An Emergent Model of the Current State of Leadership Preparation and Development of New Head Teachers for Primary Schools in Mexico

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Abstract
Preparation and development of school leaders is a priority in high achieving educational systems since evidence from research has repeatedly demonstrated the positive effects of effective leadership. This study presents the findings of a research carried out aiming to explore the preparedness for the role of newly appointed school heads in Mexican primary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the method for data collection with twelve new heads, five teachers seeking headship, and four administrators of the promotion system. This research found that newly appointed Mexican school heads at primary level are assigned to the post with a managerial identity. This identity has been acquired during their time as classroom teachers influenced by the area of knowledge they focus on their professional preparation, the meaningful opportunities or otherwise to engage in the practice of leadership, and the assessment criteria in the established system of promotion to headship. A typology of the new appointed school heads emerged: a Potential Developed Manager, a Practical Manager, a Theoretical Manager, and a Limited Manager. This research also found that the managerial identity is perpetuated during their incumbency in headship since the legal framework dictating the functions and roles of school heads in Mexico prioritises administrative and organisational functions. The study concludes that the managerial identity, the importance given to administrative functions in their incumbency, and the little attention given to offer proper preparation for the post before their appointment do not enable them to progress and develop professionally as pedagogical and instructional leaders.

Keywords: Leadership Preparation and Development, School Leaders, Identity
**Introduction**

School leaders play a key role in the way education is delivered because they are in a position to positively influence teaching and learning. The idea that leadership matters is conventional wisdom not only in education but in many organisations (Watson, 2005). Several studies on school effectiveness show that excellent leadership is invariably one of the main factors in high performing schools (Reynolds, 1991). There are some reviews of empirical research that address the relationship between school leadership and student achievement (Bell et al., 2003; Witziers 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). This has enabled that leadership preparation and development have been strengthened in many countries before appointment to leadership posts and during their time in these roles 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 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 explore the preparedness of new appointed school heads for their role based on their graduate preparation and professional experiences before their appointment to headship. The research questions that guided this study were the following: Why types of school heads regarding professional preparation can be identified in newly appointed primary school heads in Mexico? How does their professional preparation before promotion enable or limit them to enact their role as school heads effectively? And, What influences the appointment of prepared school heads in Mexican primary schools?

**Literature Review**

**Leadership Preparation and Development**

There is general consensus among practitioners, researchers and policy makers that professional training and development of aspiring and incumbent heads is positive since 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-1990's training and development for school leaders have been introduced or strengthened in many countries either as preparation for entry to the post or to further develop the skills of in-service heads (Huber, 2008). Researchers point to the need for training to school leaders to provide leadership and management skills not included in their teacher training (Devos and
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 and 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, and LaPointe (2005) identified seven key features of effective leadership preparation programmes. These are: a) clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organised, b) standards-based curriculum emphasising instructional leadership, organisational 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.

Methodology

This study sought to explore the experiences and perceptions regarding the professional preparation profiles of newly appointed heads, their leadership development, and the preparedness to perform effectively their function. Extended, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve newly appointed school heads, identified alphabetically in this study as participants A to L, nine teachers seeking headship, identified as participants M to R, and four administrators of the promotion system, also identified as participants S to W. Teachers pursuing headship and headteachers that participated in this study are all assigned to urban schools in the city of Chihuahua, Mexico. Interviews were undertaken on school premises for the first two types of participants, and in their offices for the administrators and lasted for 50-70 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. Commonalities, differences and emergent themes were sought with respect to professional preparation and development for the post of newly appointed heads. All participants fully and enthusiastically participated in the research and valued the opportunity to voice their perceptions.

