

## Chapter 23

# Mexico: Research on Principals of Public Schools in Mexico

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### Country's School System and Current Challenges

Mexico is the third largest Latin-American country (14th overall) with over 117 million inhabitants distributed in 2 million square kilometers. Its basic education system, from grades K1 to K9, serves a population of over 25 million students, distributed in approximately 227,000 schools (INEE 2012). Each of these schools has a principal, who should play an important role for these schools to work at least 200 days a year. It is the administrative position that represents the most numerous group of administrators in the country.

This section analyzes the performance and challenges of basic education school principals. It describes the public organism responsible for administrating the Mexican educational system, then it characterizes the challenges that educational system faces, and finally it deals with the role of the principal in the educational system from the official approach.

In Mexico, the educational authority nationwide is the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP, as its acronym in Spanish), which administrates the Mexican educational system. In this regard, the SEP is the governmental entity that pursues the objective of creating conditions that ensure access to quality education for all citizens, at the level and mode they require it and in the place so demanded.

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The basic education model is comprised by of the following levels:

1. Preschool. It is meant for children between 3 and 5 years of age. It is a 3-year program; only the last two are mandatory.
2. Elementary school. It is a 6-year program and is meant for children between 6 and 12 years old. It is mandatory.
3. Middle school. It is a 3-year program; it is mandatory, and it is a requirement to continue education in high school.

Mexico, as a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is pressured to improve its results on the PISA, since it ranks in one of the last places among OECD countries. Therefore, it has designed educational policies that seek to raise the quality of basic education to improve equality in both the teachers and administrators of the system and make them more accountable. In this sense, Hoyos, Espino, and García found that “although Mexico had a significant increase in years of schooling over the last 20 years, the quality of its education system—an important determinant of long term growth—is far from being satisfactory” (2012, p. 783). Thus, in the literature, the figure of the school principal becomes a determining factor in the improvement of school performance indicators (García 2009a, b; Barrientos and Taracena 2008; Cantón and Bezies 2009).

Following the revision of the context and the challenges of the educational institutions and having briefly introduced the role of the principal in the educational system, the next section will delve into how a principal is appointed and this relationship with educational outcomes.

## **The Principal: Her/His Role in Relation to the Current National Policy and the School System**

This section introduces the principal’s role in school management as her/his main responsibility and the meaning of school management in Mexico.

The principal is responsible for managing the resources to carry out the social demands in the national development plan as well as to fulfill the administrative matters issued by the Secretariat of Public Education. In contrast to these demands, several researchers found that the principal lacks appropriate training to do her/his job (Aguilera 2011; Camarillo 2006; Cordero et al. s/n; García 2011; García and Aguirre 2009; García and Carrillo 2007; Méndez-Salcido and Torres-Arcadia 2013); there is nowhere to be found a thorough description of the activities linked to the principal’s position as well as of the capabilities she/he should have. Only 5 out of 32 states in Mexico have actually defined the functions for such position in the state law of education. On account of the lack of definition for the post, the nonexistence of specific programs that foster professional training for the post is not surprising.

Not only in her/his technical profile but also as the institution's leader, the principal plays a significant role in Mexican school management. She/he fosters the creation of an identity in the school collective (García-Garduño et al. 2009) and her/his decisions will favor or not students' educational outcomes (Barrientos and Taracena 2008; Cantón and Arias 2008). Other factors that frame the importance of the principal are the connections she/he makes with the internal groups of interest as well as with the external community (Valdés 2010), which could extend the scope of the principal's influence.

The principal, along with her/his managing team, is the one who does all of the actions related to school management (Pozner 2009). The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP 2010a) clusters management in four dimensions: (1) curricular/pedagogical, which refers to the follow-up of the school program as dictated by SEP; (2) organizational, which assures the good functioning of the facilities from the perspective of the human resources; (3) social participation, which considers the social interaction with the different actors of the educational community; and (4) administrative, which refers to the functioning of the school center from the infrastructure perspective.

