
Navigating contextual equity: cross-institutional School–University Partnerships in rural Mexican telesecundarias

School–University
Partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how transnational School–University Partnerships (SUP) address educational equity challenges identified by rural telesecundaria leaders in Veracruz, Mexico, examining universities’ roles as responsive partners.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a participatory action research (PAR)-informed collaborative action research design, built around reflective conversations and hands-on workshops with rural principals and school leaders. Data sources included field notes from school visits and planning meetings, agendas and adapted tools, short questionnaires, observations of classrooms and meetings and semi-structured interviews with volunteer school leaders.

Findings – The immediate priorities were keeping students in school, improving retention and shoring up basic technology access – reliable internet, working devices and a place to charge them. When we localized equity tools such as shorter rubrics, bilingual prompts tied to attendance or transfer data; they stopped feeling imported and started opening useful conversations. Universities were welcomed most when they moved at the community’s pace and stayed present between visits.

Research limitations/implications – This is a qualitative, region-specific study. That design lets us surface policy and practice that are sensitive to context, but it likely limits broad generalization. Future work should track longer arcs and, where feasible, pair this approach with comparative sites and simple outcome measures (e.g. attendance trends, transfer data) to test what travels and what does not.

Practical implications – Schools do not need glossy platforms to get started. What helped here were low-tech, locally workable data tools (think paper/Excel attendance dashboards and SMS check-ins), routine equity-reflection cycles embedded in existing meetings and professional learning that was culturally and linguistically grounded: delivered, when possible, by regional educators.

Social implications – When universities reposition themselves as neighbors, co-designing with schools, sitting in staff rooms, returning regularly, the relationship shifts. What emerges is a more durable model of equity work built on reciprocity and mutual respect rather than one-off projects. Those partnerships won’t fix everything, but they appear to create the conditions where local expertise can lead and external support can matter.

Originality/value – This paper brings together adaptive leadership, equity-minded inquiry and PAR inside a cross-border, rural partnership and shows how tempo and fit matter. Rather than proposing a new grand framework, we illustrate how slowing down, translating tools and sharing decision-making can turn familiar equity language into situated practice. That move may seem small; in these communities, it’s the difference between a workshop and a working relationship.

Keywords Educational equity, School–University Partnerships, Rural education, Adaptive leadership, Participatory action research

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

School–University Partnerships (SUPs) have gained renewed importance in the context of 21st-century globalization, characterized by structural inequality and growing social demands. In particular, rural areas face a series of tensions that are often invisible to educational policies and prevailing academic frameworks, which tend to assume territorial homogeneity and fail to recognize the specific and diverse circumstances of marginalized contexts.

This article emerges from a participatory action research (PAR)-informed collaborative action research project led by two university researchers, one based in Mexico and the other in the USA. The researchers felt the need to go beyond university-level work and bring academic agendas to the everyday realities of basic education (which refers to compulsory schooling level), specifically in a rural context, in order to contribute to equity in education. Both initiated a joint effort with principals of telesecundarias. Telesecundarias are rural public secondary schools designed to serve small and often marginalized communities in Mexico through a hybrid model of classroom teaching and mediated instruction.

As scholars in higher education, our initial goal was to address topics commonly considered “critical” within our academic agendas, such as gender equity, human rights and social justice. However, during the first personal interactions, the school principals shifted the conversation toward what they considered more urgent. They emphasized access to technology, learning and student dropout.

This unexpected shift marked a key and disorienting moment for the researchers. PAR, grounded in a Freirean (Freire, 1970) and participatory perspective (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007), requires deep attention and sensitivity to co-construct the research approach. A dialogue was established between academic knowledge and the lived experience of local actors; in this case, the principals of the telesecundarias. The principals proposed topics that did not reject the pursuit of justice and educational equity; rather, they redefined education from their own context and material conditions.

From the perspective of the US-based researcher, academia dictated topics revolving around linguistic racism and returnee students. She had also planned to incorporate theoretical tools informed by equity-oriented analytical frameworks, such as those developed by the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California. For the researcher, it was puzzling that school leaders did not consider linguistic race and migration to be critical issues in their context. However, in reflecting on educational equity, she realized that imposing such topics could reproduce colonial dynamics within research and academic hierarchies. Precisely what the collaboration aimed to avoid.

For her part, the Mexican researcher first aimed to address issues of patriarchal structures, institutional inequality and gender-based violence. All those topics may have an impact on students in rural areas because of their gender. However, she also understood that forcing these subjects onto principals could override their priorities and present the university as a colonial and external authority on knowledge. Therefore, she also chose to focus her attention on careful listening, a sound dialogue and trusting that gender issues could (not) emerge in this context.

Despite their individual positional frameworks, both researchers shared a commitment to generating knowledge in marginalized contexts while avoiding the imposition of their own agendas. Their participation focused on creating a space for dialogue with local educational actors, centering the discussion on practice-based needs rather than on predefined academic frameworks.

The researchers’ positionality brought about tensions in understanding differing contexts, expectations and ways of conceptualizing educational issues that differed from those to which they were accustomed. These tensions were addressed through reflective processes and the articulation of positionality statements; only through these efforts were the power dynamics embedded in the collaboration made visible.

Both researchers identified statistical limitations. For instance, school principals lacked access to reliable, de-identified data on critical metrics such as academic achievement,

attendance and dropout rates. The principals questioned the accuracy of the data when discussing its potential existence. Schools in the USA operate under inclusive systems, such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and convenient technology access.

The context of rural telesecundarias in Veracruz makes this partnership more complicated, considering that their setting lacks urban advantages, such as technology, libraries and communications. These telesecundarias operate under limited conditions, characterized by a lack of material resources, a high staff turnover rate and a single teacher instructing all subjects. Within this framework, school principals began to see the university as a potential ally for developing teachers' technological skills and professional training.

This article seeks to examine how a transnational SUP can respond to the emerging structural needs of rural school leaders and contribute to building more contextualized solutions toward educational equity. In particular, it poses the following questions: How do rural principals prioritize their educational challenges? In what ways can the university become a responsive interlocutor in contexts of educational marginalization? What opportunities arise for professional development through context-anchored dialogue? The questions arise from a long-standing structural inequality, but the current context is reshaping that inequality with technological limitations and political changes.

To tackle these emerging questions, the study relied on PAR, which is a mix of workshops, interviews and diagnostic surveys that gave rural principals a chance not only to voice their concerns but to weigh and rank them according to urgency. This process was more about creating spaces where local experience could shape the agenda and less about extracting data and collecting information. What emerged from the findings offers a direct, though not exhaustive, response. They show how rural school leaders frame and sequence their priorities, the conditions under which universities can genuinely operate as responsive partners rather than distant advisors, and the kinds of professional development that seem to take root when both sides work through the messiness of real joint work.

This study's significance stems from its capacity to examine power relations in university-school collaborations, particularly those involving participants from the USA and Mexico who have similar levels of academic capital. In contrast to the current situation where schools are fighting against exclusionary discourses, Mexico's official discourse promotes humanism, diversity and community-based socioconstructivist learning, but their actual implementation is still controversial.

This manuscript also responds to the *Reimagining Pathways for Educational Equity in School-University Partnerships* recent special issue framing, which asks how universities and schools can work together to advance equity through reciprocal, context-sensitive partnerships. In this study, that framing matters because rural school leaders did not simply receive university-designed tools; they reshaped the agenda around retention, technology access and locally meaningful professional learning.