Findings

The responses shared by the participants enabled to identify the type of newly appointed heads in Mexican primary schools being influential on the creation of this typology the system of promotion that set the criteria for promotion to headship, the professional qualifications chosen by aspirant heads during their accession phase, and their meaningful or lack of leadership experiences during their time as classroom teachers. The emerging model (See Figure 1) is based on two axes, relating respectively to an emphasis on school management preparation (high to low) and leadership experiences (high to low) of newly appointed heads. There are four possible categories
emanating of the type of heads appointed: a potential developed manager, a practical manager, a theoretical manager, and a limited manager. They were defined as managers instead of leaders since the legal framework dictating the functions and role of headteachers prioritises managerial, administrative, and organisational functions. Seemingly as they accumulate years in their post they do not progress further than their roles as managers, and their initial drive to focus their attention on leadership for learning gradually vanish since they remain disconnected from classrooms and teaching practices for the attention that must be given to the managerial aspects of their role. It is important to point out that the administrators of the promotion system were essential in identifying the type of heads given that they are constantly in contact with applicants to headship, and they are responsible for reviewing their professional profiles. Moreover, four of the incumbent heads regarded as influential and useful a master programme on school management for their current role as school leaders offered by the National Pedagogical University this is why this preparation was also considered important on building this typology.

A Potential Developed Manager

Two heads and a teacher currently seeking headship, Participants E, J and N were considered in this group. These types of school heads by the time they are appointed had graduate preparation on school management, and also during their accession time had meaningful opportunities in the practice of leadership. This enables them to understand the implications of leading and managing a school both from a theoretical perspective due to the specific preparation they had on school management and from a practical perspective for their opportunities in making decision positions before their appointment to headship. These leaders might not follow an identical path towards headship however there are some similarities amongst them. They may have started to develop their leadership skills and discovered their leadership potential in practice. They were exposed to situations in which they were appointed to different leadership positions at the same time that they were teaching. There are many possible scenarios in which they assumed leadership positions. For instance, it is typical that new teachers start their career in rural areas, and some are appointed as teaching heads. Another possibility in urban schools could be a teacher invited by the zone supervisors (equivalent to a school district in other contexts) to assist them with managerial and training functions. It is common for exemplary classroom teachers being invited by the zone's supervisors for these functions. Other possibilities could be acting headships or posts in the teacher union, even parliament candidates since the teachers union is a political party. There are also teachers who could have had multiple leading positions of the mentioned above during their accession phase.

A common thing for those teachers is that they held a decision-making position that gave them practical experiences and the development of managerial and organisational skills. After or during these experiences, they enrolled in masters programmes focused on school management. It is in this part where they complete the other part of the
quadrant by enrolling in a master programme in management and complementing with theoretical knowledge the already gained practical experiences and developed managerial skills. The comments from Participant E encapsulate the experiences of these heads "I had contact with headship from my first day in education since I started my teaching career as a teaching head in a rural school. After three years I moved to Chihuahua City and I was elected the union representative of the school zone so I had teaching and political responsibilities. Those experiences influenced my decision to pursue headship that is why I completed my master in school management." However the route of being a developed manager could not be taken by any teacher aspiring headship because the practical experiences to lead a school for few months, to be a union official, or to be a supervisor's assistant do not depend on them. These positions are circumstantial and limited; something that an aspiring head cannot control or influence. This means that only few newly appointed headteachers could be placed in the quadrant of developed managers.

A Practical Manager

In this study two participants were identified for this type of school heads, Participants A and D. This type of newly appointed head has also developed high managerial skills due to their relevant leadership experiences before promotion to headship. The experiences are similar to those of the previous type of head; however, the differentiation is that participants identified with these types of heads did not regard their graduate preparation as influential and useful for their current post. They pursued graduate preparation with little relevance for their post as school heads. The appointment to headship in Mexico takes place on a competition based on the accumulation of points in several factors being professional preparation e.g. undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees one of the factors considered and recognised with points 700, 840, and 980, respectively. It is almost necessary to have a master degree to win a headship since most of the teachers competing for leadership posts have a master degree at least. The official system of appointment gives the same number of points to any kind of master degree just with the condition that the programme is related to education. These heads during their accession phase focused their preparation on programmes in educational psychology, special education, curriculum development or other areas of the broad field of education little related with the functions of headship. In the case of this study participants A and D have their graduate preparation in special education and in the teaching of music, respectively. Besides, the system of promotion does not make preparation on leadership and management compulsory or it is rewarded higher than preparation in other areas of the field of education. This enables that many teachers pursuing a headship do not seek preparation in areas related to educational leadership and management as a way to strengthen their preparation for the post. Examples of these types of leaders are teachers that before having the intention to aspire for leadership posts obtain graduate preparation in areas unrelated to school leadership and management, and later in their career are invited to collaborate in leadership positions and also decide to pursue a
headship post based on this preparation. An interesting case might be heads that pursued masters’ degrees on teaching and learning since their graduate preparation in combination with their practical leadership experiences make them candidates for potential instructional leaders.