The principal has the support of two organisms in her/his functions: the advisory technical board and the social participation school board (Barrales and Medrano 2011; DOF 1993), both of which are chaired by the principal (SEC 2011). The school's advisory technical board is made up of the teachers and the principal. They work on the technical scope of management and pedagogy. On the other hand, the social participation school board is made up of the teachers, parents (individually or through the parents' council), alumni, the principal, and the interested members of the community (DOF 1993). At the middle school level, there could be an assistant principal who is the third supporting element, as she/he shares the management functions with the principal even though the latter is still the highest authority in the school (Aguilera 2011). In summary, the Mexican school principal faces different challenges, legally and morally, to do the activities that she/he has been assigned.

Next, we present the methodology by which these topics have been structured and developed. They are introduced as the most critical issues linked to the school principal in Mexico.

## Methodology

The research focuses on two questions: (1) What are the main problems related to school principals in Mexico? (2) What gaps do researchers identify so that they become future research lines on this topic?

The first stage consisted in the exhaustive search for articles in Mexican journals. The works of García-Garduño (2004), García-Garduño et al. (2011) and Slater et al. (2008) served as the basis for the initial search on the work produced in Mexico. Although there have been some doctoral theses on the subject, it was only possible

to identify one of them (Fierro 2006). The second stage consisted in classifying articles by relevant topics, finding that in some cases more than one topic was considered, so it was decided that an article might be in more than one category, provided that the information presented was significant. Finally, an analysis of the contents of articles was done, which led us to identify four main topics. These were developed on the basis of the findings in the articles. The literature also helped to contrast and complement the theme from an international perspective. Each of the topics concludes with the remark of the research opportunities that arises from the consulted materials, as well as their implications in the Mexican context.

## Research Perspective

In Mexico, there are around 227,000 schools of the basic level: 18.3 % correspond to preschool, almost 57.8 % are elementary schools, and 23.9 % are middle schools. It is assumed that in all of them there is a principal, although at the middle school level there is a post for an assistant principal. Additionally, in these schools there are 180,000 teachers, distributed as follows: preschool 18.9 %, elementary school 48.4 %, and middle school 32.8 % (INEE 2012). It is worth noticing that while preschool and elementary school teachers are appointed to attend to one group during the school year, the middle school teachers are in charge of specific subjects in different groups and even in different schools.

In regard to the principal's profile, it is estimated that around 45 % of the principals are between the ages of 40–49, and around 25 % are over 50. Around 60 % of the principals are male, and 66 % are male principals at the middle school level; this in contrast to the fact that most of the teachers in kindergarten and more than half of the teachers in elementary schools and middle schools are female (OEI 1994), while in 2011 almost 70 % were female teachers (SEP 2013). This pronounced ratio could be even more pronounced if taking into account the 2012 statistics of women who want to become teachers of basic education: 94,000 female students versus 39,000 male students (SEP 2012). Approximately 96 % of the principals hold a college diploma, while only 11 % of the elementary school principals hold a master's degree, a figure that is higher in middle school principals: 28 %. Another aspect worth noticing is that 15 % of the principals have another job (BIE 2009, 2010), which sheds some light in regard to salary dissatisfaction.

As a result of the analysis of the country's specific research on the principal's role, work, and leadership, four relevant topics have been identified in the existing publications: (1) professional development, (2) definition of the position, (3) workload, and (4) work relationships with teachers. Such topics have been studied by researchers with the understanding that the main problems of the group lie in them. In the following section, each one of the topics is developed to show the interrelationships among them and the complexity they entail.

## Professional Development

In Mexico, the selection process to appoint a principal is carried out by the National Mixed Commission of Structure (CNME, as its acronym in Spanish), which is made up by two representatives of the Secretariat of Public Education, two members of the National Executive Committee of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE, as its acronym in Spanish), and an inspector president appointed in agreement by both parties. The selection process starts when a post is available; the CNME calls for participation (Ortiz 2003) and makes known to all interested parties the existence of such post. The selection of the principal to cover the vacancy only takes into account the structural merits of those who decide to participate to earn the post (Silva et al. 2009). The system of structural merits consists of a system of points earned mainly by seniority, academic activities, and training (Ortiz 2003); therefore, it is not a requirement to have professional training to become a principal (Aguilera 2011). Traditionally, the new principal learns by doing and through her/his experience of having observed other practicing principals.

