

Looking for Competent School Leaders for Indigenous Schools: The New System to Appoint School Leaders in Mexico

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Abstract

The understanding that leadership matters is well regarded in many types of organizations not only in education. In 2015 Mexico implemented a new system to appoint school leaders updating the previous, which was applied for more than four decades. This system aims to appoint the most competent candidate as school principal based on the scores they get on two tests. This study explored how the new system enhances or hinders preparation and readiness for leadership positions, and the effectiveness of tutoring and in-service professional development. Five newly appointed school leaders to Indigenous schools were followed throughout their first year of service. They were interviewed at the beginning, after six months, and at the end of their first year. Thematic analysis was used to process the data gathered from semi-structured interviews using a selective coding approach. Two main predefined themes were explored in this study: Leadership Preparation and Tutoring and Professional Development. Findings indicate that for schools located in remote Indigenous communities, isolation and the lack of communication infrastructure, such as internet and phone signal, hinder the possibility of effective training and tutoring. This study concludes that even though the new system seems to have made progress in appointing better school leaders, it is only partial since aspiring leaders are neither required to make specific preparation for their new post nor offered these opportunities, hindering their readiness to enact headship effectively.

Keywords: Leadership; Leadership preparation and development; Leadership learning; Mexico

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Introduction

Effective school leadership is a key aspect in educational improvement because school leaders are in a position to influence teaching and learning. The idea that leadership is a determinant factor of a school's success is well accepted not only in education, but in many other types of organizations (Watson, 2005). Research on school effectiveness shows that exemplary leadership one of the main factors in extraordinary schools (Reynolds, 1991). There are reviews of empirical research that address the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes (e.g., Bell et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Leithwood et al., 2006). These include the ways in which leaders directly participate in curriculum design and implementation; support and promote effective teaching and assessment practices; and adapt their leadership to address the needs of teachers, students, and other stakeholders (Waters et al., 2003). Due to the importance of their role, leadership preparation before appointment to leadership posts and during their time in these roles has been strengthened in many countries as key strategies to improve the quality of education offered to children and young people. In Mexico, on the other hand, the areas of leadership preparation and development have not yet received the attention given at the international level since the appointment to leadership posts does not require prior specific preparation or certification for these roles, and during their time as school leaders the developmental opportunities are limited. The purpose of this research was to analyze the relevance of the new system to appoint school leaders and to explore if it enables preparedness and readiness for the post to lead Indigenous schools located in rural and remote communities.

Related literature

Preparation and development of competent school leaders

There is general consensus among practitioners, researchers and policy makers that professional training and development of aspiring and in-service school leaders is positive because participants improve their knowledge, skills and dispositions (Pont et al., 2008). This contributes to more competent and effective leadership and eventually leads to improvements in teaching and learning (Davis et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007) given that the relationship between high quality leadership and students' outcomes is well documented. Since the mid-1990s training and development for school leaders have been introduced or strengthened in many countries either as preparation for entry to a post or to further develop the skills of in-service heads (Huber, 2008). Researchers point to the need for training school leaders to provide leadership and management skills not included in their teacher training (Devos & Tuytens, 2006). Bush (2010) points out "that headship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation" (p. 113). Thomas and Bainbridge (2002) acknowledge that effective educational leadership emanates from school leaders demonstration of knowledge. Moorosi & Bush (2011) found that not focusing on leadership preparation means that there is a chance schools are placed in the hands of unqualified personnel. Regarding effective preparation Davis, Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe (2005) identified seven key features of effective leadership preparation programs:

a) clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized, b) standards based curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management, c) field based internships with skilled supervision, d) cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and team-work in practice-oriented situations, e) active instructional strategies that link theory and practice, such as problem based learning, f) rigorous recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty, and g) strong partnerships with schools and districts to support quality field-based learning. (p. 25)

