Revista Multidisciplinaria Perspectivas Investigativas
Multidisciplinary Journal Investigative Perspectives
Vol. 6(1), 30-37, 2026
https://doi.org/10.62574/rmpi.v6i1.472

Evaluative concepts and teaching practices in rural education in Colombia

Concepciones evaluativas y prácticas docentes en educación rural en Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research was to analyse evaluative concepts and teaching practices in rural education in Colombia. It was developed under a holistic paradigm with a qualitative approach and multiple case study design, involving 12 Spanish language teachers from three rural institutions in Montería through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations and discussion groups. The results reveal tension between traditional conceptions (58%) focused on measurement and formative approaches (42%), with a predominance of objective tests (63%) and little specific feedback. The conditions of rurality, multi-grade classrooms, precarious resources, and socio-economic limitations condition the possibilities for assessment, although the territorial context offers formative potential through community knowledge that is rarely recognised in standardised assessments. Valuable contextualised adaptations (portfolios, territorial projects) were identified, but these remain isolated initiatives without institutional systematisation, limited by the pressure for standardised results, which generates paradoxes between situated pedagogies and homogenising demands.

Descriptors: rural education; education system; educational institutions. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El objetivo de la investigación se basó en analizar las concepciones evaluativas y prácticas docentes en educación rural en Colombia. Se desarrolló bajo paradigma holístico con enfoque cualitativo y diseño de estudio de caso múltiple, involucrando 12 docentes de lengua castellana de tres instituciones rurales de Montería mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas, observaciones no participantes y grupos de discusión. Los resultados revelan tensión entre concepciones tradicionales (58%) centradas en medición y enfoques formativos (42%), con predominio de pruebas objetivas (63%) y escasa retroalimentación específica. Las condiciones de ruralidad aulas multigrado, precariedad de recursos, limitaciones socioeconómicas condicionan las posibilidades evaluativas, aunque el contexto territorial ofrece potencialidades formativas mediante saberes comunitarios raramente reconocidos en evaluaciones estandarizadas. Se identificaron adaptaciones contextualizadas valiosas (portafolios, proyectos territoriales) que permanecen como iniciativas aisladas sin sistematización institucional, limitadas por presión de resultados estandarizados que genera paradojas entre pedagogías situadas y demandas homogeneizantes.

Descriptores: educación rural; sistema educativo; instituciones de enseñanza. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

Received: 18/11/2025. Reviewed: 26/11/2025. Approved: 16/12/2024. Published: 16/01/2026.
Research articles section

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of learning is an essential component for understanding and transforming teaching practices, especially in rural contexts where structural, social and cultural conditions have specific characteristics that require tailored educational responses, as argued by Moreno et al. (2019) when analysing educational processes in territories with distinctive characteristics. In the Latin American context, the use of standardised assessments has generated debate about their relevance in diverse territories, as they tend to obscure local realities and, in turn, reproduce educational inequalities, as pointed out by Ravela et al. (2018) in their studies on measurement systems in the region.

Within the Colombian education system, assessment is governed by Decree 1290 of 2009 (Ministry of National Education, 2009), which establishes formative assessment as the central pedagogical orientation for teaching and learning processes. However, multiple studies indicate that there is a persistent tension between this regulatory framework and actual assessment practices in institutions, particularly in rural areas where material and educational conditions differ substantially from the urban context, as documented by Santos-Guerra (2020) in his analyses of educational assessment. Likewise, rural institutions face limitations in infrastructure, teaching resources and access to continuing teacher training, which conditions the ways in which assessment is conceived and implemented in everyday school life, a situation that has been studied by Pérez and Montoya (2021) in their examination of pedagogical realities in remote areas.

With regard to the department of Córdoba, educational indicators are worrying and deserve priority attention in regional public policies. According to DANE (2022), the illiteracy rate in rural areas reaches 9.2%, contrasting significantly with the 2.7% urban rate, reflecting historical inequalities in access to educational opportunities. Similarly, standardised test results show significant gaps between rural and urban students, with rural institutions consistently performing at lower levels according to ICFES reports (2023). These figures reflect not only learning limitations, but also questions about the relevance of the assessment tools used and their ability to recognise the knowledge constructed in rural contexts.

