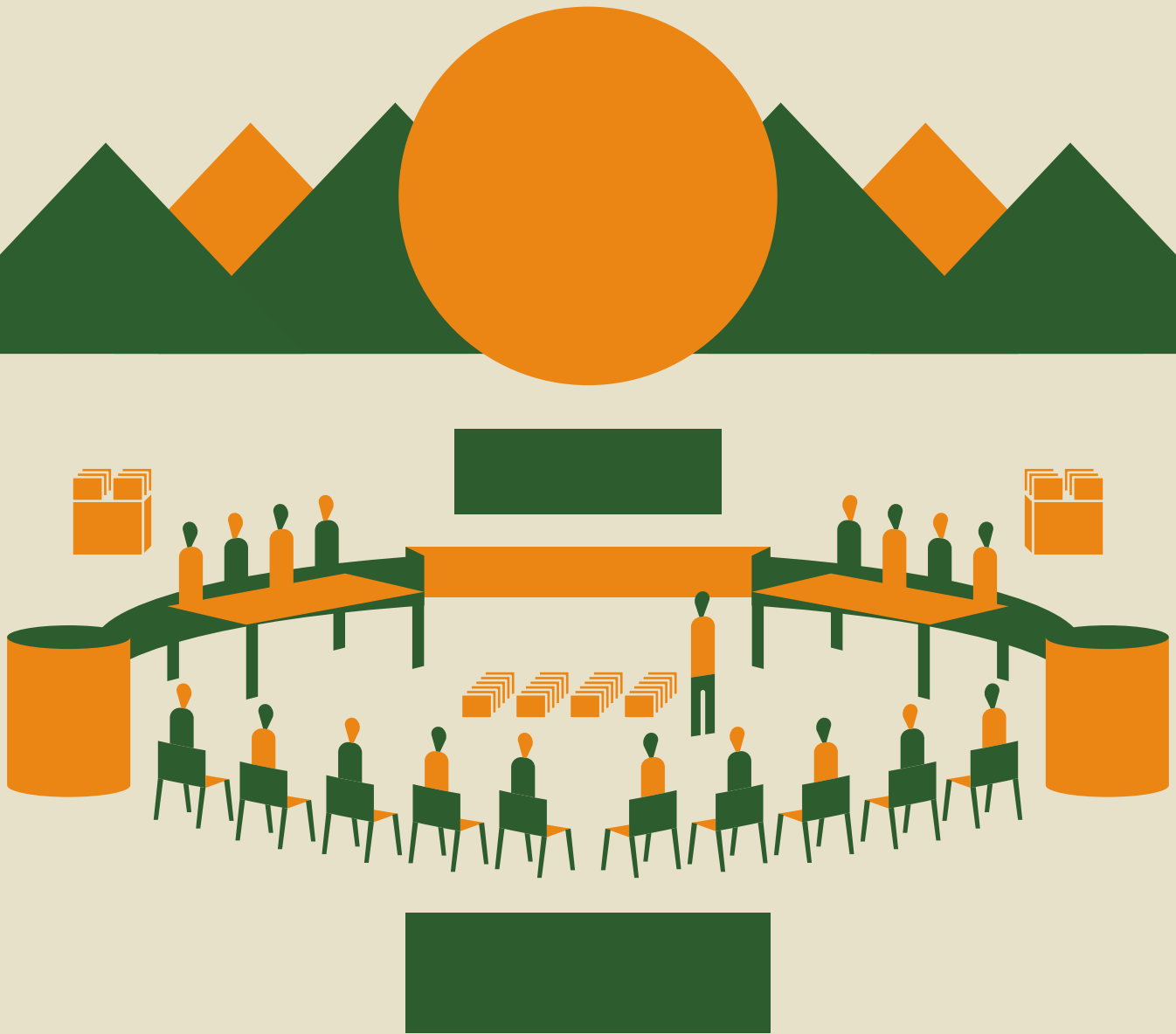




LEARNING WHAT MATTERS IN MEXICO

CONTEXT AND COMMUNICATION AS ESSENTIAL LEVERS
OF TRANSFORMATION IN NUEVO LEÓN

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ACRONYMS

BoS	Breadth of Skills
CUE	Center for Universal Education
EST	Education System Transformation
NEET	Neither in Employment, Education, nor Training
NEM	Nueva Escuela Mexicana
NEST	Network for Education Systems Transformation
SEP	Secretaría de Educación Pública

ABOUT THIS SERIES

How well are
education
systems creating
opportunities
for children and
young people
to learn what
matters?

Education systems worldwide face mounting pressure to prepare children and young people not just for academic success, but for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world (UNESCO 2023). Growing evidence suggests that, to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, children and young people need a broad set of skills including but not limited to: literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, socioemotional skills, and civic engagement (Dweck, Walton and Cohen 2014; Martinez 2022; Rado 2020).

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST), a global impact network¹ co-led by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and ten civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, seeks to understand how education systems can transform to prioritize a “breadth of skills”—an

integrated set of academic, socioemotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care, Anderson and Kim 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: *How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?* This question acknowledges that, while ideas about “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people. Rather than prescribing universal definitions, NEST embraces locally grounded interpretations that honor the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of each setting.

