

School Heads' Preparation and Development in Mexico, a Story That Has Not Yet Been Told

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Abstract

In recent educational reforms in Mexico school heads play an important role to carry out the proposed improvements at school levels. This paper presents a general perspective of school heads preparation and development in Mexico. Based on an analysis of recent educational reforms, and also research conducted in Mexico and at international level it is concluded that Mexico is not doing enough to professionally prepare and develop school heads. There has been some progress for school heads with recently educational policy particularly in the new procedures for appointment to headship. However, professional preparation remains unattended since will not be offered or required preparation in leadership and school management for newly appointed heads. The panorama in the future seems problematic since it is considered just preparation for practising heads. This leaves Mexico in a weak position compared to what is done by the countries that are at the forefront of school heads' development.

Keywords: School heads, preparation and development, Mexico

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Introduction

In the search for continuous improvement in education, the role school heads play have become relevant since it has been demonstrated with empirical evidence that school heads' leadership is a key factor in the implementation of actions geared toward change and improvement. Despite this, in Mexico there are not enough professional preparation processes for heads. This paper presents a general perspective of the limited opportunities for preparation and development of school heads in Mexico.

First of all, it is presented a historical panorama of this topic from an international perspective in which leadership strengthening has been a fundamental aspect for improvement. Then, it is described the conditions that have prevailed in Mexico and have enabled little attention to leadership preparation. In the second part of this paper it is

reviewed research that has been conducted with school heads in Mexico. These studies are classified in two groups: research that addresses headship practice, and research that focus on professional preparation and development. A third section concentrates on the aspects that still need more research. And finally, it is presented conclusions pertinent to headship development and preparation in Mexico.

Antecedents

In the year 1990 was recognised at international level a common problem, the educational systems around the world were experiencing serious challenges. With the agreements and resolutions of the World Conference on Education for All was recognised that a key element to ensure social progress was an education that could respond and meet the basic learning needs of pupils (Organisation of the American States, 1990). At that time, emerged the concept that up to that moment had just belonged to the private sector, the concept of quality.

Quality in education was conceived as a process of continuous improvement sustained by a series of actions either at classroom or school levels to ensure progress in the obtained results. Under this approach the concept of quality in education embrace five facets: relevance, efficiency, equity, efficacy, and impact. In order to achieve educational quality that meet all the aspects considered it is needed a big effort from the educational systems to give the same opportunities for accessing to education, optimise the use of teaching resources, ensure the development of skills that make possible learn to learn, learn to live in harmony with others, and acquire useful knowledge.

To ensure this responsibility at the end of the 20th century was needed the implementation of policy that could have an impact on social development particularly in education. One of the main recognitions in education was the acknowledgment that for change towards quality was needed to go beyond the curricular reforms and the improvement of teaching conditions. It was needed a deeper understanding of all factors, direct and indirect, that support high quality teaching and learning which have an effect on student outcomes.

The approach adopted by the UNESCO to enhance educational quality in the educational systems was through effectiveness. This approach focuses on the results that schools obtain compared to the aims either set by the government or the same schools. This approach was originated in England with the movement of school effectiveness which aimed at looking for the characteristics of schools that reach the standards set for the government enabling the academic progress of their students. Usually these schools obtained higher results than the expected. There have been defined eleven components of effective schools. These eleven aspects were not circumscribed to classroom practices this enable the analysis of schools comprehensively as an organisation and were identified all the aspects that have an influence in obtaining exemplary results (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995). Findings from this research enabled to conduct more in each of the eleven identified aspects, and how they influence continuous improvement of schools. This opened the view to recognise that not only teaching affects the quality of learning, but also another fundamental element has to be present in schools to reach high results, an excellent school head.

From 1990 onwards several studies have been carried out analysing the role of heads. The movement of school effectiveness identified effective leadership as the first characteristic present in effective school (Sammons et al., 1995; Loera, 2006). Other

research has demonstrated with empirical evidence that pedagogical leadership of school heads is the second factor in importance after classroom teaching in students outcomes (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Brown, Ahtaridau, and Kington, 2009; Bush, 2010) representing a 25% of students achievement.

As consequence heads leadership is a subject that has received a lot of attention from the last decades. As result of research conducted, some countries have implemented strong preparation programmes for heads. Countries as Finland, England, North Ireland, Slovenia, an Israel have established preparation programmes before accession to the post, induction for newly appointed heads, and continuous professional development for incumbent heads (Pont, Nushe, and Moorman, 2008). In countries such as England and South Africa have put in action plans for succession to ensure that schools are led by the best candidates (Bush, 2011). Other countries such as Austria, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, and Sudan have implemented induction programmes for newly appointed heads and professional development for practising heads.

