

## An Overview of Practical Experiences in The Process of Leadership Learning of Elementary Principals in Mexico

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>The educational system in Mexico has allowed teachers without preparation and training in leadership to pursue leadership positions. This paper presents the findings of a study aimed at analyzing the processes of leadership learning experienced by school principals in the course of their leadership practice. The methodology used was a qualitative multiple case study using a biographic narrative interpretative method. Findings show that principals experienced challenges throughout their practice and that these role experiences enabled leadership learning and improvement of their leadership practice. Their learning is contextualized and shaped by the practical experiences that are not only unique but they also enable on-the-job leadership learning.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <b>Received</b>                      July, 27, 2018   <b>Accepted</b>                      October, 20, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Mexican schools,                      Principals,                      Leadership,                      Situated Learning,                      Challenges</p>

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## Introduction

Leadership work by principals in schools is important because they continuously focus on educational improvement of the institutions they lead. Empirical evidence shows that leadership is a key factor in the implementation of actions geared at change and improvement that ultimately impact student achievement (Bush, 2010). Research has constantly pointed out that leadership is an influential factor in school effectiveness. The importance of the practice of leadership in principals signals that a solid process of preparation and training is required in order to learn their role effectively (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación [INEE], 2015). In Mexico, learning to lead a school effectively usually happens while principals are in their post rather than before appointment. The way school leaders are appointed has contributed to this type of leadership learning because specific preparation and training in educational leadership is not a prerequisite. The 1973 – 2012 Mexican school system was marked by two forms of job promotion for teachers' career. The first was through an examination of candidates that wanted to occupy tenured vacant posts. This type of appointment is based on seniority in the teaching service and academic qualifications, which could be related to teaching or any other area of the humanities, not necessarily leadership. The other form was direct nomination for appointments to fulfill temporary vacant positions. This other type of appointment was based on the application of political criteria. Therefore, leadership positions used to be offered to teachers who supported the teachers' union political activities (Álvarez, Ugalde y Casas, 2007). Moreover, the political activities carried out by teachers appointed through the influence of the union were seldom related to activities of leadership.

Most of the current principals in this school system were appointed through one of these two ways.

A new legal framework for appointment to administrative positions in Mexico was introduced in 2013. Now, teachers' promotion to administration is based on the results of two tests that evaluate competency (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2013). However, none of the systems (neither the one established in 1973 nor the other established in 2013) required or require, respectively, specific preparation and training in leadership. These systems have favored the appointment of principals with mainly teacher education degrees and often when teachers have taken graduate courses; their education profiles are diverse and usually unrelated to their job as school leaders.

Professional preparation is usually understood as a systematic and institutionalized process undertaken by learners who acquire the ideal practices of a field before they begin their career life in the real world (Uribe, 2010; Gysels, 2007). Following this way of thinking, common sense suggests that newly appointed principals should have received specific training and preparation for their new role. However, there are also other perspectives regarding professional development and learning. These perspectives consider that learning, and the acquisition and mastery of professional competency in a profession is a lifelong process in which people construct and reconstruct their identity in an ongoing and always unfinished process (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Ducoing & Fortuol, 2013). This last perspective seems to capture the essence of the Mexican case since principals are appointed without previous leadership education, and they have to learn how to lead a school while they are performing this role.

This study explored this last perspective of leadership learning and development on-the-job and the continuous building of a



leadership identity. We propose that such analysis reflects the process of development that some principals experienced in their leadership learning journey. The principals who participated in the study had just teaching training when promoted to a school leadership position. The main research question that guided this study was the following: How do principals in elementary schools in Mexico develop their leadership competencies?

The general objective of the study was to analyze the learning processes that occur during the practice of leadership by primary incumbent principals appointed to middleclass and to inner city schools in Chihuahua, Mexico. The following specific objectives were proposed: to analyze the leadership learning processes of participants in the study through the narration of their history of performing their role as principals and to describe the practical experience of their role as a key element in the process of leadership learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Situated learning was the theoretical framework that guided the analysis and discussion of findings in this study. This learning approach offers elements to understand the way incumbent principals have been able to learn how to perform their role. In this perspective, learning and doing are two actions mutually related. Moreover, knowledge is an element and at the same time is the result of a contextually situated activity in a specific culture (Diaz-Barriga, 2003). Situated learning needs three conditions. First, learning happens in action and in real situations. Authentic participation generates several possibilities to construct meanings and understanding. Furthermore, practical experience plays an important role because it is a point of departure for the solutions of problems present in the real world.