1. Impact networks are complex living systems, made of interacting people, organizations, and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional organizations with linear processes and standard operating procedures, networks are dynamic, interconnected, and variable. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

FRAMING OUR INQUIRY: THE FOUR Ps AND THREE Cs AS WORKING FRAMEWORKS

Informed by prior research from CUE, NEST draws on two interconnected frameworks that guide our exploration of education systems transformation towards skills development. The 4P framework identifies four high-level domains of change in systems transformation: purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop, Morris and Qargha 2023). The 3C framework proposes three catalytic conditions believed to enable and sustain the transformation process: Commitment, Capacity, and Cohesion (CUE 2022).²

We approach these frameworks not as prescriptive models, but as working theories that require interrogation,

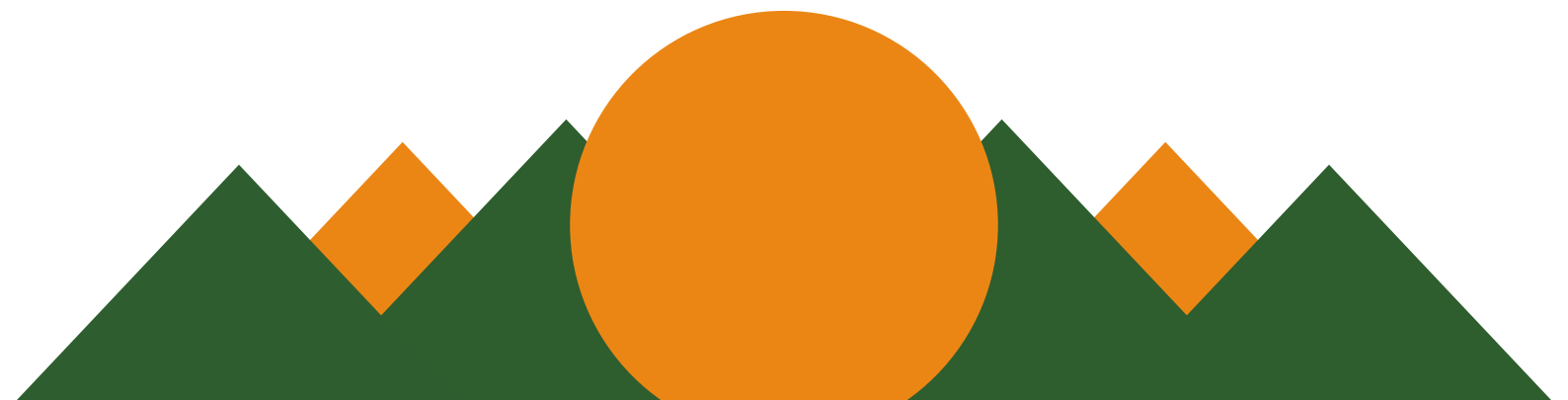
adaptation, and potential expansion based on observations in diverse local contexts. Our methodology is deliberately abductive—that is, moving systematically between observation and theoretical inference while remaining open to alternative explanations and framework modifications. This approach reflects NEST’s commitment to collaborative inquiry that is iterative, values local knowledge and expertise, and contributes to broader understanding of education systems transformation. We recognize that meaningful change cannot be externally imposed, but must emerge from genuine engagement with local realities, assets, and constraints.

2. For details, see NEST’s synthesis report (Olateju and Hui 2025).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following country-level findings represent an early stage of inquiry in NEST's ongoing exploration of education systems transformation for skills development. Exploratory in nature, the insights emerging from Mexico's unique context represent an initial step toward a shared understanding of Mexico's education landscape. While findings of this research may not be directly transferable to other settings, we believe that the patterns, tensions, and possibilities identified in this report can inform broader conversations about

how education systems worldwide might better support all children and young people in developing the skills they need to thrive. As NEST continues its collaborative work across ten countries, subsequent studies strive to deepen these insights and further refine our understanding of what enables sustainable education systems transformation toward a breadth of skills. As such, the following report should not be read as a final statement, but as part of an ongoing, iterative process of learning and discovery that contributes to an emerging field.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For children and young people in Mexico, learning “what truly matters” extends beyond academic achievement to encompass the range of skills needed to thrive in an increasingly complex world. Yet education systems often struggle to move beyond conventional approaches to prioritize holistic development due to disconnected priorities, fragmented structures, and institutional inertia. This limits their ability to support young people in developing the range of skills needed for themselves, their communities, and beyond. Nuevo León is among Mexico’s most industrialized, urbanized states. Despite its favorable conditions for education system transformation, actors throughout its educational ecosystem are struggling to truly transform it into one that truly supports range-of-skills development.

Despite a favorable policy environment and scattered innovations, systemic transformation is hindered by structural inertia, political discontinuity, and limited coordination.

This report contains the results of our exploration of the opportunities and challenges to transforming Nuevo León’s education system in response to NEST’s shared research question: how well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? Drawing on system mapping, desk research, quantitative data, and