In the case of Latin America Chile and Mexico have established preparation but only for incumbent heads (Pont et al., 2008). Being in this region the development and preparation of school heads unattended and neglected. Additionally there is strong criticism in the procedures implemented to accessing headship posts. Molina and Contreras (2007) point out that in countries in which there is not preparation for heads usually is direct without a committee responsible for assessment of candidates. This increases the possibility to appoint persons that probably are not prepared to enact the position adequately. Consequently in these countries when addressing the role assigned to school heads it is usually described as managerial and administrative leaving aside leadership and change for improvement.

In the case of Mexico the pursue for quality and transformation of the model to lead and manage schools initiated with the amendment to article 3 of the constitution jointly with the signature of the National Agreement for the Modernisation of Basic Education (ANMEB) in 1992. Those changes favoured new educational policy and actions to transform the way schools are led. However, still with the ANMEB reform the role of school heads did not change and appointment procedures were not improved. The appointment of heads take place "without preparation for the post following a vertical career ladder that favours seniority, and sometimes appointed due to the teachers' union influence" (Alvarez, Ugalde, and Casas, 2006, p. 2).

Regarding preparation for heads, it was until the year 2000 that the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) implemented two courses for incumbent heads. However, the courses were voluntary and designed under the approach of autonomous learning so that participants did not interact with other heads. At the same time the SEP implemented a national proposal to improve academic achievement of some underperforming primary and secondary schools, the Quality School Programme (PEC). Heads of these schools received training for the implementation of the programme they led. The programme adopted a democratic and shared style to manage and lead schools in order to find solutions as collective for the main problems through an improvement plan generated for all the members of the school. The PEC programme has enabled headship preparation and development for incumbent heads even though this was not the main aim.

Likewise in 2009 was launched a curricular reform adopting the teaching for competencies model in which it was also considered to articulate, preschool, primary and secondary education. School heads were the responsible to train their staff in relation to

the proposed curricular changes. These changes presented two challenges for school heads: get more deeply involved in pedagogical aspects to support teachers in the design of classes and teaching processes according to the new model and the pedagogical supervision required to ensure that the curricular reform was implemented adequately. This did not mean that school heads demonstrated pedagogical leadership, on the contrary, it showed their deficiency in preparation as pedagogical leaders since their new roles demanded to go beyond the managerial aspects to lead a school.

Recently in the year 2012 was implemented another reform that intends to improve the limited educational results obtained by schools. The main aspects in this reform were the process of accession to the teaching profession and the processes in which appointed teachers could keep their job. In this reform it was also proposed a new mechanism for accession to headship in which is also considered that underperforming practising heads could be removed from their post. According to the new legal framework, the new procedures to appoint heads will be through a public competition in which the winner supposedly would be the most adequate person for the post. Besides, new appointed heads will have a period of two years for induction in which they will receive training in leadership and will be assessed and removed from the post those who do not pass the evaluations (Gazette Official of the Federation, 2013). Another aspect of this 2012 reform is the autonomy that will be given to schools representing an additional challenge for school heads.

For Mexico the new process to appoint school heads and their tenure in the post represents an important progress to strengthen the appointment of better prepared school heads. However still heads would access to the post without previous preparation and seemingly time will be wasted in their development. Furthermore, it is needed to point out that it was not reformed the legal framework that regulates the functions of school heads which focuses mainly on managerial and administrative aspects leaving aside the meaningful participation of school heads in pedagogical aspects. The null existence of initial preparation programmes for aspiring school heads, the ambiguity of the term 'qualified' defined as "the capacity to perform the assigned role...[in this case headship] equipped with the knowledge and skills needed" (Martinez, 2013), and also the possibility to be assigned to leadership post without certification show the little attention to leadership preparation and development. Therefore, despite the recent changes and reforms in the past decades educational leadership has not received the required attention and still is taken for granted that a good classroom teacher will be a good head once is promoted to headship.

The perspective of research

In Mexico, research in school leadership is relatively recent. Research in this field started in last two decades of XX Century, perhaps this is why there is not much research carried out in this area. Garcia, Slater and Lopez-Gorosave (2011) presented a summary of the research development conducted in Mexico in leadership classifying it in four stages. The first phase takes into consideration the work of Ramirez a pioneer doing research in school organisation and the role of supervision in the 1930's to 1940's. The second phase emerged in the 1990's due to the importance given to the School Technical Council for improvement of schools in which some of the research conducted in this area explored the role of heads in the council's performing. A third stage arose with the implementation of strategic planning to education and the implementation of school

improvement plans in which heads played a key role in the design and implementation. Finally a four stage presents research conducted in relation to heads practice, functions and roles.

