School Restructuring and New Guidelines for Regulating Teaching Work

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Abstract: This article presents some of the findings of a research project carried out in public elementary schools, within the framework of policies resulting from the National Agreement on the Modernization of Basic Education. Such findings report on the educational reform in its everyday expression. The article contributes to understanding the sociopolitical processes being experienced by schools, and analyzes the effects of strategies to promote new school governance and teacher professionalization: the production of guidelines for restructuring schools and teaching work. By emphasizing the reconstruction of representations and imaginaries regarding professional work, the article reveals the composition and structural processes of teachers.

Key words: teaching work, evaluation, professionalization, knowledge, school governance.

In the early 1990s, given the urgency of integrating Mexico into the dynamics of globalization as an alternative for development, as well as the critical effects of the policies of structural adjustment, government reform could not wait. Growth and economic stability were the priorities of public policy, and the central strategy for stimulating the productivity and efficiency required for participating in international markets was to articulate and subordinate the educational system to the new demands and establish quality control mechanisms (Aboites, 1995; Ibarra, 1999; Noriega, 2000).

As in other Latin American countries, the rhetoric used to impel and legitimate educational reform (a government reform) included the arguments and recommendations of the World Bank as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Government diagnoses and decisions were translated into policies, programs and procedures—requirements of the new contexts of production and worldwide economic dynamics.

Educational decentralization, as a concrete strategy, and new federalism, as a political technology, were defined in harmony with the economic agenda. Largely impelled by government requirements to reduce public spending, the restructuring of the national educational system and the new federal pact implemented in 1992, through the national agreement for the modernization of basic education (Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica, ANMEB), are milestones in the overturn of government policies. Joint
responsibility and participation were key to the state’s repositioning in social regulation. They also represented justification for decentralizing the administrative tasks of an announced financial redistribution, and for allowing the intervention of the private sector in education—explicit matters in subsequent legislative reform, development plans and educational programs.

The promotional discourse of new educational management linked the redistribution of resources with state power; strategically, discourse emphasized the objectives of greater balance among the distinct branches of government and encouraged the intervention of local interest groups in regulation and in policies of assignment. In this sense, the discourse’s rationality made decentralization appear to recognize local needs as well as the return—limited and conditioned—of social responsibilities.

Limits and conditions were defined by normative instruments. In practice, while the federation assumed the functions of regulating, evaluating and compensating, the new regulations committed the participation of state governments in reorganizing the system and distributing resources. In the concrete setting of schools, skillful proposals were introduced, such as the forming of boards for social participation, the strengthening of schools’ technical councils, and the formulation of the school project, which would encourage the transformation of schools from within and from the community.

In spite of the radicalism and speed of the transfer of resources to the state governments and the multiplication of ordinances to put into effect the defined lines of policy in the ANMEB, it was to be expected that given the history and diverse conditions of each federal entity and school, the political/cultural project of the reform would come face to face with the projects defined by local actors. A decade later, research on the generated processes is beginning to become widespread. The research I present in this article was carried out in the framework of the inter-institutional doctoral degree in education based in the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, and was presented as a doctoral thesis entitled Gestión escolar y profesionalización docente. Las respuestas de los profesores en la región Laguna de Coahuila a las propuestas de modernización educativa (“School Governance and the Professionalization of Teachers. Responses from Teachers of Coahuila’s Laguna Region to the Proposals of Educational Modernization”).

Description of the Research

The particular conditions of Coahuila suggested certain forms of ANMEB dynamics and the preceding governmental regulations. Coahuila is a border state, predominantly urban, with public education historically affirmed by economic and sociodemographic indexes. Educational transfer took place in the state during the electoral process and change in administration, which coincided with the opening of the nation’s borders through the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As documented by other research projects (Schmelkes, 1999), the government of Coahuila translated the normative prescriptions into more than 60 programs and projects for which teachers were directly responsible. The call for teachers to become agents of change centered attention on what was happening in the schools and on what events would mean for teachers.
During the 1997-1998 school year— when we began the research— the more than 60 programs and projects implemented by the new administration (under state control) had been reduced to 25. Proposed as lines of priority, these programs and projects were significant references for defining actors and school action. In light of the initiatives underway, there was interest in discovering if teachers identified with the guidelines for restructuring, as well as interest in learning how the provisions to implement them were produced; i.e., how the teachers were deciding if guidelines represented worthwhile options for their involvement, or on the contrary, how they were developing the rules for participating in the definition of their work.