qualitative insights from 29 interviews and two focus groups with actors across government, civil society, private sector, and youth organizations, the study reveals a growing shared commitment to a breadth of skills agenda that strengthens youth agency, socioemotional development, and community engagement in Nuevo León. However, despite a favorable policy environment and scattered innovations, systemic transformation is hindered by structural inertia, political discontinuity, and limited coordination. Qualitative data highlighted the importance of building a shared intersectoral vision, strengthening local capacity, and fostering social demand for quality education that transcends traditional test-based accountability measures. We argue for an expanded conceptualization of transformational conditions to include Context and Communication under the existing 3C framework, and conclude that sustainable transformation requires aligning actors across sectors, amplifying youth voices, leveraging local context as a foundation for change, and embedding learning that truly matters at the heart of the system via systematic attention to all five Cs.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Mexico operates one of Latin America's largest and most complex education systems, serving approximately 34.7 million students as of the 2023–2024 academic year. This includes 23.9 million in basic education, 5.5 million in upper secondary, and 5.3 million in higher education (INEGI 2023). However, despite its scale and recent reform efforts, the system still faces significant systemic challenges that limit its ability to prepare students for the demands of contemporary society. Internationally, Mexico consistently performs below OECD averages on PISA assessments, ranking 58th out of 72 countries in 2015, with less than 1% of students achieving top performance levels across all domains (OECD 2017). Mexican labor market analysis (OECD 2017) also reveals a critical “skills gap,” i.e., the country's skills system is not fully responsive to the evolving needs of the labor market. As of 2024, over 16% of young people are neither in employment, education, nor training (NEET), and therefore lack access to the comprehensive skill development opportunities needed for meaningful participation in society and the economy (OECD 2024). These outcomes are not mere statistical concerns. They represent a fundamental mismatch between what young people learn and what they need to thrive in an increasingly

complex, interconnected world. The traditional focus on rote learning and standardized testing has created a system that, as one educator from this study noted, “prepares students for exams, not for life” (Santibañez, Vernez and Razquin 2005).

The 1992 decentralization reform³ in Mexico established the current education system governance structure: the Federal Ministry of Public Education (SEP) maintains responsibility for curriculum development, planning, and textbook provision, while state authorities manage service delivery, teacher training, and locally relevant programming. Historically dominated by efforts to expand access and reduce illiteracy, Mexican education policy has recently shifted toward post-COVID learning recovery and integration of socioemotional competencies into official curricula (Reimers 2024). For example, in 2023 the federal government introduced the Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM), a proposal aimed at education system transformation (EST) in Mexico via humanistic, community-based approaches. The NEM reform maintains a centrally designed curriculum with mandatory national standards, but encourages local adaptation through project-based learning and community engagement (Bremner et al. 2024, SEP 2023).

3. The 1992 decentralization reform transferred responsibility for basic and teacher education services to the 31 states while preserving the federal Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) as the responsible for national curriculum design, textbook production, and strategic planning. This dual governance model aimed to combine national coherence in learning goals with local flexibility; states took on teacher training, school management, and context-relevant programming, while the SEP continued setting overarching standards, situating curriculum reform squarely at the intersection of federal standard-setting and state-level capacity.

The NEM represents a paradigm shift toward holistic, inclusive, and community-engaged education that emphasizes project-based learning, ethical formation, and teacher autonomy (Sakata et al. 2025). The curriculum incorporates not only academic content, but also socioemotional skills, civic values, and respect for cultural and environmental diversity. The NEM recognizes Mexico's deeply entrenched inequalities—particularly among Indigenous, rural, and socioeconomically marginalized groups—and ensures inclusion via culturally relevant materials, targeted support for students facing systemic barriers, and other mandated measures. It also seeks to affirm Mexico's multicultural heritage by incorporating indigenous languages, histories, and epistemologies throughout the curriculum. While generally welcomed for its emphasis on cultural diversity, identity, local cultural

relevance, social justice, and equity, its implementation has revealed significant challenges: inconsistent pedagogical practices, insufficient teacher guidance and preparation, and infrastructural gaps like staff shortages (Bremner et al. 2024).

Nuevo León: A strategic laboratory for educational transformation

A northern Mexican state with approximately 1.6 million students, Nuevo León (see Figure 1) is among Mexico's most industrialized and urbanized states. In a complex national landscape, it emerges as a compelling case for state-level EST.

FIGURE 1: MAP OF MEXICO HIGHLIGHTING NUEVO LEÓN



Source: Wallenfeldt, W. (n.d.)

Relative to other states, Nuevo León benefits from economic prosperity and a dynamic educational innovation landscape, making it a useful environment to explore opportunities EST. The state government has expressed strong political commitment to educational equity and quality. Flagship policies to this end with broad citizen support and approval create favorable conditions for systemic transformation (Consejo Nuevo León 2021). Nuevo León has also led Mexico in enrollment growth at all educational levels (especially upper-secondary and higher education), championed the prioritization of early childhood education, and remained committed

to educational assessment and measurement practices. Despite these advantages, Nuevo León still grapples with disparities in education access and quality, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Against this backdrop, this study explores how effectively the education system in Nuevo León is creating opportunities for young people to learn what matters. Specifically, it aims to understand how reshaping the education system in Nuevo León can better support young people's learning and development of a range of skills, particularly in ways that are meaningful, equitable, and contextually grounded.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to explore how well the education system in Nuevo León is creating opportunities for children and young people to develop a broad range of skills that enable them to thrive in today's complex world, and identify necessary strategies that can contribute to Nuevo León's EST process (see Box 1).

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating desk research, quantitative data analysis, and qualitative ecosystem mapping to offer a comprehensive understanding of Nuevo León's educational landscape. Desk research encompassed the review of over 30 national- and state-level policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and reforms associated with the NEM, with particular emphasis on skills like language, mathematics,

sciences and technology, and critical thinking in the revised secondary curriculum. Concurrently, quantitative analysis of administrative data, survey results, and key educational indicators provided insights into system-level trends and contextualized the qualitative findings. This approach aimed to balance the breadth of system-level analysis with the depth of education ecosystem actors' perspectives.

The core of the study involved developing an educational ecosystem map for Nuevo León in collaboration with a consulting firm. Data collection included 29 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with stakeholders from government, civil society, the private sector, philanthropic institutions, national experts, and youth organization representatives.