Second, learning occurs out of the need to perform an activity and solve a practical problem. According to Wenger (2001) situated learning is the result of an internal searching process for solutions that interacts with previous learning. Third, learning occurs through the interactions with other people. Vásquez (2011) points out that nobody can learn a new skill or practice alone. The guide of at least one more experienced person facilitates learning.

This last condition suggests the idea that learning takes place in a community where participants carry out a common activity. Wenger (2001) named this a *community of practice*, a group of people with a joint activity. Within this framework it is assumed that knowledge is distributed amongst the members of a community and constructed through practical situations they experience (Arrue & Elichiry 2014). Consequently, situated learning is the product of a practical situation that integrates several contextual elements that enable learning (Tiburcio & Jimenez, 2016). This theory offers elements to understand and interpret principals' development in the Mexican case. It has been observed that some conditions in this case are consistent with a community of practice. First, principals mainly learn some aspects of the job by facing real situations in their practice. Second, they learn this way because they need to solve problems that arise from practical experiences. And third, they learn through the formal and informal observations they conduct with other principals, the help they might ask to other colleagues, and finally the support they get from their supervisors. The supervisors were themselves principals before being appointed to a higher position in their career.

Leithwood (2009) defines leadership as the ability to influence others and to move them to actions and intentions in order to achieve some shared goals within a group. Therefore, we can infer that



leadership is a competency and as such it is not innate. It is a skill we must develop. Education for leadership presupposes the development of leadership competencies. At an international level it is recommended that programs of leadership incorporate innovative changes that have at least these seven components: recruitment and selection process, program structure, curriculum, teaching strategies, induction process and evaluation of school leadership (Gordon, Oliver & Solis, 2016).

On the other hand, recent research has shown that leadership learning is favored by actions such as the exchange of experiences among equals, dialogues about topics of interest, study cases, relationship between theory and practice, internship experiences, analysis of stories or personal cases of participants in training programs and even the relationship with other members (Gordon Oliver and Solis, 2016; Ni, Rorrer, Pounder, Young and Koarch, 2019). For this reason, it is important to research how leadership is learnt in Mexican schools. Although there's lack of leadership preparation programs and the existent ones pose serious limitations (e.g. the recruitment and selection process), nonetheless there is an empirical training process worth studying.

### **Methodology**

This study stems from the idea that each principal has built a unique and different process of professional development according to the needs, abilities, opportunities and interests present in their life histories. This vision is congruent with the existence of multiple realities supported by a qualitative paradigm. For this reason, a methodological design that enabled understanding of these realities was implemented. The method of multiple case study was chosen. This

method offers valuable means to analyze a research unit in-depth so that a problem may be thoroughly understood (Stake, 2006). In Mexico preparation for school leadership is a process influenced by the socioeconomic context in which it occurs. Therefore, two criteria were applied to choose the cases, the first criterion for selection was seniority in the appointment, and the second was the socio-economical context in which schools were located.

The participants in this research were four cases of experienced principals with more than five years in their position, and four newly appointed heads with less than a year in their position. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with each of the case study participants. Interviews were conducted in three sessions. In the first interview the narrative of their life experience and in particular their schooling process was obtained. In the second we focused on their perception regarding their professional practice as principals. The third session was used to build a biogram (Bolívar, 2012). The biogram is a graphic summary used to retrieve their life history in particular their professional development. Furthermore, the last session was used to address questions that arose while constructing the biogram with the information obtained in the first two sessions. Different preparation and professional developmental experiences in their incumbency as school leaders were identified in the biogram. Fragments of interviews addressing practical experiences that contributed to their leadership learning were analyzed through open and focus coding (Saldaña, 2009). Then, micro narratives were written following chronological and analytical approaches that described in detail their development processes.



