



## **Perception of Mexican Educational Actors Regarding the Implications of School Life on Educational Achievement**

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This paper analyses the implication of school life, understood as coexistence, in the educational achievement of secondary school students. The article is based on data collected as part of a collective piece of research from the perspective of the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. 135 in-depth interviews were conducted with both teachers and students as well as participant observation sessions at different times and spaces in the educational institutions in this study. Further discussion is enhanced when problems such as insecurity and poverty are brought forward into the scene. It is concluded that if the concept of bullying continues to be reduced as a problem of disciplined coexistence among peers, palliative educational policies will prevail that lose sight of this type of violence. The results show the omission in educational public policies regarding the importance of interpersonal relationships on both teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: educational achievement, school life, stake holders, discipline, school violence

### **INTRODUCTION**

School coexistence, a theoretical category that has been used in Latin America to refer to school life in which violent behaviors and peaceful or positive interpersonal relationships are included, is one of the factors that can influence educational attainment.

This topic has been widely documented through studies using quantitative methods. When making a review of previous pieces of search, we found some carried out in Norway, USA, Israel, Canada, Turkey, India, Italy, among other countries. There is a tendency towards the affirmation of school bullying and other types of violence as explanatory factors of limited educational achievement. In this sense, this article aims to provide data and reflections derived from a qualitative study so that a deeper

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understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved by focusing on coexistence, not only on violence, and emphasizing what the actors themselves consider, beyond the statistical relationship that can be established from school indicators.

In accordance with Schutz (1973), learning about the daily life of the study subjects allows us to understand the nature and importance of the social world in which they live. From a phenomenological perspective the foregoing is relevant so that we can understand the meaning that the educational actor himself gives to the way in which he relates to others and to what he considers and educational achievement while at the same time capturing, under natural conditions, the personal incidence of interpersonal relationships on educational work.

As can be seen later, the interviewed actors state that the school environment, defined by the type of coexistence between students and teachers, is important for educational achievement, however, they do not observe that educational achievement is a consequence of how they relate to the rest of the school community. Unlike most previous studies, we did not find that educational attainment is diminished by being a victim of bullying.

In the previous studies considered here, the role of teachers in relation to the construction of harmonious coexistence environments has not been addressed in depth. Thus, another element that this research contributes with is documenting the need expressed by students with respect to being understood by their teachers and being able to establish a relationship of trust and closeness, which is referred to as something fundamental to live harmoniously and have better results in school. In this sense, what happens in the telesecundarias (one of the options students can enroll in middle schools in Mexico) becomes fundamental, with a single teacher who teaches all the academic subjects, which allows him or her to know all his or her students and monitor their academic performance, as well as favor conditions harmonic interaction among peers.

Another point to consider, without it being the main axis of discussion, is the social conditions that surround the schools where this study was carried out. We should consider that in Mexico the educational process is being developed in communities that, to a greater or lesser extent, suffer the consequences from the presence of organized crime, which places schools in violent contexts and that violence that exists in the community seeps into the classrooms.

### **Context and Review of Literature**

We first discuss the framework of the study. The theoretical categories in question are complex, school coexistence is not usually characterized. Studies in this regard focus on the analysis of school violence and from this the notion of coexistence must be inferred. While, when talking about educational achievement, other theoretical constructs are also considered that, sometimes, are dealt with interchangeably, such as academic performance, generally operationalized with degrees or qualifications (Savage & Wozniak, 2016). Therefore, to guide the analysis of this document, school coexistence is understood as a component of the school culture constituted by the recursive patterns of interaction and the symbolisms that carry the actions, norms and values that

characterize a particular institution (Cruz & Pérez, 2018). While educational achievement is conceived as the achievement of valuable learning that translates into better results for all actors, in that sense, the results must be valued from a perspective of attention to diversity where quantitative indicators are not paramount. but rather the permanence in school, achieve the expected learning, carry out continuous and complete school trajectories, in addition to meeting the expectations of the students (Pozo et al., 2012).

We consulted research carried out from the year 2000 onwards. We identified in such sources that the focus has been concentrated on academic performance, quantitative indicators, leaving aside the qualities of the teaching-learning process, which brings with it that educational achievement, in the terms that this research is positioned, has not been analyzed. However, these investigations allow us to have a reference on the relationship that has been found between violence and the performance of students in academic activities.

The first point of analysis is to have been a victim of violence in relation to academic performance, in that sense, the tendency is to affirm a close relationship between these variables. While Savage et al. (2017), Usman et al. (2023) and Morales-Ramírez & Villalobos-Cordero (2017) points out that, although the association between low academic performance and having faced violent behaviors is constant, it is not particularly strong. On the other hand, there are the studies by Savage & Wozniak (2016) and Brück et al. (2014) who found a strong negative influence of violence on academic performance.