The condition of the poor, scarce training in leadership for the Mexican principal is repeatedly found in the literature (Camarillo 2006; Esparza and Guzmán 2009; Silva et al. 2009; Aguilera 2011, among others). This is due to the little, if any, training to be appointed to the post. Nevertheless, the principals' professional training is a relatively new topic in Mexico, which has become stronger since the educational reforms of the last decade of the twentieth century, when the need to implement strategies to improve the quality of the educational institutions was discussed (Aguilera 2011). In regard to this topic, García-Garduño and Martínez-Martínez (2013) point out that the programs for the principals' development have not been adjusted to meet in a timely fashion the requests established upon being appointed to this position.

In the 1995–2000 program for educational development, the Mexican authorities acknowledged for the first time the principals' lack of preparation, as their appointment had been made through the vertical structure, which in fact did not assure the right profile to assume the responsibilities the post entailed. This first assertion has been reiterated in the following national development programs (Cordero et al. s/n). In this light, it is evident that it is no longer subject to debate whether the principals' training is needed or not. However, the great question is in regard to the processes for this training to be pertinent and articulated to the mechanisms with which the principals have been appointed. Along with these issues, the follow-up to the programs that have emerged is a matter of interest since it is relevant to know how much they have contributed to the educational quality in aligning all the resources of the sector.

On the other hand, the principals have become aware of their lack of preparation and of the demands as by-products of the different programs that required greater involvement from them for academic achievement. In this regard, Camarillo points out the principals' change of attitude concerning their awareness of the need of self-training to do their job, as stated by a principal: "... You study to become a teacher,

but not to become a principal. Therefore, I think that a principal should have this profile, have more knowledge of his functions, not only knowledge but also preparation for the post, which has not happened so far. Truth is, you cannot see it anywhere and so happens in elementary schools, middle schools and pre-schools. You get there randomly...” (Camarillo 2006, p. 92). The principals acknowledge not being prepared to assume the post, that the training they receive on behalf of the Secretariat of Public Education does not meet the job needs, and that when they attend the training called by the SEP, it is more to pursue the goal of getting points for their teaching career (García and Carrillo 2007) than to improve their professional performance.

Some effort has been made to encourage the self-training of the school principals; there have been courses, certification courses, some master’s degree programs, and even doctoral programs offered to the principals that choose the teaching career; nevertheless, limited congruency has been reported between the training offer and the general guidelines of the educational policy concerning the updating of school authorities and teachers (Aguilera 2011). For example, the national updating course for principals of basic education was promoted. It included readings and problem-like proposals made independently by principals who do not see it as a real solution to the problem of principal training (Cedillo 2008) but one of many isolated and disarticulated efforts trying to solve the problem of principal professionalization. In this regard, it can be seen that the multiplication of programs oriented to principal training does not come from systematic research nor does it include processes to evaluate results accurately (Cordero et al. s/n). Some research results based on the experience of successful principals in Mexico suggest that training should emphasize order, culture, and discipline (García-Garduño and Martínez-Martínez 2013) and communication skills and inclusive decision-making processes, among others (Torres-Arcadia et al. 2013).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states that even though efforts have been made toward the training and development of principals, these are not mandatory but are still promoted. These are courses that give points to advance in the professional growth. Despite the extensive offer of courses, diploma courses, and master’s degree and doctoral programs, only 8.73 % deal with school leadership; moreover, there are statements that question the practical usefulness of such programs. Besides, the system does not consider if the courses taken correspond or not to the responsibilities of those who enroll. After analyzing the courses offered for updating and professional growth, Ortiz (2003) considers it worthwhile to have only one process to certify the professional competences that set the equivalence to the teaching career; this would clarify the relationship between such training and the education and development of the defined profile, which has not been clarified either. In summary, the training and development offered has been oriented more for the teacher than for the educational leader. Additionally, this is more identified with a part of the vertical structure rather than with a direct opportunity to enrich job performance. Under this context, the OECD points out: “Until recently, attention to school leadership has not been a high priority in Mexico” (2010, p. 127).

In relation to the professional preparation of the practicing principals, the Bank of Educational Indexes (BIE, as its acronym in Spanish) found that almost 98 % of elementary school principals had undergraduate degrees, while only 11.4 % had graduate degrees, which were not necessarily linked to her/his functions as a principal (BIE 2010). In this regard, Aguilera (2011) points out that the proposal for educational quality requires a professional principal with the right competences to do her/his job, not sufficing that she/he is a teacher with graduate studies: training related to the post is required.