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## Findings

This study shows that in Mexico, given the lack of training programs for school leaders, principals basically learn how to be leaders by undertaking their role and the needs demanded by their role. In this respect, learning experiences and leadership experiences generated in practice are one and the same.

Life history analysis conducted through biograms and micro narratives showed that principals lived several developmental and training experiences related to their role as school leaders. We found in the narratives that teachers' previous experiences enable them to start constructing their self-concept of leaders and the role of principals. This conceptualization not only guided to some extent their actions in their incumbency but also helped them to develop useful skills for their leadership practice.

Principals highlighted two previous experiences that favored the construction and re-construction of their concept of what a school leader is. One of them is linked to their experience as students in different schools. The construction of their concept of principals can be traced back to their whole schooling experience in which they observed and were peripheral recipients of the actions and way of being of the principals they had. This lived experience led to an acceptance of the role and its concept without questioning. They mainly saw principals as figures of authority and power and took this constructed experience as an absolute truth.

Another relevant experience is their work as school teachers. Teachers usually required from their principals to solve several problems and meet the needs they had. According to the help offered, teachers judged the performance of their principals and this helped in

their construction of the concept of leaders and their role. Participants in this research shared the following comments in this regard: “this is the way principals should be” or “this was a bad school leader”. This subjective feedback received directly and indirectly enables also a *malleable* construction of the concept of headship.

We also found two other experiences that have to do with the development of skills for their role as principals. One of these experiences was the opportunity to be in charge of a group of people before appointment as principals. It does not matter if this experience happens outside education. The relevance of this experience is that it enables to build the self-concept of authority and leader within a group.

The second experience is their direct participation in activities related to school administration. This happens when they have to temporarily ‘act’ as heads in their school with or without appointment and in which they are not totally in charge of the school. According to participants their leadership learning depended on the length of time because some of these positions lasted days, weeks or even months. These experiences offered ideas about what the role of a principal is and should be that emerged before their formal appointment.

As it was reported by participants, the most meaningful experience regarding training for school leadership is the practical experience they had as school heads because they were forced to learn their role: what school leadership is, what their functions are, what the consequences of the decisions they make as principals are, amongst others practical challenges of this administrative position. The singularity in their experiences offers a unique conceptualization of the role and identity construction as principals.

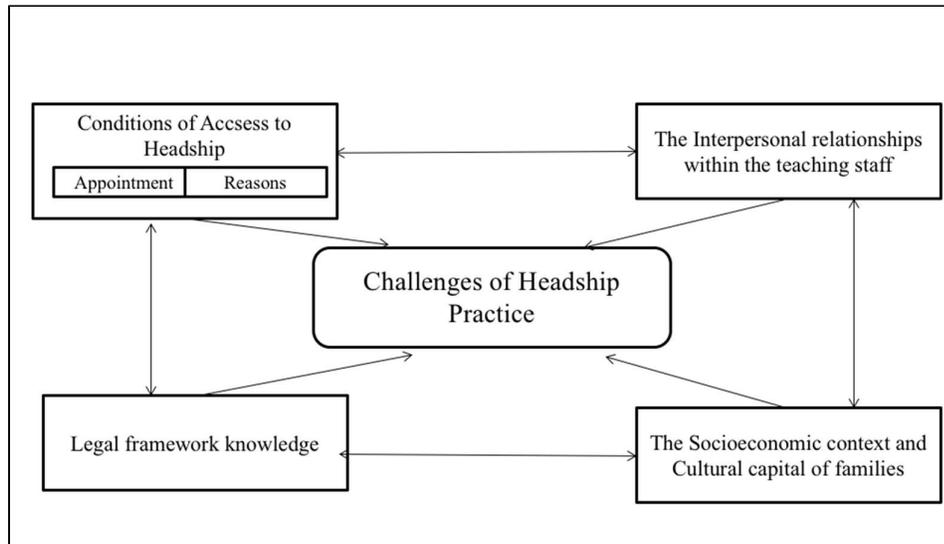


From the perspective of situated learning, practical experiences play a vital role in adult learning (Wenger, 2001; Baudouin, 2009). This research showed that role enactment was a central aspect in the process of leadership learning and professional development for incumbent heads. The need to solve problems derived from the leadership practice oriented principals to learn their role and develop needed skills. Practical experiences in the post were different for each teacher and also these experiences were different when they were appointed to lead another school. This is the reason leadership learning was a singular process in which some elements enabled learning to occur.