For leadership preparation based on competencies models, Gigliotti & Ruben (2017) identify vertical and horizontal approaches to leadership development. Vertical competencies refer to specific positional proficiencies such as the technical and disciplinary knowledge and skills that are unique to a particular field, role, or position. In this case, vertical competencies reflect the knowledge and skills required to perform the position of school leader, a privileged approach of leadership for learning. The horizontal approach points out cross-cutting leadership competencies that transcend specific settings—the personal, organizational, communication, and analytic competencies that have increasingly been recognized as essential for outstanding leadership across multiple contexts. They include those skills necessary for communicating and collaborating effectively with a broad array of internal and external constituencies, dealing effectively with colleagues representing an array of interpersonal and multicultural styles, leading change, building effective teams and fostering successful teamwork, promoting innovation and translational applications from other sectors, and anticipating and dealing effectively with crisis and conflict (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). McCauley (2006) identified three essential leadership competencies that effective leaders of any type of organization must have: the ability to lead the organization, to lead the self, and to lead others in the organization. He suggests that this model should be used when selecting, developing, and promoting leaders. The following are the aspects that each competency should include

1. Leading the organization: managing change, solving problems and making decisions, managing politics and influencing others, taking risks and innovating, setting vision and strategy, managing the work, enhancing business skills and knowledge, understanding and navigating the organization.
2. Leading the self: demonstrating ethics and integrity, displaying drive and purpose, exhibiting leadership stature, increasing your capacity to learn, managing yourself, increasing self-awareness and developing adaptability.
3. Leading others: communicating effectively, developing others, valuing diversity and difference, building and maintaining relationships and managing effective teams and work groups. (n.p.)

The new system to appoint school leaders in Mexico

Recent educational reform in Mexico has brought changes to different aspects of education, and one of them is the way in which school leaders are appointed to their posts. Prior to this reform, there were two processes for the appointment of school leaders. The official system, known as the *Escalafon*, was a point-based system in which positions were assigned in a public competition to teachers who accumulated higher points in four assessed factors: knowledge, aptitude, years of service, discipline and punctuality. This system ruled the appointment of school leaders for forty-three years. There was also an unofficial procedure, in which leadership positions within schools and within the educational system were given as prizes and incentives for those teachers who were loyal and highly involved in the political activities of the teachers' union.

Leadership appointments under the new system are assigned based on the results of two tests. This system aims to guarantee competency in the knowledge and skills of newly assigned school leaders, and to have a more transparent selection and recruitment process. It is mandatory for participants to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience. This new process has three phases. The first phase includes the following sub-phases: a public announcement and notification for application; pre-enrollment, enrollment, and reception and checking of documents. The second phase, which represents the most relevant change, requires the application of two assessment instruments, the *Test of Knowledge and Skills for Professional Practice*, and the *Test of Intellectual Aptitudes, Ethical and Professional Responsibilities*. The third phase consists of several sub-phases, namely: grading, creation of priority lists, and appointment to principalship. During their first two years of incumbency as school leaders, candidates go through an induction process, which includes being assigned to a tutor who will assist them with mentoring activities, and taking online courses focused on educational leadership. Confirmation and permanent status in their post are obtained at the end of the two-year period if candidates earn a positive evaluation; otherwise, they return to their previous teaching posts.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore leadership preparedness and mentoring of school leaders appointed through a new system of promotion. Educational policy in Mexico is centralized, and it applies the same criteria and procedures to urban, rural, and indigenous schools. This study was conducted to explore these aspects with new appointees to lead indigenous schools that present different cultural and socio economic realities when compared to urban schools, which usually are the base for new educational policy.

This research followed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews as the main method for data collection. Five newly appointed principals were followed throughout their first year to explore and analyze their preparedness for the post, and the effectiveness of tutoring and in-service training. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant: at their beginning as incumbent principal, after six months and at the end of their first year. The first cohort of school leaders appointed through this new system was in August 2015. Data collection was scheduled to be conducted in the school year 2015–2016. However, for this first co-

hort, tutoring and professional development were only offered in the last five months of their first two years, even though they were supposed to receive professional development for two years. For this reason, an extra interview was conducted with study participants at the end of their second year to explore the impact of tutoring and professional development. Interviews were conducted in September 2015, March 2016, July 2016, with an additional interview in July 2017. Interviews took place in the capital of the municipality of Guadalupe y Calvo in the south of Chihuahua State, where school leaders gather on a monthly basis with their supervisor.