According to Savage & Wozniak (2016), the negative correlations between academic performance and violence are strong, to a lesser extent academic performance and non-violent crime are related. In addition, these authors refer to a close association between intelligence and academic performance: the origin of the intelligence deficit has been found in exposure to violent behavior. In this regard, Brück et al. (2014) mention that the intensity of the conflict is an element that determines the impact on the psychological well-being of the student and the results of standardized tests for university entrance. In their study, they also found that conflict negatively affects the quality of the school learning environment, thereby disrupting both the learning process and test performance.

Other studies have analyzed exposure to violent social environments, without necessarily having been victims of an act. Beulahbel Bency (2019) and McGaha-Garnett (2013) argue that there is a significant association in the academic performance of the school and the locality in which it is located. Even Akbas-Yesilyurt et al. (2020) state that student performance is contagious; the academic performance of the neighbors contributes to focus, or not, of the students on their studies.

Exposure to neighborhood violence is associated with student behavior and participation in the classroom. Given the social nature of the educational process, the effects are not only reflected at the individual level, but also affect the whole group. The main mechanisms linking local violence and educational outcomes allude to psychological stress and adaptive strategies aimed at providing protection in dangerous

neighborhoods. In these conditions, a feeling of hypervigilance is generated and a tendency to interpret the actions of others with a bias towards hostile intention, for which young people may resort to aggressive behavior as a form of protection. However, this type of behavior can be interpreted by peers and teachers as direct and non-defensive aggression, thus developing a feeling of insecurity in the classroom, and undermining the relationships between students and teachers that are necessary to create a productive learning environment. Thus, when students experience high levels of neighborhood violence, the entire school reports that they feel less safe, have more disciplinary problems, and have less trust in their teachers (Burdick-Will, 2018).

According to McGaha-Garnett (2013), young people who socialize with violent peers are more likely to exhibit similar violent behaviors. Additionally, schools in neighborhoods with high rates of violence are more likely to experience violent incidents within the institution. Gimenez and Barrado (2020) point out that being exposed to criminal violence affects attendance and completion of school but can also condition the development of cognitive skills. Students who are exposed to these types of crimes score lower on standardized tests. This is confirmed by Monteiro & Rocha (2017) who document the negative impact of armed conflicts between drug gangs on standardized test scores; Likewise, Gómez (2016) discovers that the violence generated by the civil armed conflict in Colombia affects performance in high school exit exams. Otherwise, Márquez-Padilla et al. (2015) report that, although the increase in homicide rates is associated with a reduction in standardized test scores, in the case of young Mexicans, the impact is not significant.

In the latter country, Mexico, organized crime violence is closely linked to poverty. This conjunction of social components makes the scenario in which students must function more complex. Castro et al. (2017) refer that in Latin American schools it can be observed that students from private schools take advantage of their socioeconomic status and the possession of cultural assets. Even American students living in poverty show notable academic deficiencies compared to those who are not in poverty (Rutkowski et al., 2018).

Contrary to genetic essentialism, from which it is assumed that the performance of middle and upper class students reflects a superior intellectual capacity, while the low performance of the working class points to their genetic deficit (Croizet et al., 2017), the explanation can be found in a neurological perspective: children raised in poverty are more likely to experience emotional and social challenges, chronic stressors and cognitive delays due to significant changes in the structure of the brain in areas related to memory and emotion ( Brito & Noble, 2014). From a social perspective, families that have books at home, the father and mother have at least a high school education and have a job, in general, they are in stimulating environments, they provide better opportunities for academic success, for which, the Socio-cultural status is more relevant than individual characteristics and family structure (Castro et al., 2017; Akbas-Yesilyurt et al., 2020; Atchia & Chinapah, 2023).

According to Croizet et al. (2017), academic success is saturated with cultural norms related to the use of language, attitudes, knowledge, body posture and interaction

models. The expected practices are the product of cultural dispositions molded in the middle and upper class, which skews the educational system in favor of students from privileged origins. Schooling values the use of written language, the way of verbally expressing personal opinions, familiarization with the arts, among other elements that define the correct way of acting in school, however, they represent qualities that students who live in poverty condition. Working-class students, less familiar with these cultural practices, have to confront the resulting stereotype: intellectual limitation. Derived from this, students of humble origins are prone to experiencing a sense of intellectual insufficiency (Croizet et al., 2017). Given this, McKensie (2019) emphasizes that children raised in poverty may lack the ability to empathize with others, due to the condition of inferiority that they make them feel in the classroom environment. This lack of empathy, in turn, hinders the ability to develop collaborative work activities and for these students to become unwanted participants, increasing their feelings of inadequacy. Thus, poor social skills can cause a decrease in academic performance.

Thus, exposure to neighborhood violence and poverty is an important predictor of student learning (Burdick-Will, 2018). This allows us to understand that the differences in student performance that exist between schools in the same community or within the same school reflect the different degrees of exposure to endemic violence (Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2017) and of cultural resources that have been able to take (Croizet et al., 2017), for which we must consider what happens at home, not only in the locality. In this sense, we resorted to reviewing studies that have explored the violent family environment as an influencing factor for poor academic performance.

