

THE APPROPRIATENESS OFF APPOINTING SCHOOL HEADS THROUGH THE VERTICAL *ESCALAFON*, AN EXPLORATION IN PRIMARY 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 worldwide and governments are investing resources to identify, train, develop and appoint well-prepared school leaders. This exploratory case study is a critique of the Mexican system for appointing school leaders. The study is a qualitative research which used semistructured interviews to collect data pertaining the strengths, shortcomings, and possible improvements of the Mexican point-based system to appoint school leaders. The study revealed that there are some positive aspects in the Mexican system that could enable its consolidation. The study found a need to upgrade the

current system of promotion since school leaders in Mexico are appointed by a system in which its regulations and procedures were promulgated almost 40 years ago. The current system of promotion does not enable the appointment of prepared school leaders, since preparation for the post is not mandatory. The study also explored other topics such as talent identification, preparation, and leadership learning. From these aspects, when compared to what is currently done at international level, it was evident that Mexico still needs to do more.

KEY TERMINOLOGY: leadership, appointment of school leaders, leadership preparation, talent identification, leadership learning.

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. 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). 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 (Thorton, 2007; Day 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). Therefore, 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). That is why internationally the training of aspiring heads shows a recognized concern to prepare and equip them with the theoretical, methodological and technical knowledge and skills to better accomplish their job (Bush, 2008). 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. However, the assertion 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. Another 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 was to explore through the perceptions of current heads, teachers seeking a headship and the officials of the commission on promotion the process implemented in Mexico to appoint school leaders. This 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 participants 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?

Methodology

The most suitable approach to answer the proposed research questions was through 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. 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. Trustworthiness was addressed when the interview questions were piloted in a first stage and by respondent triangulation at the moment to conduct the interviews in which participants were asked the same questions. The current research was also carried out to the highest ethical standards of the British educational research.

Findings

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

The second research question aimed at gathering the perceptions of participants on the shortcomings they perceived. On this subject, 8 themes emerged: 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), and the assessment of teaching performance seemingly is not real (n=9).

In the third research question participants reflected on how the current system enables or does not enable the promotion of prepared heads. This question was approached with a neutral. In the case that the system enables the promotion of competent heads the themes that emerged were: many 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 system enables leadership talent identification, training and development in leadership, and leadership learning. The participants pointed out that exists an informal process of talent identification carried out at school level to fill temporary leadership posts (n=18). It was expressed that preparation for leadership and management is not compulsory (n=10), and there is an expressed need for preparation and training in leadership and management (n=21), and 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 could be done in Mexican compulsory education to appoint better prepared school leaders. 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. Participants also 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

The *Escalafon* 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 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). Also,

teachers holding tenure in Mexico are entitled to participate for leadership posts under this system was perceived as another positive aspect. This perception 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. Favours 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. Desimone (2009) points out that professional development enable the change on participants' attitudes and beliefs and also the development of new skills. Another aspect that emerged is that the assessment of participants in several aspects 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.

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. 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 emerged as an 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 pursue a leadership post in their early stages of the career also emerged as a shortcoming as they

raised the lack of economic incentives as a factor that prevent classroom teachers to pursue

leadership posts after they have increased their salary through *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* or to increase the economic incentives to make leadership posts more attractive. Another theme that arose was that the evaluation of teaching performance is seemingly unreal. 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. 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 performance 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.

This research also aimed to identify 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, participants expressed that many heads appointed through the *Escalafon* are considered good 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 because in the literature good heads in Mexico are considered those who follow the established norms within a managerial administrative approach of leadership (Barrientos and Taracena, 2008). The promotion of experienced teachers was also considered a positive aspect given that having taught 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 considered a source of promotion of well-prepared heads in the sense that facilitated their leadership learning on their journey to headship. 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. 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 after classroom teachers, school leaders are the most influential factor in improving student outcomes (e.g. Thorton, 2007; Day et al., 2009). 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.

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 that in relation to talent identification there is not a specific programme to identify potential school heads 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 *Escalafón*. In relation to preparation and training, the emergent themes were that there is available preparation and training in school management in the form of Masters programmes. However, even though there is training available, it also emerged that under the current system 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 pursuing headship do not receive systematic training and preparation in leadership before promotion.

Finally, with regards to leadership learning, the present study suggests that Mexican 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, teaching staff and educational authorities in order to interact more with applicants. 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.

Conclusion

As conclusion, this research 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 to enable the appointment of better prepared school heads.

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