This classification makes a temporal analysis of the development of research conducted with school heads in Mexico. At first as school heads were considered just a piece and element of management of the educational system that is the reason research conducted focused on managerial aspects. Then research addressed specific aspects of school heads job. In this analysis it is reviewed research conducted in the last ten years with school heads. Studies are classified by object of study in two areas. On one hand those related to head's practice, and on the other studies relevant to the preparation of school heads.

Concerning school heads' practice, Vallejo (2007) made an analysis between what ought to be the function of heads taking into consideration the legal framework of the ministry of education and in reality what happens. The study shows that there is a tension between the model of school heads described by the legal framework and what in reality happens with practising heads. The study also found that have been changes over time in the professional practice of school heads, curricular reforms, and research with school heads mainly at international level; however, the legal framework dictating the functions of school heads and their promotion to headship have not change in decades. This shows contradictions between what ought to be done and what it is in their professional practice.

On the other hand, the hierarchical relationships in the educational system have also an influence in the professional practice of school heads since traditionally heads have a higher rank than classroom teachers. This has enabled that personal goals have an indirect influence in the professional practice of heads. Ayala (2009) found that personal decisions to seek headship sometimes are made for personal interests to position themselves politically in the educational hierarchy now as school head and possibly later as educational officials. This type of school head needs particular competences mainly political due to the personal motivations that drive pursuing making decision positions such as headships to advance in the ladder of the educational system.

The importance given to quality in education has positioned school heads as key agents that enact the fundamental role of promoting change and transformation to improvement as it is assumed by recently educational reforms. However, from the perspective of school heads, reforms are not implemented properly because it is not modified the culture prevailing in schools. Furthermore, it constantly emerges the "lack of training for school heads" (Torres, 2009, p.9) to completely understanding and implementation of these reforms.

The lack of preparation is one of the main problems expressed by school heads besides the excess of managerial load and the disposition of teaching staff to truly collaborate with the improvement of schools. Heads frequently acknowledge that responsibilities of their post are difficult and stressing. The main problems are seemingly with teachers since one of heads duties is to take the place of absent teachers, and also support ineffective teachers to improve their teaching practices. Heads problems are bigger in their first years in the post, whereas for heads with more years of experience the stress level is seemingly less and the duties are carried out more effectively. This is why it is recommended that "educational policy creates programmes of training and preparation for new heads" (Garcia, Slater and Lopez-Gorosave, 2010, p. 1070).

In studies reviewed pertaining to heads practice could be inferred that their practice is influenced by their inadequate training and preparation. In this regard, empirical evidence shows that even though initial training and preparation is not needed to access to headship there is preparation courses for practising heads in which some of them have participated. However, although satisfaction of participants seemingly is good still the courses do not equip heads with the needed competencies to lead and manage a school (Alvarez et al., 2006).

There was also found an important difference in the concepts of training and preparation the former refers to acquiring technical elements of management and the latter implies the expansion of critical thinking and the development of a professional identity with a broad pedagogical and leadership knowledge and skills. Analysis carried out to the courses offered for practising heads have shown that these courses cover only aspects of training and not preparation and development. This has contributed that incumbent heads develop only operational and managerial skills leaving aside the possibility to deepen in their professional development as school leaders (Vargas, 2013).

Another problem found from empirical evidence is that practising heads have a discourse and rhetoric about their performance and how ideally should be the performance of practising heads; however, this contrasts with their practice since many times do not match what is said with what is done (Escamilla, 2006). In other words, school heads that have had the opportunity to receive in-service training know theoretically from a learned discourse what good practice should be, but seemingly they do not know how implement it in their daily practice.

The story that has not yet been told

Literature review shows that school heads in Mexico are promoted to headship in three specific circumstances. Firstly they are appointed to headship by a vertical promotion process or by direct appointment by local educational or union authorities. Secondly, school heads take up their post ill-prepared specifically in school leadership. Thirdly, once in the post the legal framework and the system demand that they mainly focus on managerial duties leaving aside or giving little time to the aspects of leadership that could enhance positive change and improvement. This seems to be contradictory since new reforms have been introduced with the aim to improve educational quality being heads highly regarded in the implementation of these reforms, and on the other hand, it is kept the old legal framework of responsibilities of heads in which their main duties are managerial.

These circumstances reveal that still there are things and aspects to know and explore in the processes of training, preparation, and formation of school heads in Mexico. First, it is needed systematic characterisation of the training, preparation, and formation processes that has enabled school heads develop as heads. Second, it is needed to identify the relationship that exists between problems and challenges heads face in their first years of service and their ability to respond to these challenges and the complexity of the role based on the processes of formation experienced.