Thematic analysis was used to process the data originated from semi-structured interviews using selective coding. Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that the term selective coding refers to the process of choosing specific categories or themes to be the core categories of the research. Central themes represent the main aspects studied, and they are closely related to the research questions and aims of the study. In this study, two main predefined themes were examined: *Leadership Preparation* and *Tutoring and Professional Development*. Exploring these themes was central to the study, as they are pivotal for effective leadership. Furthermore, tutoring and professional development were basic changes to this new system of appointment. To conduct the process, interview transcripts were selectively coded to identify any data, ideas, pieces of text, passages or chunk of texts related to *Leadership Preparation and Tutoring and Professional Development*.

Findings

Preparedness for the post

The new system appoints school leaders based on the results that participants obtain on two exams. Those with the highest scores are considered to be the most competent to lead the schools for which they are competing. Participants are only required to have two years' employment as classroom teachers. The system does not require any type of preparation in school leadership, either as a course or as a graduate program, as prerequisite to participating in a competition for a headship. In contrast, countries with advanced education systems require school leaders to be prepared with a combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences. In this new system in Mexico, preparation for a leadership position could be regarded as limited, given that participants are required only complete a self-study process while actually in the leadership position. After studying and successfully completing examinations, candidates obtain certification as competent school leaders. In this regard, participants one and three mentioned:

I do not think I should call it training or preparation but the information I read while preparing for the test was at least a glimpse of the principal function.

You study the suggested material by yourself just to pass the exam. Once you are in the job you know your lack of preparation for this role.

Participants received a study guide two months before taking their qualifying exam. They mentioned that in the case of the practical aspects of leadership education, the indirect experiences they had acquired by observing school principals dur-

ing their time as classroom teachers were their main source of learning. Participants two and four said:

Sometimes I solve problems and manage the school, using as role model a principal I had when I was a teacher.

I imitate the leadership style of a principal I had previously worked with.

The participants in this study had all been teaching in urban schools and once they were selected as competent to lead a school, they were appointed as principals to remote, rural indigenous schools. The geographical isolation of these schools and lack of communication infrastructure such as internet or mobile phone connection did not enable the online preparation and tutoring offered by this new system, and there were very few opportunities to share with other school principals. Participants three and five emphasized:

An obstacle, I would say for almost everything, is the location of the school. The closest semi urban community is around 4 hours away. Besides we do not have Internet; that is a limitation in many aspects. For instance, it was difficult to fully participate in the course offered online.

It is a beautiful community specially the natural scenery. It is good not to be worried about traffic and stress of the cities. However, we cannot deny we need the basic things of modern life such as the internet or mobile phone signal. Due to the lack of connectivity my supervisor suggested I print out the material of our course. However it is not the same; you do not have the opportunity to share with other participants.

Another situation participants commented on is that their first language is Spanish, while in the communities they were assigned people speak an Indigenous language. This situation hinders the effectiveness of communication with students, parents, and members of the community. Participants mentioned that they had not been trained in multiculturalism, which is necessary to better understand and work with different cultures, as pointed out by participants one and two:

If you are going to be appointed to an Indigenous school either as teacher or as principal, a logical thing to do is to offer training in interculturalism to better understand the communities and your students.

You were born and raised in an urban area with a different perspective and set of values. You will teach based on Western values and in [the] Spanish language. In the long run, education offered to these communities is detrimental to their cultural survival.

This new system seemingly hinders meaningful leadership learning when it is compared to the previous system. Considering the previous systems shortcomings, it did promote more preparation although it was not specifically focused on school leadership. Participants for leadership posts used to compete on a point-based system in which graduate programs and courses for professional development were highly

recognized. An administrator of the system mentioned that “[t]he previous system promoted more preparation and training. Every academic degree or course taken gave them points for promotion so that teachers in the leadership path used to have more preparation.”

