

The Agency of Local Actors in the Policy of Teacher Professionalization: An Ethnographic Case Study in Hidalgo, Mexico

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Abstract: The objective of this research report was to understand the changes in the teacher professionalization policy from the perspective of the authorities at the Escuela Normal Superior Pública Del Estado de Hidalgo. A qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach was employed, gathering information through an in-depth interview with the school's fourth director and the review of official documents. The analysis was conducted using Bertely's five ethnographic documents. The theoretical framework considered the contributions of public policy by Ostrom and Poteete (2012). The findings reveal that the policy changes due to social factors.

Key words: authorities, policy, teacher professionalization

1. Introduction

In Mexico, “escuelas normales” are institutions responsible for providing pedagogical training to basic education teachers, which includes preschool, elementary school, and middle school levels. In the Mexican educative context, teacher education has been a relevant topic to promote student learning. Throughout the years, diverse policies have been implemented, aimed at enhancing the initial and ongoing education of teachers, with the purpose of preparing them to face the obstacles and the requirements of a constantly changing society (Imbernón, 2021; Camacho & Legaspi, 2023; Legaspi & Camacho, 2023).

The teacher professionalization in Mexico has been a dynamic process, defined by various stages; therefore, it is necessary to analyze the connection between teacher professionalization and teacher federalization, since they have acquired various meaning over the country's history

Rodríguez & Meza (2011) emphasize the ambiguity of the term “federalize”, associated with centralization and decentralization process; an example of that was the creation of Department of Public Education (SEP) in 1921, which established a national educative system, and strengthened the centralization of educational control from the center to the periphery.

The seventies began with a decentralization process aimed to reduce administrative bureaucracy and government spending. This trend continued in the nineties with the signing of the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education (ANMEB), which delineated distinct roles between the federal government and the states; despite discussions of decentralization, the states assumed a limited operational role (Arnaut, 1998;

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Camacho, 2001).

The ANMEB (1992) marked a turning point in educational policy by establishing a division of responsibilities: the federal government was assigned roles such as setting regulatory standards, determining the content of textbooks, and directing teacher training, while state entities were responsible for implementing the decisions made at the federal level.

Ernesto Zedillo's federal government (1994-2000) emphasized the need for renewing and improving the active teachers, which leads to the issuance of agreements 284 and 269. This led to the mixed modality, which learning process occurred during weekends and school break periods (Hernández, 2023).

In 2001, authorities in the state of Hidalgo create the Escuela Normal Pública del Estado de Hidalgo (ENSUPEH), with the purpose of instruct classroom teachers without a professional profile, based on federal agreements 284 and 269.

In 2011, ENSUPEH fused with the Centro de Estudios Superiores del Magisterio (CESUM), from this moment, bachelor's degree in the school-based mode were offered on a standard calendar, that aspect transform the institution's approach on recent high school graduates.

As a result, the following questions arise: What changes did the dynamics of ENSUPEH present after the merger of both institutions? What factors are these modifications associated with? How does the school director's statement explain the reconfiguration of the student population?

Public policy specialists, such as Aguilar (1992), mention that there is a "clear centralization, given the subordination of local governments to the federal government" (p. 35). Therefore, it is important to study this case because it helps to understand the factors related to the reconfiguration of teacher professionalization policies.

Based on the above, the following research question arises: What factors contributed to the reconfiguration of the student population at ENSUPEH? What impact do the measures taken by the federal government have on the life and direction of the institution? How does the process of federalization materialize through the participation of local institutional authorities? How does electoral activity influence decisions that should be planned and agreed upon in advance?

The study was conducted using a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach, characterized by understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the subjects experiencing them. Ethnography enriches the understanding of public policy within the context in which it is developed (García, 2015); facilitating the analysis of Federal Government regulation and its implementation in the case of ENSUPEH.