A snowball sampling strategy was used to identify informants with system-level influence, particularly those engaged in youth development, equity, and cross-sector collaboration. Qualitative data were analyzed through a systems thinking approach to identify reinforcing and balancing feedback loops across educational, social, political, and economic domains (Spivack 2021).

This study is guided by an expanded conceptual framework based on Sengeh and Winthrop (2022) and Morris and Qargha (2023) that considers the “four Ps” of EST: purpose, pedagogy, position, and power. The framework aims to provide a systems thinking approach to analyze the complex dynamics within education systems.

The study also draws on the CUE/ NEST 3C⁴ framework which suggests that increased commitment, capacity, and cohesion among ecosystem actors can support a systemic shift toward a breadth of skills in education systems. This study focuses on the 3C framework in particular, reflecting on its sufficiency as a set of conceptual levers in the Mexican context. While exploratory in nature, this research constitutes an initial step toward a shared understanding of Nuevo León’s educational landscape. Limitations include the absence of school-level data, potential sampling bias toward more visible or engaged actors within the ecosystem, and limited representation of student voices in data collection.

BOX 1: QUESTIONS GUIDING NEST’S RESEARCH IN NUEVO LEÓN

Primary research question:

How well does Nuevo León’s education system create opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?

Secondary research questions:

What specific skills are integrated into Nuevo León’s curricula, pedagogical practices, and assessment systems?

What systemic conditions currently enable or constrain the development of a breadth of skills in Nuevo León’s education system?

Which strategies or interventions can contribute to transforming Nuevo Leon’s education system towards the goal of cultivating the breadth of skills that children and young people need to thrive?

4. The 3C framework developed by the CUE identifies the three Cs as critical levers in the transformation process of any education ecosystem, and represents the intermediate outcomes expected of the CUE Knowing-Doing Network (KDN), of which NEST is a part.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on document analysis, review of key educational statistics, 29 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with stakeholders across five categories—academia (24%), public sector (24%), private sector (21%), development organizations (17%), and civil society (14%) (see Annex B)—this study reveals both the current state of skills integration in Nuevo León’s education system and the systemic conditions shaping transformation efforts. There is a broad consensus around an expanded vision of essential skills for young people, though persistent gaps systemically inhibit the EST of Nuevo León. Participants across all stakeholder categories consistently emphasized socioemotional skills (e.g., emotional regulation, empathy, self-awareness), critical thinking, problem-solving, civic engagement, leadership, identity development, collaboration, and resilience-building as critical for youth development.

However, interview data revealed substantial structural and relational challenges. Teachers reported receiving mandates to teach socioemotional learning without corresponding training, time, or assessment tools. Assessment systems remain focused on traditional academic subjects, and promising youth agency initiatives are primarily in community-based rather than school-based, creating what multiple respondents described as a “bifurcated

system.” Stakeholders identified key enabling conditions (i.e., strong state-level political commitment and growing cross-sector interest in the breadth of skills agenda) and constraining factors (i.e., political discontinuity undermining long-term planning, inadequate teacher preparation systems, misalignment between assessment and broader skills agendas, limited cross-sector coordination despite shared commitment, and resource constraints affecting implementation of progressive pedagogical approaches).

Against this backdrop, the findings of this report reveal a system in transition, characterized by enabling and constraining forces that affect how well the system supports children and young people in developing a relevant breadth of skills. Our analysis of Nuevo León’s education system through the 4P and 3C frameworks suggests that, while there is a strong commitment to education that helps children and young people develop a broad set of skills, structural and relational challenges persist. This study identifies four critical patterns within Nuevo León’s education system: strong commitment and shared sense of purpose without institutional embedding, progressive pedagogy constrained by structural barriers, emerging youth agency in community spaces, and concentrated power dynamics that sustain system resistance to transformation (see box 2).

Teachers reported receiving mandates to teach socioemotional learning without corresponding training, time, or assessment tools.

BOX 2: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Strong commitment and shared purpose without institutional embedding, where holistic education goals remain peripheral to dominant accountability systems

Progressive pedagogy constrained by structural barriers, as reforms like NEM face implementation challenges due to resource constraints, concentrated power structures, and misaligned priorities

Emerging youth agency in community spaces, with promising innovations positioning students as active participants, though these remain disconnected from formal education

Concentrated power dynamics that create vulnerability to political cycles while limiting sustained transformation

Education has to prepare for life, not just for exams. What matters is that young people know about themselves, love each other, and know how to influence their environment.

Each new administration wants to start from scratch. We lose people, knowledge, and trust.

In the following sections, we further analyze these four patterns and argue that in order to transform the education system in Nuevo León toward supporting a breadth of skills for children and young people, actors across the education ecosystem must consider two additional key conditions that enable transformation: context and communication. Together with the original three Cs—capacity, commitment, and cohesion—these five levers of change may offer a window into understanding how sustainable transformation can occur locally in Nuevo León.