This experience demonstrates that pathways to equity cannot be imposed from the outside, making it an important component of the *Reimagining Pathways for Educational Equity* in SUP initiative. Rather, they ought to be constructed in tandem by acknowledging regional requirements. As a result, it is important to reconsider the social role of universities as institutions that shape and are shaped by, other community institutions rather than existing only as repositories of knowledge.

2. Context

This research was conducted in joint collaboration with principals of telesecundarias. Telesecundarias are public secondary schools designed to serve in rural areas, including Indigenous communities, in localities with populations no larger than 2,500 inhabitants (Navarrete-Cazales & López-Hernández, 2022). For geographic reasons, these specific students do not have access to other secondary school options, such as general or technical

secondary schools. The principals came from schools located in marginalized regions of the state of Veracruz, a state marked by high cultural diversity and educational inequality (Montes-Rentera *et al.*, 2022). The region is characterized by poverty and significant socioeconomic disparities. The demographic profile of the area reveals a dispersed population and an economy sustained mainly by agricultural labor and both internal and external migration. In this context, telesecundarias find major obstacles that include less access to educational resources, not enough qualified educators and limited access to communication technologies (Ruz *et al.*, 2023; Eras, 2024).

The telesecundarias educational system was created back in 1968 as a result of a public policy that intended to improve access to those students in underprivileged areas. The system leans on textbooks and televised lessons. And yet, after 50-odd years of tweaks and re-tweaks, the same old snags keep showing up. In theory, the model works, but falters in practice, constrained by the social conditions (Navarrete-Cazales & López-Hernández, 2022). The effectiveness of the model is still restrained by social circumstances. According to INEE (2017), poor student performance in subjects like reading and math has been caused by outdated curriculum materials and gaps in teacher preparation.

Despite these difficulties, the telesecundaria system has proven to be an initiative that promotes adaptation and resilience and is worth mentioning, especially in areas that do not have access to other educational alternatives. In some ways, the telesecundaria system manages to provide basic education to people in vulnerable situations, thereby reducing inequalities and illiteracy in remote areas. As Rendón (2024) and Clavijo (2024) argue, the point is not flashier tools so much as fit: strategies that actually speak to rural realities, for example, lesson routines that can run without stable internet or parent–teacher workshops held after the harvest. In the same vein, Rendón (2024) suggests tightening the school–community loop – think principals sharing weekly attendance snapshots with *ejido* (communal land governance unit) leaders to keep the work student-centered. Hernández (2021) presses for development that sticks: locally run, recurring workshops (not one-offs) that can survive staff turnover.

In this regard, Mexico has two primary categories of institutions of higher learning: Normal Schools and Universities. Universities have the social role of traditionally forming future professionals; while Normal Schools aim to form future teachers of basic education. Founded in the state of Veracruz, Universidad Veracruzana (UV) serves as a vital link between the telesecundarias and the needs of the community throughout the state. UV describes itself as a public university committed to ethics, social responsibility and sustainability, with a mandate to generate knowledge that answers local needs and pushes toward fairness. In practice, that mission reads as an invitation to be a neighbor, present in communities, not just at conferences; and it helps explain why UV is often seen as an institution that works with people, not merely for them.

Normal Schools carry the teacher-prep load. Their charge is straightforward but heavy: four-year programs that prepare future preschool, primary and secondary teachers and, ideally, cultivate a professional identity grounded in social responsibility. Their mission is to help future teachers develop a strong professional identity based on social responsibility and moral obligation (Álvarez Mendiola & López Casanova, 2022). These places have always been important for education and have also been important for social change.

The educational philosophy of Normal Schools closely aligns with the principles of the *Nueva Escuela Mexicana* (New Mexican School policy framework: from now on NEM), a national education reform that emphasizes equity, inclusion and community-centered learning (SEP, 2022). These schools not only teach teachers how to do their jobs, but they also teach them how to be aware of and sensitive to the cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic differences that exist in different schools. Thus, basic education teachers and principals are regularly trained in Normal Schools.

In sum, the study takes place in telesecundarias staffed by educators specialized in working with children and adolescents. The context faces challenges that demand a reconfiguration of

educational policies grounded in equity and focused on the empowerment of both teachers and communities (Bautista Rojas, 2018; Rivera Sepúlveda & Zavala Berbena, 2020). In this effort, the university could represent a fundamental counterweight by providing workshops, courses and/or guidance in various areas such as STEM, the humanities and other disciplines. Together, telesecundarias and the university stand at the forefront of the struggle for educational justice in Mexico's most underserved territories.

3. Frameworks

Analytically, this study draws on two main lenses: adaptive leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007) and equity-minded, asset-based inquiry (Yosso, 2005; Moll *et al.*, 1992) (Table 1). The PAR-informed collaborative action research design shaped how the study was conducted, while adaptive leadership and equity-minded, asset-based inquiry shaped how the data were interpreted. Equity-mindedness pushes us to read outcome gaps as institutional signals rather than student deficits; adaptive leadership reminds us that what looks technical rarely is. In rural telesecundarias, where the rules of the game already tilt unequal, this mix helps leaders name what's happening and try responses that fit the place.

Read together, these frameworks give us a wide-angle, working lens on rural telesecundaria leadership. PAR keeps us in an inclusive, reflective, do-something loop. Equity-mindedness asks us to read culture and institutions directly so structural injustice is named rather than sidestepped. Adaptive leadership, for its part, offers ways to act amid uncertainty and to coordinate people who don't share the same constraints or authority. And the trio – trust, mutuality and reciprocity – reminds us that power-sharing has to live in everyday routines, not just in mission statements. In our use, this triangulation does two things at once: it helps us analyze leadership practice with more texture, and it nudges the work toward locally driven professional learning and, over time, system change. We say “nudges” because context will set the pace; still, the direction of travel seems clear.

The conceptual basis for this work is adaptive leadership, equity-mindedness and PAR operationalized via the framework of rural SUP. Scaffolding provided by SUPs allows one to embed these theoretical orientations into localized leadership development and group research. As the Teacher Workforce School Support Program project shows, school–university alliances create “a common ground for facilitating school-wide change,” by combining “shared vision, tools to translate vision into practice and ongoing, collaborative teacher learning” (Borda *et al.*, 2020, p. 46). The Teacher Workforce School Support Program is a collaborative initiative that emphasizes professional development, collaborative problem-solving and locally responsive strategies to improve educational equity and school retention between universities and K-12 schools. Next, we discuss the two analytic lenses, adaptive leadership and equity-minded, asset-based inquiry. We return to the PAR-informed design in the Methods section.

Table 1. Guiding theoretical frameworks

Framework	Focus	Strength	Limitation	Relation to others
Adaptive Leadership	Leading change under uncertainty	Helps diagnose and respond to context-specific challenges	Does not focus explicitly on equity or participation	<i>Sets the behavioral stance for leaders within PAR and equity approaches</i>
Equity-Minded Framework	Data-informed analysis of systemic inequality	Shifts deficit thinking to institutional responsibility	Needs robust data systems and contextual adaptation	<i>Guides what adaptive leadership and PAR must attend to (e.g. exclusion, bias)</i>

3.1 Adaptive leadership

Following [Heifetz et al. \(2009\)](#), we treat adaptive leadership less as a title and more as a practice “mobilizing people to overcome tough challenges and thrive” which is to say, behavior over rank. In our reading, this perspective helps principals sit with ambiguity, test small moves and invite broader participation when authority alone won’t carry the change. It also cautions us: quick fixes may soothe, but they rarely shift loyalties, priorities or beliefs, which is where the real work appears to live. With this framework, school principals are able to identify problems and understand the need for change using adaptive leadership. Principals recognize that initiatives involve “changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, and loyalties” ([Heifetz et al., 2009](#), p. 19).