The instruments used were a review of official documents issued by federal and state authorities and an interview with the current director of the institution to learn about their experiences

We used Bertley's five ethnographic instruments (2007) for the analysis. First, we transcribed and analyzed the interview, integrating excerpts from official documents. Next, we identified and highlighted emergent patterns through detailed reading. Based on these patterns, we established analysis categories, organized and coded the information, and created analytical tables. We then generated inferences and hypotheses using these organized social categories. Finally, we applied a triangulation approach to connect empirical data, interpretations, and existing theories. This methodological approach allowed us to conduct a thorough and contextualized analysis of teacher professionalization policies, focusing on the case of ENSUPEH.

2. Central Decision: Rise of the Mixed Modality

Aguilar (1992) argues that public policies are a set of actions that guide the achievement of objectives considered essential to meet common needs in this sense, the policy of teacher professionalization led to the creation of the mixed modality for the training of in-service and non-profile teachers, under which ENSUPEH was established.

Aguilar (1992) argues that public policies are a set of actions that guide the achievement of objectives considered essential to meet common needs. One type of public policy is educational policy, which is defined as a set of government actions aimed at transforming the educational reality (INEE-IIPE UNESCO, 2018). These actions can be created by international, private, and non-governmental organizations; they can also arise from and be implemented by local or national governments.

Far from being top-down decisions that faithfully reach the grassroots, educational policy involves actors with agency capacity who have their own resources and modify the initial proposals to define and achieve their objectives. This participation or agency of educational actors without power in the centralist dynamic can steer the course differently from what was originally designed. These actors, who are only considered to implement what has already been agreed upon by the political and bureaucratic elite, have been called “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1999).

An educational policy includes at least three elements: the identification and justification of the problem, the purpose to be achieved, and the set of assumptions that explain how it will be accomplished. In this sense, educational purposes can be associated with and addressed through economics, political science, administration, law, ethics, etc. (Espinoza, 2009).

From this perspective, the policy of teacher professionalization has been diverse across the country, depending on specific conditions and actors with particular characteristics. In the case of Hidalgo, the hybrid modality for the training of in-service and unqualified teachers was introduced, under which ENSUPEH was created. This decision, in some way, responded to a central policy.

In the early years following its establishment, ENSUPEH experienced high demand, resulting in excessive growth. As one informant mentioned: “the school began to gain recognition, and many teachers and administrators in service who needed their degree started attending the normal school.” In response to this notable growth, educational authorities in the state of Hidalgo requested the expansion of the mixed modality offerings and managed the implementation of the Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Education with a specialization in Telesecundaria:

“Letter addressed to Dr. Bernardo Espino Del Castillo Barrón, requesting authorization for the Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria, 1999 Plan, mixed modality” [Letter DGESPE/1576/2015, June 23, 2015].

The above demonstrates that policies are not always implemented in a linear and top-down manner from the federal to the state level; initiatives and adjustments can also arise from the local level to the federal level. This bottom-up approach can be observed in the management of the ENSUPEH director:

It was notified that the Escuela Normal Superior Pública del Estado de Hidalgo is authorized to register the relevant studies with the General Directorate that you oversee, in accordance with Articles 3, 5, 7, and 16 of the Law for the Coordination of Higher Education and the State Authorization Agreement dated March 23, 2015, issued by the Ministry of Public Education of Hidalgo. [Official Letter DGESPE/1576/2015, June 23, 2015]

This process demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of educational policies, where local needs and decisions can influence and modify federal directives. The intervention of educational programs highlights the importance of local participation and management in the implementation of public policies. In this regard, Ostrom and Poteete (2012) emphasize the importance of involving diverse social actors rather than imposing solutions from higher levels of authority. They point out that every public policy has a causal chain of decision-making and actions with rules that affect other areas throughout the policy process. This means that although the Federal Government established the policy for teacher professionalization and emphasized training for in-service teachers without professional qualifications, the implementation within each entity was unique due to the modifications made by social actors in the educational field.

ENSUPEH was created with the intention of training in-service teachers, regulated by agreements 284 and 269. The mixed modality had a special calendar, with activities taking place on weekends and during vacation periods, shaping the initial years of the educational institution. However, over time, this modality gradually declined, as expressed by the school director:

In the mixed modality, the demand for some specializations began to decrease. For example, we had no demand in training; we no longer had applicants for English or History.