Purpose: Shared commitment but low cohesion

Across stakeholder groups, there is a growing recognition that education must extend beyond academic achievement to foster holistic development and active citizenship. While academic skills such as literacy and numeracy remain essential, participants

consistently emphasized the importance of socioemotional skills, critical thinking, leadership, identity development, collaboration, resilience-building, and civic engagement skills, deeming them essential in shaping young people's future and ability to thrive. As one educator stated, *"Education has to prepare for life, not just for exams. What matters is that young people know about themselves, love each other, and know how to influence their environment."*

However, it emerged in interviews that this shared vision remains aspirational rather than institutionalized. Participants discussed how the system's focus on the development of aforementioned skills is not yet fully embedded in dominant educational discourse, policy priorities, or daily school practices, citing the education system's vulnerability to political turnover as a key barrier. They noted how new administrations often dismantle or reshape existing efforts, eroding institutional memory, trust, and relationships. One public official observed, *"Each new administration wants to start from scratch. We lose people, knowledge, and trust."* This

We all want transformation, but it feels like we're building ten bridges to the same island—none of them fully connected.

cyclical disruption weakens long-term shared commitment and systemically impedes learning.

In addition to these political and institutional challenges, a lack of coordination and cohesion across sectors further constrains the realization of a shared educational purpose. Although many actors—including those from government agencies, civil society, and private foundations—express a commitment to transformation, their efforts often occur in parallel rather than in collaboration. As one foundation director remarked, *"We all want transformation, but it feels like we're building ten bridges to the same island—none of them fully connected."* This fragmentation limits the system's coherence and collective impact.

These findings underscore that system transformation towards supporting the development of a breadth of skills for young people requires more than sheer commitment—it demands cohesive agendas and institutionalized mechanisms built upon deep relationships and trust.

Pedagogy: Constraints to implementing student-centered practices

The New Mexican School (Nueva Escuela Mexicana, or NEM) represents a comprehensive reimagining of Mexico's educational paradigm, grounded in four foundational

pillars: curricular integration, professional autonomy of teachers, community as the integrative core, and the human right to education. Together, these pillars articulate a vision of learning that transcends rote knowledge acquisition to foster the development of socioemotional competencies, civic values, and critical life skills essential for both individual flourishing and collective well-being (Hernández Moreno 2024). Central to this vision is curricular integration, which abandons siloed subject-matter instruction in favor of an interdisciplinary approach. Traditional subjects are reorganized into broad interdisciplinary domains known as "formative fields" (e.g., "Scientific Knowledge and Thinking"). Teachers are encouraged to weave together concepts from different fields in ways that resonate with local realities and global challenges. Within and across fields, learning is meant to be contextually relevant and project-based. The NEM envisions learning that connects classroom activities with community needs and local contexts, and encourages students and teachers to work together to identify problems, and develop solutions through interdisciplinary projects. Teachers are encouraged to step out of the classroom and engage with community members as co-educators. The NEM also explicitly encourages teachers and schools to adapt the curriculum to local contexts and student needs. Educators are seen not merely as implementers of a centrally prescribed syllabus, but as professionals with the autonomy to decide what and how to teach.

Although recent reforms like the NEM promote project-based learning and socioemotional development, these pedagogical innovations have yet to

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They ask us to care about the whole child, but the system only cares about test scores.

take root across the system. Educators frequently expressed frustration at the gap between curricular intentions and implementation realities. One noted, *"We're asked to teach socioemotional learning, but we're not given time, training, or support. We end up going back to what we know: the textbook and discipline."* Insights from a national study examining the implementation of the NEM across three states including Nuevo León (Sakata et al. 2025) reinforce these concepts. While many stakeholders initially embraced the reform for its effort to "rescue" local cultures and traditions—particularly Indigenous languages—and for granting teachers greater curricular autonomy, several expressed confusion about the flexibility and lack of guidance. In interviews, teachers expressed frustration with inconsistent policy messages and a lack of explicit training on the NEM curriculum. One local supervisor in rural Chiapas described the rollout as "a paradigm shift...But there has been no real systematization of teacher training." A supervisor in Nuevo León noted that information trickled down sporadically if at all, leaving local authorities and teachers in the dark and highlighting the importance of strong communication policy loops. The NEM's decentralizing impulse has left some teachers unsure how to proceed with their newfound autonomy. These accounts underscore that, while the policy design grants teacher autonomy, the support structure to productively exercise it through professional development, clear guidance, and communication has lagged behind. For some teachers, the abrupt shift to an open curriculum led to feelings of isolation and a reversion to traditional methods.

This disconnect between policy and curricular vision and implementation realities points to deeper structural and institutional challenges to the Nuevo León education system. These include heavy administrative burdens, outdated teacher training models, and accountability systems that still prioritize standardized testing over a breadth of skills development. One school principal summarized the contradiction, stating, *"They ask us to care about the whole child, but the system only cares about test scores."* Without adequate structural support like mentoring, professional learning communities, and in-service training, teachers' capacity to adopt more human-centered pedagogies stays limited. Capacity must extend across the system and beyond technical skills to include institutional support systems that build trust. As one public official said, *"Teachers need freedom and accompaniment. It's not enough to change the curriculum—you have to change how they are trained, how they support each other, and how they relate to their community."*

These insights illuminate the complex interplay of structural conditions that require fundamental reconfiguration for the education system to effectively support a breadth of skills agenda, demanding coordinated changes across assessment systems, professional development models, institutional support mechanisms, and the broader accountability framework that shapes daily educational practices. Participants' reflections underscore the importance of contextually sensitive structural changes. They recognize that sustainable change cannot be imposed from above but must emerge from a genuine understanding of local realities,

assets, and constraints. In Nuevo León, this could mean leveraging the state's strong political commitment with educators' desire for peer learning and shared reflection. By addressing both the structural constraints and investing in the capacity of actors in Nuevo León, we create the conditions for transformation to take root and flourish.