Participants in the current study pointed out the lack of preparation for the post and also acknowledged that one of their main sources of leadership learning was their daily experiences in the post. In comparison to the previous system, this new system favors the appointment of younger school leaders. Previously, seniority was highly valued and many classroom teachers looked for promotion towards the end of their careers, to retire with a higher salary. In this regard, the participants of this study acknowledged their limitations as new principals, but professed a willingness to learn and improve their leadership practices. According to participants four and five:

A positive aspect I see with this system is the possibility to appoint younger principals. They bring new ideas, perspectives, attitudes, and dispositions.

With two years of teaching service I won a headship. If this system had not been implemented, it would have been impossible to become a headteacher with the number of years I have in the teaching service. I know there are a lot of things to learn, but I want to do the job the best I can. For instance, I am already learning the local language spoken by the community. This is not a requirement, but I feel it as a moral obligation.

The following table presents examples of participants’ views regarding the need for preparation before appointment.

Predefined theme	Interview	Participants’ comments
Leadership preparation	First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a challenging job • I did not expect I had to deal with too much bureaucracy • Sometimes you do not know how to prioritize your job. It would have been positive to receive training to manage our workload and task management. • This job is full of administrative work that you are not trained for. • I am struggling with budget and resource management • I am learning the roles and responsibilities of each member of the Governing Board. • An aspect that is totally new for me is the lack of knowledge and training in issues of ethnicity, culture, language, and race.
	Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I review and give feedback to teaching plans the way my principal used to review mine. However, sharing with other principals I am learning other approaches. • Something that never is addressed is learning to cope with difficulties. We should be trained in the emotional part that this task involves. • I never expected to have such a hard time meeting external standards and requirements.

Predefined theme	Interview	Participants' comments
Leadership preparation	Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with misbehaving and low performing students is something that I would like to have preparation for. I believe I need preparation in cultural responsive leadership because I work with parents, community members, teachers, and students from a different culture.
	Third	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An aspect I need to strengthen is the establishment of collaborative work cultures. My priority as school leader is to raise the level of student achievement, something that I am in the process of learning. As a classroom teacher it is easier. Now you are in charge of all students. Learning how to monitor and evaluate teaching practices effectively has been a challenge, and something I did not have preparation. Once on the job, you start learning.

Tutoring and mentoring and professional development

Tutoring and mentoring was one of the key aspects considered in this new appointment process. Under this system newly appointed heads are supposed to go through a two-year induction period, which includes taking specific courses on school leadership in order to strengthen their knowledge and perform their new role more effectively. In addition, all candidates are assigned a tutor for two years, who assists them in honing their leadership skills. The participants in this study were offered tutoring and online professional development just five months before the end of their two-year probationary period. Participants 1 and 4 commented:

After a year of my appointment I have not been assigned a tutor. I am really looking forward to this process with the hope to learn a lot from him or her.

We do not know much about the training we are going to receive yet. It has been already a year, and we do not know anything yet. The problem is that soon we will be evaluated, and this presumed preparation is key for keeping our position permanently.

Officials of the Ministry of Education justified this delay saying that it is the first cohort of school heads assigned by this system, and that it had been officially implemented before the training courses and the mechanisms of tutoring were designed. Interviewees commented that the Ministry of Education offered them three online courses a year and a half after they took up their positions. New principals were required to choose one of the three offered courses and complete it as a self-study course. This hindered the possibility of interacting with other heads to share their experiences and learn from one another, which is one of the foundations of meaningful adult learning. Participants three and four stated:

I expected more regarding training. The ministry of education officials often said this training was going to be a fundamental tool to

perform our function effectively. Honestly, the course and the way it was delivered did not meet my expectations.

I anticipated other types of preparation with more relevance, application, and collaborative learning.

Participants commented that in the end, their supervisors acted as mentors and tutors. Tutoring, mentoring, and professional development have not been properly offered even in urban areas where the human and material resources needed to effectively carry out these processes can be found readily. In the case of rural schools, most supervisors live in the closest cities and visit the schools they are in charge of occasionally. Participants two and five said:

My supervisor and the other pedagogical advisor we have as support do not live in the community or in another nearby community of the municipality. They live in Parral City, a city located four and a half hours away.

