Climbing up the ladder to headship in Mexican compulsory education: perceptions of The Escalafón, the point-based system currently used in Mexico to appoint school heads, an exploration in elementary schools.

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Abstract

There is evidence from empirical research that effective school leaders have a positive influence on activities at the heart of school improvement, teaching and learning. Effective school leadership is a priority world-wide and governments are investing resources to identify, train, develop and appoint well-prepared school leaders. Mexico, as in many countries in Latin America, has established a vertical point-based system to appoint school leaders. The system is administered by both government and union officials in a joint commission on promotion. In this vertical point-based system, teachers seeking a headship are promoted taking into consideration years of experience, qualifications, continuous development and training, and assessment of their teaching practice. This research explored the strengths and areas of possible improvement of the promotion system along with other central elements of school leadership which are being addressed and given especial attention at international level as it is the case of leadership talent identification, leadership training and development, and leadership learning.

Key terminology: leadership, appointment of school leaders, leadership preparation, talent identification, leadership learning.

Thematic area: Continuing Professional Development (Formacion y Desarrollo Profesional de Docentes)
INTRODUCTION

The importance of school leadership in ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people has been demonstrated repeatedly in research, and is a key policy priority for governments worldwide (NCSLCS, 2009). Governments around the world are devoting unparalleled resources to develop aspiring school leaders, as well as those who are already in the role (Leithwood and Day, 2007). School leaders play a key role in the way education is delivered since they can influence the conditions that help or hinder educational practices in schools. There is evidence from research that school leaders influence the activities that are at the heart of educational endeavours such as teaching and learning. It has been demonstrated that after the classroom teacher, school leaders are the next most influential factor in improving student outcomes (Owings et al., 2005; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007; Thorton, 2007; Day et al., 2009; NCSLCS, 2009; Louise et al., 2010). There has been verification of how in schools with effective school leaders, teachers improve their practices at a greater pace than those with less effective leadership (Beteille et al., 2009). It has also been reported that effective school leaders can be very influential in improving schools serving the most disadvantaged students (SREB, 2010).

Implementing a process of choosing an effective school leader is one of the most significant decisions an educational system has to make, as new leadership can propel a school forward in meeting its goals (Clifford, 2010). A school leader is responsible for successfully leading students, staff, and parents within an environment of multiple functions. Due to the value of the role of school leaders in leading schools to exemplary status, the importance of implementing processes to appoint effective headteachers who are committed to the success of their students has been a priority of educational systems. Currently, school leaders in many countries face a demand of higher levels of achievement on student standardised tests as proof of improvement, along with the daily challenges of the multiple functions a head has to carry out. That is why Internationally the training of aspiring heads shows a recognised concern to prepare and equip them with the theoretical, methodological and technical knowledge and skills to better accomplish their job (Brundrett and Crawford, 2008; Bush, 2008; Brundrett et al., 2006).
One of the main reasons to study the process of appointing headteachers in Mexico is due to the not so favourable results in student academic achievement in both national and international evaluations of schools in Mexican compulsory education. This assertion is not to blame school leaders for the recent modest results of students in meeting the academic benchmarks because student academic success is influenced by a complex interaction of factors such as, teaching quality, classroom resources, individual differences in learning preferences and strategies, sociocultural factors, socioeconomic status, just to name a few. However, the comment is with the intention to see the educational system as a whole and make the improvements in the needed areas, including school leadership as an essential component. It has been demonstrated over and over that school leadership strengthening needs to be considered as a priority due to the critical role played by headteachers on student achievement and school effectiveness as usually there is no a good school without good school leader. A second reason to carry out a study regarding the process of appointing school leaders in Mexico is that the current process was established in the early seventies, and it has remained the same without any improvement. There has been long time of being implemented, and there is a lack of research regarding the appropriateness to appoint heads by this system to lead schools in the twenty-first century. The aim of this research is to explore through the perceptions of current heads, teachers seeking a headship and CNME officials its strengths and shortcomings along how key aspects of school leadership such as leadership talent identification, leadership training and development, and leadership learning are strengthened or hindered under the current system to appoint school leaders. The theoretical framework used to frame the research, analyse the findings, and theorise was the literature in school leadership and school improvement.

METHODOLOGY

The research was framed as an exploratory case study given that this design enabled to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of aspirant headteachers, incumbent heads, government officials and union officials in relation to the process implemented in
Mexico to appoint school leaders. This proposed study sought to answer four central interrelated research questions which were used to guide and focus the research:

- Which are the strengths of the Mexican point-based system to appoint school leaders?
- Which are the shortcomings of the current system to appoint school leaders?
- Which are the perceptions of heads, teachers in transition to headship, and administrators of the jointly promotion commission on how the current system established for the appointment of school heads enables the appointment of effective school leaders?
- Which are the perceptions of participants in the study regarding how the current system to appoint school leaders enables leadership talent identification, training and development for leadership, and leadership learning?
- Overall, how could the current system to appoint school leaders, and in general in Mexican compulsory education could be improved with regards to appointing better prepared school leaders?