The teaching of Spanish in rural contexts takes on substantive relevance, as it constitutes a cross-cutting area for the development of communication skills that enable access to knowledge in all disciplines, as Cassany (2019) argues when examining literacy practices in various educational contexts. However, assessment approaches in this area tend to prioritise the measurement of grammatical content over the development of functional communication skills, a situation that Lomas (2018) identifies as a disconnect between the educational objectives of the curriculum and actual classroom practices. In this sense, this gap between educational objectives and assessment practices is accentuated in rural areas, where students' cultural and linguistic references differ from the assumptions in curricula and standardised assessments that tend to homogenise educational experiences.

In this regard, Prieto and Contreras (2018) identified that teachers with traditional conceptions tend to favour summative and quantitative assessment, while those who hold constructivist perspectives implement more varied and formative strategies that recognise the learning process. Meanwhile, in rural Latin American contexts, research such as that carried out by Díaz et al. (2023) reveals that teachers develop contextualised assessment adaptations, although often intuitively and without institutional systematisation that would allow these pedagogical experiences to be shared.

From the constructivist perspective of assessment, theoretically supported by authors such as Black and Wiliam (2018), it is proposed that assessment should be a tool for learning and not merely a measure of it, which implies transforming traditional practices centred on grading. In this vein, this approach involves actively engaging students through specific feedback, transparent criteria, and opportunities for self-regulation that allow them to understand and improve their learning processes. On the other hand, sociocultural theory emphasises that all assessment occurs in specific cultural contexts that determine what is valued as legitimate learning, as Vygotsky (1978) argued when developing his contributions on cognitive development in social contexts.

This research sought to understand the assessment concepts and practices of Spanish language teachers in three rural educational institutions in the municipality of Montería (La Victoria, Kilómetro 12 and Patio Bonito), recognising the teachers' voice as a legitimate source of situated pedagogical knowledge that emerges from everyday experience in the classroom. In this sense, the study sought to transcend deficit views of rurality to identify the knowledge, tensions, and adaptations that teachers develop in their specific contexts, valuing their strategies as creative responses to the material and cultural conditions in which they carry out their educational work.

Consequently, the objective of the research was based on analysing evaluative conceptions and teaching practices in rural education in Colombia.

METHOD

The research was developed under the holistic paradigm, which integrates multiple methodological perspectives to understand complex phenomena in their entirety (Hurtado, 2020). A qualitative approach with a multiple case study design was adopted, which allowed for the exploration of the particularities of each educational institution while maintaining the possibility of comparative analysis (Stake, 2017). The holopractical method guided the articulation of the perceptual, apprehensive, comprehensive, and integrative levels of the research (Barrera, 2018).

The participants were 12 Spanish language teachers from the educational institutions La Victoria (4 teachers), Kilómetro 12 (4 teachers) and Patio Bonito (4 teachers), located in the rural area of Montería. The inclusion criteria were: teaching Spanish with a minimum of 2 years' experience, current employment at the institution and voluntary participation through informed consent. Teachers with provisional appointments of less than 6 months were excluded. The average age of the participants was 42 years (range 28-58), with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 22 years, while 67% had postgraduate training in education.

Data collection techniques included: semi-structured individual interviews (12 interviews lasting 60-90 minutes), non-participant classroom observations (24 observations lasting 90 minutes each) and three discussion groups (one per institution, with four participants each). The interviews explored conceptions of assessment, assessment criteria, instruments used, and perceptions of rurality as an evaluative condition, while the observations recorded evaluative practices in context using structured guides. The focus groups allowed for a deeper exploration of the tensions, adaptations, and training needs identified.

Data processing was performed using content analysis with thematic coding assisted by ATLAS.ti version 9 software. Semantic networks were constructed that linked emerging categories: evaluative conceptions, use of evaluation, contextual adaptations, and pedagogical tensions. Categorical triangulation allowed for the comparison of data between the three collection techniques and between the participating institutions (Flick, 2018). Credibility criteria were applied through verification with participants, transferability through dense contextual descriptions, and confirmability through auditing of the analytical process.

Ethical considerations were governed by the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through identification codes, while the protocol was endorsed by the university's ethics committee. Ethical particularities of the rural context were recognised, including cultural sensitivity and feedback of results to the participating communities.

RESULTS

Evaluative conceptions in tension

Participating teachers expressed heterogeneous evaluative conceptions that ranged from traditional perspectives to formative approaches. Fifty-eight per cent of the statements in interviews associated evaluation with the measurement of knowledge through written tests: ‘Evaluation is measuring how much students have learned’ (Teacher 3, IE La Victoria). This conception is linked to practices focused on numerical grading and performance comparison. However, a formative discourse also emerged in 42% of the references, which conceives

assessment as a feedback process: 'Assessing is seeing how the student is doing in order to help them improve' (Teacher 7, IE Kilómetro 12). This discursive tension is reflected in practical ambiguities, where teachers who verbalise formative perspectives predominantly implement summative assessments at the end of periods, with little process feedback.