As the research moved forward, I attempted to identify the representations\(^3\) and imaginaries\(^4\) that oriented teachers' actions and the guidelines of school governance, in addition to locating the tensions and sources of tension as well as induced effects. From a sociopolitical perspective, I looked for strategies and positioning from which various political actors, on diverse scales and levels, participate in configuring the field of education: I analyzed the intervention of international financial organizations, government bodies, legal instruments in which prescriptions are deposited, and on the other hand, what I called governance and professionalization regimens; i.e., the dynamics of conceptual formulations that produce hegemonic meanings. I found that school governance and teacher professionalization appeared as emblems\(^5\) of ongoing reform.

On centering the research on the subject and on micro-political dynamics,\(^6\) however, I was encouraged by the possibility of participating in an effort to understand how regulations are produced at various levels of action and how they “normalize” and reconstitute individuals’ guidelines for action (teachers, in this case). They also introduce certain rules of reasoning that guide practical decisions while representing expressions of broader sociopolitical processes.

I decided to document, from the school, professor responses to outside and internal rules regarding homework, responsibilities and conditions for defining a new educational proposal in agreement with the modernization policies and particular context of the Laguna region of Coahuila. The research was carried out in four public elementary schools in Torreón, Coahuila, that occupied a central location in the local conception of “better schools” but yet had characteristics that distinguished them from each other: their relationships with the state administration, local administrative bodies or other schools in their zones; their geographic location and historical founding; the student population and the implications declared in various officially promoted projects and programs.

A prolonged stay— eighteen months in the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years— permitted the observation of multiple and diverse situations: teachers' meetings, technical school board meetings and meetings with parents; civic acts, celebrations and festivities; morning classes, project-related activities, contests, and events concerning evaluation. The identification of the ethical components of the management system in each school required an in-depth approach with the involved actors. In addition to recording informal conversations in a daily log, semi-structured interviews were prepared based on the analytical reconstruction of school micro-policy. Special attention was paid to the dynamics produced by school-project actions (a strategic proposal for new school management) and by evaluations (an articulating element of the management policies and teacher professionalization), as well as the implications and meanings mentioned by teachers.
The analytical reconstruction of school dynamics was organized by taking into account, in first place, the processes of school governance as the context in which the teachers’ work occurs; and in second place, evaluation, as a co-substantial component in redefining such work. Through the ethnographic reconstruction of each school as a case, we obtained particular expressions that were later submitted to a comparative analysis in two categories: guidelines for action and guidelines for regulation prepared from a sociopolitical perspective, in the presence of the double association between government practices (which generate mechanisms and devices that attempt to define order) and schools’ concrete practices: attachments, resistance, replies, the mechanisms of local power and the regulations produced in the daily action of social subjects.

Position and Perspective with Regard to Other Research Studies

Other recent research studies (Alvariño et al., 2000) show proof of efficient schools as the alternative proposed by neo-liberal thinking for transformation; or research shows models of evaluating organizational management and innovative experiences centered on performance indicators that confirm or reject school system efficiency. Other studies have focused on schools’ and teachers’ capacity for innovation (Pérez Gómez et al., 1991). The diagnostics that supported the need for reform (Torres, 2000) reiterate the affirmation of the insensitivity, the indifference or the resistance of teachers to proposals for change.

In Mexico, research on innovation in the context of decentralization (Pardo, 2000) attempted to analyze the degree the design and implementation of novel solutions have favored solving problems of quality and equity. They evaluate the relationship between general government policy and its repercussions in the local sphere in generating innovation. By favoring the reconstruction of processes of design and implementation, these studies assume power resides in the organizations they consider responsible for producing rules and defining desired results. The exclusion of teachers from design establishes them as obstacles or limitations at the time of project definition.