A Theoretical Manager

In this study were identified three heads and two teachers seeking headship with this type of heads, Participants G, K, L, M, and R. These headteachers have graduate preparation in school management however do not have the meaningful practical experiences in leadership before their promotion to headship as the previous heads. As mentioned before significant experiences in the practice of leadership for prospects headteachers are not predominant in the educational system and just few teachers benefit from them. This type of head when appointed to the post has the theoretical knowledge in school management as a result of their graduate preparation in this field. Academic programmes in educational management available in Mexico are theoretically focused. They do not offer opportunities for participants to engage in real world experiences and active learning to develop managerial and leadership skills. In other parts of the world leadership preparation programmes offer a mix of theoretical and practical knowledge supported by processes of coaching and mentoring. It is intended that participants strengthen both theoretical and practical knowledge. In the case of Mexico, participants who pursue graduate programmes with an emphasis on school management only strengthen their theoretical knowledge. An example of this was commented by participant K "I understand the concepts of strategic planning, but I also needed to know how to apply this in my professional practice." These candidates decided to pursue headship at some stage of their career, and they are also actively looking for opportunities to lead. However in comparison to the previous type of heads, the opportunities they are given are not as meaningful as those of the potential developed manager and the practical manager. Most of the opportunities these heads obtain are the organisation of events, special projects or commissions within the school. A teacher currently seeking headship commented on this "in my second year of teaching I realised that I wanted to be a headteacher [...] that is why I studied my masters in educational management. I also volunteer to be responsible of the organisation of many activities in the school to put myself in the real practice of leadership; however, they are small tasks because leading a school is much more complex than organising the celebration of the mothers’ day." Another difference with the previous types is the self nomination to the post since the teachers identified with this type in the study recognised their desire to pursue headship when they enrolled in the programme of school management, and the previous type of heads based their decision to apply on self conviction that they were competent to lead a group of people given that they were assigned to leading responsibilities because other persons saw their potential.
A Limited Manager

There were identified five heads and two teachers seeking headship in this group, Participants B, C, F, H, I, O, and P. These types of heads are assigned to headship with preparation little related for the post, and also they had little opportunities to engage in the practice of leadership during their time as classroom teachers. They are referred as limited not because they are professionally incompetent but because it took them more time to enact properly the position in their learning how to lead and manage successfully a school. Participants C, F, and I commented that they "learned to lead by trial and error." The graduate preparation of this head is similar to the second type, the practical manager, however they did not have pertinent opportunities during their accession phase to engage in practical managerial experiences so that they did not develop these skills and have to develop them in their post. These types of heads during their teaching phase focused their graduate preparation in areas related to education but not specifically to school management. They at certain point in their career felt they could make a broader contribution from the position of headteacher as commented by Participant B "I decided to pursue headship because I had good results as teacher and I wanted contribute more to the education provided to our children from a more influential position; however, in the first months as headteacher I felt that my masters in research in education did not equip me theoretically and practically to lead a school."