The demand naturally declined. The specializations in Mathematics and Spanish were no longer as popular as before when the groups were overcrowded, with slightly more than thirty students. Later, the demand decreased to twelve or thirteen. On one occasion, a group was opened with twelve students, but unfortunately, since it was a bachelor's degree pursued over six years, personal circumstances led to students gradually dropping out. By the end of the six years, the group of twelve had dwindled to six or fewer. Consequently, the state authorities realized that this situation was no longer feasible.

This situation made the authorities aware of the infeasibility of continuing with this modality. From the "pluralistic" perspective, public policy is considered a coordinated adjustment among different parties (Valencia, 2020, p. 126). This approach allows for the participation of other social actors, such as citizens, in modifying policies to fit local realities.

However, this situation reflects the trend observed at the national level. Medrano and Ramos (2019) analyzed the enrollment in teacher training colleges nationwide and concluded that there was a reduction in the average annual growth rate of -6.4% during Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012–2018) due to changes in the admission criteria for the educational system. According to Flores (2020), graduates from teacher training colleges, upon completing their initial training, will have to undergo an evaluation for entry into the Professional Teaching Service [Diario Oficial de la Federación, September 4, 2018].

The above shows that enrollment in the mixed modality, both in ENSUPEH and nationwide, decreased. In the particular case of this teacher training college, starting from the 2013-2014 school year, the lack of demand in the mixed modality led to changes in the school life of ENSUPEH.

In the mixed modality, starting around 2013 or 2014, the number of students applying to enroll began to decrease. Over time, all the specializations started to disappear; some specializations vanished gradually due to a lack of demand. Physics and Chemistry disappeared first, followed by Geography, then History, and so on.

Overall, the enrollment in bachelor's programs in the mixed modality gradually decreased until the initial objective of their creation "the updating, training, and professional advancement of in-service teachers" was lost. According to Medrano and Ramos (2019), several educational programs in teacher training colleges underwent a

liquidation process.

The opposite happened with the Bachelor's Degree in Middle School Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria, which maintained a significant percentage of enrolled students due to the appeal of better economic and job stability compared to other specializations. According to the director of ENSUPEH, the factors associated with the number of hours of their initial position upon entry into the National Educational System are:

The high demand for telesecundaria is because the initial position is 30 hours, whereas in another bachelor's degree or specialization, when they participate in USICAM¹, they receive a maximum initial position of 22 hours, some get 19 hours, others 16 hours, and there are even some who have been given positions of 12 hours.

The high demand for the Bachelor's Degree in Middle School Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria, offered in the mixed modality, is due to the economic stability provided by this educational level. Degante et al. (2019) note that almost all teachers working at this level enjoy better employment conditions compared to their colleagues in general Middle school education, since "the service is designed to operate with one teacher per grade, and the size of these schools is relatively small" (p. 56), whereas general Middle school teachers only have hourly contracts.

The Telesecundaria specialization offers full-time or three-quarters-time contracts, ensuring greater economic and professional stability for teachers. Moreover, the average monthly salary of telesecundaria teachers is usually higher than general Middle school teachers, who often have unstable incomes due to their hourly contracts. These contractual advantages make the Bachelor's Degree in Middle school Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria a highly attractive option for aspiring teachers (Degante et al., 2019).

The largest number of students enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Middle school Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria aligns with the results obtained by Medrano and Ramos (2019), who noted that in the national registry, "the largest number of students were enrolled in the telesecundaria specialization" (p. 68).

The various specializations in the mixed modality are experiencing a decline, with the exception of the Bachelor's Degrees in Middle school Education with a Specialization in Telesecundaria and in Mathematics, which were the only ones offered in the 2018-2019 school year. In the 2019-2020 school year, only the telesecundaria specialization was available, as noted by the school's director:

The last time a call for applications was issued, there was a demand for 31 candidates for telesecundaria, and these were the last generation. However, we risked not receiving enrollment because, three or four days later, Mr. Taurino, Head of the Department of Normal Education, called me and said there was a problem: we were not going to receive enrollment for the mixed modality. I asked him, "How?" and he informed me that I would have to sign an agreement stating that this would be the last generation. Mr. Taurino did not want to cancel it, saying, "The spirit of ENSUPEH is the mixed modality," because it was the modality with which it was created. However, there came a point when federal authorities no longer supported the mixed modality because they did not update the 1999 curriculum plan and program.