These studies have two coinciding suppositions. The first is their view of reforms as contrasting with concrete experience, and their view of teachers as being in a relationship of subordination to the prescription or norm. In other words, they remain at the level of confirming the impact of policies in school dynamics or are based on the idea that innovation represents necessary reform. The second coinciding supposition seems to accept that governments, experts, directors, etc., have the authority to determine the action of others (teachers), who become responsible for obeying the law, for developing innovation and for implementing prescriptions.

I assumed a counter position, considering that when the prescriptive nature of laws and regulations becomes predominant, the relationships of power in which they were produced may remain hidden and may be conceived as prolonged representations of socially shared interests and values (Popkewitz, 1994). Therefore, although they are references of dynamics that cross the school—in recognizing school as a social and historical production—by including them in the analysis, I did so just as they appear to teachers in a concrete situation. I asked myself which frameworks of management are being produced in schools; faced with the homogenizing discourse and devices that guide professionalization, I wondered how teachers
define work priorities, how they construct the norms and rules that limit them, and which meanings they attach to being professionals.

Based on the study’s findings, the idea I wish to emphasize here is the restructuring of teaching work that is produced in the transition from an organization based on a bureaucratic structure (which the new governance hopes to change) to an organization based on the mechanisms of self-control and the individualization of recognition and incentives for teachers as employees, which is established by strengthening bureaucratic control and introducing timely references to being professional.

The Findings: Local Expressions of New Governmentality

The transfer of resources, the first step in the system’s restructuring, was objectified by the responsibilities assumed by the state government and its control over finances; in administrative terms, the integration of subsystems has been marked by the tensions produced in the history of union organization and the political conditions of union relations with formal educational organizations and the state government.

The first expressions in the writing of state policy were adjustments, negotiation and agreements between the government and union sections (the new structure in dispute) and with private enterprise (oriented to the creation of secondary and technical professional institutions by joint investment, the certification of individuals over age fifteen who had not completed basic education and the simplification of paperwork to create options at this level), as well as a budgetary exercise of public spending on education defined in the relationship between federal and state government (which suffered a crisis when fiscal law imposed new safeguards on budgeted items and distribution criteria followed demographic density, which considerably reduced the budget assigned to most municipalities in the state).

Considering space limitations, I will only allude to the dynamics produced in translating the diverse lines of national policy into state commitments, particularly those lines dedicated to strengthening the curriculum and revaluing teaching careers (or the preparation for teachers’ action).

While the adjustment and redefinition of mediating structures were contained as confrontations between groups of administrative power and negotiations with the state’s three sections of the teachers’ union occurred, the effervescence in schools increased with the presence of groups providing support and consulting. Such groups multiplied the tasks and duties of schools and teachers, who needed to be oriented on carrying out the projects for which they would be responsible.

In the administrative and financial setting, the new structure, on one hand, broadened groups of management and control, and formed a new base that encouraged contributions from private enterprise, impelled multiple projects and negotiated federal financing (insisting on the inequities of new federalism, questioning the distribution of resources, and agreeing on the state’s incorporation into programs of compensation). On the other hand, the new structure forced schools to intensify their search for funds that would allow them to meet their commitments and demonstrate their competitive capacity. In the sociocultural setting, the
schools translated joint responsibility into the formation of boards of social participation and school boards, as well as eventually the execution of programs with short-lived effects, local and immediate.

In the professional pedagogical setting, the margins of decision-making narrowed. The emphasis put on results (certified by evaluation or local recognition) assumed the need for actions aimed at public acceptance or the official certification of teachers’ and students’ tasks and knowledge. We can thus understand that schools chose among formal options and sought out the support of specialists and the private supply with a sense of complementarity that provided an immediate solution for their responsibility.

The rhetoric of parents’ joint responsibility legitimized the introduction of private supply and the local collection of funds to support schooling projects. If parents’ contributions are an historical component in school modernization and expansion (Mercado, 1997), then in the name of democratic participation and quality, the “standardization” of such contributions is the adjudication of state responsibilities. In addition, private sector progress in providing schooling is represented by “individual” responsibilities and definitions whose content, cost or investment concerns individuals: the supply of additional services like English and computer science, art, teachers’ substitutions or aids, uniforms and transportation services, supplemental materials, etc..