With adaptive leadership, a distinction is made between technical and adaptive problems, recognizing that in rural telesecondary schools, infrastructure limitations, digital exclusion or the organizational requirements of multigrade education cannot be solved with technology alone. [Heifetz et al. \(2009\)](#) assert that adaptive leadership transpires in the “productive zone of unrest” (p. 33), where discomfort serves as a catalyst for innovation and learning. In the context of SUPs, leadership promotes school collaboration through change, frequently under the direction of the principal, who assumes a controlling role in “orchestrating change with the team in contexts of adversity and uncertainty” ([Pujianto et al., 2023](#), p. 48).

3.2 Equity perspective

This leadership style is complemented by equity-mindedness, which focuses on systematic rather than personal inequalities. It utilizes separate data to guide change and emphasizes institutional responsibility for uneven results ([Yosso, 2005](#); [Moll et al., 1992](#)). Equity-minded practices must reject deficit thinking and instead acknowledge the “community cultural wealth” of underprivileged groups, which includes aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational and resistant forms of capital, as noted by [Yosso \(2005\)](#). Similarly, schools must value “funds of knowledge” to avoid “blaming historically underrepresented students and their families.” Data can help – so long as they aren’t read through deficit lenses that blame students for system-level barriers. In many Latinx-serving contexts, reforms that are locally grounded; say, bilingual materials that reflect neighborhood speech or leadership development tied to community roles are more likely to take root ([Gines & Barnes, 2025](#)).

[Yosso \(2005\)](#) proposes the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) perspective, which refers to rural school leaders who develop their roles through their work in historically underserved communities; yet they emerge as leaders who become repositories of knowledge, bearers of experiential wisdom, skilled in navigating institutional systems and, above all, resilient. Similarly, [Moll et al. \(1992\)](#) propose the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) perspective, which recognizes the knowledge historically accumulated within communities and the importance of integrating that knowledge into educational practices. Thus, these two proposals guided the design of the workshops by focusing the discussion on strengths, local strategies and contextual knowledge. Operationally, CCW helped the analysis look for the forms of capital rural leaders, students and families used to navigate scarcity, especially social, familial, navigational and resistant forms of capital. Funds of Knowledge guided attention to community routines, local labor patterns, language practices and school-community problem-solving as evidence of local expertise rather than as background context.

[Yosso \(2005\)](#) and [Moll et al. \(1992\)](#) suggest that school leaders should be encouraged to question institutional systems that reproduce educational inequalities, thereby avoiding blame and challenging “deficit notions about underrepresented groups” ([Yosso, 2005](#), p. 3). Instead, the aim is to recognize the inherent advantages and resources that diverse students and their families can bring to educational contexts. SUPs promote “data-informed instruction” and “diagnosis of institutional inequities” following models such as Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge, as well as tools such as the Equity Index and Vital Signs adapted

from the Center for Urban Education (Bensimon *et al.*, 2016, p. 105; Borda *et al.*, 2020, p. 46). These types of practices encourage reflection and action with a perspective of social justice and educational improvement for students. School-University Partnerships

4. Literature review

The functioning of telesecundarias is affected by multiple inequalities that interact in rural school life. In this context, structural and technological gaps persist that can limit access to resources and restrict classroom activities (Cuevas, 2021). The different types of deficiencies and limitations are, in turn, related to social marginalization, poverty, migration and student trajectories that technology alone cannot resolve (Plata, 2022). Added to this situation is the prevalence of multigrade teaching in the telesecundaria system. Thus, there is a specific body of literature addressing the challenges faced by telesecundarias in relation to infrastructure, pedagogy and leadership. The following subsections examine four categories: (1) structural and technological inequities, (2) social marginalization and student experience, (3) multigrade instructional complexity and (4) leadership and everyday constraints. At the end of this section, SUPs as Vehicles for Situated Learning is discussed.

4.1 Structural and technological inequities

Structural, technological and sociocultural inequities still mark the everyday realities of rural telesecundarias. The model was meant to widen access to secondary schooling, yet it routinely bumps up against digital divides, fragile infrastructure and the very real pedagogical demands of multigrade classrooms; conditions that, taken together, may help explain why equity goals stall in practice (Cuevas, 2021; Morales, 2023).

Infrastructure is a persistent sticking point. To put a number on it: roughly two-thirds of rural telesecundarias have any computers (64.6%) and only about one in five has an internet connection (19.4%) (Morales, 2023). Those ratios are not merely inconvenient; they shape what students and teachers can do in class. The pandemic made this painfully obvious. As the Marco Curricular Común de la Educación Media Superior (MCCEMS) (Common Curricular Framework for Upper Secondary Education) noted, there was a “forced digital migration,” exposing wide gaps in the availability and reliability of technology – especially in lower-income regions (SEP, 2022).

According to Heifetz *et al.* (2009), there are technical problems that can be resolved through prior experience, administrative adjustments and available material resources. However, the authors emphasize that adaptive problems – such as beliefs, practices, relationships and institutional culture – involve uncertainty, negotiation and collective learning. In the context of rural telesecundarias, in addition to technical limitations such as internet access or a shortage of equipment, challenges were also described in teacher collaboration, community participation and the need to rethink leadership practices.

4.2 Social marginalization and student experience

The tech gap doesn’t land on neutral ground; it stacks on top of social marginalization. Plata (2022) links “low academic performance” and “accumulated overage” to tight household budgets, cultural mismatch at school and thin family backup – and these patterns often map onto Indigenous and migrant households and to parents with little formal schooling. In real terms: a ninth-grader covering morning childcare; homework squeezed onto a cracked phone with prepaid data that runs out by Wednesday; a quiet spot to study only if the TV is off. Quinto (2024) points to the predictable next step – spotty attendance tied to poverty and limited school supports nudges students toward leaving – especially when paid shifts or caregiving swallow the week. So yes, devices and internet matter; without time, calm and an adult at school who notices, the tech fix is likely to skim the surface.

4.3 Multigrade instructional complexity

Considering the telesecundarias' multigrade instruction, one should add another layer of complexity to the quality of instruction. According to Hoyos (2023), teachers occasionally have to manage various groups at the same time, which limits their ability to educate or mobilize resources. So, having multigrade classrooms may have an impact on curricular engagement – especially in those schools where teachers and administrators are the same people. Cuevas (2021) adds that multigrade environments require quick policy and support interventions, particularly for Indigenous rural schools where language barriers and cultural disconnections remain unresolved.

4.4 Leadership and everyday constraints

Leadership matters here, but the job is messy. On paper, School Management Autonomy refers to policies that give schools responsibility for administrative, financial and pedagogical decision-making. In rural Mexican telesecundarias, however, autonomy can also mean that school leaders are expected to solve institutional problems with limited external support. In practice, many directors start the day hunting for a substitute, phoning the municipality about a repair and redrawing a budget that never quite adds up (Morales, 2023; Cuevas, 2021). The improvement work – coaching a new teacher, sitting in on a multigrade lesson – gets pushed to the edges. Santillán-Hernández (2022) calls the workaround “creative resistance”: tapping favors, leaning on community networks, inventing small fixes. It is real, and sometimes quietly transformative. But it is also reactive, which may explain why progress comes in short bursts rather than steady arcs. If we want more than patchwork, leaders need time, a bit of discretionary money and cover from the system to protect instructional work from the daily fires.

Seen together, social marginalization, limited technological access, multigrade demands and restricted leadership capacity do not act separately; they reinforce one another. Although it might be tempting to import strategies from urban, single-grade contexts, the findings suggest that such initiatives are unlikely to work without adaptation. More promising are gradual, collaborative designs that build capacity over time and sustain leadership within community ties.