The mixed modality with which ENSUPEH was established did not experience any modifications in the 1999 curriculum plan and program. From the first to the last generation in this teaching modality, it lacked curricular updates.

¹ It is the Unit of the System for the Career of Teachers (USICAMM), an administrative agency with technical, operational, and management autonomy. This body, affiliated with the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (SEP), is responsible for the recruitment and career advancement of teachers. It oversees horizontal promotions (such as moving up within the education levels with added incentives in elementary and middle education) and vertical promotions (such as promotions to higher positions). Its goal is to recognize and support educational practice.

Díaz Barriga (2021) highlighted that teacher-training colleges experienced a period of marginalization in educational policy, leading to a reduction in their financial resources and, in a way, anticipating their disappearance. This problem was worsened by the 2013 constitutional reform, which established that obtaining a teaching position required only passing an exam and being a graduate of any higher education program.

In the case under study, ENSUPEH altered its approach due to the low demand for the mixed modality and the growth of the school-based modality.

Currently, the teacher training college serves a large number of students, primarily recent high school graduates and children from families who attend their classes during the week. This change brought a new dimension to the daily life of ENSUPEH, adapting to new needs and demands.

3. Local Determination: Exponential Growth of the School-Based Modality

The merger of the Centro de Estudios Superiores del Magisterio (CESUM) and the Escuela Normal Pública del Estado de Hidalgo (ENSUPEH) had a significant impact on the trajectory of ENSUPEH, as it began to offer various bachelor's degrees in the school-based modality. This change altered the dynamics of the school, providing educational services to a growing number of recent high school graduates who had not yet joined the Educational System.

According to the testimony of the fourth director of the teacher training college, the growth of the school-based modality was the result of a management process carried out in collaboration with Professor Taurino Ramírez Labra, Head of the Department of Teacher Education in the State of Hidalgo:

Everything has its history. It didn't happen overnight; it was something well-thought-out. The management of the bachelor's degrees in the school-based modality had to be well planned with Professor Taurino. It happened because when I arrived as director, I saw that there was a lot of staff, especially in the mixed modality, so there was a surplus of hours, and in the school-based modality, those who had previously been part of CESUM were working.

Therefore, for labor reasons, because the authorities wanted me to make at least fifty percent of the staff available, since there was a surplus, Professor Taurino and I considered that it was necessary. Moreover, the existing demand led to the creation of morning and afternoon shifts in the school-based modality. Many of those who worked in the mixed modality went to study in the morning or afternoon shifts, as it was a necessity.

Professor Taurino and I then went to see the Secretary of Education, Mr. Joel Guerrero. We presented our need and concern to him. The Secretary asked me if we would need more human resources, and I told him no, that we had them, and that he just needed to authorize that all the specialties be offered openly in the school-based modality, and that we would handle it with the staff assigned to the teacher training college.

These management processes carried out by the authorities provided the opportunity for the incorporation of many students into the school-based modality: "Currently, the school-based modality is growing, and more teachers are needed to meet the needs of the enrolled students."

Teacher professionalization policies are not solely implemented through top-down decision-making; they are also shaped by the management at lower levels. Thus, the request for authorization of the bachelor's degrees in different specialties in the school-based modality was approved on June 23, 2015.

AGREEMENT

It is authorized to offer the Bachelor's Degree in Middle school Education, with a Specialization in Telesecundaria, in the school-based and mixed modalities, Plan 1999, and the Bachelor's Degree in Middle School Education, with a

Specialization in English, in the school-based modality, Plan 1999, at the Escuela Normal Superior Pública del Estado de Hidalgo, in the city of Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo. [Oficio DGESPE/1576/2015].