Positioning: Reimagining the roles of youth and communities

A promising shift in Nuevo León is the gradual repositioning of students, particularly youth, as active participants in their own learning and in broader civic life (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2019). Participants of the study noted that, given the inertia and rigidity of the education system, some promising opportunities for youth to strengthen leadership, agency, collaboration, and academic skills are emerging in informal, community-rooted spaces. One interviewee described how a school-based mentorship model in which older students supported younger peers fostered academic gains, a better school climate, and a sense of collective responsibility. Outside formal education, community-rooted programs are enabling youth to express themselves, take leadership roles, and envision new life trajectories. As the program coordinator of an urban arts initiative to build socioemotional skills in Monterrey's periphery noted, *"They come here angry or shut down... but after a few weeks, they're expressing themselves, leading projects, even talking about college."* These

spaces demonstrate the potential for community-rooted learning to complement formal education.

Through mapping Nuevo León's educational ecosystem, we identified more spaces that are working to strengthen youth agency, ensuring that they are not passive recipients of the education system but active agents of change. Local Youth Committees are non-partisan youth groups with the aim of fostering young people's leadership skills and active engagement in community life. These committees are designed to cultivate personal and collective growth among young people while aiding the effective operation of local community centers. A participant highlighted how such spaces can foster youth agency and position it as a vehicle for systems transformation by summarizing: *"Young people who are empowered in freedom and equality, as agents of their own transformation—joyful, fulfilled, aware, deeply rooted in their communities, and co-creators of social health and vitality within just, supportive, and resilient environments in a Nuevo León with an economy that values and respects life."* Another interviewee emphasized the importance of such spaces: *"Young people already have a different consciousness, but they need spaces to exercise it. If they can't practice their rights, they end up doubting that they have them."*

Importantly, the shift in the positioning of young people within Nuevo León's education system reveals both the potential and the paradox of youth agency. While informal, community-based spaces are demonstrating alternative models where young people are positioned as co-creators of transformation, these innovations

Context should not be viewed as a constraint, but “as a compass.”

remain largely disconnected from formal schooling, creating a bifurcated system where meaningful skill development occurs primarily outside traditional education institutions. The evidence suggests that young people already have the capacity and desire for active participation, but the formal system has yet to create the structural conditions to enable this positioning at scale. This disconnect reflects broader power dynamics within the education system of Nuevo León, where top-down, hierarchical relationships and connections continue to influence system functioning, excluding young people from meaningful participation in highly regulated environments, such as schools (Reimers 2024). The concept of power and its implications in EST are further explored in the following section.

Power: Systemic inertia, political volatility, and the role of context

The distribution of power within the education system in Nuevo León is a central barrier to lasting transformation. Currently, decisionmaking authority is concentrated in just a few institutions, and system-level changes often hinge on individual leadership rather than robust institutional design (Scott et al. 2018, OECD 2018). Institutionally, the system remains highly sensitive to political transitions. Reforms and programs are often reset with each new administration, disrupting relationships, erasing institutional memory, and weakening long-term capacity. As a result, change and innovations tend to be fragile, vulnerable to political cycles,

and disconnected from broader system dynamics (Bonilla-Rius 2020, Cruz Orozco 2023, Scott et al. 2018).

Beyond institutional structures, power is also shaped by sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Interviewees emphasized that transformation efforts often fail when they are imposed from above without considering local realities. Top-down reforms that overlook community voices, contextual constraints, and social dynamics, tend to fade without sustainable impact. As one participant put it, context should not be viewed as a constraint, but “as a compass.” Recognizing this calls for a new understanding of power—one that includes the capacity of communities to shape the terms of educational engagement.

System transformation requires far more than the implementation of new programs or technical policy adjustments; it demands cultural change and a redefinition of collective meaning. Power in education is exercised not only through institutions but also through discourse: who defines what education is for, whose experiences are centered, and what values and narratives shape public belief. In this regard, communication is not merely the delivery of messages, it is a process of constructing shared meaning, fostering collective ownership, and legitimizing diverse voices in shaping educational purpose. As one international policymaker noted, *“Education is a public matter, not only from the public sector. We all need to be part of the conversation.”*

This is especially critical in contexts where families and communities have internalized generations of inequality

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**We don't need
another reform.
We need a
movement.**

and exclusion. Some interviewees described how deeply rooted cultural narratives—such as learned helplessness or low expectations—continue to constrain both student aspirations and parental engagement. In one low-income community, for example, a parent was quoted as saying, *“Don’t dream too big, you’ll only get hurt.”* Such mindsets, while often rooted in lived experiences and structural dynamics, reinforce educational disengagement and weaken the agency and power of students and families.

One of the most significant insights emerging from this study is that, without a strong and inclusive social

demand for quality education, system transformation will remain fragile and fragmented. As one participant succinctly stated, *“We don’t need another reform. We need a movement.”* This demand cannot be confined to educators or policymakers alone—it must become a broader public will that engages youth, families, civil society, the private sector, media, and political leadership. This echoes Reimers’ 2021 argument that educational change is not merely a technical or managerial endeavor, but a civic one requiring dialogue, imagination, and democratic deliberation about the kind of society we want to build and the kind of learning that supports it.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to explore how well the education system in Nuevo León enables children and young people to learn what truly matters. Through the application of a systems thinking lens and the 4P framework—purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power—we found an education ecosystem marked by complexity, and an explicit commitment to holistic transformation.