Traditional conceptions are associated with institutional factors: pressure for results in standardised tests (mentioned by 11 teachers), numerical grading formats required in institutional systems (9 teachers) and limited training in alternative assessment (10 teachers). Teachers with more experience (more than 15 years) tended toward more traditional conceptions, while young teachers (less than 5 years) expressed openness to formative approaches, although with difficulties in implementation due to a lack of institutional support.

Assessment practices observed

Classroom observations revealed a predominance of traditional instruments: objective written tests (63% of the assessments observed), individual workshops with quantitative assessment (28%), and oral participation without explicit criteria (9%). Specific feedback was scarce; only in 3 of the 24 observations was detailed individual feedback on strengths and areas for improvement recorded. However, valuable contextual adaptation practices emerged. Four teachers (33%) implemented portfolios of evidence documenting writing processes: 'I ask them to keep all their drafts so they can see how they improve' (Teacher 5, IE Patio Bonito). Three teachers (25%) developed classroom projects linked to community issues: research on local crops, documentation of oral traditions, and production of rural newspapers. These experiences integrated authentic assessment, although without institutional systematisation.

Co-evaluation and self-evaluation were implemented marginally (2 teachers, 17%), generally at the end of periods using standardised formats without process reflection. The evaluation criteria were rarely made explicit to students; only one teacher presented a detailed rubric before an evaluative activity. This opacity of criteria generates student uncertainty about performance expectations.

Pedagogical use of assessment results

The analysis revealed limited use of assessment information for formative purposes by the participating teachers. The results were used predominantly for assigning periodic grades (100% of cases) and communicating with families (83%), but rarely for adjusting teaching strategies to respond to identified needs. Only three teachers (25%) reported modifying their lesson plans based on difficulties identified in assessments, as one of them stated: 'If I see that they did not understand a topic, I explain it again' (Teacher 2, IE La Victoria). However, these types of adjustments are basic and do not respond to a systematic reflection on learning processes, limiting themselves to repetitions of content without methodological variation.

The discussion groups showed that teachers perceive assessment more as an administrative requirement than as a pedagogical tool with transformative potential. In this sense, the minutes of the assessment committees analysed mainly document pass rates and lists of students in difficulty, without analysing causal factors or differentiated improvement strategies that address the particularities of each case. Likewise, feedback to students focuses on pointing out errors, with minimal guidance on how to overcome them, which contradicts the principles of formative assessment that emphasise support in the learning process.

Rural conditions and assessment implications

Teachers identified multiple rural conditions that significantly affect assessment practices. The heterogeneity of levels in multigrade classrooms (present in 6 of 12 classrooms observed) makes it difficult to implement differentiated assessments, as one of the participants explains: 'I have 6th, 7th and 8th grade students together, it is complicated to assess each one according to their level' (Teacher 9, IE Patio Bonito). Consequently, this situation creates tension between graded curriculum standards and the realities of multilevel teaching, forcing teachers to develop alternative strategies that are rarely recognised in institutional assessment systems.

The scarcity of technological resources, for its part, limits assessment methods that could enrich learning processes. No institution has stable internet connectivity; in fact, only three computers

per institution are available on average, although these are mainly used for administrative tasks. In this context, assessments that require consultation of digital sources or multimedia production are unfeasible, while the precarious state of school libraries (an average of 150 books per institution) restricts assessments based on independent reading of diverse texts that would allow for the development of broad reading skills.

Family socioeconomic conditions also limit assessment possibilities in everyday school life. Teachers reported that students often lack basic materials (paper, pencils), which limits extensive written work or activities that require specific resources. At the same time, family work responsibilities (agricultural work, caring for younger siblings) make it difficult to assign homework, as one teacher points out: 'I can't ask them to do a lot of work at home because some of them have to go to work with their parents' (Teacher 1, IE La Victoria). This reality therefore creates inequality when comparing performance with urban benchmarks that assume the availability of time and resources, without considering the particularities of rural areas.

Paradoxically, teachers also identified the potential of the rural context to enrich the educational process. The connection with the territory enables authentic assessments linked to the students' life experiences: 'When we assess the river or crops, the students know a lot because they live it' (Teacher 11, IE Kilómetro 12). In contrast to material limitations, community knowledge about agricultural practices, traditional cuisine, natural medicine, and local cultural expressions constitutes cognitive capital that is rarely recognised in standardised curricula and assessments, despite its educational and cultural value.