In this sense, one of the main topics to explore is to describe and characterise the aspects, actors and institutions that contribute to school heads training, preparation, and formation, and in doing so, analyse these processes to find recurrences and divergences that point the strengths and weaknesses of the formal preparation of heads in Mexico. It is

still needed to explore the ways in which heads acquire resources to solve their problems, the information sources to which they turn for support, the way they deal with making decision on a daily basis to lead the school, in what they base and ground their practice, and also to explore the informal preparation processes experienced by practising heads. It is also important to know, understand, and explore the institutional preparation programs for heads to know their appropriateness, utility, and efficacy.

School heads in a big way are responsible for innovation, transformation, and improvement of school; therefore, their performance as good or bad will affect the processes of change and improvement (Molina and Contreras, 2007; Alvarez, 2006). In this sense specific preparation that they receive to assume their role is as important as their professional performance. The process of preparation experienced by Mexican school heads are characterised by important contrasts. It is needed scientific research to find the causes for which some heads look for professional preparation for the post while others do not. These factors seemly contribute to an existing heterogeneous reality in the profiles of school heads in which it is difficult to identify a standard or typical professional identity. This justifies the need to understand and characterise the professional identity of Mexican school heads.

It is needed a set of indicators and competence standards that could define a professional profile and characteristics that guide the performance of school heads. Professional performance of heads requires certain knowledge, competences and skills different from those required from a classroom teacher. In this sense, it is needed research regarding the shaping of identity in school heads, and to explore how school heads develop their identity. It is also important study the self-conceptualisation and self-perceptions of school heads, how take place the identity transition from classroom teacher responsible for the learning of a group of children to that of school head responsible for leading and managing a group of adults. It is needed to know if this process of identity change takes place independently of the already developed teacher's identity or if the identity as a classroom teacher is a point of departure to develop their school head identity.

Since there is no formal professional preparation process for aspiring heads, it is also interesting to research if the identity of school heads develops as a process of routinely using accepted practices, customs, and traditions. If in this process of identity development has an effect the specific context in which newly appointed head start their leadership practice, or if heads as collective and in non intentional way in their process of professional socialising and interacting set the expected level of performance. Or otherwise, their role, responsibilities or indicators of performance are determined externally by educational officials who may have never been in the post of headship or even in a classroom. It is important also to understand the cultural aspects of the educational system that may contribute with the creation of the professional identities of heads, and/or on the other hand, how the practices of school heads contribute maintaining these cultural aspects in the educational system. Another pending aspect for research in school heads is the need to be investigated is the relationship between preparation and effective practise.

In Mexico the professional preparation of school heads is experienced by informal processes still are not understood with clarity the mechanisms and processes that enable that school heads develop their professional identity. It has been acknowledged the importance of school heads in student outcomes. In this sense, the implications that the process of preparation have in the professional performance of school heads have still not

been sufficient explored. It is needed to know if the time spent in formal professional preparation (before, at the beginning, or during heads' practice) has a positive effect in their leadership performance and if the implemented actions to prepare school heads are positive in supporting their professional practice.

In this respect, it is needed to conduct more research of the consequences for a school which is led by a head without previous preparation for the post, and the effect it has for the school the time it takes for its head to learn in the post and enact headship effectively. Appointing a new head certainly have impacts in the organisation and functioning of the school. This is why it is needed to deepen in the understanding of what happens with the established processes in the school when a new head is assigned to the school, and what kind of changes take place in a school when a new head without preparation for the post is assigned to the school. And also what happens when this phenomenon of assigning heads without preparation and learning to lead in the post is repeated over and over in a school.

It is also needed to compare and contrast the type of changes that take place between a school in which is assigned an experimented head and those taking place in a school with a newly appointee without preparation. It is needed to know the effects for the educational system especially in students' outcomes the present way to appoint school heads and the consequences for school heads professional performance the current preparation processes of heads in Mexico.

Conclusion

During the last thirty years and as a consequence and influenced by international school reform movements Mexico has implemented changes in the educational system mainly in compulsory education. In the implementation of changes and reforms for improvement and quality heads play a fundamental role. However, the increase in the responsibility and the recognition of the importance of the role of school heads has not been accompanied with proper preparation and development. This means to leave in inexperienced hands a big part of school transformation for quality and improvement.

It is risky and "contradictory that new educational policy hold high expectations and responsibilities for school heads without offering them proper professional preparation for the post" (Garcia et al., 2010, p. 1070). Continuing appointing ill-prepared heads is to hold back the improvement educational processes proposed by the current educational reform. Research conducted in Mexico in school leadership is little and limited. This has contributed as well with insufficient changes in the policies of professional preparation and also evaluation of school heads. These conditions point to the urgent need to carry out research in school leadership, professional preparation and the practice of school heads in Mexico for the betterment of educational results. Research in these areas would support the implementation of education policy that strengths the appointment of better school heads.

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