On that view, SUPs offer a particularly relevant pathway. Literature on SUPs emphasizes joint sense-making, long-term collaboration and locally grounded adaptation rather than “best-practices” roadshows (Quinto, 2024). In rural Mexico, this means that SUPs can help directors and teachers transform daily improvisations into shared strategies that persist. Think small and specific: a one-page homeroom attendance tracker; noticing Fridays dip on payday weeks; and calling home before lunch instead of after dismissal (Morales, 2023). None of this is glamorous. We don't pretend a spreadsheet fixes structural issues; still, this is the grain-size of work that tends to stick because it fits the day-to-day.

4.5 SUPs as vehicles for situated learning

Current guidance, as outlined in the MCCEMS, frames “the role of the teacher as a creative designer and an agent of social transformation” (SEP, 2022, p. 47). We read that less as a call for gadgets and more as license to design with what is available. A unit that asks students to interview a local health worker, map the town's water sources and present findings to the PTA fits the bill and keeps costs down. Where connectivity allows, a light augmented-reality layer (e.g. pinning photos and short audio clips to the map) can lift engagement while still honoring the push to “to promote active participation and strengthen situated learning” (SEP, 2022, p. 3). SUPs can scaffold these efforts by supplying methodological support, pedagogical accompaniment and modest resources to make local innovations sustainable.

Comparative work on rural leadership in the USA points in a similar direction: progress tends to follow trust, shared leadership and steady community partnerships. Not magic – habits. Regular check-ins that surface small wins, roles that spread decision-making beyond

the director and partnerships that bring in a museum educator or a local farm co-op when the syllabus needs fresh air. For telesecundaria directors managing multigrade classes and short staff, those moves seem minor, but they often keep morale intact and the work moving.

We center rural telesecundaria leadership in broader equity debates because their everyday dilemmas – digital exclusion, multigrade complexity and socioeconomic marginalization – call for adaptable, participatory leadership. SUPs can support such practice, not as a technical fix, but as a pathway toward longer-term, community-rooted change.

5. Methods

PAR gives the project its method and its politics. In the spirit of [Kemmis and McTaggart \(2007\)](#), teachers gather “meaningful data that they can use immediately” to “improve practice,” which keeps external agendas from crowding out local concerns. The work moves in cycles – naming a problem, collecting and making sense of evidence, trying a change, then reflecting together. In our sites, Professional Learning Communities did some of this heavy lifting; as one study puts it, they help with “determining a goal for professional growth and . . . carrying out an action plan intended to influence . . . outcomes” ([Canglia et al., 2023](#), p. 124). The point isn’t a grand solution handed down; it’s building capacity to notice, test and adjust – slowly, and with the people most affected. These research cycles not only improve student outcomes but also foster teachers’ sense of autonomy and research-based leadership skills ([Hales, 2017](#)). Instead of imposing solutions, PAR closely resembles adaptive leadership from outside experts because it values local knowledge and fosters change from within.

PAR supports the contribution nature of SUPs, which allows the university community and other school leaders to act as “self-critical agents of change” ([Schmuck, 2006](#), p. 29). As suggested by [Patterson et al. \(2010\)](#), it is through cycles of “Observe, Think, Act” that it is possible to identify problems and analyze data at the school level; subsequently, possible pilot solutions are implemented and the results are evaluated. All this while strengthening leadership capacity through reflective team collaboration. In this regard, [Kruger et al. \(2009\)](#) suggest that successful partnerships are sustained by a shared vision, fair use of available resources and, without a doubt, reciprocity in communication. This ensures that educational joint collaboration lasts beyond a simple initiative with no future.

A PAR approach was used to analyze reflective processes involving the participation of researchers and school administrators from rural educational contexts. Together with the researchers, participants worked collaboratively to identify contextual challenges, adapt potential strategies, engage in participatory dialogue and support decision-making processes ([Mertler, 2006](#)). The work itself was not limited to data collection; rather, it focused on shared reflection and the participatory development of strategies aimed at student retention, access to technology and the specific conditions of telesecundarias. Consequently, administrators were not treated as passive recipients of knowledge from external professors, but as participants with relevant experience and contextual knowledge grounded in their own educational realities. However, it is acknowledged that participants were not full co-researchers; rather, the study emphasizes their collaborative role and active participation throughout the project. Their contributions were fundamental in identifying strategies, recognizing local needs and engaging in shared reflection on the findings.

This study highlights a collaborative model; therefore, the participants were not considered co-researchers. In other words, the participants had a significant influence on the priorities, contextual adaptation and interpretation processes, while the researchers were responsible for providing the overall methodological framework. The distinction between researchers and directors reinforces the study’s contribution by illustrating how participatory collaboration can function as a framework for partnerships between rural telesecundarias and the university.

5.1 Rural context-specific action research planning

The study focused on understanding how school principals and administrative teams from rural telesecundarias in central Veracruz, Mexico, identify and propose educational strategies through PAR. The guiding questions are: How do rural principals prioritize their educational challenges? In what ways can the university become a responsive interlocutor in contexts of educational marginalization? What opportunities arise for professional development through context-anchored dialogue? [Mertler \(2006\)](#) define PAR as a participatory and cyclical process in which educational actors examine local challenges in order to inform practical solutions. This approach emphasizes the active participation of educators in reflective and collaborative problem-solving processes ([Bensimon et al., 2016](#); [Schmuck, 2006](#)). Accordingly, the study followed an iterative cycle of observation, critical analysis, collaborative planning and decision-making. The process involved university facilitators and school leaders, who assumed complementary roles throughout the cycle.

The PAR consisted of three stages: an initial inquiry to identify participants' concerns, semi-structured interviews and a third stage to measure the impact of the proposed workshop. The first stage enabled us to develop a workshop to respond to participants' concerns and offer suggestions. During the workshop, participants shared and were interviewed about their initiatives and anecdotes related to their professional practice. Also, they were encouraged to analyze their own proposals. As researchers, our participation was limited to asking questions, guiding the discussion and encouraging reflection during the workshop.

The third moment allowed us to compare perceptions and record the progress. From those responses, we put together a short audio brief, with examples from Latin America and shared it for self-paced listening. In the workshop, questions picked up; we grounded our answers in the relevant research and local context. At the close, we ran a brief satisfaction check to see what felt useful, what didn't and how likely folks were to try the activities back at school.

The researchers designed and coordinated the overall structure of the study, while the directors served as active participants in identifying local priorities, adapting the workshop discussions, reflecting on interpretations and defining the practical aspects of the project. Consequently, the collaboration took place through participatory dialogue and contextual co-construction; in other words, it was not a joint research effort in every sense.

5.2 Research subjects

Ten administrators from different telesecundarias participated: principals, assistant principals and other leadership team members. In this manuscript, we use "school leaders" to refer to principals, assistant principals and leadership team members. No separate classroom-teacher participant group was included unless a participant also held a school leadership role. Each participant was over eighteen years of age, freely agreed to engage in one or more of the study activities and worked in suitable surroundings. Participants were recruited through an invitation extended to a leader of principals. All participants took part in the activities voluntarily. The inclusion criterion for participating in the study was to be a principal at a telesecundaria.

5.3 Data tools and references

We compiled many qualitative data sources to highlight triangulation and participatory analysis, such as a survey, a workshop, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In the case of the survey, two were conducted: a pre-workshop survey to diagnose the group's needs, and a second survey to assess whether the workshop had addressed those needs. Two semi-structured interviews were also conducted prior to the workshop with volunteer telesecundaria school leaders to identify key topics to be developed.