The practice of the vertical structure has limited the principal's selection and training processes. Lately, it has been suggested that this practice be removed on account of the recently passed General Law of Education (LGE 2013) that complements the General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD 2013). In this, a 2-year training period is established after which an evaluation should determine if the post is granted or not to the candidate. This legal change, although representing a great advance in terms of the professionalization of the principals, is still far from becoming a reality. Matters such as the definition of the principal's profile, the training programs, and the way to evaluate such a profile are nonexistent resources. Today, as mandated by these laws, it is SEP that facilitates the process to implement them as well as to call the different instances to define the mechanisms.

Under the LGSPD, the norms should condition the principal's appointment to the post only after she/he has received the proper training, leaving aside the vertical structure model as explained in Article 27: "In Basic Education, the promotion to a post with principal's functions will lead to an appointment, subjected to a period of induction with a duration of 2 years in a row, time in which the personnel should take programs to develop leadership and school management skills determined by the local educational authority. During the induction period, the local educational authorities should provide orientation and the pertinent resources to strengthen the leadership and school management skills. At the end of the induction period, the local educational authority will evaluate the personnel's performance to determine if they comply with the demands of the managerial position. If the personnel so complies, she/he will receive the definite appointment. When in the evaluation the level of performance in management functions is found insufficient, the personnel should return to her/his teaching function in the school she/he has been assigned" (LGSPD 2013, p. 15). This law establishes the apparent end of the vertical structure as well as the definite appointment that had prevailed in Mexico for over 80 years. It would be expected that this law is a framework to give new sense to the teaching career and to be even more aligned to the educational objectives.

In agreement with this new legal disposition, Aguilera (2011) has argued the need to develop a management model based on the required profile and to tailor training to meet the profile. Such training should be contemplated even before accessing the post and during its exertion. Training should not be isolated and should be oriented to the practice and regulations, considering the job of supervisors as a key piece for their orientation and their capacity to diagnose the principals' needs in regard to the competences to do their job. On the other hand, the OECD (2010) recommends reviewing the age ranges and number of principals to know

where it is more productive to invest: in the initial training of principals or in the training of principals who are already in the post, since “the current challenge of leadership ... is not only to improve the quality of the present leaders, but also to develop clear plans for future leadership and effective processes for leadership succession” (Pont et al. 2009, p. 16). The challenge seems to lie in arriving at a consensus about what it means to be prepared as a principal (Esparza and Guzmán 2009).

## Definition of the Principal’s Professional Profile

As mentioned, teachers have traditionally served as principals. They are appointed to the post by means of the structural system that has prevailed since 1973. In this model of appointment to the post, the candidates are not evaluated based on merits related to the post for which they are competing, and neither is the permanence in it conditioned; therefore, once the principal assumes the post, the appointment is permanent. This panorama could be favored by the lack of institutional definition of the principal’s professional profile, since, even though there are several definitions, there is no consensus about the required specificity needed to determine the processes to train and select candidates nor a systematic way to evaluate their performance once they are in functions. The following paragraphs describe these problems and some possible solutions based on the recently approved General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD 2013).

The principal’s position was originally defined as “the first authority responsible for the right functioning, organization, operation and management of the school and its annexes.” This definition was only stated at the level of agreements, as an incipient effort to clarify that this appointment was authorized by the SEP, but not by union action (Chap. IV, Article 5, SEP 1982). It is not until the publication of the General Law of Education that the definition and responsibilities of the post are raised at the law level (DOF 1993). Some of the designated functions according to the regulations introduced by the SEP at the moment were as follows: channel the functioning of the school within the current legal, pedagogical, technical, and operational framework; organize, lead, coordinate, and evaluate the activities done in the school; represent the school technically and administratively; spread and enforce SEP’s dispositions; solve any problem; make a work plan; and look after and manage the school’s resources, among other functions. Fernández (2001) summarizes them from the classical management theory approach of planning, organizing, leading, coordinating, and controlling. It is worth noticing that the definition granted the principal a mere administrative role to manage the school’s human and material resources. It was not until the administration of the National Evaluation of Academic Achievement in School Centers (ENLACE, as its acronym in Spanish) in 2006, a test that made evident the students’ low academic achievement, that further responsibilities were added, such as a follow-up of the students’ performance. This gave the principal administrator the image of an instructional leader. Despite this advancement in what denoted a fledgling sketch of the principal’s profile, there was



no meaningful progress in the congruency of delegation of responsibility in management on behalf of the federal government (OECD 2010).