Methodological strategy, according to Mason (2002), is "the logic by which you go about answering your research question [and] it is the logic which underpins the way you design your research project as a potential answer to your research questions" (p. 30). Thereafter, the most suitable approach to answer the proposed research questions was through a qualitative framework using the methodology of case study. This study also followed a humanistic approach which seeks to gather and theorise from the experience of those who are leaders and locate them within specific, social, cultural and historical settings (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002; Ribbins, 2003). The assumption guiding this approach is that every person has their own unique way of perceiving and understanding the world, and that the things they do are compatible with their perceptions.
The present study was approached from the qualitative paradigm as an exploratory case study. Qualitative research emphasises qualities of entities the processes and meaning that occur naturally (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). In the case of being an exploratory case study, this type of research is recommended when very little prior research has been conducted on a phenomenon (Mayer and Greenwood, 1980). Hence, the adoption of an exploratory approach here was justified.

Interviews were used as the main method of data collection because of its appropriateness as method for exploratory research and the humanistic approach. It was explored through the method of semi-structured interviews, the strengths and areas of possible improvement of the current process implemented to appoint school leaders in Mexico, and how through this process of nominating school leaders, school leadership is strengthened or hindered on its different facets such as leadership talent identification, leadership training and development and leadership learning. Interviews enabled to explore in-depth all these issues through the voices of those who are directly involved in the administration of the programme as well as those pursuing a headship, and incumbent heads. There were interviewed three administrators of the Joint National Commission for Teacher Promotion, 8 teachers pursuing headship, and 10 incumbent heads. The interviews were recorded in Spanish, and accurately translated into English and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was the procedure adopted in the analysis of interview transcripts.

Lincoln and Guba (1988) argue that a researcher can only persuade his or her audience that the inquiry is worthwhile if the research findings are trustworthy. For this research, a part of trustworthiness was addressed when the interview questions were piloted in a first stage. Another form to address trustworthiness was by respondent triangulation at the moment to conduct the interviews in which participants were asked the same questions. By asking the same questions to the different participants, researchers seek patterns of commonality as well as points of difference of the same topics. The current research was also carried out to the highest ethical standards of the British Educational Association (2004) such as informed consent, participants' personal privacy, and participants' right to withdraw.
FINDINGS

The 21 participants reflected on the positive aspects of the current system to appoint school leaders in Mexico, its shortcomings, on how it enables talent identification, training and development, and leadership learning; furthermore, they expressed their opinion on how the current system could be improved and what should be done in Mexican compulsory education to appoint better school leaders.

The first research question on the strengths of the point-based system to select headteachers found 6 themes from the responses of all participants. The participants perceived that the strengths are an increased trust in the system (n=17), there are opportunities for all teachers to participate for a headship post (n=14), the system promotes academic preparation (n=8), and also continuous professional development (n=10), and participants seeking headship are holistically assessed in several aspects (n=7).

The second research question was set with the intention to have a critical perspective of the current system. This question aimed at gathering the perceptions of participants on the shortcomings they perceived. On this subject, 8 themes emerged from the responses of participants: the system promotes credentialism (n=17), there is a lack of previous preparation for the post (n=8), headship is not attractive at early stages of teaching service (n=4), the system needs more transparency (n=8), ethical and attitudinal performance is not evaluated (n=6), the assessment of teaching performance is not real (n=9), and information of vacant posts sometimes do not arrive on time (n=4).

In the third research question participants reflected and shared their views and experiences on how the current system enables or does not enable the promotion of effective school heads. This question was approached with a neutral perspective without assuming the system enables or do not enable the appointment of competent heads. In the case that the system enables the promotion of competent heads the themes that emerged were: most heads appointed through the Escalafon are regarded as good (n=12), it enables the promotion of experienced teachers (n=8), and successful deputy headships enable the appointment of competent heads (n=8). In the case that
the system hinders the promotion of competent heads the themes that emerged were: headteachers are only appointed based on a high score in points (n=14), deficiency in preparedness in leadership, management, and people skills (n=12), and lack of practical meaningful experiences in leading and managing (n=8).

The fourth research question was aimed at gathering the views of the respondents on how the point-based system enables leadership talent identification, training and development in leadership, and leadership learning. Three interview questions encompassed the topics addressed by this question; hence, the findings were presented as they emerged in every interview question. In interview question 4 participants pointed out that exists an informal process of talent identification carried out at school level to fill temporary leadership posts (n=18). In the case of interview question 5, it was expressed that preparation for leadership and management is not compulsory even though there is an academic programme in this area in a local university (n=10), and there is an expressed need for preparation and training in leadership and management (n=21). In question 6, emerged that leadership learning occurs basically in the post (n=19) and in many cases by trial and error.