Triangulation between instruments showed consistency in the results obtained throughout the research process. The tensions between conceptions were evident both in discourse (interviews and groups) and in practice (observations), allowing for an understanding of the complexity of assessment dynamics. Furthermore, the contextual adaptations identified in observations were corroborated and expanded upon in discussion groups, where teachers shared experiences of situated assessment that were not directly observed but were significant for understanding their everyday teaching strategies.

DISCUSSION

The tensions between traditional and formative conceptions identified coincide with previous research conducted in Latin American contexts. In this regard, Prieto and Contreras (2018) documented a similar contradictory coexistence between renewed discourses and conservative practices among Chilean teachers, which shows that these tensions transcend national borders. This gap suggests that the appropriation of formative approaches requires more than discursive changes; in fact, it demands transformations in institutional cultures, accountability systems, and material conditions of teaching work that enable the implementation of learning-centred assessments.

The pressure for results in standardised tests emerges as an inhibiting factor for formative assessment in the institutions studied. In this regard, Santos-Guerra (2020) warns about the evaluative tyranny that reduces teaching to exam preparation, relegating knowledge-building processes that are essential for comprehensive education. In rural Colombian contexts, this pressure is particularly problematic, as institutions systematically occupy low positions in rankings that do not consider unequal starting conditions or territorial particularities. Consequently, teachers face the paradox of responding to standardised logic through contextualised pedagogies, generating conflicts between their pedagogical convictions and institutional demands.

The contextual adaptation practices observed (portfolios, projects linked to the territory, documentation of community knowledge) represent valuable efforts towards educational justice that deserve recognition. These strategies coincide with the views of Díaz et al. (2023) on the need for assessments that recognise diverse cultural repertoires and value knowledge constructed in specific contexts. However, the absence of institutional systematisation limits their potential, leaving them as isolated initiatives that are not articulated in institutional pedagogical models capable of granting them legitimacy and continuity over time.

The lack of specific feedback identified contradicts fundamental principles of formative assessment outlined in the specialised literature. In this vein, Black and Wiliam (2018) demonstrate that feedback is the assessment factor with the greatest impact on learning, even more so than the quality of the tests administered to students. Feedback should be timely, specific and provide guidance on how to improve performance. However, the results reveal that rural teachers lack the time and training to implement quality feedback, resulting in an assessment that is solely certifying in nature and limited to assigning grades without pedagogical support.

The opacity of assessment criteria represents an ethical and pedagogical problem that affects equity in educational processes. On this point, Ravela et al. (2018) argue that fair assessment requires transparency about what is being assessed and how it is graded, allowing students to understand learning expectations. The absence of explicit rubrics or criteria generates student uncertainty and inhibits possibilities for self-regulation of learning, limiting the development of metacognitive skills (Fontalvo-Gómez, 2025 and Torres-Calderón et al., 2024). In contexts of socio-educational vulnerability, this opacity reproduces inequalities, as students with less cultural capital have fewer implicit references to interpret teachers' expectations, putting them at a disadvantage in the face of unclear assessment processes.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of assessment concepts and practices in rural educational institutions in Montería shows that there is a marked contradiction between formal pedagogical discourse and concrete actions in the classroom, where traditional instruments focused on objective written tests (63%) and quantitative assessment predominate, with little specific feedback and implicit assessment criteria that generate opacity and inequality for students with less cultural capital. Although the structural conditions of rurality—multi-grade classrooms, precarious technological and bibliographic resources, and material limitations—substantially condition assessment possibilities, the territorial context offers valuable educational potential through community knowledge of agricultural practices, oral traditions, and local knowledge that are rarely recognised in standardised assessments.

In contrast, the contextualised adaptations identified (process portfolios, projects linked to community issues) represent efforts at educational justice that remain isolated initiatives without institutional systematisation, limited by the pressure for results in standardised tests, which generates the paradox of demanding homogenised responses through situated pedagogies. Therefore, the transformation of assessment practices in these contexts requires changes in institutional cultures, accountability systems, and the material conditions of teaching work, recognising the situated pedagogical knowledge that rural teachers build on a daily basis, offering specific training in formative assessment, and creating spaces for the systematisation of contextualised experiences that allow for progress towards assessments that recognise territorial diversity and promote meaningful learning.

FUNDING
Non-monetary

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
There is no conflict of interest with individuals or institutions linked to the research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Metropolitan University of Education, Science and Technology (UMECIT), Province of Panama.

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