5.3.1 Semi-structured interviews. A subset of volunteers joined 30–45 minute Zoom interviews before the first workshop. These conversations let us probe how leaders see

institutional priorities, educational equity and their own career paths in rural school systems. The interviews were carried out in Spanish, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and later translated into English for analysis and reporting.

Each interview included open-ended guiding questions organized around four domains: (1) definitions and practices of equity, (2) school infrastructure and retention challenges, (3) leadership responses to barriers to learning and (4) professional background and experience.

5.3.2 Pre-workshop survey form. Before the first workshop, participants answered a diagnostic survey designed to identify the primary institutional and structural barriers related to access, retention and learning for all students.

The instrument included 15 items combining:

- (1) Closed-ended questions (multiple choice and Likert-type frequency scales).
- (2) Categorical selections (e.g. identification of student groups facing barriers).
- (3) Open-ended responses (e.g. examples of exclusionary practices, institutional changes).

The survey was structured into five sections:

- (1) School context.
- (2) Equity challenges.
- (3) Use of disaggregated data.
- (4) Institutional culture.
- (5) Self-assessment and support needs.

This instrument provided data to tailor workshop content.

5.3.3 Workshop sessions. Two three-to four-hour professional development seminars served as both intervention and data-collection settings. Emphasizing structured reflection, case study discussion, peer-to-peer communication and application of adaptive leadership strategies for diagnosis of inequity, USC and UV researchers co-facilitated these sessions. Activities generated artifacts consistent with local school improvement projects: modified team protocols, annotated diagnostic templates, equity action plans.

Handout 1 Case-Based Discussion Tool.

Handout 2 consisted of three contextualized case studies addressing inequities in rural secondary schools (e.g. technology access, absenteeism linked to agricultural labor, cultural mismatch in digital initiatives).

Each case included:

- (1) A detailed contextual narrative.
- (2) 2–3 guiding discussion questions.
- (3) A menu of evidence-informed strategies (e.g. community participation, offline digital tools, teacher training).

This tool supported collaborative analysis and problem identification using SWOT during workshop sessions. This instrument generated practice-based data on how participants used analysis into action.

5.3.4 Final survey (post-workshop questionnaire) and notes. At the end of the workshop, participants completed a final survey to assess learning outcomes and planned actions. The instrument included:

- (1) Open-ended questions (e.g. planned actions, timelines, required resources, collaboration networks).

- (2) Checklist items identifying facilitators of learning (e.g. group discussion, practical activities).
- (3) Barrier identification items (e.g. time constraints, lack of examples).

This survey captured intended implementation and contextual constraints.

5.4 Ethical considerations and positionality

Each participant received a Spanish-language information sheet outlining the study's aims, voluntary nature and confidentiality rules, consistent with USC's Institutional Review Board and Mexico's Federal Law on Protection of Personal Data.

We kept a reflective stance by naming our institutional affiliations, social identities and assumptions about language, power and knowledge hierarchies in SUPs. Throughout this manuscript, "the research team" refers to the two authors unless another role, such as participant advocate or local facilitator, is explicitly named. Debriefs and positionality statements surfaced assumptions about language, power and knowledge hierarchies in SUPs. All seminars were run in Spanish by bilingual researchers to support cultural responsiveness and access.

We built trust through steady communication, partnerships with respected local organizations and by centering practitioner expertise. A participant advocate at UV offered an easy, independent point of contact for questions or concerns, which helped protect participant agency and strengthened the study's ethics.

5.5 Data analysis

Grounded in the conceptual framework of the study, data analysis followed an iterative, theory-informed coding process combining institutional analysis, equity literacy (Gorski, 2017) and adaptive leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Both inductive emergence from the data itself and deductive alignment with pre-defined workshop goals helped to create coding categories.

The analysis began with reading interview transcripts, survey materials and researchers' reflection notes in order to identify recurring issues, patterns and references to educational inequality in rural telesecundarias. During the first cycle of analysis, the researchers conducted open coding in Atlas.ti, assigning descriptive labels to raw data segments by considering, on the one hand, the language used by participants and, on the other, the recurring discussions that emerged during the workshops. Initial codes referred to technological limitations, attendance concerns, shared leadership practices, adaptation of external tools and institutional policy constraints.

Deductive coding drew on three sets of analytic categories: adaptive leadership, including technical problems, adaptive challenges, facilitative leadership and shared responsibility; equity-mindedness, including disaggregated data, institutional responsibility, deficit explanations and equity gaps; and asset-based inquiry through CCW and FoK, including community knowledge, family and peer networks, navigational strategies and creative or resistant responses to scarcity. We first coded the data descriptively, then clustered related codes across interviews, surveys, workshop artifacts and reflection notes. Analytic memos helped us track tensions, especially when a problem appeared technical, such as internet access, but required adaptive work, such as changing routines, relationships or expectations.

Initial codes included:

- (1) Adaptive and collaborative leadership – Found in numerous sources, including final thoughts and observation notes, this theme caught how school leaders moved from compliance-based responsibilities to more responsive, facilitative leadership approaches. One participant, for example, described the need to "foster the principal's leadership as a facilitator of change."

- (2) Use of disaggregated data for fair decisions – This code surfaced in survey responses where school leaders noted growing awareness of equity gaps by subgroups (such as Indigenous, migrant or disabled students) and how disaggregated data could guide planning: disaggregated data for equity purposes: *“We need tools to visualize gaps beyond the school average.”*
- (3) Distribution of school leadership –Several leaders talked on ways to involve staff members in reflective activities. *“We began a monthly review with the entire teaching group using rubrics adapted from the workshop,”* one participant said.
- (4) Promotion of a culture of continuous improvement – Participants underlined the need to maintain collaborative inquiry activities going outside the workshop. One pointed out: *“Now we are considering how to create opportunities for internal dialogue before deciding on changes.”*

The analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti to compare meanings across interviews, surveys, workshop materials and reflection notes. The research team used cycles of memo writing, thematic clustering and peer discussion to refine interpretations and identify relationships among codes. Preliminary thematic interpretations were also discussed during workshop reflections and in follow-up conversations with participants as part of the member-checking process. These discussions helped clarify meanings, confirm interpretations and refine emerging themes. Through triangulation across multiple qualitative sources, five main themes emerged that reflect participants’ evolving understandings of equity-oriented leadership in rural telesecundarias.

To support credibility, the research team used triangulation – cross-verification of themes across papers, questionnaires and conversations – member checks – participants reviewed early summaries – and analytic memoing to capture tensions and uncertainty. For example, a recurring problem mentioned in at least four documents was the code “actions without conditions” emerging as a critique of the inadequate support for rural implementation given by federal equity guidelines.

By including participant examples and directly linking themes to practice, the study revealed how rural school leaders translate abstract equity needs into locally grounded action plans.

5.6 Limitations

This small-scale participatory study included in professional development is not meant to produce generalizable conclusions. Its strength, then, is in its significant contextual relevance and involvement for the reality of rural Mexican school managers. Some constraints are variation in participant attendance, social desirability in survey answers and early-stage application of some action plans. Still, the participatory nature of the study enhances the validity of observations on how school leaders view, plan for and react to equity concerns in their specific environments.