Soon after, there was an additional advancement toward the definition of the principal's post when the Technical Norm for Work Competence was prepared for the basic education principals. Such initiative was made in the framework of the Quality Schools Program (PEC, as its acronym in Spanish). The PEC was instituted in 2001 as an initiative to reform school management. The norm would integrate three competences that school principals should have: the elaboration, execution, and follow-up and evaluation of the schools' 5-year strategic planning. Even though the program is still in use, there is no evidence that the norm was used for what it was intended: to be the beginning of the certification of the school principals (OECD 2010). It seems evident that to reach this goal, not only the government's will but also that of the union and the civil society all together are required.

Another effort to clarify the definition of the head's function may be found in the assessment process of professional performance when the principal decides to participate in the teaching career (TC). The TC is a voluntary mechanism at the margin of the vertical structure, with which the teachers and principals receive economic incentives as a result of introducing performance and training evidence. In this program, the evaluation of the principal's performance entails the introduction of evidence that the principal participates in the following activities (Ortíz 2003):

- Planning school work
- Development of activities (technical and pedagogical)
- Development of school activities
- Diffusion and link with the community

Despite these attempts and that there are national and some state norms, it has become evident that having a norm has not sufficed to properly define the principal's professional profile, a core matter for the principal to do her/his job and to be evaluated (Aguilera 2011). In this sense, society in general perceives a prevailing incongruity between the demands of the educational reform and the profile of those who have been appointed to high administrative positions in the schools.

As part of a foreseen breakup and even struggling against the union's opposition, the General Law of Education (LGE 2013) was recently approved; it includes the General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD 2013). This law states a more thorough and integral definition of the personnel appointed to an authority post in a school center as cited below:

That who does the planning, programming, coordination, execution and evaluation of the tasks for the well-functioning of the school in accordance with the applicable legal and administrative framework and has the responsibility to generate a school environment leading to learning, organizing, supporting and motivating teachers; does the administrative activities effectively, leads the school's continuous improvement processes, fosters communication with parents, guardians or other agents of community participation and develops all other tasks needed to achieve the expected learning. (p. 3)

It is worth noticing that this definition ratifies the principal as an academic leader, being the center of all performance in the administrative and in the linking parts.

Besides defining the post of the school principal, the LGSPD officially states that the definition of the principal's professional profile is the foundation to select, train, and evaluate the aspiring candidates to be appointed to those posts. It is also relevant to mention that this basic requirement had repeatedly been described in the literature, as asserted by Aguilera (2011). The author mentions the importance of defining the kind of school principal needed and then to be in the right position to set training programs. These last issues had been developed but were unsystematic and occasional. Another relevant aspect of the LGSPD is that it grants SEP the responsibility to determine such profile as well as the power to define the selection criteria and the training programs.

In this new context, the definition of the principal's profile should lead to setting guidelines for performance in the post, aimed at increasing the probabilities to improve the school's educational level (Méndez-Salcido and Torres-Arcadia 2013). While there is no clarity in regard to the ideal profile of the school principal in Mexico, it will be difficult to set the competences or standards to train and select the educational leaders needed to achieve the educational quality expectations that are so present in the national discourse. The need to determine what is expected and needed from the school principals based on the practice and with the support of research is clear. Based on these agreements, it would be feasible to implement the competence system to shed light on the role the school principal plays and to give legitimacy to her/his appointment, an appointment that so far has happened through the vertical structure and that has been evidence of its fruitlessness, jeopardizing the success of any quality educational program, regardless of how well this has been articulated. Therefore, it is necessary to tailor programs to meet the profile and to be careful that such definition does not match past needs (Pont et al. 2009).

## Principal's Workload

One of the worldwide concerns about the role of the principal is the workload, which has intensified due to the high expectations of the present society swirling around educational institutions (Pont et al. 2009). These expectations originate in the drastic changes the world is going through and thus the need to develop the capacity to adapt quickly and to create. These entail the need to have leaders that train change leaders in a sustainable and ethical environment.