My supervisor hardly ever comes to the school. Our meetings are usually held in the biggest community of the municipality. We have to travel two or three hours to get there because it is easier for him to meet seven principals in one day. I believe sometimes this is fine, but the supervisor should visit the schools more often.

In terms of tutoring and mentoring in the most remote villages, usually Indigenous communities, this seems to be worse because there is neither an internet connection nor mobile phone signal. The lack of proper infrastructure makes it difficult to complete online courses and benefit from distance tutoring, which would seem to be the best way to implement the professional development process for school principals working and living in small and remote villages. For this first cohort of principals, whether working in urban or rural schools, tutoring, mentoring, and development courses were only offered for five months. They were supposed to benefit from these processes for two years. At the end of their first two years, new principals will be evaluated to determine whether they obtain tenure or go back to teaching. However, they lost a year and a half of support. Participants one and two mentioned:

When I was first appointed as principal, I had many expectations due to the promised professional training and tutoring. However, the way these aspects were carried out, I do not feel they really added to my level of competency as principal.

It is a pity that training and mentoring were not properly offered. I think we could have benefited professionally and also would have learned with and from other principals, strengthening our professional practice.

The following table provides examples of interviewees comments regarding tutoring and professional development:

Predefined themes	Participants' comments
Tutoring and mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am disappointed with the tutoring process because I had only five months when I was supposed to have two years. I had only two meetings with my tutor, and I think with such little time it is difficult for your tutor to know you professionally and to build trust. • Tutoring was ridiculous! The ministry of education officials did not know how this was going to be carried out when they launched this program. In my case, my tutor was my supervisor. When I was assigned to this school, neither of us knew that besides my supervisor he would also be my mentor. So for almost two years he acted as my boss with a professional distance, and I am not afraid to say this, sometimes with arrogance, and suddenly he notifies me that he is my tutor. I said to myself: "No way! Our personalities are not compatible! I do not see him as a role model!" • My tutor is my supervisor who lives in Parral City. He comes to the community once every two months. The ministry of education told me officially who my tutor was almost at the end of my first two years. I just saw him once and we talked about it. Honestly we did not created any agenda or plan. • Simply matching a pair together is not tutoring. • I do not believe they received training to be tutors.
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this community we do not have internet connection. I was supposed to take an online course to prepare for my evaluation, but how? • The training that this program promotes is disappointing as well. I was not expecting online training for schools that do not have internet, nor even a phone signal. • I do not see much benefit with the course I took. I printed out the materials to prepare for the exam when I went to Parral, but it would have been much more useful to share the content with other principals. Everyone has a perspective. In my case I learn more by interacting with others. • I think we deserve better training than we received. The course was very generic. I have a colleague in Chihuahua City who took exactly the same course. We are leading an Indigenous school, which is totally different from an urban school. • Hopefully with the new cohorts this improves because this can not be considered professional development towards leading an Indigenous school.

Discussion and conclusion

Studies on school effectiveness show that excellent leadership is invariably one of the main factors in schools that perform well. Given the importance of educational leadership, Bush (2008) argues that the preparation of aspiring school leaders should not be left to chance. For Mexican educational authorities, a good school leader is a person who just stabilizes institutions, or follows the established norms with an acceptable performance, but not someone who promotes excellence in teaching and learning. According to Barrientos & Taracena (2008) and Canales & Benziens (2009), Mexican school leaders basically have managerial roles within schools in which a central task is to control the teaching staff and ensure they follow the established norms.

This limited perception of the importance of leadership in schools seems to have had an effect on leadership preparation and development. Even though the new system of selecting school leaders seemingly appoints competent candidates, it is still missing the element of preparation for the post. The only progress in this new system is the short self-study process in which participants study a guide for two months in preparation for their exams. This self-learning approach is problematic with the principles of adult learning, because adults learn by sharing, reflecting, and doing. Countries with highly performing education systems generally require candidates to have completed this preparation before applying for a leadership position. In Mexico, however, this element of preparation is addressed in the two-year induction period of mentoring *after* taking up the position. Lopez (2015) found that newly appointed Mexican school leaders described facing many challenges and problems in their new role due to little or patchy preparation and lack of practical experiences in school leadership, and in many cases learned by trial and error. Waiting to offer preparation after candidates take up their positions seems to negatively impact their readiness to enact the position effectively. The process of mentoring is a positive aspect introduced in this new system of appointment, and it should be seen as a support in candidates' leadership learning. However, the first cohort participants in this research described many inconsistencies. Participants missed a year and a half of tutoring and did not have access to the online course they were supposed to take before being examined to obtain tenure in their post.

