generate any mixed feelings such as the ones they now express when they put themselves in the children's place. Maybe the children they observed are now going through their own adaptation – or perhaps resignation – and have nothing to say about that.

As we have shown, our students identify the basic conditions of the schools they visited and their services, the actors involved, and some actions that could be taken to address issues that violate the children's rights: "I think that in these cases it would be necessary to charge a fee for the maintenance of the schools and their facilities, and maybe with that money they could buy toilet paper and hand soap" (OC). Or "As a future teacher, I believe this issue is very important because I will have to deal with this reality" (AG). The point is not the viability of the proposals: the visits to elementary schools seek to activate our students' thinking and to start a dialog in which we analyze the issue of children's rights and the fragility of the conditions of their schools that risk violating those rights.

The differences between the schools were perceived in the visits, together with that an understanding of what they had in common. As one of our students points out: "Two different schools, different students and different principals, but one thing was similar: the restrooms were in such poor conditions" (OC). Our students' subjective texts refer to the present they experienced, but they also link it to their own past and create expectations for their future; that is, they sensitize them towards the tasks they have chosen as their life profession.

Our students' narratives put them in contact with themselves, building a way to become teachers through their contact with their learning experiences: "Narrative, as a way to know and also as a way to organize and communicate experiences" (McEwan & Egan, 2012, p. 16). This connection with their subjectivity and their memory works as a sort of intersubjective link that joins together a shared present, an individual past, and a future under construction, but is also a way to express who they are, what they think, believe and feel when they are with the children in an elementary school. Developing a sensitivity towards their profession is one of the goals of approaching the schools, and it is clearly reflected in our students' subjective texts.

The right to quality education includes restrooms

"Restrooms are like a presentation card for schools that has not been very good so far" (OC). Restrooms are also a link in the chain of children's rights in their everyday concrete realm; that is, they are a concrete way to serve or violate their rights. Assessments conducted by the INEE, such as the ECEA "offer information to society, and especially to educational authorities, on the degree to which the right to an education and the exercise of rights within education are being fulfilled" (INEE, s.f.a, p. 12). As has been shown, it is necessary to make the information about the conditions of the schools available to all; however, little is known about concrete actions taken based on that documented information.

Making the basic conditions in which schools operate known is also documenting that the children's rights are being violated, in actions apparently as simple as having running water in the restrooms and keeping them clean. The first impressions of our students, future elementary school teachers, are also data that show the conditions in which school restrooms are every day, as well as the children's opinions. Although the analysis we conducted with our group did not focus on the issue of children's rights, our female students' opinions show their "indignation" about dirty and neglected restrooms, and their assessment that there are problems. Their expression is a way to show how children's rights are being violated.

The aim of the census and the assessments we have referred to is to provide information to make decisions. What kind of decisions must be made on the issue of the restrooms? The Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved on November 20 1989 and ratified by our country in 1990, recognizes children as "individuals with the right to full physical, mental and social development, and with the right to express their opinions freely" (UNICEF, 2006, p. 6). Ratifying this Convention means accepting the State's obligation to "take the necessary measures to make all the rights recognized by the Convention effective" (UNICEF, 2006, p. 6).

Children and adolescents are full subjects of law. This view shows an evolution in the juridical position of minors, from a concern for the protection of children to the recognition that "children are individuals with dignity that enables them to be subjects of human rights" (Lázaro, 2011, p. 22); that is, from a paternalistic attitude to a recognition of "their self-government insofar as their natural capability allows" (Lázaro, 2011, p.23). Children's opinions and their self-government in regard to the issue of restrooms have been heard through our students' first impressions, opinions which seem to contrast with the conditions described for the school buildings.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has established the:

Juridical recognition of children as active subjects of rights, deserving of a different protection from the one that, for the same rights, adults receive, with the aim of ensuring that the interest of children be attended to as superior to any other legitimate interest (Lázaro, 2011, p. 24).

Thus, dirty and neglected restrooms violate not only the children's rights to an education and good health, but also their human rights. Unfortunately, the importance these rights deserve is reflected in conditions as elementary as school restrooms. However, we must not seek culprits but to act consequently. The educational community of elementary schools has a specific function in order to guarantee the fulfillment of these rights; that is, a specific function in the cleaning and maintenance of the restrooms.

The State, in turn, also has obligations to be met to ensure the basic services of the schools, such as water supply, an essential condition to keep the restrooms clean. The ECEA points out

that “the flexibility of the [evaluation] model will make it possible to set more demanding standards as the basic conditions are met for everyone” (INEE, s.f.a, p. 8). Meeting these conditions “appeals to different actors” (INEE, s.f.a, p. 12):

Assessing each one of these areas makes it possible to know the basic conditions in which schools operate and to orient decision-making to improve them. With this information, federal and state educational authorities may plan the provision and improvement of resources, and the members of the school community – principals, teachers, students, etc. – with the support of the parents may undertake actions to maintain and improve resources and processes within the school, which does not exempt the State from fulfilling its obligations of guaranteeing, promoting, protecting, and respecting the right of students to quality education (INEE, s.f.b, p. 12).

Is speaking of restrooms a pedagogical discussion? Restrooms are not seen as a pedagogical or educational issue because we tend to see processes as fragmented and in parts, but if we see the school as a whole we cannot allow one of its parts to diminish the quality of the whole school. The purpose of the school is educational, from its physical infrastructure to the most subtle elements of classroom work. If one part begins to fail, sooner or later it will all fail. Restrooms are linked to hygiene and health, but is that not part of the school’s pedagogical purpose, and of the training of future teachers? Analyzing education through school restrooms has to do with children’s rights, but also with human rights: “The goal of an educational approach based on human rights is simple: to ensure that all children have access to quality education that respects and promotes their right to dignity and optimal development” (UNESCO, p. 1).

The educational system must be articulated with other systems to support schools, as can be seen in our students’ writings. Sometimes schools lack the resources or leadership required “to implement actions aimed at ensuring adequate sanitary facilities for the school community as a whole, thus preventing health hazards and guaranteeing the community’s wellbeing” (INEE, 2010, pp. 56-57), so programs to address this issue would have to go beyond the local level of the schools and educational institutions to guarantee comprehensive attention to children, as stated in Article 1, numeral III of the General Law of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (2014):

To create and regulate the formation, organization and functioning of the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, in order for the State to fulfill its responsibility to guarantee the comprehensive protection, prevention, and restitution of any children’s or adolescents’ rights that may have been violated.

At the time of writing this text, Mexico's SEP presents the Better Schools Plan (*Plan Mejores Escuelas*) 2012-2017, that once again focuses on the physical infrastructure of the schools. This represents an unmet challenge, and at the same time the lack of a comprehensive view of the rights of children; the State insists on attending in parts and through unarticulated programs the rights to education and to good health. Much remains to be done, and in this regard training *in situ* involves future teachers already studying in our country's teacher colleges. It means looking at schools as a comprehensive space where, in many ways and through all its spaces, we may contribute to guaranteeing or violating the rights of children, which depend on what we do or fail to do.

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