6. Findings

Upon reviewing the documents (surveys, workshop, interviews and handouts) together and with some care, several common threads emerge that help to better understand the complexities of educational leadership, the pursuit of equity and daily practice in rural secondary schools. Some patterns are right there in the documents – stubborn, everyday problems that call for local fixes (leadership bandwidth, spotty infrastructure, pedagogy that fits multigrade classes and how the community gets pulled in). Other threads only come into focus when we borrow a lens – adaptive leadership, equity-minded leadership and the like – which, while hardly the only way to read the material, helps us make sense of what we’re seeing. This may not be the only way to look at it, but this combination seems to offer a broader

view of how rural contexts deal with deep inequalities, scarce resources and pressures from education policy to try, sometimes with more success than others, to build a more equitable and effective school system.

6.1 Theme 1. adaptive, collaborative and inclusive leadership

Adaptive and collaborative leadership in rural secondary schools is fundamentally context-sensitive and inclusive, emphasizing adapted problem analysis, shared responsibility and community involvement. Early open codes – “use of SWOT on a real problem,” “director as facilitator of digital change,” and “community hands in technology projects” – came straight from Handouts 1 and 2. We grouped these under adaptive leadership: planning that is inclusive, iterative and grounded in context. One illustrative example is the use of the SWOT framework to analyze a real challenge in the telesecundaria; this activity encouraged participants to engage in more deliberate analysis prior to action.

The invitation to “share your analysis and plan with colleagues in small groups” (Handout 2) does more than fill time; it builds a habit of peer critique and mutual support. It is acknowledged that participants raised technical challenges, such as the procurement of devices and internet access. However, during the workshops, they also identified adaptation issues (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). In the discussions, it was noted that increasing teacher participation required a change in school culture, as well as improvements in collaborative relationships and leadership practices. Handout 1, which invited participants to consider the roles of parents and local leaders, helped frame collaboration as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time activity.

6.2 Theme 2. data-driven leadership for equity

Talking about school leadership with a focus on equity in rural areas is, to a large extent, talking about the use – or lack – of data that can truly be used to make fair decisions. In theory, having information disaggregated by gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity should help identify hidden inequalities; in practice, this occurs unevenly and, at times, in an improvised manner.

In the inductive analysis, revealing codes emerged: “data disaggregated by gender and socioeconomic status,” “use of data for SWOT analysis,” and “limited application of data with an equity focus.” These elements formed a clear theme: the need for leadership that uses data not only as an administrative record but as a tool to detect and address inequities.

Several documents highlight the importance of making visible patterns of inequity in student outcomes. One case that recurs is that Indigenous girls tend to have lower mathematics achievement. In other cases, socioeconomic sensitivity translates into very concrete decisions, such as waiving school fees for students whose families are experiencing economic hardship, as recorded in the observations. Read through CCW and FoK, these data also pushed us to ask what resources students, families and communities were already using, such as peer support, local language knowledge, family work routines and community networks and how school routines might be adjusted around those assets rather than treating them only as barriers.

From an equity-mindedness perspective (Bensimon *et al.*, 2016), disaggregated data represent more than mere administrative practices; they reflect a growing effort to identify patterns of exclusion hidden within educational averages. Thus, rather than attributing low achievement to individual student deficiencies, the participants in this study interpreted inequalities as linked to institutional and contextual conditions affecting specific groups of students.

From a more theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with equity-focused leadership frameworks, which insist on using evidence to guide specific interventions (Bensimon *et al.*, 2016). Even so, there’s daylight between collecting numbers and using them. Too often the spreadsheet gets filed, not discussed. Which raises the obvious question: why gather the data at all if there’s no shared method – or will – to act on it? This gap shows that, for equity to move from discourse to action, systematic processes and collaborative spaces are needed where data can be translated into decisions.

6.3 Theme 3. culture of continuous improvement

In rural schools, the idea of “continuous improvement” may sound ambitious, even a little far-fetched, given the material and personnel shortages. However, the data show signs that, when there is committed leadership, practices that point in that direction can be sustained, even on a small scale.

In the inductive analysis, codes such as “SWOT-based strategic planning,” “collaborative reflection,” “capacity building through training” and “regular evaluation and feedback” emerged. These codes reflect actionable practices grounded in participants’ experiences. The observation notes are even more concrete: principals trading quick wins and snags, comparing attendance trends and borrowing each other’s fixes. Unremarkable on paper; quietly powerful in practice.

These practices reflected adaptive learning processes in which principals had to continually reassess strategies, incorporate feedback and adjust their responses based on changing conditions at their respective schools (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, improvement was not understood as a stable, defined institutional plan but rather as a continuous collective process marked by uncertainty and local realities.

That rhythm lines up with organizational learning and adaptive leadership – small tests, feedback loops, shared responsibility – but the fit isn’t automatic (Senge, 1990; Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). However, the data show that these cultures do not emerge out of nowhere. They are fragile, dependent on leaders who know how to maintain motivation and communities willing to get involved. Therein lies perhaps the most critical point: without people to drive these practices forward on a consistent basis, continuous improvement risks becoming nothing more than a nice phrase rather than an everyday reality.

6.4 Theme 4. structural challenges and adaptive responses

In telesecundarias, talking about infrastructure sounds almost like a broken record: insufficient computer equipment, internet that fails more than it works, makeshift classrooms. But when these limitations are combined with socioeconomic problems – families that depend on child labor, unstable incomes or even a certain cultural resistance to change – the landscape becomes even more difficult to transform.

In the inductive analysis, codes such as “lack of computer devices,” “unstable internet,” “economic difficulties,” “child labor,” and “cultural resistance” emerged. In theory, these findings fit with proposals that link material conditions to educational outcomes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). But seeing it on paper does not take away from the harsh reality of how these barriers intersect and reinforce each other, complicating any attempt to implement educational policies effectively.

However, creative responses are also evident. Documents such as Handouts 1 and 2 show strategies such as organizing rotating schedules for computer lab use, creating offline digital libraries or using mobile phones as learning tools. These solutions do not eliminate the problem, but they do seem to alleviate the limitations, at least in part.

It is acknowledged that some responses focused on technical issues, while others referred to challenges of an adaptive nature. These challenges related to broader socioeconomic conditions, institutional constraints and, above all, community trust. Consequently, participants emphasized negotiation, local collaboration and gradual adjustments, ruling out definitive and static solutions.

In this sense, empirical data support theories about technological adaptation and creative use of resources in low-resource contexts. Even so, the question remains: to what extent are these strategies sustainable if they depend on local goodwill and ingenuity rather than more solid structural support?

6.5 Theme 5. inclusive practices and school-university partnerships

The findings seem to indicate that SUPs were not limited to providing ad hoc technical assistance. In several cases, they served as a meeting point for principals and academics to

develop diagnoses tailored to local realities, design training programs that responded to specific needs and implement inclusion strategies that would otherwise have been difficult to implement. They became forums for proposals to be discussed, negotiated and modified without the immediate pressure to adhere to external directives, which was particularly important in rural areas characterized by political tensions and structural limitations. Their value probably lay as much in the relational as in the practical.

The workshops and adapted equity tools functioned as boundary objects that facilitated dialogue between university researchers and school leaders across different institutional realities. Rather than imposing external models, these tools became flexible mediating instruments through which participants negotiated locally meaningful interpretations of equity and inclusion.

Inclusion in rural secondary schools is not limited to opening doors to all students; it also involves adapting teaching to respond to very different and sometimes invisible needs. The data show that this effort is often supported by the use of disaggregated information and context-specific pedagogical strategies.

On the theory side, this tracks with intersectionality and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995): notice layered identities and teach to them. In practice, the “intersectional monitoring” piece is more promise than procedure. The script is not always followed in practice, though; intersectional monitoring, for instance, seems more like an intention than a methodical process.