It is important not to consider their preparation in all cases as a limitation. Participant O pursued a masters degree in learning and teaching and regarded it as helpful in supporting her staff in effective teaching: "it has been helpful because I learned what means effective teaching in math, science, and social studies so that it helps me to support my teachers and give them feedback to design meaningful learning activities for our students." The limitation might be perceived by giving the same amount of points to the variety of masters’ degrees even if they do not relate much and are completely useful for the post of headteacher or are closely related to the core activities of schools, learning and teaching. According to the administrators of the promotion system this type of head is the most common appointed in Mexico since the promotion system does not make mandatory preparation for the post. An administrator of the promotion system identified as Participant T commented "the majority of the applicants do not have graduate preparation in school management [...] there is much variety in the preparation profiles of candidates for headship."
Discussions

Data obtained from the interviews of teachers pursuing headship, school heads, and administrators of the promotion system enabled to identify the professional profiles of newly appointed school heads. A model emerged indicating the types of heads promoted based on two relevant aspects: graduate preparation and a background of meaningful leadership experiences or the lacking of them prior their promotion to headship. From the explanation of the findings and also derived from the emerging typology can be identified general themes of analysis. These themes relate to leadership identity development and leadership preparation and development.
Leadership Identity Development

In this research seemingly most newly appointed heads arrive to the post with an extended classroom teacher identity. That is a professional identity strongly attached to the vision and role conceptualisation of headship from the perspective of a classroom teacher. And, in the cases that had meaningful leadership experiences and preparation in school management start their post with a managerial identity. Professional identity is defined as one's professional self-concept on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Slay and Smith, 2011). School heads in this study did not self defined them as extended classroom teachers; however, it could be inferred from their experiences, especially from those identified as limited managers, that they learnt to lead and manage a school in the post sometimes even by trial and error. This leaves schools without effective leadership for the time their school heads enact properly the position and they feel comfortable leading and managing a school. New heads appointed with an extended classroom identity means that they are mainly professionally familiarised with the job of a classroom teacher. This seems problematic given that the role of school heads implies lead teaching and learning; develop themselves and others; lead improvement, innovation and change; lead the management of the school, engage and work with the community (Jensen et al., 2015). The transition to school principal normally requires newly appointed headteachers to ‘let go’ some of their identity as a teacher and embrace a new identity as a leader of others (Ibarra et al., 2014). In the case of Mexican heads progress to a managerial identity after sometime that they feel comfortable in their position.

In this study were also identified participants that are appointed with a managerial identity. There seems to be present a level of managerial identities because some heads arrive to the post with an already managerial identity developed taking into consideration their graduate preparation in management and their meaningful leadership experiences before appointment as in the case of the potential developed manager. Others arrive to the post with a partial managerial identity as the case of the practical manager and the theoretical manager. The later had just relevant experiences in the practice of leadership lacking meaningful preparation in school management, and the former arrive to the post just with theoretical knowledge of how to lead and manage a school due to their graduate preparation in school management and the lack of exposure to the practice of leadership before their appointment to headship. These partially managerial identities also progress to completely managerial identities when they feel comfortable and professionally perform as needed by their post. There seems not to be a progress to a leadership identity, especially to an instructional leadership identity, when they have been in the post for several years since headteachers have carry most of the time administrative, organisational, and paperwork related tasks. In the legal framework dictating the twenty-four functions and duties of primary school heads eighteen focus mainly on administrative and managerial aspects. The educational system is centralised with the decisions affecting schools made mainly in the ministry of education offices. School heads do not influence the hiring and relocating of teaching,
administrative and supporting staff, the implementation of the curriculum, fund raising, budgeting management, and equipping schools. The progression to a leadership identity implies upgrading the role and functions of school heads to make the position more influential and relevant than currently is since school heads just play intermediate and managerial roles between the ministry of education and the school staff. This progression to a leadership identity also implies training and preparation before promotion and during their time in service.

Leadership Preparation and Development

There seems not to be recognised the importance of leadership preparation and development in Mexico. It is seemingly accepted the idea pointed out by Bush (2005) that good teachers can become effective managers and leaders without specific preparation that is prevalent in countries not giving the needed attention to school leadership. The administrators of the promotion system recognised that most of the applicants for headships have the professional profile of the limited manager. Participants in this study with preparation related to their function as headteachers in the form of the graduate programme in school management regarded it as important for their current role. On the other hand, there were other participants that their graduate preparation was partially related and others expressing that their preparation was totally unrelated. Those considering their preparation was partially related to their functions were participants with a master's degree on learning and teaching. Bush and Jackson (2002) concluded that apparently there is an international curriculum for school leadership preparation for the similarities in content across countries that are giving attention to leadership preparation being the focus on effective teaching and learning the second most important content in the components they found in their study. Robinson et al. (2008) found that "the more [school] leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes" (p. 637). Therefore, an essential component for school leadership preparation is to address effective teaching and learning. The difference between school heads with a master on learning and teaching and educational management is that the latter also gives importance to addressing instructional leadership by including three courses on teaching and learning plus the addressing of topics with specific relevance for school leaders.