In this sense, I affirm that a new form of school is configured. In other words, the new management system, while displacing responsibilities at the micro-level, emphasizes and legitimizes the destabilization of the ordering principles of public schools. Management rhetoric proposes that schools involve parents in defining their schooling project, but the restriction of parental intervention attaches the meaning of participation and joint responsibility to the providing of material resources. Concretely, the meaning of parental participation that is limited by standards (to collaboration and support for the school as well as for teaching) represents support for teachers in “complying with” the responsibilities that the state “has returned to society” and that are evaluated in schools.

**The Findings: the “Professionalization” of Teaching Work**

At the schools studied, the most significant distinctions have to do with what teacher actions can represent in “increasing prestige” or in considering teachers as “good”. But the nuclei of identification associated with these distinctions are changing. The meaning of “being a good teacher” is organized into diverse systems of evaluation: the feeling of belonging and recognition from parents or colleagues, the relationship with authorities or the influence that can be exerted in school dynamics—now emphasized by the recognition of certification in the processes of evaluating the teaching profession.

Concerns about school prestige along with the multiplication of programs and projects designed by experts (teachers are excluded but induced, convinced or seduced) made diverse demands and offered multiple spaces for action.

When, when had they given us the opportunity? ... Now in the projects one sees his possibilities, one knows where he can improve his action; everything is available and there is
something for everyone. The thing is that you have to look for your own means, because they give you the project, and well, a little training, but however you do it, that is up to each person, to get busy, to search (TMR1297).

As one teacher’s testimony shows, assigning teachers to proposals from outside the school has implied a broadening of each teacher’s traditional intervention. The action to which teachers are impelled now finds other references in standard patterns and double authority. On one hand, such authority is external/academic and represented by proposed means and mechanisms of control; on the other hand, it is a local hierarchical authority that induces, promotes and sanctions the concrete means of its execution while legitimizing options and games in seeking control over school space and time.

Look, each one could choose a project or program ... Some said they would be in charge of this one or that one and then they would quit. Then, when evaluations are done, they cannot be expected to be even. If someone does his project, besides relieving the pressure of the people who are requiring it, you get points. If you don't do it, then how can you demand anything? But besides, it helps you, whether you want it to or not. You learn something. Something obligates you to search and you even broaden your contacts because you have to convince them to help you, to participate (TMR1297).

The recognition of some teachers’ ability, however, has represented a rupture in the patterns of submission to authority. For most teachers, backing their own authority at school has implied adhering to a program or project. In their various settings of action, they have used texts or regulations as identifiers or nuclei of adherence, which they utilize to defend or displace their union knowledge¹⁰ and update the traditional guidelines of their profession. For teachers, the regulations, projects and support materials codify legitimate means of “being professional”; updating the relationships of power that accompany formal proposals and the introduction of controls of evaluation impel some teachers to validate their attachments: “Why should we look elsewhere? The materials are there. The continuing education courses are based on the same materials. They are going to evaluate you the same way. You can comply with them ...” (EMR0698).

Teachers express the urgency of safeguarding their territory, now invaded by multiple and diverse agencies throughout the school. Some of these agencies have been introduced by the teachers themselves, with an over-evaluation of the publicity effects and in an attempt to “liberate themselves” from intensification or disqualification, or also seduced by the promises of the intervening party. By standardizing these practices, teachers have not allowed space for reflecting on the implications and costs for their own work and the social action of the school.

The truth is that it is a lot of work. Sometimes you don’t even know what to do, or whose requirements to meet. Sometimes you have no choice, and other times because it’s easy ... What you do is look for someone to help you. Besides, sometimes there are things you cannot do, so you look for someone who can do it better. And in addition to resting, you get a lot of advantages. You see they’re noticing what you’re doing and not doing (TMA0399).

With these dynamics, schools began to show the effects of the transition from the protected work environment of union prerogatives to an environment of individualized competence and
evaluation, and the assumed correspondence between salary and evaluated or certified "competence".