In this respect, this research found that practical leadership learning had five key elements: the contextual conditions in which appointment happens, the interpersonal relationship with teaching staff, the socio economical context and cultural capital of families, the legal framework knowledge that appointed principals have that regulates compulsory education and their role, and the challenges they face in their leadership practice. This last element, the challenges, originates from the interaction of the first four. This makes leadership practice unique given the high stake challenges they face. Figure 1 shows these elements and their interaction.

Figure 1.

*Elements That Comprise a Leadership Experience in Practice. Personal Elaboration*



**Challenges of Headship Practice**

The challenges principals face is one of the key elements that appears in the configuration of leadership learning. A challenge is a relevant event, difficult situation or a significant problem (Baudouin, 2009). In these situations, principals know they have to do something but the solution cannot be found in a manual. It is a highly contextualized problem that requires a specific solution. Facing challenges requires that principals use several professional resources, skills and knowledge. The search for solutions enables principals an ongoing understanding of their role. Moreover, these situations compel them to use all the resources they have to make decisions and solve these problems. These decisions try to solve the challenge, but at the same time are adopted as a way to enact leadership. This



contributes to an ongoing process of learning and of (re)construction of their professional identity as principals.

Each time a principals or former teacher are appointed to a new school they face new challenges. The contextual conditions influence the practice of their role and these conditions are different in each school. Then other elements, such as their type of appointment or the interpersonal relations with teachers and staff that influence the leadership experience become relevant. In this regard, if principals are appointed temporarily, they are not perceived the same by teaching staff as if they had a formal appointment. The temporary nature of acting as leaders does not favor total ownership of their posts because the teaching staff does not make a true effort to implement projects. School teachers know that once a permanent principal is appointed former initiatives and projects will probably change.

There are also other times when the teaching staff tries to manipulate the decisions of principals and challenge their authority. There is not a manual or legal document that tells them what to do in a situation like this. Consequently, principals need to find solutions, making sure they are perceived as leaders. A participant in the study narrated her first experience when she was appointed as a temporary acting principal due to retirement of the previous one. She described how she was elected by her peers in a democratic process summoned by the school inspector. However, when she needed to make decisions she found resistance amongst teachers who wanted to influence her decisions. She decided to assert her authority in the school through her actions and decisions:

*When I was appointed as a principal, the first thing I faced was an angry teacher "I supported you to be elected and that is the way you pay me back." I called a meeting immediately and told them: "hey colleagues yes, you voted for me, but*

*so sorry. I am the principal now". It was difficult at the beginning because some of them kept telling me: "you think you are better than us, but officially you are still a teacher." I let them know that I cannot be conditioned to make decisions based on what the people who supported me could think. I needed to base my decisions in what was best for our children and school. (2NUCM-1)*

According with her narrative, this principal built her attitudinal knowledge and learned to be assertive and to perform her role out of these experiences. She understood at the beginning that not all actions could be made democratically or through a consensus since this could risk her authority.

This participant did not face the leadership challenge the same way when she was later moved to a different school with a tenured track position. This shows that each time principals lead a different school they face different contextual challenges. In our research we found that these challenges are related to the four contextual conditions above mentioned that offer uniqueness to the leadership practice. In our previous example we saw how the appointment conditions could generate specific challenges. Additionally, there are other elements such as interpersonal relationships amongst the teaching staff, the socio economic context, the cultural capital of families, and the official legal framework regulating teaching and the operation of schools that shape the experience and learning of leadership. In the following sections each of these is addressed giving examples of specific challenges faced in relation to each condition.