Among the problems detected in this concern is that in Mexico, the working day is not long enough for the principal to do all the functions she/he is supposed to do (García 2007). Therefore, a principal faces multiple activities and interactions that go beyond her/his working day. Besides, she/he does not have the proper training to handle all the responsibilities of the post as pointed out before. There are assertions that apparently contradict the principal's lack of time, since Antúnez (2002) points out that it is the principal who has more time to visualize the school's needs. Nevertheless, García (2007) highlights that the activities related to management "exceed the [principal's] working day" (p. 7).

Several factors contribute to the principal's lack of time to perform satisfactorily as the institution's leader. For example, the responsibility of administering the institution's resources and staff requires a great part of her/his attention because of the paper work, management, and account rendering instead of investing in a balanced journey with the teaching/learning processes (Pont et al. 2009). For example, the principal's activities could include recreational ends or school activities of civic formation and even the role of discipline guardian, whether it is directly with the students or through the teachers (Pastrana 2002). In this sense, the functions related to the different interactions that the principal develops in and out of the institution require an important investment of time, relations with supervisors, educational authorities, peers (principals of other educational institutions of the sector), parents, students, and teachers. On the other hand, the need to do other professional activities to complement her/his salary is represented by 15 % of the principals (BIE 2009, 2010), which means that besides the activities she/he already does, she/he has in mind other priorities that make her/him end his work day to continue with other professional endeavors.

In accordance with what has been stated before, recent research has found that the main source of the principals' problems is the lack of time to do administrative work, mainly involving completion of formats and the elaboration and follow-up of the school project; the lack of support from the authorities such as the inspectors who see the principal as a report supplier has also been noted (García-Garduño et al. 2010; García-Garduño et al. 2009). It is interesting that the authorities that coordinate the principals, inspectors and supervisors, did not have the right training for the job either. Therefore, their actions are unplanned and affect the work of the principal by asking for the completion of tasks quickly and with no previous notice. The OECD (2010) has reflected on this overload of paperwork and control and suggests that the principal change her/his administrative role to an academic one so that her/his main concerns become "teaching effectiveness and the child's performance" (p. 138). Actually, the new school management states that the principal should devote less time to administrative activities. Even though there has been no change in the administrative demands for the educational institutions and their personnel, it adds importance to doing the academic and linking functions (Vallejo 2011). In this sense, the authors pointed out how the interaction of principals with the teaching body about pedagogical aspects is limited because of the principal's traditional role: the principal responds to administrative and bureaucratic requirements and continues his work managing the school's infrastructure (Zorrilla and Pérez 2006; Canales and Bezies 2009).

An important observation of what this challenge represents is the principal's level of frustration due to not fulfilling all of her/his duties properly. Besides, she/he considers that she/he lacks knowledge and abilities to develop her/his duties timely and adequately. There is also great ambiguity in the functions and activities she/he has to do. Pont et al. (2009, p. 22) comment that the principal's stress "could diminish her/his capacity to work the best possible, and within time it could erode her/his engagement to work." Finally, the impact of the principal's lack of accomplishment and her/his stress and frustration affect the teaching morale, thus affecting the

teaching/learning process. It is worth clarifying that regarding the efforts made by SEP in the framework of the Quality Schools Program (PEC, as its acronym in Spanish), it is stated that the principal's role is strategic as it facilitates the definition of strategic goals and encourages and fosters their fulfillment through teamwork, empowerment, and follow-up. Nevertheless, reconsidering the matter of principal training to develop these competences requires training aligned to these roles and functions, which is not present today.

## Working Relationship with Teachers

A relevant aspect of school leadership is the principal's ability to develop interpersonal relationships with different interest groups: parents, teachers, students, other institutions, school authorities, etc. Among these, one of the high priorities is the relationship with the teachers of her/his own institution to coordinate the teaching work and to have effective school management. Besides, the environment's demands and challenges have an influence on the principal to encourage collegiate work and to participate in the decision-making processes, delegating certain activities (Aguilera 2011). In this sense, Ezpeleta (1990) studied the hierarchical-bureaucratic structure of the technical board (committees that regulate and make decisions about the academic affairs of the school, formed by the director and school teachers). The study recommends the implementation of radical transformations in the structure and management of the technical board. Related to this subject, Fierro and Rojo (1994) carried out an action research that was meant to transform the technical board in a space for teacher training and strengthening of educational tasks.