The last research question was aimed at gathering the views of the respondents on how the current process to appoint school leaders could be improved and what should be done in Mexican compulsory education to appoint better prepared school leaders. Two interview questions were asked to all participants to address the topics of this research question. In interview question 7 some of the recommendations relate to the shortcomings of the system found in the second research question. The theme that emerged was the need to implement a panel composed by parents, teachers and educational authorities to interview participants pursuing a headship (n=10), and also to check their professional performance. In interview question 8, participants recommend the need to strengthen leadership preparation before promotion and during incumbency (n=18) complemented with a certification programme (n=9) for incumbent heads and the rotation of headteachers (n=4) after some years of headship.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Escalafon or point-based system was created as an initiative to appoint school leaders, and it was created with the assumption that under this model is enabled the appointment of competent heads. The first positive aspect expressed by the participants is the trust in its proper implementation has increased following the established regulations and procedures. This perception contrasts with the negative stigma reported in the literature of how school leaders in Mexican compulsory education in the past seemed to be appointed without following the established norms, and with a big influence in of the teachers union (e.g Raimers, 2006; Hevia et al., 2010; Guevara and Gonzalez, 2004). Also, teachers in Mexico are entitled to participate for a leadership post under the Escalafon which was perceived as a positive aspect mainly due to the improper implementation of this system in past years. This perception that all teachers have the opportunity to participate for a leadership post should be understood in the context that preceded the previous non-transparent practices to appoint school leaders in which regulations and procedures used not to be followed. Favouring the academic preparation and qualifications by giving to them high scores enables participants seeking a promotion to strengthen their theoretical knowledge and skills. It seems that the assumption guiding the value given to preparation is that the more academically prepared newly appointed heads arrive to the post the better headteachers they will be. This seems to be aligned to the common agreement that aspiring school leaders should receive academic preparation and formation in order to generate peak performance in their roles (Matters, 2005), and that effective educational leadership emanates from school leaders demonstration of knowledge (Thomas and Bainbridge, 2002). Participants also consider that another positive aspect of this system is that teachers seeking a leadership post are continuously engaged in professional development which favours the acquisition of up to date knowledge and new skills. Desimone (2009) points out that professional development increases teachers’ knowledge and skills and/or changes their attitudes and beliefs. Another aspect that emerged in this research is that holistic assessment of participants in a competition favours a comprehensive evaluation in several aspects which seems to favour the appointment of competent heads. The Escalafon evaluates knowledge (45%), aptitude (25%) from which 20% represents...
initiative assessed in the annual teaching evaluation report, and 5% other activities, years of service (20%), discipline and punctuality (10%). All factors and sub factors, accumulated in a general score expressed in points, were regarded as positive and may enable the promotion of good school leaders. This supports the notion that for the evaluation of leadership potential should be considered several aspects.

In relation to its shortcomings the responses from the respondents in this section seem to confirm the need to restructure the system implemented in Mexico to appoint school leaders if is intended to promote better prepared school heads. As the system gives high value to academic preparation and continuous professional development, it was perceived that this high emphasis promotes credentialism in which aspiring school leaders pursue courses, diplomas and graduate programmes sometimes just with the intention to accumulate points. Jonasson (2006) points out that under credentialism people focus on seeking credentials rather than specific professional knowledge or skills. The lack of preparation for the post and leadership has also as important shortcoming even with the strong emphasis on academic preparation and continuous training. Bush (2008) argues that headship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation. This is aligned with the findings of Daresh and Male (2000) comparative study of first year school heads in Britain and the United States in which is pointed out the culture of shock of moving into headship for the first time facing newly appointed heads. The perceived lack of interest of Mexican teachers to purse a leadership post in their early stages of the career also emerged as an important shortcoming as they raised the lack of economic incentives as a factor that prevent classroom teachers to pursue a leadership post after they have increased their salary though Carrera Magisterial, a programme in which is easier to advance as classroom teacher than in a leadership position. This raises the debate for the need to either restructure Carrera Magisterial and also to increase the economic incentives to make leadership posts more attractive. Another theme that arose was that the evaluation of teaching performance, as part of the factors that are assessed under the current system to appoint school leaders, was perceived by participants in the study of not being real. A common practice is to give the highest score to most teachers because there are not mechanisms to know if other schools evaluate teachers with the required rigor. The
current promotion system implemented in Mexico seems to match the problems that school districts in several states in the USA had in the 1980s as it was reported by Brandt (1995). It is worth remembering that the Mexican ladder system was established in the 1970s and still is functioning with the same rules and procedures; therefore, teaching practice seems to need an upgrading. There is also a concern regarding the evaluation of ethical performance of candidates pursuing headship. It seems to be superficial and subjective and also the current system does not forbid the participation in competitions to those candidates who have not had an acceptable professional behaviour during their career as classroom teachers. Participants also considered that the system still needs more transparency because some of them mentioned that have witnessed unhappy applicants for the score some applicants get. In this aspect, participants consider that there should be implemented mechanisms to guarantee that applicants know how their files and those of other participants were evaluated. Another shortcoming expressed is that the information of vacant posts does not arrive timely to schools giving little time to apply. Finally, it emerged that there is a need to upgrade some of the regulations especially those of part 5, factors of promotion; for participants there should not be a limit in the number of points that are awarded in the factors knowledge and years of service.