The factors associated with the growth of the school-based modality are linked to local aspects. According to Ostrom and Poteete (2012), it is not possible to isolate each decision-making space from other spheres of the public policy process. This means that although the Federal Government proposed the teacher professionalization policy and highlighted the objectives of training in-service teachers and those without the required profile to be in front of a group, over time, changes occurred due to the surplus of teachers, the high demand for the school-based modality, and the low demand for the mixed modality.

The school director describes how the bachelor's degrees were opened:

At the beginning, in the school-based modality, we only had one building, which is why four specialties were assigned for the morning shift and four for the afternoon shift, with one group per specialty. Therefore, the eight groups that started were four in the morning shift and four in the afternoon shift.

The growth of the school-based modality happened gradually; however, in the 2018-2019 school year, due to a campaign promise by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, we were required to accommodate a large number of students in different specialties:

In 2018, due to the campaign promise of the current president, the authorities demanded that we open as many groups as possible. So we figured out how to organize ourselves and admitted fourteen groups, which are the ones graduating now. In the morning shift, we accommodated two groups of telesecundaria, two groups of mathematics, two groups of Spanish, and one of English, making a total of seven. In the afternoon, we had two groups of telesecundaria, two of biology, one of history, one of geography, and one in teacher training, making another seven. The following year, we could not do the same because we lacked the capacity in terms of classrooms and even staff to handle them.

It is evident that the admission of young people to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is not based on criteria of social relevance but on political considerations. For instance, to meet the needs of the students enrolled during this period.

According to the school director, a significant portion of the students enrolled in the afternoon shift are classroom teachers but have chosen not to enroll in the mixed modality due to its duration, showing a preference for completing their studies in the school-based modality:

However, the afternoon shift helped many who were considering the mixed modality. I told several students, "Hey, you can join the mixed modality," but they said no because it takes six years, whereas here it only takes four. A high percentage of students still work in the morning and study in the afternoon.

It is important to highlight that the teacher professionalization policy that initially led to the creation of ENSUPEH aimed to address the training needs of teachers who were already in the classroom without the proper professional profile. However, as demand decreased and the request for the school-based modality grew, along with the surplus of teachers, these factors drastically changed this policy, shifting it towards the education of students in the school-based modality.

4. Conclusions

According to Ostrom and Poteete (2012), actions are conditioned by the set of rules established at various levels; what can be done at one level is limited by the actions of other levels, which, in turn, are influenced by

what is defined at a higher level, extending to the normative level. In this sense, it is important to consider the analysis of policies within different spheres of action, where each link is governed by a specific set of rules.

The contributions of Ostrom and Poteete (2012) allow for the breakdown of complexity into its basic elements and allow for a reverse progression from the simple to the complex. This approach aims to clarify the interaction patterns among actors within the multi-level hierarchical structure, with a focus on analyzing relationships across different levels.

In the case studied, it is concluded that although the bureaucratic apparatus guides teacher professionalization policies based on the legal framework, this framework directs the processes of training, updating, skill development, and professional advancement through the establishment of norms and curriculum plans, as well as human and financial resources available to achieve objectives.

As part of the study, it was observed that social and political processes modify decision-making paths in educational policy due to the interplay of interconnected networks that shape interactions in other action scenarios (Ostrom & Poteete, 2012). In the case investigated, despite the federal policy's aim to regularize the training of in-service teachers without a professional profile, reality changed over time due to the low demand for the hybrid modality and the high demand for the school-based modality, as well as situational decisions related to, for example, electoral campaigns, the surplus of teaching staff, and the management of educational authorities within the state.

All these elements constituted the factors that reconfigured the organization of ENSUPEH, charting new paths in the policies for training basic education teachers.

Local actors, particularly institutional authorities, played a significant role, thus shifting what the federal government had decided regarding basic education teacher training. The management of the institution's authority, in conjunction with state authorities and social demand, allowed the growth of the school-based modality. In general, the design of teacher professionalization policies for teacher training institutions in Mexico can oscillate between the federal government's guidelines and the practices at various levels of bureaucracy, down to the local level.

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