Carrell & Hoekstra (2010) found that children from troubled families score significantly lower on reading and math tests than their peers and markedly increase the misbehavior of others in the classroom. In addition, people who come from larger households are more likely to misbehave, they are more likely to experience interactions related to bullying from other siblings or parents, and they can transfer the pattern from home to the school setting. In relation to motivation, students who have several siblings are less likely to be successful academically, as they have less social support and are more likely to maintain a pessimistic attitude towards the learning environment (McGaha-Garnett, 2013).

Hall (2020) refers that sometimes families want to participate in the training of their children, but do not know how to do it, so attention must be directed to directing their efforts, since the motivation and academic scores of the students increase when their families participate in the feedback process. In addition, a healthy relationship between parents and children and friendship between peers, can contribute to reduce the psychological damage of the violence experienced (Huang & Mossige, 2012).

Other social factors that were found related to low academic performance were migratory and ethnic conditions, gender, as well as the urban environment. Rutkowski, et al. (2013) found that students whose parents were not trained in the same educational system, due to their immigrant status, have a lower performance than their native peers, while the impact is even greater when it comes to minors who were born in the abroad

and have just joined the system. Like migrant and ethnic conditions, weaknesses in the educational infrastructure, characteristic of schools located in rural and marginalized areas, are often identified as a cause of poor educational results (Gimenez & Barrado, 2020). However, the problem is not limited to rural schools, Basch (2011) indicates that violence and aggressive behavior have a high and disproportionate prevalence among urban dwellers, particularly among minority youth, and as mentioned above, this has a negative impact on academic performance, since cognition, school connection are negatively affected and absenteeism increases.

So far, the review of previous studies has allowed us to observe that the conditions of the context, from the most intimate environment that is the home to the most public that is the community, affect what happens inside the schools. Now, in the field of school, specific phenomena such as bullying take place, which falls within the spectrum of violence, but has its particular forms when operating between peers, repeatedly and with the full intention of causing harm, although it cannot be strictly delimited to the school space, its occurrence is linked to the school as it is the place where the actors usually know each other and coexist on a daily basis. Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to bullying as an influencing factor for poor academic performance.

According to Rutkowski et al. (2013), the relationship between school violence and performance in school exams is widely documented, as well as the relationship this has with psychological and emotional well-being. Ponzio (2013) found that being a victim of bullying considerably affects the performance of students in the first years of study and the adverse effect increases in the following educational levels. Therefore, school violence seems to be a relevant factor to explain student performance. In a larger study, Engel et al. (2009) identified that the effect of bullying on mathematics test performance was significantly negative in 44 of 49 national educational systems analyzed. The results obtained lead to the conclusion that students' perceptions of violence and bullying are key predictors of performance in mathematics, although it is not the only factor to consider.

As previously noted, some research has pointed to an explanatory chain of the negative effect of bullying on academic achievement, with the emotional effects being the bridge that unites these two elements. Mardianto et al. (2021) founded a strong positive relationship between adolescent attitudes towards cyber aggression and their behavioral intentions to do so, therefore, the subjective interpretation of the aggression determine the emotional response, following from this, Frugård Strøm (2014) states that bullying causes low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideas, as well as poor academic performance. Bullied children and adolescents are more likely to perform worse in school compared to students who are not bullied and, in the long term, this has an impact on future school options, such as college completion. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) also writes in this direction when mentioning that children who have been bullied often experience low self-esteem and depression, which can lead to self-harm and other physical risks, which results in poor performance and lack of commitment to the school. Additionally, bullying in schools can increase absenteeism for victims, just as cyberbullying is linked to negative school experiences and lower academic performance.

In this way, we can find that the relationship between bullying and school performance is multifactorial, bullying not only affects performance and it does not respond only to being a victim of bullying. Çağatay & Erten (2020) identified that students who have a clear vision of achieving positive performance try harder, since they believe that the learning process is under their control, which can counteract the effect of other variables, including bullying at school.

Mahlobo (2000) also found that bullying does not fully explain student achievement. Students believe that violence does not affect their academic work, which can be explained because generalized violence in some communities is so common that it leads social actors to normalize violence and its effects. Being exposed to high levels of violence, acts such as slapping, sexual harassment and threats are not considered violence at all. However, this research also indicates that levels of school violence are increasing, and academic results are decreasing, suggesting that there may be a relationship between these two trends (Mahlobo, 2000).

On a more focused level, it has been pointed out that the relationship between the teacher and the student is crucial, when a bond of friendship is established, better results are achieved because the educational experience becomes a pleasant practice for the student (Beulahbel Bency, 2019). According to McGaha-Garnett (2013), young people who demonstrate inappropriate behaviors in the classroom receive less discipline from teachers and are more likely to demonstrate harmful behaviors in school. Likewise, Huang & Mossige (2012) refer those educational results are diminished when young people have suffered domestic violence, because these experiences affect the social relationships of the victims. Thus, the role of interpersonal relationships that students can establish with adults, at home and at school, stands out to preserve their emotional health, achieve better school results and establish healthy and peaceful social relationships.