Even the technical board offers an opportunity to promote academic interactions between teachers and the principal. There are different elements that constitute the framework of the relationship: working days with schedules, the leave of absence permits, unauthorized absences, supervision, and encouragement for performance. The principal faces loyalty dilemmas with pairs, which orient the decisions and management actions leaving aside the educational perspective and the focus on students, severely compromising educational quality and equality (Fierro 2006).

In general, the literature indicates that the main problems a principal of basic education institutions faces with teachers are as follows: (1) the relationship through the National Union of Education Workers, (2) the lack of time to foster the relationship with teachers, and (3) the scarce follow-up to provide feedback in pedagogical work. In the following paragraphs, each one of these will be presented in more depth.

Mexican principals face the union's intervention in teacher management (Aguilera 2011; Camarillo 2006). An example of this is the case of absenteeism: the principal has no right to reprimand a teacher who was absent because the union defends even negative actions such as absenteeism (Ezpeleta and Weiss 2002). Another difficulty the Mexican principal faces is the lack of support from the educational authorities (Aguilera 2011; Camarillo 2006; García-Garduño 2009),

which generates an absence of autonomy in her/his decisions. Likewise, the lack of support from the educational authorities and the meddling of the union affect the principal's legitimacy, required to fulfill the establishment of the school's path. All these translate in a lack of authority within the academic community members who should see her/him as a leader.

García-Garduño et al. (2010) found that the second most important problem principals face after the lack of time is the relationship with teachers. The most important issues in this regard are as follows: maintaining the school operation with incomplete staff due to the authorities' delay in the replacement or substitution of teachers on leave or who have retired; the administration of paid leaves, since teachers have the right to take short paid leaves of absence during the school year; and the nonfulfillment of working schedules from teachers who feel the protection of the regulations and the union. According to regulations, if a teacher is late three times, the teacher should be discounted 1 day off his salary; however, not all principals are willing to enforce the regulation to avoid tension with the teachers. Indeed, this action works against the acknowledgement of the principal's authority. In light of the newly accepted General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD 2013), greater support could be expected in attending to the cases of teachers arriving late or missing work without justification. This law contemplates the dismissal of those who miss work 3 days in a row. This course of action had not been contemplated in previous norms and policies even if it affected the principal's authority and above all the educational quality.

Finally, another way the principal establishes relationships with the teachers is the follow-up she/he does or does not do regarding teachers' performances. In this regard, the LGSPD (2013) contemplates the internal evaluation that should lead to continuous improvement. It is the principal, along with the teachers' active collaboration, who should coordinate and lead this evaluation. This interaction is very important because one of the evaluation processes is on teachers' performances. From this perspective, it is the principal himself who should propose crosswise growth for each one of the teachers according to the results of her/his evaluations. These new additional functions in SEP include incentives that benefit their professional advancement.

Based on the above context of teacher-principal interaction, one of the difficulties pointed out in the literature is the lack of constant follow-up to provide feedback in the pedagogical practice (Aguilera 2011). This lack of attention from the principal is due to the fact that his attention is steered to more bureaucratic activities than to such an important relationship (Ezpeleta 1990). The lack of feedback affects the teacher directly in her/his personal motivation regarding the uncertainty surrounding her/his performance, without taking into account the search for improvement under any criterion set because of the lack of follow-up and evaluation. In this regard, it is important to specify that the principal's work should be more than just supervising teaching actions; in fact it should be more of a guide and facilitator for the teacher to seek continuous improvement in the teaching/learning process. The educational authorities in Mexico specify that the principal's functions should be to supervise the teacher in the classroom. (This hardly ever happens because the

principal lacks time to do so.) These functions should instead become motivational and give feedback, allocating resources for the fulfillment of teaching projects that they suggest developing.