The contribution of this study relates to areas pertinent to professional management. The assumption behind professional management is to have the right person in the right job with the right skills at the right time (Rhodes, 2012, n.p.). This implies identification, recruitment, development, and retention of high performing individuals. And, once candidates are in their posts as principals, continued leadership development remains important. Learning to enact the function of principal implies leadership learning, and as suggested by Browne-Ferrigno (2003), leadership identity transformation is required in order to make a faster progression from the professional identity of a classroom teacher to that of a school principal. In the case of leadership learning in Mexico, newly appointed principals seem to arrive at their posts with a shallow perception of what it means to be a school leader. The knowledge, conceptualizations and skills of newly appointed principals are those of a classroom teacher. There must be a progression in the understanding of the principal's role and mastery in the development of required skills to perform the job better as time passes in combination with on-the-job learning. The identity of a newly appointed principal could be regarded as that of an extended classroom teacher, for whom there is a slow transition to the identity of school manager. In Mexico, leadership learning for newly appointed principals progresses slowly to managerial and controlling functions. They learn to operate schools in a stable way on a daily basis, without promoting any meaningful change and improvement, and just doing what has been traditionally done in schools.

There was an urgent need to update the approach to appointing school leaders because the previous system was established more than 40 years ago, in 1973. Recent educational changes in Mexico have put an emphasis on improving the quality of

education offered to pupils. For instance, in 2008 a standardized exam was established to assign teaching posts for the most competent teachers in compulsory education. The reform and introduction of a new national curriculum based on a competency framework was established in 2011. And recently, in 2013–2014, the institutionalization of a collaborative culture within schools through the School Technical Councils has created a space in which teaching staff and school leaders dedicate a complete day each month to share effective practices, analyze the school's problems, and propose solutions to strengthen professional collaboration. However, despite these changes the development and preparation of schools principals seems to be neglected. In June 2015, a new process to appoint school leaders was established based on standardized exams that also evaluate participants in different dimensions, such as the role of school principals whereby vacant posts are assigned to participants with the highest scores. Even though the introduction of qualifying exams seems to be an improvement, it is only a partial success, given that aspiring heads are neither required to have specific preparation for their posts nor are they offered appropriate opportunities for their theoretical and practical preparation and development as future school principals. The current approach of appointing teachers to positions of leadership without previous preparation seems problematic, since candidates are required to learn how to lead and manage a school when they are in the post.

The approach to enhancing the appointment of school principals who are better prepared to lead Indigenous schools should go beyond simply solving the inconsistencies found in supporting their professional development. A deeper support of their transition from teacher to leader of a school in an Indigenous community is needed. We believe there should be a comprehensive and specific strategy to develop school leaders for Indigenous contexts, in which aspiring and incumbent school leaders go through a journey of leadership learning, fully assimilating the theoretical and practical aspects of leadership practice for the conditions in Indigenous communities. In the current system of promotion, *competency* is a key word mentioned in documents regulating promotion and appointments. Competency implies possession of the knowledge and skills needed to perform the job of school leader effectively. In the case of Indigenous schools, competency implies the ability to guide effective teaching and learning in unique cultural settings, and with a different language and understanding of the world. This knowledge and understanding of the Indigenous world is usually absent for new teachers and school leaders appointed to such schools. Advancing towards a comprehensive and specific strategy for development of school leaders for Indigenous schools implies the improvement of current educational policies and the addition of new elements. This includes specific preparation of aspiring school leaders, availability of culturally pertinent preparation programs focused on leading Indigenous schools, and developing strength and innovation in the mechanisms of mentoring and professional development for school leaders working in these contexts.

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