The NEM (SEP, 2022) aims high – equity, sociocultural constructivism, a humanistic frame. The rollout, at least in rural sites, runs into familiar walls: thin infrastructure, uneven backing and teacher workload that makes “new” hard to sustain. Classic implementation gap, as Lipsky would remind us. (Lipsky, 1980). This is where transnational SUPs show their value. The documents analyzed, such as handouts and surveys, record initiatives ranging from local needs assessments to teacher training, specialized academic support and community outreach activities. That mix – needs assessments, training cycles, outreach – fits what collaboration and community-participation folks have long argued (Epstein, 2011): shared responsibility, dialogue, context before template.

And the teacher-to-teacher piece matters. Swapping materials, pairing up informally, checking in after tough weeks – none of it glamorous, all of it glue. Even though these practices aren’t always written down, they help create networks of trust and places where new ideas can come up to solve specific problems. Thus, support networks keep change possible, even when the system as a whole does not facilitate it.

The project incorporated participatory and collaborative principles associated with PAR. This approach also supported knowledge production grounded in practice and responsive to the local context. Data collection extended beyond a purely theoretical level by incorporating workshops and ongoing reflective processes to inform sustained action. In this way, the study aimed to generate actionable knowledge to address local challenges shaped by structural inequalities and the consequences of the pandemic.

6.6 Navigating political and structural constraints

Here the distance between what the NEM asks for and what rural telesecundaria leaders can actually do comes into focus. NEM speaks the language of inclusive, humanistic, sociocultural pedagogy; on the ground, the fit is loose. Principals point to brittle infrastructure – few devices, unreliable internet – and to the juggling act of multigrade teaching, all of which makes inquiry and participatory learning hard to sustain. To be blunt, the policy reads aspirational; doing it with what schools actually have is uneven. Principals kept naming the ordinary snags: one working projector shared across rooms, Wi-Fi that drops out after lunch, a single teacher juggling two grades. Under that setup, inquiry cycles and small-group work don’t just fizzle – they’re hard to start. As one principal put it, trying to do inquiry and participatory tasks without a stable connection – while covering multiple grades – is “almost impossible” (Cuevas, 2021; Morales, 2023).

And the top-down mandates? They added another snag. Principals described pressure to “show” compliance with equity programs without the resources to make them real. In practice, they nudged change while uncertainty and constraints persisted. In that space, the partnership mattered less as a compliance tool and more as a buffer against box-checking – somewhere to think aloud, compare notes and sketch responses that fit. In our read, those conversations helped leaders move from performative adherence toward practices that made local sense. This went beyond just following the rules and into practices that made sense in their own context.

Even though SUPs can provide basic yet important support in addressing structural challenges, such as facilitating shared labs or offline libraries, they cannot, on their own, close the technological gap.

6.7 Equity tools as boundary objects

US-developed equity tools – CUE’s indices and disaggregation protocols – ended up working as boundary objects. They sparked new kinds of reflective talk among principals, but only after some translation – linguistic and cultural – to fit rural Mexican schools. Early reactions were skeptical, sometimes rightly so. Over time, the critique became productive: the tools were treated less as templates to follow and more as mirrors that made institutional inequities visible, provided we adapted them carefully to avoid misreads or tidy-but-thin analyses.

This experience highlights that equity tools are most efficacious when collaboratively owned by school leaders and thoroughly integrated into the unique contexts of rural schools. This experience suggests that equity tools worked best when school leaders owned and adapted them. [Yosso’s \(2005\) Community Cultural Wealth framework](#) and [Moll et al.’s \(1992\) Funds of Knowledge](#) helped us read principals’ adaptations as asset-based practice: leaders used local knowledge of attendance patterns, family work schedules, peer support and community relationships to make the tools usable. Once principals treated the tools as theirs and folded them into everyday routines, the conversation became less abstract. Our experience tracks with that. Once principals treated the tools as theirs – and folded them into everyday routines – the talk got less abstract. Instead of “equity” in general, we heard, “Fridays, 2B’s attendance dips; let’s front-load the quiz” or “Split the math group so Ana isn’t the interpreter again.” The back-and-forth tweaking was the work. Flexible tools let people read their own context and act on it, which sits well with the special issue’s push for locally made, participatory decisions ([Pascarella & Savick, 2025](#)). SUPs functioned as cultural translators, bringing together linguistic differences and contextual constraints, so they became usable in rural practice.

6.8 Repositioning universities as local equity partners

A notable shift was our role as a university team. Principals started wary of outsiders parachuting in with tidy agendas. As trust built, we moved toward co-learner and facilitator – less sage, more sounding board. That stance – reciprocal, slower and attentive to limits – lined up with what the partnership literature flags as effective ([Kruger et al., 2009](#)).

We also saw the value of slow, long-horizon work in resource-lean settings. Principals pointed to steady benefits – patient listening, gradual capacity-building, fewer pre-packaged fixes. That pacing seemed to lower the political temperature and created neutral ground for hard equity questions; it echoes recent calls for situated, co-developed solutions ([Pascarella & Savick, 2025](#)).

Steering clear of slogans and quick technical remedies, what helped was adaptive, equity-minded partnership work tailored to local conditions. When those pieces were in place, dialogue deepened, tool use became shared rather than top-down, and leaders could better navigate political and structural cross-pressures. Modest contributions, yes – but they show how participatory, reflective routines can yield context-relevant gains in marginalized schools. SUPs served as mechanisms that helped shift adaptive leadership from individual to collective practice, while also normalizing monthly meetings and collaborative revisions.

The five themes identified in the findings – adaptive and inclusive leadership, equity-centered data utilization, a culture of ongoing improvement, innovative responses to structural limitations and inclusive practices enhanced by school-university collaborations – seem to provide a strong framework for the conclusions presented here. Rather than isolated categories, they function as interlocking pieces: some point to the skills needed to sustain change, others to the minimum conditions for that change to be possible. They may not cover every aspect of the problem, but they do give a clear enough picture to help make suggestions and start new debates. So, these findings point to different ways in which SUPs operate as bridging infrastructures that convert localized experimentation into more stable equity-oriented practices.

The results derive from a PAR-informed collaborative action research intervention that incorporated workshops, collaborative analysis and context-responsive tools. This process enabled participants, on the one hand, to identify local challenges and, on the other, to experiment with concrete strategies and collectively reflect on their implementation. The findings also suggest the importance of gradual, sustained and context-sensitive interventions in advancing more equitable forms of school organization.

7. Implications and recommendations

The findings of this PAR-informed collaborative action research project have implications for policy, practice and school-university partnerships aimed at supporting educational equity in rural telesecundaria settings in Mexico. Addressing these effects starts with seeing the day-to-day realities that school leaders and their communities experience daily. These implications are related to both the intervention process and its outcomes, primarily because they emphasize gradual implementation, collaborative learning processes and the capacity to adapt tools to diverse social contexts.

7.1 Policy: invest in the nuts-and-bolts of implementation so schools can actually meet federal DEI criteria

As earlier work has already warned (Cuevas, 2021; Morales, 2023), long-standing tech gaps keep equity reforms from getting off the ground. These aren't just fewer resources; they shape what is even possible in class. Without a basic floor – power that holds, devices that work, a connection that stays up – “adaptive leadership” risks reading like talk. Principals also flagged the gap between the Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM) goals and what their schools can realistically run.

Principals kept returning to the same snag: thin technology – few computers, unstable internet – makes it hard to put equity-focused curricula and inclusive teaching into practice. Building issues compound the problem and fall hardest on students already at the margins. Policymakers need to fund basic infrastructure, so schools have the technical and material tools to do the work. This recommendation follows most directly from Theme 4, where technology gaps, infrastructure constraints and socioeconomic pressures appeared as mutually reinforcing barriers.