This research project also aimed, on a balanced perspective, to identify from the participant's perspective how the current system of promotion enables or does not enable the promotion of well-prepared school heads. In relation to the aspects that enable the appointment of well-prepared heads, it was expressed that most heads appointed through the Escalafon are considered good emerged as positive factor of the current system of promotion in which other experiences as successful deputyships or temporary leadership posts perhaps have an influence in the promotion of competent heads. The term 'good heads' needs to be taken with reserve given that as it has been described in the literature good heads in Mexico are considered those who follow the established norms within a managerial administrative approach of leadership as it has been pointed out by other researchers (e.g Barrientos and Taracena, 2008). The promotion of experienced teachers was also considered a positive aspect of this system given that teaching in several schools and in different contexts enables that applicants
for headship bring to the position a wide repertoire of experiences. At the same time successful deputyships in environments of shared and distributed leadership were also a source of promotion of well-prepared heads in the sense that facilitated their leadership learning on their journey to headship. On the other hand, in relation to the aspects that does not enable the appointment of well-prepared heads, it emerged that base the promotion on just the accumulation of points is a narrow criterion if it is expected that schools are to be lead and managed by competent heads. In the same vein, it emerged that newly appointed heads reach the post deficiently prepared in leadership, management and people skills even with the strong emphasis on preparation. In this regard, there is evidence that high-quality leadership is vital for school improvement and school improvement. In England, it was demonstrated by PrincewaterhouseCoopers (2007) that after the classroom teachers, school leaders are the most influential factor in improving student outcomes. And, also closely related to the previous theme, it emerged that newly appointed heads in general arrive to the post with insufficient practical experiences in leadership and management, which gives an idea of the state of development of school leadership in Mexico.

This research also intended to explore how the current system of promotion enables talent identification, training and development for leadership and leadership learning. It is evident from the findings of this research question that in relation to talent identification there is not a specific programme to identify potential school heads such as in other countries (e.g Finland, England, or Singapore). The identification of future headteachers in Mexico happens indirectly when classroom teachers are assigned to temporary leadership posts or are assigned to temporary leadership posts. In some cases these experiences as acting heads enable that teachers continue their academic preparation in order to compete for a leadership post through the Escalafon. In relation to preparation and training for school leadership, the emergent themes were that there is available preparation and training in school management, the closest related to school leadership, in the form of Masters programmes. However, even though there is training available, it also emerged that under the current system to appoint school leaders preparation in leadership and management is not mandatory. For training and preparation for leadership, a core finding was the unanimous concern of the 21
participants in the study that teachers pursing headship do not receive training and preparation in leadership before promotion. Finally, with regards to leadership learning, it emerged in the present study that Mexican primary heads learn to lead and manage schools basically in the post.

This research also aimed at exploring on how the current process to appoint school leaders in Mexico could be improved. Respondents suggested that a possible way to improve the current version to appoint school leaders is through the implementation of a panel composed by parents and teaching staff of the school where the vacant position exist, and educational authorities in order to interact with applicants and know how they could improve the school they want to lead. A certification programme was also proposed by the participants in the current study. This suggestion seems to be more comprehensive since it implies preparation and continuous certification in leadership knowledge and skills. Rotation during incumbency, after some years as headteacher in a school, was another suggestion that participants considered could improve the appointment of better prepared school heads; however, this recommendation should be taken with care analysing both positive and negative aspects for headteachers and schools.

As conclusion, this research project enabled to explore the positives and shortcomings of the Mexican system to appoint school heads along with others core components of school leadership that are being addressed and given special attention at international level such as talent identification, training and development for leadership and leadership learning. This study has provided findings that enabled an extensive discussion by comparing and contrasting them with pertinent literature. The study concludes that there is a need to upgrade the current system of appointing school leaders in Mexico given that the system was established almost 40 years ago. In this upgrading should be incorporated leadership development and training as a key component. This will enable better prepared school heads and at the end the improvement of student outcomes.
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