**Work Conditions: Pace Defined by Evaluation**

Changes in working conditions imply processes of construction and deconstruction of the conceptions teachers use to define options and commitments. Some teachers saw the teaching profession as a possibility for proving themselves, while others decided to elude it. However, for all the teachers, the profession was becoming a type of control that marks and differentiates. Their condition as successful professionals is thus associated with demonstrated results, with action, with the carrying out of "innovative" projects, with participating in the new management, but especially with competition between equals and with accepting the evaluation that defines the categories each teacher "deserves". The resulting distinctions (participating or not, being accepted or not, being promoted or not, being attached to one category or another) point to certain guidelines of action and participation in school governance and union integration or disintegration.

The diversification of projects and the demand for permanent action (subject to the pace of evaluation) and the obligation to promote parental contribution and coordinate the intervention of multiple agents in the school, increase the administration's control over teachers' time; such intensification limits teachers' control over themselves. Asserting the right not to be subject to demands outside of the work day does not free us from the tasks that must be completed after work: the workload was accented by concerns for the school's public image and individual recognition. Teachers were busy with their broadened responsibilities and the emerging imperatives of their new action, in addition to attempting to sustain the traditions that identify the "better schools" by strengthening or updating them.

Here everything must be done. The school has that tradition. Besides, they almost always come to supervise. But now you're in permanent competition. You have your project and you have to show that at least your parents (of the students in your group) are participating. Then they ask you for reports and everyone is pressuring you... If you want to stay in this school, you have to comply. Because if you can't do it here, where at least the parents cooperate, then imagine it at another school (TPM0198).

The saturated workday and the pace imposed by the new responsibilities produced a new evaluation of the capacity for pragmatic response and of the "professional" competence associated with the demonstration of "successful" results. The strategies of control over teachers are "normalizing" the practices of subcontracting, of teachers' search for outside support and of the distribution of new responsibilities in the space and time of pedagogical work. These forms of meeting government demands silence the implications of obligatory actions and produce effects that make deliberating on work conditions apparently pointless.

**Professional Workers: the New Meaning**

The self-image of teachers becoming involved in school dynamics has been formed by the desire to prove themselves, to be recognized "professionals" and by personal activity. Defining guidelines in this self-image are produced in teachers' relationships with the local representative of authority, and the hierarchical regulations of their work.
The ethical components of the defining system of teachers' work are expressed in the meanings teachers attach to their actions and to their supporting evaluations. Defining themselves as employees reminds them of their condition as wage-earners, as government employees subject to government regulations, or as individuals who claim rights. Defining themselves as professionals finds references in the evaluations of concrete experience overridden by the devices of the “new evaluation” of teaching. For example, some teachers find that being a professional implies specific forms of relating to knowledge, which are a reminder of the technical mastery of content and teaching; of relating to other people (students, colleagues, parents), which was translated into terms of competitiveness and efficiency. Being a professional also implies relating to one's self, which permits considering, within the range of possibilities, the options to which one is committed.

The importance teachers attach to certification can be understood as part of the process of internalizing a new regimen of differences and professional categories, based on results and outside judgment. Teachers begin to define new priorities in their work. Programs, projects, courses, evaluations and examinations act as devices that regulate scholastic knowledge; they also promote the reconstruction of knowledge and practices as “viable” alternatives. Their value as a reference is expressed in various ways. One teacher affirmed:

I went to take the first examination not to advance in the teaching profession, but to evaluate myself... How much you know, how much you remember, how much you can do. I do it for that reason, for personal satisfaction, to show what you know, and if you know what you have to teach (EMR0598).

As executors of outside proposals, teachers are modelers (Gimeno, 1994) whose action remains anchored to the specific and immediate, marked by formal demands or by the hyper-realities (Hargreaves, 1996) produced by competition or evaluation. One group of teachers who decided to work together to obtain professional certification was able to reduce group tensions only while obtaining the document— which they later used to compete against each other and against other teachers in their school zone. One of the participants states:

We had thought that by working together, if we had a common interest [not present in their positions in school dynamics], we would achieve better relationships with each other ... But we did not have time ... to get the paper and submit it on time for the teaching certification. We had to finish in one month, at the most a month and a half. They told us that at the union and the university supported us. Maybe that is why we accepted. It seemed easier to obtain a personal benefit than to solve a problem that involves everyone. The worst thing was that once we had the piece of paper, we didn’t even remember the other part. We felt superior, it went to our head. That led us to confrontation right away when a contest was held for an open position (EPJ0699).