Stakeholders across sectors consistently emphasized a reimagined purpose for education that centers youth agency, emotional wellbeing, and meaningful participation in society. However, this vision remains peripheral to dominant system logics that still prioritize test-based accountability and narrow academic

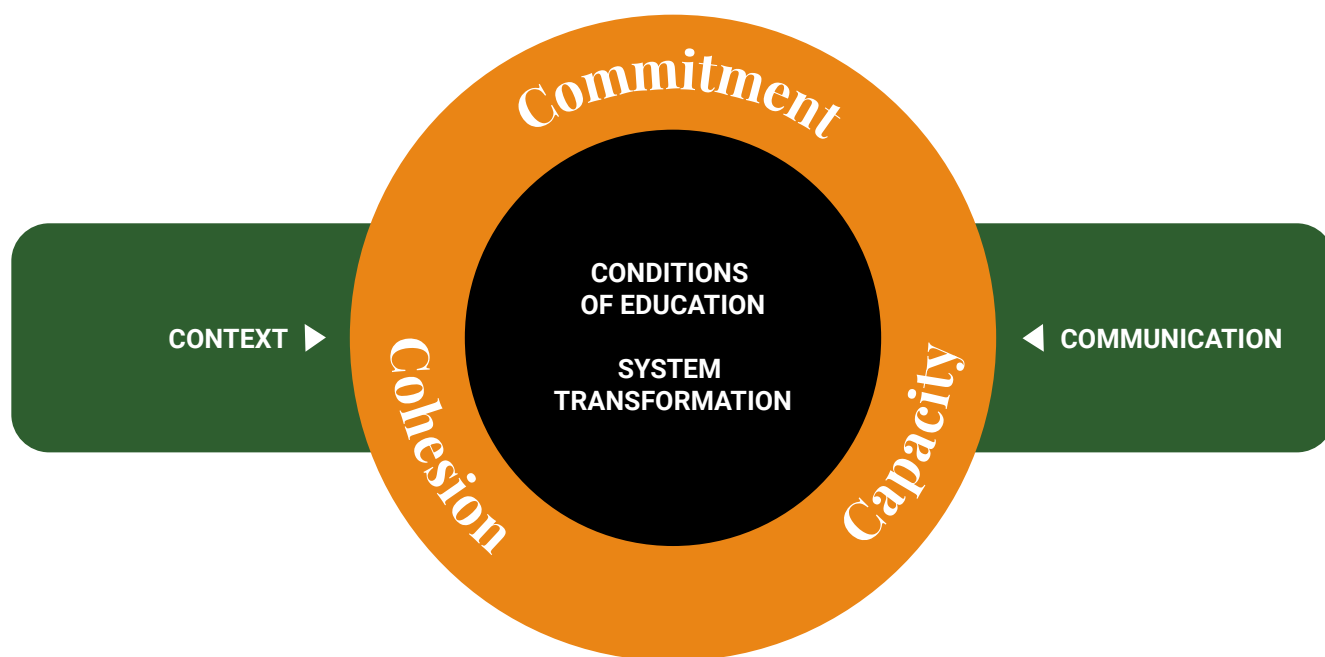
outcomes. In pedagogy, progressive curricular reforms such as the NEM have opened new possibilities, but implementation remains constrained by inadequate teacher support, limited professional development, and a lack of institutional alignment.

Emerging practices in repositioning youth as leaders, mentors, and co-creators of knowledge signal promising shifts—particularly in informal, community-based settings. However, these innovations are often disconnected from the formal system, where young people, teachers, and families still occupy marginal roles in decisionmaking. Finally, structural issues of power—including policy discontinuity, centralized control, and inherited narratives of low expectations—

undermine long-term transformation and limit the system's ability to sustain change. To move from fragmentation toward coherence, and from isolated programs to systemic impact based on insights from Nuevo León, we propose

expanding the 3C framework—capacity, commitment, and cohesion—by adding two essential dimensions: context and communication (see visual 2), and offer the following recommendations grounded in the findings:

FIGURE 2: CONTEXT AND COMMUNICATION AS ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONS TO THE 3C FRAMEWORK



Source: Authors' illustration of an expanded 3C framework

Provide more opportunities for capacity developing at different levels: To strengthen the capacity of Mexico's education system during the early years of curriculum reform, we recommend prioritizing more explicit, personalized, and school-embedded teacher training, as well as opportunities for local governments to coordinate with federal counterparts.

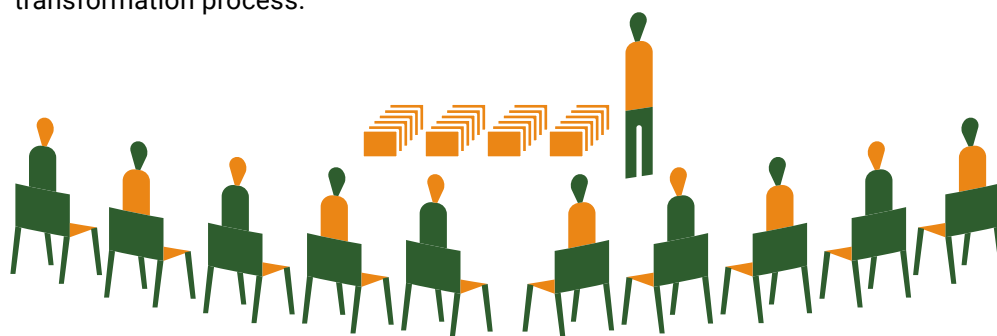
Prioritize local context as a lever for transformation: Educational change must be grounded in the social, cultural, and political conditions of Nuevo León. The state-level context offers a strategic entry point where actors can be held accountable and where cross-sector coalitions can address challenges collaboratively. This includes recognizing community-rooted innovations and elevating local governance as a platform for long-term planning.