## **METHOD**

This study was carried out in accordance with and compliance with the research ethics standards established by the Institution where we work. This piece of research involves human participants who were interviewed as detailed below. We make sure that all participants have the necessary information about the purposes and procedures of the research prior to their consent, always guaranteeing confidentiality in accordance with our ethical standards.

The research question that guided this piece of research was: Do the ways in which educational actors coexist within the school institution affect educational achievement? Based on this, the general objective was to analyze the implication of school life, understood as coexistence, in the educational achievement of secondary school students. The specific objectives were drawn from the following categorical axes: 1) the meaning that the actors give to the notion of educational achievement, 2) correspondence between school coexistence and educational attention, and 3) the factors that favor or not educational attention.

The present study is based on the perspective of the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. It was carried out involving actors and observers. The social observer, also known as a scientific observer or social researcher, is involved in a descriptive, comprehensive and interpretive action of meaning subjective of the actor's action (Schutz, 1973), in other words, it makes a distancing of the objects, thus naming the school coexistence and its link with academic achievement. Based on this epistemological paradigm, the operation of a research method that can apprehend the dialogue and the actions of the actors is required, for which a qualitative study was implemented that used the interview and participant observation as data collection techniques.

Students in the study were selected by school principals and counselors, with prior authorization from the students themselves and their tutors. They were asked to leave the classroom during the school day to be interviewed in assigned spaces which provided conditions of privacy and comfort. There was no limitation regarding the amount of time used for the interviews. Schools were visited at least three times for a period of three times. and they were carried out for three months in which each school was visited at least 3 times. Participant observation was carried out inside the school during class time and on the periphery of the institutions during the entry and exit times of each shift. Field notes were taken on the interactions that took place at recess, in classes and at other types of special events, such as ceremonies, national bank days, festivities such as the Day of the Dead.

The study was carried out in the State of Mexico, one of the federal states that form the Mexican United States. This state has the highest population density and one of the largest school enrollments in Mexico. The investigation was carried out by a research group made up of seven professors. Twelve middle schools were part of the study, in which principals, teachers and students were interviewed; the principal of each school was interviewed, while teachers and students were randomly selected. A total of 135 in-depth interviews were carried out, 11 on average for each institution, which were processed and analyzed by means of a triangulation by level (Cisterna, 2005). It should be noted that in Mexico there are three options for you to study this educational level: general secondary, technical secondary and telesecundaria. The general secondary schools are intended to prepare the student to enter the following level which is High School; technical secondary schools have the same purpose, in addition, they give the opportunity to join the labor market with some training in several fields (technological education); while telesecundarias use TV to deliver instruction. They operate with the same study programs as general secondary schools, and primarily serve the population of isolated communities. In these schools there is only one teacher in charge of all subjects, unlike the other two options in which each subject has a tenured teacher.

## **FINDINGS**

The first element to highlight is that the principals shared a very general vision about what happens in their schools. Such visions are far from the processes that are experienced daily in the classrooms. The data they provided is valuable because they show a comprehensive view of the head of an educational institution: We know that it is



partial. It fails to portray what is happening between teachers and students or among classmates. Therefore, the value of the data obtained in the interviews with principals was exceeded by what was received from teachers and students.

When it comes to the meaning they give to educational achievement, for the interviewed actors, it is related to five components: obtaining high grades, failure rates, access to high school through selection exams, standardized test scores, and the prestige of the school within the community. The first element, high grades, and failure is the main reference for students to assess educational achievement. For managers the most relevant components are the last three: access to high school through selection exams, standardized test scores and the school's prestige within the community; whereas, from the teachers' perspective, educational achievement is constituted by the conjunction of all the elements indicated at the beginning, among which learning by itself and the orderly behaviors of the students are also added.

Among the indicators that the actors consider for regarding a school as having a high level of academic achievement is the number of students who manage to enter high school at public universities or collages in the State of Mexico and Mexico City. The results of standardized tests, such as PISA, and the results obtained in competitions in which they compete with the schools in their school zone.

The principal of one of the schools proudly pointed out that they were the middle school with the most students accepted into high schools, some of our graduates have been able to enter UNAM (The most prestigious public university in Mexico). In that sense, another principal also shared his feelings regarding the scores that his school abstains in standardized tests in comparison with some private schools in his school district: "We have had the highest scores in the district. We have done way better than private schools".