***Conditions of access to a principal position: Becoming a principal by choice or by designation***

The conditions of appointment influence the way principals face new challenges and how the teaching faculty and staff reacts to decisions made by the school administrator. Therefore, the experience



participants had could be located within two extremes of a continuum. In one of these ends, we have the actions of the school faculty. In the other, there's the self-perception of principals about their possibilities of action. There are several conditions that characterize the promotion of teachers as school principals. Two of the most salient ones are the type of appointment and the reasons to pursue a school administrative position. There are two types of appointment, interim and tenure track. Interim appointments are offered to fill temporary vacant positions, while tenure track positions are obtained through a public examination of candidates. Prior to the 2012 educational reform, interim appointments were common because tenure principals were often invited to other positions in the ministry of education or in the teachers' union.

In their narratives, participants in this study reported that teachers and staff recognize less authority from interim principals and conversely more authority from tenured principals. A principal described that the first time he was appointed as interim was because the previous principal was promoted to a committee in the ministry of education. At the beginning the teachers and staff happily approved his appointment but later they started to disobey his orders:

*To suddenly see two or three teachers outside the classroom chatting when they were supposed to be teaching. I think to myself "It is not possible that all of them needed to go to the restroom at the same time." I think it is a problem they are not in the place I assigned them to take care of the children during the children's break or they do it only for two or three days. I remember them as colleagues, and they were not this way with the former principal. (1NUM-2)*

The above example could be explained on the grounds of how the interim nature of their post is a condition that generates authority challenges for this type of principals. On the one hand, staff seems to respect their authority, but on the other some actions challenge this

authority, e.g. by asking for permission to do things that they know they are not entitled to do. This shows that there is low authority recognition for this type of principals unlike the situation with the previous tenured head. This headteacher feels that he does not have the authority to sanction and reprimand teachers who disobey because he feels that he is still part of the teaching staff and he is at the same level thus hindering his authority.

On the other hand, this perception changes once they obtain tenure. Principals reported more ownership of their post and more commitment in comparison to the time when they were interim principals. One of them mentioned that when she was promoted to and got her tenure, she felt unprepared for her role even though she had been an acting head before.

*I had a glimpse of this function when I was promoted as a tenured principal because I had the opportunity to be an acting head before. This experience helped me but still I felt unprepared. I had taken a course on school administration before which also helped me understanding this role. (2NUCM-3)*

This principal later in the interviews mentioned “now my headship” contrasting with previous descriptions of her interim experiences. Once she got a tenure school position she felt more committed to the school administration and started to think in a long term improvement project.

The results of this study also show other emerging conditions such as the motives or reasons for pursuing a school leadership position. There are principals who did not mean to pursue such position. However, they were persuaded to take up a vacant temporary post. It was found that in these cases there was less determination to face challenges and even a desire to drop the job and go back to teaching. A principal described how he did not have plans



to pursue a school management position; however, there was a temporary vacancy and his coworkers proposed him as a candidate:

*I was appointed as a school principal just by chance and not because I was pursuing it. All of my coworkers trusted and voted for me. This was motivating and favors my openness to learn new things. I said "if they trust me, I will accept this challenge." I think at this time I have learned so many things. I still need to learn many others in order to be a better school principal. However, I feel much more comfortable teaching. I feel that my true calling is teaching because I like working with children. The time I am in a classroom either modeling a lesson or substituting an absent teacher I enjoy it much. Probably I will go back to teaching. (1NUM-2)*

In his description this school principal acknowledges some shortcomings but also that he could improve his performance. However, he does not seek professional development in school administration because he would rather go back to teaching. On the other hand, there are principals who did pursue this career path and mentioned reasons for this or the desire to lead a specific school. In these cases, it was found more determination to face school administrative challenges and to look for solutions because they had their own motives to be in this position.

A participant in this study described how she tried to apply to a school position very close to where she lives and with a high prestige in the community. She shared that at the beginning of her administration, a teacher threatened to make a petition to remove her as principal if the teaching staff did not like her performance. She was not intimidated by this situation because she had personal reasons to be in this school.