7.2 Fund professional development with regional and cultural relevance

Good equity-oriented professional development calls for more than a one-size-fits-all, solution-based approach. This recommendation draws from Themes 1 and 3, where principals emphasized facilitative leadership, peer exchange and continuous improvement routines. School administrators underlined the need for professional development particularly customized to local social, cultural and educational environments. Regionally grounded professional development has to cover pragmatic pedagogical strategies, culturally sensitive teaching and leadership skills tailored to rural environments given the complexity of multigrade instruction and resource limitations. Policy frameworks should thus support

continuing, localized professional learning opportunities designed cooperatively with school leaders to guarantee relevance, effectiveness and major integration into daily practice. School-University Partnerships

7.3 Practice: embed equity reflection into cycles of improvement in practice

The findings suggest that principals appeared to gain considerably from using structured equity reflection tools – resources that seemed to spark the kind of discomfort and questioning Heifetz *et al.* (2009) describe as the “productive zone of disequilibrium” in adaptive leadership. This recommendation follows from Theme 2, where disaggregated data became useful only when principals had time and structure to interpret it collectively. This isn’t to say the process was easy; confronting ingrained practices rarely is. Even so, folding these routines into the everyday improvement cycle seemed to help. The harder part – several leaders admitted – is keeping the dialogue alive once the formal project wraps.

A major outcome was weaving reflection into ongoing school-improvement processes. Giving principals and staff simple structures to revisit equity questions made it easier to spot baked-in biases and revisit how resources are allocated. To make change stick, schools should treat these practices as a standing part of planning and teaching, not an occasional add-on.

7.4 Provide low-tech locally controlled tools for basing decisions on data

Given the continuous challenges around digital connectivity and technology infrastructure, the development and application of low-tech, locally managed tools supporting data-informed decision-making is absolutely vital. This recommendation follows from Theme 2 and Theme 4: leaders needed data tools, but those tools had to work in low-connectivity schools. While principals underlined the need for equity indices and data disaggregation methods, they also underlined the need to customize these instruments to local settings and resource availability. Developing or changing readily available low-tech solutions for gathering and assessing equity data should be given top priority in schools thereby ensuring that these instruments remain relevant, controllable and directly actionable in small rural areas.

7.5 Cooperation: redefine partnership success as slow, capacity-building work – not quick fix solutions.

This kind of slow, trust-centered work seems to echo the observations of Kruger *et al.* (2009), who noted that in places where resources are stretched thin, the partnerships that last are rarely the ones built on quick, technical fixes. Instead, they tend to grow out of steady capacity building – often measured not in months, but in years – and in the patient weaving of relationships that can weather setbacks. It’s a pace that might frustrate those expecting rapid change, but in such contexts, speed often comes at the cost of depth.

In this study, school leaders emphasized that continued contact, trust-building, small-scale capacity development and regular communication mattered more than a single workshop. This recommendation follows from Theme 5, where the partnership became useful because tools and conversations were adapted slowly with school leaders rather than delivered as quick technical fixes. For that reason, partnership success should be framed as cumulative: repeated visits, shared revision of tools and follow-up conversations that help principals try, revise and sustain context-specific strategies.

7.6 Place universities within the local educational fabric

Trust and mutual respect in the relationship were much enhanced by redefining universities as participatory co-learners rather than outside technical consultants. Trust rose when the university showed up as a co-learner rather than a fixer. This recommendation draws from Theme 5 and from our positionality work: the university became more useful when it listened first, adjusted its tools and treated school leaders as holders of local expertise. Principals were more willing to collaborate when we took local knowledge seriously and adjusted plans to fit

place. Universities should work inside the local fabric – reciprocal learning, attention to rural school realities and partnerships that bend to community priorities.

Getting to fairer schooling in rural telesecundarias takes a bundle of moves: targeted infrastructure, context-relevant professional development, routine equity reflection and low-tech, locally controlled data tools. Above all, SUPs thrive on steady, reciprocal work that centers local knowledge and slow, steady progress.

These are not new slogans; they translate the frameworks we discussed into steps rural telesecundarias can actually try. Read against our data and the broader literature, the strongest link appears where policy, daily practice and joint work meet. Put another way, context-sensitive, equity-oriented reform tends to grow by layering small, doable routines; not by sweeping proclamations.

For this particular partnership among UV, USC and telesecundaria leaders in Veracruz, the next phase is likely to be modest and relational rather than a new stand-alone intervention. UV can serve as the local anchor for follow-up conversations with school leaders, while USC can continue to share adapted equity tools and analytic protocols when they are useful. A practical next step would be a small cycle of periodic check-ins, principal-led revisions to attendance and retention tools and shared review of what changed in school routines. At this stage, we would not describe the partnership as fully institutionalized unless a formal agreement is already in place; the more accurate claim is that the partnership is moving toward continuity and possible institutionalization.

8. Conclusion

Emphasizing the transforming power of contextually grounded SUP, this PAR study clarifies key paths toward advancing educational equity in rural Mexican telesecundarias. The outcomes of this partnership demonstrate that reflective, adaptive practices, culturally relevant professional development and collaborative support structures became embedded in local school improvement processes, supporting equity-oriented leadership beyond mere symbolic mandates. Through the work, school leaders got sharper at spotting equity problems and trying small, concrete fixes. We read that as evidence that well-run partnerships can help – not a cure-all, but enough trust and structure to move changes that stick.

Stepping back, the case may travel. The mix we used – flexible leadership, locally tuned professional development and simple reflection tools – looks portable when adapted with care. For educators, policymakers and partnership leads, the takeaway is ordinary but stubborn: DEI work in rural schools moves when it's co-owned, paced and grounded in local knowledge, while naming the political and structural limits you have to work through.

The study offers recommendations based on the experiences and conclusions documented throughout the workshop, interviews, discussions and reflection sessions with the principals of rural telesecundarias. For example, the issue of limited access to technology reflects recurring concerns that stem from the local context. Similarly, the discussions emphasized the need for universities to act as long-term partners rather than external consultants. The present implications are limited to a small-scale, qualitative study specific to a region of Veracruz, rather than universally transferable conditions. For that reason, the recommendations should be read as context-sensitive possibilities rather than general prescriptions for all rural SUPs.

The results gain analytical depth when the theoretical frameworks that guided the study are taken into account. Drawing on adaptive leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009), some of the issues identified went beyond merely technical challenges and touched on processes of negotiation, collective learning and the transformation of institutional practices. Similarly, the equity-mindedness approach allowed for the use of disaggregated data in an effort to highlight the structural inequality faced by certain student groups. Meanwhile, the collaborative dynamics that emerged in the workshops reflected PAR principles because they provided spaces for shared reflection and the development of context-specific educational responses.

Ultimately, this study supports a critical understanding of equity leadership as contextual, politically aware and deeply participatory. The natural development of educational equity depends on regular, respectful interactions emphasizing local knowledge, contextual adaptation and mutual learning as the first priority. It cannot be forced from a distance or achieved by surface compliance. Looking ahead, we would recast the university's role: not an outside expert with the answer, but a local partner – responsive, steady and willing to learn alongside schools. That arrangement gives people room to navigate complexity and the occasional political storm and to keep nudging classrooms toward fairness.

We see the next stage as a test of continuity: whether the relationship can support repeated school-led inquiry cycles, modest tool revision and shared reflection across sites. If that work continues, the partnership may eventually become a more formal SUP structure, but the immediate priority is simpler and probably more important: staying responsive to what school leaders say they need.

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