Students with good grades, express that they are recognized to participate as group representatives, to integrate a selected group of students to carry the flag and say the pledge of allegiance and represent the school in academic competitions in their school zone, however, some point out that they are subject to offenses or ridicule for excelling, which carries a negative assessment of educational achievement. For the student, educational achievement, understood in terms of grades, and being having good relationships with his group mates are equally or less important; There are those who said that the most important thing in high school is not getting good grades, but learning a little and doing other things they like. An outstanding student sadly commented that in her class they would call her a nerd. Another student that has been labeled with behavioral issues said that if he really wanted, he could do better at school, but for him it is more important to do other things: "have a good time with my friends".

Schools in marginalized areas, the possibility of finishing high school education, accessing upper secondary education and higher education, considered as being professionals, are aspects related to school achievement that were expressed by students and teachers; For some students, the greatest achievement is overcoming their own family subsistence conditions and being able to complete at least their secondary education. The possible entry to upper secondary education is something that is more

present among the motives and desires of women. A male student mentioned that maybe when he finished high school, he would go to work with his dad. A female student mentioned that she would like to study architecture. She knew it was difficult because it meant to move to Toluca, the closest city to her community.

For students, grades are not significant as an indicator of comparison with other schools in the region, to which they add that to enter high school, good grades are not required, what is important is the score they obtain in the exam where they select candidates (screening exam).

If we consider the criterion of educational achievement referring to access to the high school level in schools supported by public universities, we can see that some middle schools do not meet it, not only because of the number of graduates who reach that objective but because in some areas there are no high schools with that feature. The economic deficiencies of young people become an obstacle due to the expenses that this implies. The scores obtained in standardized tests, according to the principals and teachers, are good, however, this is something unknown and of little relevance to the students. Social prestige is undoubtedly the most useful and pragmatic criterion for assessing the quality of schools, since in the discourse of teachers and students the idea that parents choose their children's, school based on the prestige that exists among the school recurrently appears. It should be noted that not all schools had a good reputation and members of the community were aware of this, however, they did not have access to a better school.

The profile that the interviewed teachers outline on those who achieve high marks, is constituted by discipline, fulfilling tasks, order during classroom activities, staying in place without talking to their classmates and not interrupting classes. On the other hand, there are students who are apathetic to teacher's wishes. Most of the time those students are labeled as a limited or with low achievement. They usually have problems while interacting with other students. Some rejection of their fellow classmates can be noted.

Regarding the relationship between educational achievement and school coexistence, two dimensions of analysis were found that the actors themselves distinguish: the impact at the group level and the academic performance of those who exercise violence against their peers. In the first dimension, an almost completely uniform response was observed: managers, teachers and students recognize the importance of having a harmonious learning environment to develop their classes with better results. The actors consider that to be successful academically it is important to have a good environment in the classrooms and at school, since this allows them to concentrate on learning. For example, a teacher pointed out "if the group is not in order, you cannot work and how are they going to learn?". However, with respect to the second dimension, a great diversity of responses was found, teachers and students assume that there is no constant pattern between being violent, or not, and educational achievement, since it is identified that those who exercise violence against their peers do not always, they fail in school, some of them even excel academically. A teacher mentioned that every now and then he would be surprised because the most annoying students get good grades.

There is not a single trend outlined in what the three types of actors interviewed refer,

especially in the case of teachers, who shared different experiences; For some, students who cause violence in the classroom have low educational achievement, however, there are also young people who are empathetic and tolerant with their classmates and do not necessarily achieve good grades. On other occasions, those who distinguish themselves by exercise violence against their peers do not fail in school, there are even those who are academically outstanding. For certain teachers a gender difference can be perceived, boys with poor grades generally have bad behavior, while girls with bad grades do not necessarily have bad behaviors.

Students who are assumed to be conflictive or misbehaved refer that their grades do not depend on their behavior, they say whenever they decide they will turn in their homework and will be able to obtain good grades, thus, they will be able to access upper secondary education and study a professional degree. As an example, we can mention what a student refers to: "I could get good grades, but I do not like doing homework. I'll do my best when I am studying my degree in college".

Regarding students who are victims of bullying, the testimony of two students was obtained who admit to being the target of ridicule and intimidation for being poor and for their physical appearance. A young man shares: "They make fun of me because I am fat and because of the way I wear my hair". Another young woman says that "nobody wants to get together with me because they say that I smell ugly because I do not take showers and my clothes are old". Those situations have resulted in little interest in school and isolation. They obtain low grades and suffer scolding from the teachers for not fulfilling all the tasks, one more element is added that generates mockery towards them: being donkeys<sup>1</sup>.

Finally, students and teachers agree that disinterest and inattention are the main factors that affect learning, young people consider that obtaining good grades does not depend on how they get along with their classmates or how their friends perform, since there are those who have friends with good grades and their results are ordinary. However, many teachers understand school coexistence as a category inextricably linked with discipline: "behaving well is living well". When questioned about the relationship between school coexistence and educational achievement, they referred that children with low grades do not pay attention to the class or hand in assignments, they forgot the quality of interpersonal relationships and focused on responding taking into account what happens with undisciplined or restless students. Therefore, for the interviewed actors, the impact of interpersonal relationships on educational achievement is overvalued: "It is true that it influences on everyday teaching because you can teach a very good lesson. Although some students have excellent grades even though they are never quiet".