## Conclusions

In Mexico, the principals of basic education institutions are the largest group of administrators. However, it is the group that faces the most challenges to achieve success in the development of its functions; the challenge of improving the students' learning achievement is the most compelling and difficult. It has become evident in the international setting that the principal's role is fundamental to increase the educational quality in her/his ability to influence the school culture (Fullan and Stiegelbauer 1997) and to generate an environment that influences the students' performance in an important way (Leithwood and Montgomery 1984). It is the principal who sets the pace and the agenda to achieve educational development (Møller et al. 2009). In this regard, Day (2009) highlights the principal's responsibility for creating trustworthy conditions that should reach the whole organization. Therefore, examining the principal's role in a specific way within school management is justified, and its study is relevant because it could provide knowledge that helps improve her/his performance and thus the school's results. In this context, the most relevant findings in the revision of the literature are presented below.

The mechanisms that show the centralization of the Mexican educational system were explored. The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) is the federal entity that possesses the responsibility for making education accessible to all Mexicans and grants limited autonomy to the states to operate according to the entity's needs. On the other hand, the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE) has been a relevant political force with significant influence over the educational system and the author of the mechanisms with which it operates. This is illustrated by its open influence in the appointment of principals through its participation in the National Mixed Commission of Structure as well as in the direct intervention to support the teacher, even by defending punishable behavior and thus undermining the principal's authority in her/his function as a leader and manager.

The lack of principal training has become critical in the last decade in the sense that the principal in Mexico changed from an administrator of human and material resources to an academic and social leader. Nowadays, the quality improvement programs demand the pedagogical follow-up of programs through the tutoring to teachers and the school's connection with parents and other members of society, together with an overload of administrative paper work, a product of the bureaucratization of the educational system. The principal has become a supervisor of report submission instead of a manager who supports and facilitates strategic work.

Perhaps the most important matter to solve is the need to define the Mexican school principal profile. It would shed some light on the ideal competences and make them susceptible of being evaluated and developed in both aspiring candidates

and practicing principals. Throughout the recent history of the Mexican educational system, the unequivocal requirement of providing specific training for those who manage schools has increased. In this concern, different initiatives and programs, with fewer or greater results, have been analyzed; but because of the scarcity of political will, they have lacked the right articulation to favor their implementation, evaluation, and follow-up of achievements. If there is no evaluation of what is done, there is no way things can be improved. The recent reform to the General Law of Education (LGE 2013) and the new General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD 2013) are introduced as a convincing answer of the federal government to channel the educational system toward a stage of more transparency, based on the establishment of profiles, parameters, and indicators of the General Law for the Professional Teaching Service, all of which are nonexistent today, with the already mentioned consequences.

The methodology used for this investigation was to identify the literature related to the principal in Mexico and to identify the common issue; later these were compared and contrasted to obtain the common findings and the implications for the principal's practice. The main topics found in the literature were as follows: (1) the ambiguity in the definition of the position, (2) the lack of professional training for the principal as an academic and administrative leader, (3) the insufficiency of the work day, and (4) the deficient relationships with teachers.

In regard to the documented research in Mexico about the principal, it was found that it is scarce, and, therefore, the development of educational researchers is compelling: researchers who can document their findings and favor the development of knowledge in the field are needed. The research lines derived from this analysis were as follows:

There should be more studies of the professional and personal profiles of the Mexican principal, not only in the international research but also in studies done in Mexico. The specific issues in the different settings should be considered in this profile. The definition of this profile should include the system of competences, knowledge, and values as well as the functions and roles. Analysis and evaluation of the different training and development programs for school leaders should also take place. This analysis should include the kind of support required in the different professional stages: candidates, beginners, experienced, and those nearing retirement. There should be agreement between the available training and the expectations of the principal's position.

There should be more analysis of the context from the perspective of the current educational policy, emphasizing the management of change processes needed to favor the evolution of the principal from a mere practicing administrator to that of an academic and social leader.

More studies are needed on the principal-teacher relationship with an approach to empower, give feedback, and participate. This could aim to be a positive influence on educational quality.

Throughout this chapter, the literature about school principals has been presented, covering the topics that seem to focus attention on Mexican researchers, as well as the administrative and legislative educational authorities in Mexico. The information included sets the frame for the presented findings and includes chronological and statistical data to explain the most recent initiatives. The synthesis of the

research done in Mexico about principals is expected to be used by other researchers interested in the topic and even by the principals, principal educators, and authorities responsible for legislating in this regard.

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