Another important factor relevant for leadership development that was evident in this research was leadership learning through meaningful experiences in the practice of leadership before promotion to headship. Hamilton et al., (1996) found that on-the-job experience is a primary source of leaders' learning. Southworth (2004) recognised the importance to provide opportunities for aspirant heads when he acknowledges that "research and experience show that most school leaders believe they learn how to lead by being given opportunities to lead and through on-the-job learning" (p. 345). In the model identified in this research the potential developed manager and the practical manager benefited from meaningful leadership experiences in their accession time. The
opportunities mentioned by the participants were teaching headships, acting headships, district positions, union representative at district level, union official, and community leaders. According to the participants these opportunities had a determinant influence in their seeking of headship. They considered that these opportunities enabled them to gain confidence and develop their leadership abilities. Some participants had the possibility to have two or more of these experiences, and they referred to a gradual leadership learning by the increasing level of responsibilities. For instance a participant expressed that it was not the same to be a teaching head in a rural school with three teachers than to be in a similar position but in an urban school with fifteen teachers. Leithwood et al., (2004) mentioned that the work of school leaders can be conceptualised as practical problem-solving, a type of thinking embedded in activity. Further Leithwood et al., (2004) assert that "[a] significant part of the learning required for such leaders to further develop their practical problem-solving expertise is usefully conceptualised as “situated.” Such learning is specific to the context in which it is learned and most likely to be learned in contexts exactly the same as or closely approximating the situations in which it is to be used. Therefore, these participants experienced leadership and discovered that they were competent to enact the position effectively at least from an organisational and managerial point of view. Another interesting facet to analyse this aspect would be asking other teachers that had these meaningful opportunities however did not look for headship or other leadership positions within the educational system. Perhaps succeeding when these opportunities are given is an indicator of future leadership competence; however, this also must be taken with reserve since some participants mentioned that things were not always easy since they identified areas they needed to develop and improve. Therefore, it seems reasonable to think that teachers with desire to pursue leadership in the system might start looking for leadership opportunities within their school and progress towards higher levels of responsibility either in their school or at district level. However, meaningful opportunities to engage in the practice of leadership as the mentioned above are not vastly spread in the educational system since these opportunities are circumstantial and limited.

Conclusions

In recent educational changes in Mexico emphasis has been given on improving aspects that could improve the quality of education offered to pupils. For instance, in 2008 it was established a standardised exam to assign teaching posts for the most competent teachers in compulsory education. Another action was the reform and introduction of a new national curriculum based on a competency framework. And recently, in the school year 2013-2014 the establishment of collaborative cultures within schools through the school technical councils as a space in which teaching staff and school leaders dedicate a complete day per month to share effective practices, analyse the school's problems, and propose solutions to strengthen professional collaboration. However, despite these changes the development and preparation of schools heads seems to be unattended. In June 2015 a new process to appoint school leaders was established based also on a
standardised exam that evaluates participants in different dimensions concerning the role of school heads in which vacant posts are assigned to participants with the highest scores. Up to these days there are not yet results of these exams to know the scores of participants in the different dimensions assessed. Even though the introduction of this exam seems progression, it is a partial advancement given that aspiring heads are neither required specific preparation for the post nor offered opportunities for their theoretical and practical preparation and development as future heads. Moorosi and Bush (2011) concluded: "[the] less focus on [leadership] preparation means that there is a chance that schools are placed in the hands of unqualified personnel" (p.71). This approach to appoint school heads without previous preparations as in Mexico seems problematic. The reason perhaps is a waste of time in their readiness to enact headship effectively since they have to learn how to lead and manage a school when they are in the post.
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