Regarding the factors that obstruct educational achievement, the lack of interest of young people towards school stands out, without this being the only element to consider. The violence that prevails in the communities is understood by principals and teachers as an element that has increased and, in some cases, has leaked into schools through the sale and consumption of drugs, eventual fights and robberies on the periphery of schools that involve actors outside the school community, night robberies

of educational facilities, and in the southern part of the State of Mexico, where the presence of organized crime is more evident, there have been cases of extortion of teachers. Despite all this, they do not consider it to be a factor that directly affects educational achievement, the concern revolves around the safety of the school community and the risk of young people falling into addictions.

Sometimes, students living in poverty cannot fulfill tasks for which they require materials that they cannot acquire or, because their parents work all day and cannot be at home, young people are left in charge of their younger siblings and housework, therefore, they do not have time to do homework or study. This condition is accentuated in women, who are assigned this responsibility due to gender stereotypes that prevail in Mexican society. Teachers report that some parents of troubled students stay out of what happens at school, are not aware of their children's grades or attend appointments with school personnel to solve problems of poor behavior, interpersonal conflicts, failing grades, or absenteeism. A note should be made of cases of absent parents for work reasons, they work in another city and are only at home on weekends, or because they have migrated to the USA. In those cases, children live with their grandparents or another relative, which makes a difference. Parents usually have basic education studies and the jobs they hold are not high-income; however, they represent a better option compared to what they could earn in their community. Parenting responsibilities are completely delegated to the person who is in charge of caring for children, who are usually overwhelmed by the complexity of responsibilities in their charge and the lack of energy to attend children needs, since they usually take care of more than one child and many times, they are elderly people.

As a result, some young people are distinguished by being conflictive and paying little attention to school, while others are highly committed to their education because they value the efforts of their parents and set the goal of studying up to college level.

Among the teachers there were those who mentioned that the students' lack of interest in the school is explained by their taste for reggaeton<sup>2</sup> and the lack of tolerance towards others; According to them, students should reflect on their behavior and behave appropriately to promote the creation of an environment of harmonious coexistence, with which better learning experiences could be achieved. Directors and teachers do not recognize the ability of students to make decisions and define the type of school environment in which they want to live. In this regard, complaints are expressed regarding the generational change, longing for the respect and obedience that teachers experienced in the past, unlike now, with young people who question the authority of the teacher, miss school and even cases of ridicule or offenses to teachers or other collaborators of the institution.

From the perspective of the teachers, the evening shift students have lower academic achievement, with lower grades and higher failure rates. Parents often want their children to be on the morning shift because they argue that teachers are less tired and their children concentrate better. According to the students, if the teacher created a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom, they would be encouraged to study. Young people have a good image of their teachers, they consider them capable, although it

bothers them that their classes are boring and that they are intolerant of the jokes they make in the classrooms. From their point of view, many of the things they do are jokes, although teachers interpret them as aggression or indiscipline. Faced with this scenario, the school becomes a burden, it causes annoyance, disinterest, they see no point in studying; They are more interested in going to school to be with their friends and classmates, but not to learn something. Students believe that their low grades are due to not trying as hard as necessary, missing classes a lot, and not turning in homework, so they don't find low grades or failing a concern. Even among students classified as annoying or violent, there are arguments from the assessment of their own ability that they could improve those results, if they wanted. Friends and their dating relationships are more important to them, which is why they dedicate more time and attention to it.

While students consider the classroom atmosphere boring, teachers think that sustained attention and order are essential characteristics for learning. In this regard, conflicting positions were found among teachers, on the one hand those who affirm that discipline is essential for learning, especially among older teachers, unlike young people who are convinced that it is necessary to establish a good relationship with their students, without this implying a loss of respect or freedom to do anything, since by feeling comfortable in the classroom and feeling trust towards the teacher, the teaching-learning process has better results.

For students, having good relationships with their peers and friends creates a taste for the school, not the number they get as a grade. However, for the teachers, this is something unheard of, firstly because performance must be high to qualify the institution compared to other schools in the area, and secondly, for the continuity of their studies at the immediate higher level.