*I applied, and I said, I want a school in the north of the city, and then I had the opportunity to choose. And, I chose this school because of its good reputation, because of its academic achievement. I remember a lot one of my first days as a*

*principal in this school that a teacher approached me and told me that I am very impulsive. She said 'welcome to our school and I hope everything goes fine for you because when a new principal does not meet our expectations we write a complaint to the ministry of education offices asking for his/her removal' (2NUCM-4)*

In these examples we can notice how the type of appointment and the reasons to undertake this position create conditions that challenge principals to effectively perform their position. Nonetheless, in some cases, it could represent a resource to which principals turn to in order to face their challenges.

***The interpersonal relationships within the teaching staff: It is not the same to be a school principal with a cohesive teaching staff than with a divided one***

The particular culture of a school is created by ideas and beliefs of the school community. This includes the way in which schools operate and the dynamic of interpersonal relationships amongst the teaching staff (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1999). Participants in this study found an established school culture to which they were expected to integrate to. Some participants reported they found a school culture they did not like. There were costumes contrary to the official norms and regulations. The cultural clash between the established culture and the new ideas of recently appointed principals originated challenges for them. These challenges were related to the need to organize a new work dynamic and also to face teaching staff threats as described previously.

In addition, it was found that when the teaching staff had good interpersonal relationships this could be a point of support for effective leadership practice. A participant described that part of his job is to



have good interpersonal relationships so they can reach established goals:

*Having good relationships amongst the teaching staff and working together is part of my role, keeping this work environment. If we do not have good personal relationships, there is a possibility to have conflicts within the teaching staff and also with me as school leader. I think it is very difficult to work when there are conflicts because in these situations persons reject and oppose to good ideas just because they were proposed by someone they did not like. (1NUM-2)*

Furthermore, when there are bad relationships or antagonistic sub-groups in the school this could also be a challenge. A participant described how often he had to solve conflicts amongst teachers.

*I as school principal could not close my eyes to the evident reality we had in the school. I had to face an extreme case, which I am not sure if I should tell you, but once two teachers physically fought in front of their first grade students. I had to intervene right away. They've had a problem for a long time, and they could not sort it out. I let them know the obvious 'we are educators; we have to set a good example for our children.' (3EUM-1)*

The official responsibilities of principals in Mexican schools do not explicitly dictate they are accountable for good interpersonal relationships among the teaching staff. However, in this study positive relations were highly regarded by principals because no conflicts mean less challenges and a smooth transition to their new position.

***The socioeconomic context and cultural capital of families: Taking care of children who in turn reflect what happens outside school***

In their narratives, principals reported that students' socioeconomic context which is deeply related to their cultural capital posited special conditions for their performance as principals. Cultural capital is understood as the potential the families' and context offer to an individual for his/her intellectual development (Bordieu,

1979). In this regard, the cultural capital also implies the type of participation families have in schools, which could also represent several challenges to principals.

A participant faced problems related to social violence, which from her perspective affect children and affect their emotional development, causing aggressive conducts, little attention and concentration, misbehavior and other problems. For her, it is imperative to pay attention to these issues because they affect student learning.

*Children reflect what is going on in the wider social spectrum. Children bring to the school more and more emotional situations and conflicts that limit their academic achievement, their relationship with other classmates, and their overall performance as students (4EUCM-2)*

Some of the actions implemented in schools were aimed at preventing bullying and violence. Principals look for support in their families since it might be presumed that if children have problematic behavior is because they have been surrounded by such environment. Another participant described how she had to face low expectations of parents with low cultural capital who often mention that they as parents do not expect much from their children due to their economic limitations.

*We tried that parents understood the importance of their children learning even though the family did not have much money. It was a challenge to overcome the perception that our students could not learn because we were the poorest school in the district (2NUCM-1).*

In the above fragments we can perceive that cultural capital is related to the socio economic context. Therefore, cultural capital influences leadership experience because it determines the type of participation families have in the educational process.



Most of the challenges faced by principals related with family participation in the educational process are closely related to the socioeconomic context and cultural capital of families. In the case of more favorable middle class contexts sometimes principals face challenges as well because parents want to impose their opinions and even threaten teachers. On the other hand, in disadvantaged contexts there is little participation due to the low expectations regarding academic achievement because parents give more importance to solving economic problems.