Co-creating conditions for transformation through dialogues: Systems change requires honest and open communication rooted in relationships and trust. With a strong cross-sectoral commitment to a breadth of skills agenda, Nuevo León is uniquely positioned to develop a new public narrative that frames education as a shared good and recognizes youth, families, and communities as central voices in the system transformation process.

Align actors through an articulated shared vision of purpose: A clear and sustained vision—centered on the holistic development of young people—must be articulated and reinforced across administrations. Establishing and fostering the intersectoral youth committees can help consolidate this vision and shield it from political volatility.

Institutionalize the five Cs as enablers of system change: To ensure coherence and sustainability, transformation efforts should explicitly develop and monitor the five systemic enablers: commitment, capacity, communication, cohesion, and context. These dimensions should inform planning, resourcing, and accountability frameworks across education institutions.

Cultivate broad social demand for quality education: Transformation requires not only technical reforms but also a cultural shift in how education is valued. Empowering youth, families, civil society, and media to co-define and advocate for meaningful learning experiences will be critical. The Local Youth Committee can serve as a model for expanding civic voice and public ownership of the education agenda.



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ANNEX

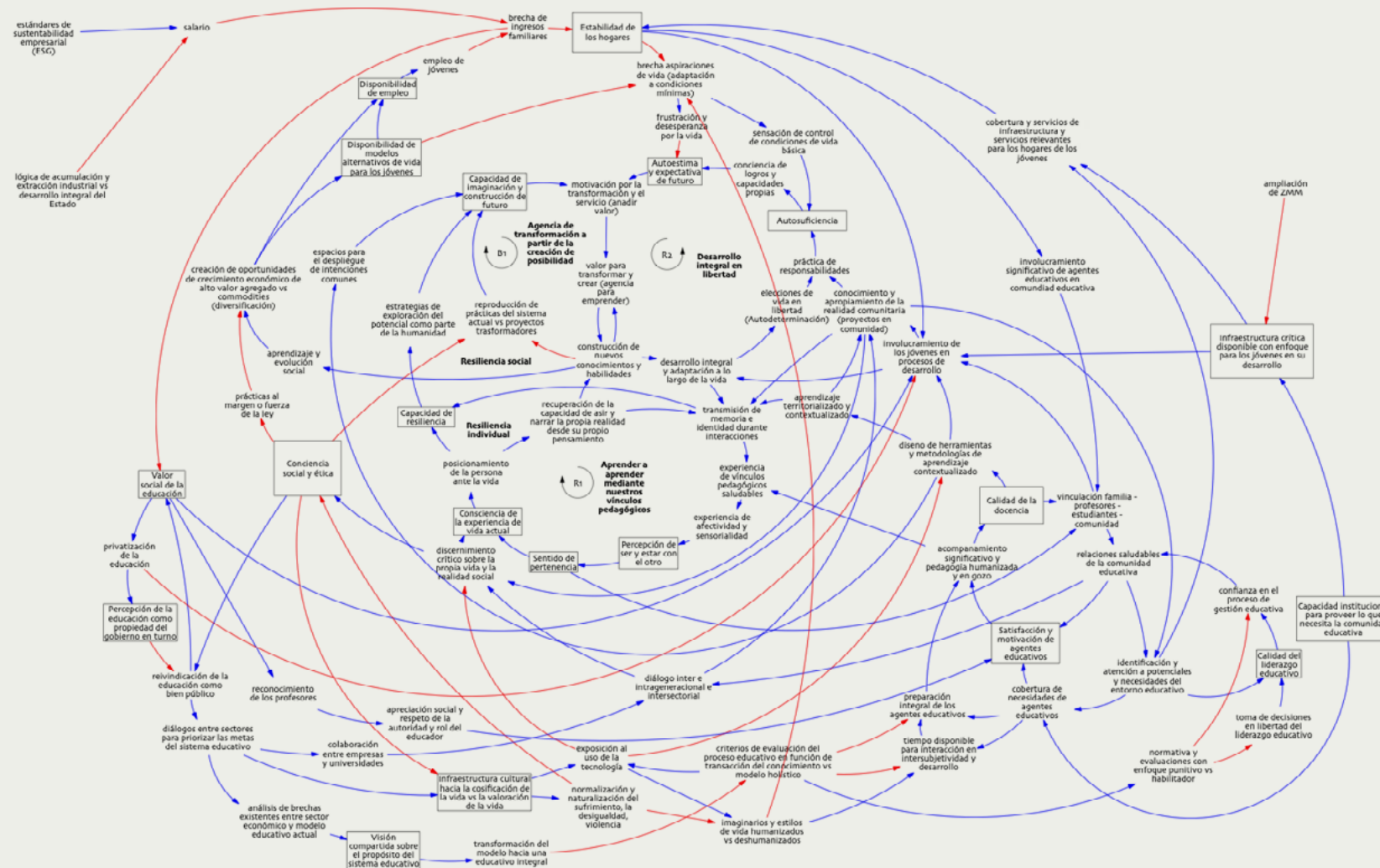
Number of KII by gender

	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Male	16	55.17%
Female	13	44.83%
Total	29	100%

Number of KII by profile

	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Academia	7	24.14%
Public	7	24.14%
Private	6	20.69%
Development	5	17.24%
Civil Society	4	13.79%
Total	29	100%

Systemic dynamic map



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