A particular case was found in telesecundarias, the reports of violence were lower compared to the other two subsystems of middle school education. The teachers themselves identified as an advantage being able to work with a single group throughout the day, since this allowed them to get to know the students more and draw up coaching strategies to strengthen their social and academic skills, while reducing the burden of learning: "You can monitor their behavior and find the most appropriate strategies to achieve change. Homework as a compulsory activity is regarded as pertinent". Telesecundaria teachers consider that this is an advantage to promote better conditions of coexistence and favor educational achievement, since they can even work on the characteristics of a student. This is positioned as an advantage of telesecundaria, not only for academic purposes but also to consolidate better relationships between members of the school community.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis carried out here should be read considering that a qualitative study does not pretend to make generalizable statements to an entire population. It portrays a comprehensive understanding of the object of study from the experience and the perspective of the interviewed actors. That said, reflections are presented around the three categorical axes of the research. Regarding the way in which educational achievement is conceived, the participants of this study construct a notion that involves

the quantitative indicators that usually characterize academic performance: grades and failure rates, and somewhat subjective components are added: the social prestige of the school and the achievement of learning (without having clear guidelines to assess that this occurs), as well as indicators that are not the full responsibility of the institution, since they also imply the talent and commitment of each individual: access to high school and scores on standardized tests. The value that teachers and principals give to the discipline stands out, they consider it an indicator of educational achievement and an equivalent notion of harmonious coexistence, from this it is possible to notice that these actors have lived a personal and professional training in which the precepts from authorities must be strictly followed to show respect and demonstrate the development of social and professional skills. Thus, what Savage & Wozniak (2016) said about educational achievement operationalized through grades and other quantitative indicators loses meaning from the experience of the participants in this study.

Despite the fact that bullying is not perceived as something that consistently affects academic performance, there is another type of violence that does manifest itself as an obstacle to educational achievement: structural violence translated into poverty, which had already been found in the studies by McKensie (2019), Burdick-Will (2018), Rutkowski et al. (2018) and Croizet et al. (2017). Even though bullying is not perceived by educational actors themselves as a significant cause of low educational achievement, it is observed that this has a negative impact on the emotional health of students and teachers, as pointed out by authors such as Rutkowski et al. (2013), Mardianto et al. (2021) and Frugård Strøm (2014), as well as affects the dislike for school and that may have even greater implications for permanence in future educational levels.

On the other hand, according to what the school actors themselves refer, school coexistence does not seem to have a direct relationship with educational achievement, at least not in a homogeneous or persistent way as found by Savage et al. (2017), Mahlobo (2000), Morales-Ramírez & Villalobos-Cordero (2017) and Usman et al. (2023).

Regarding the last axis of analysis, the main obstacles to educational achievement stated by members of the school community include material and sociocultural deprivation, lack of discipline, lack of accompaniment to carry out school activities by parents and, to a lesser extent, bullying, to this the students add the unpleasant and stimulating environment generated by the teachers, while the teachers emphasize the disinterest and lack of commitment of young people with their educational training over the rest of the elements. In general, sociocultural factors are the main obstacles to educational achievement. Teaching strategies, study plans or any other pedagogical component have been identified as causes of school failure. Therefore, the Mexican educational system must be reinforced with social policies that improve security conditions, the family economy and the socio-cultural stimulation of children and young people.

When conducting this research, it is necessary to delve into the implications of the absence of parents in relation to educational achievement and school coexistence. This condition of abandonment, in some cases (previously documented by McKensie (2019), Carrell & Hoekstra (2010) and Huang & Mossige (2012)), or lack of interest of parents towards school development and the way their children relate to the rest of the

educational community, must have consequences that need to be documented and discussed.

On the other hand, this study is part of the perspective of authors such as Mahlobo (2000) and Savage et al. (2017), who do not find bullying to be a full explanation for school achievement. On the contrary, it seems that the teacher-student relationship and the school environment that teachers build are elements of greater relevance, as argued by Beulahbel Bency (2019). Teachers need to develop strong and empathic relationships with their students, incorporate respect into their interactions with students, incorporate social skills into lessons, promote inclusive classrooms, recognize signs of poverty, empower students, and positively alter classroom environments. We cannot expect respect from someone who has not developed the social skills necessary to show respect, nor can we expect active participation in group interaction if they have never been considered in decision-making (McKensie, 2019).

Among the interviewed actors, poverty is an element that links low educational attainment and is a reason to be bullied by peers and, in turn, results in low grades. In this way, the results validate what was said by Frugård Strøm (2014) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015): those who suffer bullying do experience low self-esteem and low self-efficacy.

Regarding poverty, coincidences can be observed with what has been said by authors such as Castro et al. (2017) and Rutkowski et al. (2018), who mention that poverty conditions affect student performance. Although it was not the only condition that was referred to as a cause of deficiencies in educational achievement, it was mentioned as one of the components that is present. In addition, the statement by McKensie (2019) is ratified regarding the negative impact that poverty generates on personal security and the ability to establish intimate and cordial interpersonal relationships.