***Legal framework knowledge: Following guidelines and regulations***

There are no requirements for specific academic preparation to be promoted as school principals neither the knowledge of the legal framework to perform the role effectively in Mexico. However, this study found that not knowing the regulation that dictates the operational aspects of schools limits principals in solving several problems. In this regard, not knowing the legal framework is another challenge to carry out effectively their role. Likewise this knowledge is a useful tool as this participant described how her knowledge of the legal framework has enabled her to solve situations:

*The following are reflections and questions we as principals continuously go through: do things this way, follow the established procedures, to who this information should be submitted, under which administrative procedure, what the administrative code says, what the official memo says, what the union regulation says. Knowing the legal aspects of school leadership has enabled me to persuade the teaching staff to respect my work and in my case respect the work of teachers (2NUCM-4).*

Furthermore, other principal mentioned that in her case it would have been much better to know the legal framework before she started her role because during her practice she has faced some problems that

would have been easier to solve if she had had knowledge of the legal framework.

*In the teaching profession when we are classroom teachers we are not aware of all legal aspects and regulations involved in the operation of schools. Then, we are promoted to the school management without preparation in these legal aspects and administrative procedures. It is when we face a problem we are looking to understand the rules, and we usually look for support from an experienced colleague. We as principals should know all the legal aspects involved in public education because you face situations that need to follow a specific procedure. I wish I had been trained and prepared in the legal and administrative procedures dictating the operation of schools before I was promoted to school principal (4EUCM-3)*

Both examples show that knowledge of the legal framework is a condition that helps the practice of effective leadership. Often this knowledge is shared by other principals or supervisors.

### Conclusions

This study found a scheme of previous practical experiences, and this in turn has an influence in the leadership practice principals display, and also that these experiences are part of their leadership learning. Leadership learning is favored when several challenges are present and principals need to find solutions to solve them. This also contributes to strengthen their leadership identity. According to Diaz-Barriga (2003) doing and learning are two processes that happen simultaneously. This is why leadership learning happens when principals need to solve a problem that emerges from their practice.

Principals face many challenges that in most cases are particular to the context they experience. To overcome these challenges implies to learn how to perform effectively the role expected from them, and to develop skills that enable them to design actions and make decisions



regarding the best way to lead the school they are in charge of. Likewise, Tiburcio and Jimenez (2016) point out that the context in which practice occurs enables the learning of specific aspects. This is why the configuration of leadership practice of principals is relevant because leadership learning is singular in the sense that each headteacher has to learn specific contextual aspects of their role.

However, it is relevant to ask about the kind of learning that happens in these situations we have described. This study shows that principals go through an empirical leadership learning process, which seems limited and specific to their context. International organizations as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggest that the strengthening of leadership preparation favors the development of instructional and distributed leadership approaches (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2009). This was also highlighted by the Second Teaching and Learning International Survey in Mexico for elementary education which reported that only a fifth of the incumbent principals mentioned they had only practical preparation in regard to their abilities and skills for their role (INEE, 2015).

Moreover, these results are consistent with the findings of Garcia, Slater and Lopez (2010) who conducted a research study about the problem of new principals in Mexico and in the United States. They found that in Mexico the role is considered highly stressful given the challenges faced in the post. Moreover, some of the problems encountered are similar to the ones found internationally. Nonetheless the above researchers concluded that the challenges for Mexican principals are greater given their lack of previous training. Furthermore, this study reveals that in the first years in the job the challenges are even greater. Most principals after a few years of

experience have achieved a level of development in which they have gained a group of competencies and have acquired a body of knowledge and expertise that allows them to meet more efficiently the demands and problems posed by the role.

According to these sources there is a need to develop instructional leadership in which administrative actions are focused on changing the organizational and professional conditions to improve student achievement. Leadership preparation and development in public schools could be a mix of self-learning strategies that promote the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills and positive attitudes needed to enact properly their role. Knowing the way in which leadership learning happens through practical experiences gives elements to strengthen the empirical processes traditionally followed in Mexico by principals for school leadership learning.

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