In a society with as many problems of insecurity and poverty as Mexico, it is significant that educational actors do not consider that this affects the development of school activities, contrary to what other research has found (Savage & Wozniak (2016); Brück et al. (2014); Beulahbel Bency (2019); McGaha-Garnett (2013)). Managers are more concerned with institutional efficiency results, teachers with discipline and students for friendship and courtship relationships. The violence that exists in their communities is diluted in their speech. It seems that what Mahlobo mentions about the normalization of violence, inside and outside school, is fulfilled, as it is a constant factor close to the actor. Teachers point out that violence in the school environment has increased, which makes them feel insecure, as Burdick-Will (2018) points out, although they consider that what happens in the social dimension remains far from the educational dimension. In a certain sense, there is a contrast of ideas in teachers and principals. Concerns about the increase in violence are common while the relevance of these events is diminished, especially in terms of their impact on educational achievement. Thus, this narrative could be thought of to remain calm in the face of an overwhelming scenario or in an attitude of resignation towards what cannot be changed.

For their part, students did not express any concern about violence in their community and did not consider that the environment has any impact on academic activities. In this

sense, this study seems to corroborate what was said by Márquez-Padilla et al. (2015) on the little effect that violence in the environment has on Mexican students, while at the same time contradicting what was said by McGaha-Garnett (2013) who affirm that concern of violence of everyday school interaction does matter. Although students live in violent neighborhoods at school, the incidents of violence within school grounds are low.

Without attempting to explain what happens within schools based on what characterizes the communities where they are located, it is important to consider that the violence that distinguishes Mexican society impacts on the meaning that young people give to their actions. Apparently the standard for considering violent behavior is rising, as Mahlobo (2000) points out, which causes some violent expressions not to be perceived as such. It is essential to consider that organized crime has overtaken Mexican public security corporations, including the national army, which is why what Basch (2011) points out becomes relevant: once the domain of criminal justice is recognized, violence can be approached appropriately by the education and public health systems. Of course, this goes beyond educational actors, however, it can begin by promoting respect for the rule of law from micro-social spheres such as the classroom, while maintaining the hope that those responsible for public policy will make favorable decisions to counteract the high rates of criminal violence.

There is a permanent tension between teachers and students due to the meaning that each of these actors gives to the behavior of young people. Teachers expect a behavior attached to the norms and conventions that prevailed in their student days, hence discipline and obedience are key elements to characterize school coexistence. Student expects a relaxed environment and seeks proximity with his classmates and teachers, experiences frustration by not receiving the expected response from his teachers. This corroborates the findings of Beulahbel Bency (2019) and McGaha-Garnett (2013), who point out the importance of teachers maintaining good communication and friendship ties with their students to avoid resorting to disciplinary practices.

In this sense, what happens in telesecundarias becomes fundamental, with a single teacher who manages to get to know all his students and monitor their academic performance. This becomes relevant when facing scenarios characterized by drug trafficking and organized crime problems, existing in rural and urban contexts, in addition to the complications derived from migration processes, the abandonment of children when parents go to work in the USA or Mexico City and they leave the children in the care of grandparents or uncles who cannot take proper care of them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We can conclude that the answer to the research question of this piece of research is that the way students coexist does not affect educational achievement. Regarding the first specific objective, it must be considered that, on the one hand, for students, educational achievement is not determined by grades or some other numerical parameter, this is meant as having the ability to access the subsequent educational level and live an experience rewarding at school. On the other hand, for teachers, educational achievement has a connotation related to grades and scores on standardized



assessments, as well as the social prestige of the institution. Regarding the relationship that this has with coexistence in school, the second specific objective, it can be argued that it is not a determining factor, despite the fact that there is bullying and violence in the communities in which they are being trained, which seems to be due to the normalization of violence and the little impact it has on their sense of well-being within school. Finally, social factors such as family support and economic conditions have greater weight in relation to educational achievement; Likewise, the atmosphere that the teacher can create is a substantial element; the student wants to feel understood and listened to, without having to face dynamics of rigorous discipline and permanent scolding. This last point is fundamental, since for the teachers interviewed it does not represent a priority, their speech focuses on other elements of a technical or programmatic nature without considering personal relationships as something that they must attend to, unless it becomes an obstacle to developing their lessons.

The recommendations derived from this study revolve around the construction of stimulating, safe educational environments, and harmonious coexistence, where the participation of principals and teachers becomes crucial. If there are no school environments with these characteristics, Mexican children and young people are exposed to reject their school education, consequently, dropout and school failure is favored, with all the social consequences that this entails. The work of teachers, especially the school counselor, beyond focusing on enforcing the rules of school discipline, should foster a dialogue with students, in order to know the particularities of each one of them and thus bet on an assertive and fluid communication that allows them to impact the thinking and actions of students inside and outside of school. Finally, if the concept of bullying continues to be reduced as a problem of disciplined coexistence among peers, palliative educational policies will prevail that lose sight of this type of violence as a larger problem, due to the implications it has on mental and physical health. The development of healthy and peaceful interpersonal relationships might depend on that. The student who does not know how to live in harmony with his classmates, will hardly behave as a proactive citizen towards her community.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Expression used in Mexico to denigrate those who obtain low grades.
2. Musical genre that in recent years has gained a lot of popularity, especially among young people.

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