In spite of the games caused by certification or the lack of certification (a product of “evaluations”), evaluation is the expression of control par excellence. The central device for implementing reform and stimulating teacher professionalization is becoming a legitimate definition of what must be done and known. In spite of its individual and local interpretations, it is becoming part of common knowledge. When a “teacher of the year” is chosen at a school, the criteria are modified:
Well, we observe, and taking into account the indicators they give us we analyze some of the profiles they give us... They range from eleven to thirteen indicators... You have to fill out the profile. There it is, the new profile (EPL0498).

Analysis showed how the discourse of professionalization triggers images and how some teachers transformed proposals into prescriptions for themselves, by accenting individuality subject to the control of records or to self-control. Representations of being professional and autonomous are affected by teachers’ experience and their available resources for exercising, demanding or defending autonomy.

Some teachers believe that the principal references for forming professionals are practical experience and the dedication of time from the workday to taking care of their assigned groups. Autonomy is reduced to avoiding the risk of confrontation, and takes on the meaning of safeguarding. Defined as noninterference in individual space, autonomy is defended by teachers as distancing themselves from people who in practice direct action at school. But teachers also distance themselves from devices that question their experience and daily knowledge. By exercising such autonomy, they affirm the value of individualization, confident it will safeguard them. Teachers safeguard themselves by centering their individual work on attending to students, and thus control various forms of risk, based on their experience. Students are their obligatory reference. Being a professional is defined by the value of commitment and responsibility in their duties with regard to students, and limited to the school space.

Other teachers consider themselves professionals because of their technical competence in assuming responsibility for “necessary change”; they adopt administrative prescriptions and turn to actions based on their convictions to maintain the school’s prestige. Autonomy has to do with the ability to implement a new proposal. Such teachers orient their actions by emphasizing the values of the new management; they are proud of promoting institutional adaptation to the competitive requirements of various levels.

Teachers find that developed technical competence is a sign of being a professional. Teachers’ convictions regarding the legitimacy and pertinence of knowledge promoted by official proposals (programs, books, materials, courses) or the alternatives that simplify their work (lessons, guides, exams) offer them guidelines for action that value skills and competence in practical development. Autonomy assumes the mastery of actions that teachers apparently can learn from the intervention of others as guides in what they “should” do. They manage their own ways of developing prescriptions or introducing initiatives.

The apparent autonomy of teachers becomes evident with regard to the centralized measurement of the results of teaching. Evaluation is the reference for teachers and confirms the validity of selected options. Implementation is “reinforced” by the various patterns of evaluation and the options for continued learning of knowledge in the teaching profession.

Some people complicate things because they want to. If they are telling us what is going to be evaluated, then let’s work with what is going to be evaluated. And there are different strategies, there is a lot of support. What each person has to do is develop his outlines, and you compare
them with the ones the consultants give you. We also have the Santillana outline and the exams every two months. And you notice the ones they come to give (EPH0998).

Practical knowledge, which is transmitted through informal networks, is valuable in that it permits dealing with everyday situations. But it does not always correspond to what the teacher is expected to know, as indicated by the devices that are beginning to regulate knowledge: programs, projects, courses, evaluation and examinations—references for shared knowledge that displace the basic and traditional aspects on which teachers relied.

Even when not all participate, professional teacher certification organizes what teachers “should” address, know and develop. Effects are expressed in the search for resources to deal with processes for obtaining wage increases or the personal satisfaction of a contextual evaluation as a “good teacher”. The instruments for evaluating the teaching profession allow teachers to evaluate their own approximations to standard specifications or the feasibility of attaining a “professional” profile while becoming references for evaluating their colleagues in a mutual confrontation of evaluations.

The Professionals Teachers Attempt to Be: Self-government

In contrast with affirmations regarding teacher opposition to suggested reform or the deep-seated traditional guidelines on which teachers rely (Whitty et al., 1997; Rivas, 2000), documented experiences show that teachers abandon their pedagogical traditions when faced by the immediacy of administrative demands and controls. They assert their conceptions by adopting or adapting proposals in relation to formative processes, by selecting or systematizing the curricular content, or by transferring to the pedagogical relationship what they are “learning” or “clues” from exams. The renovation of overlapping organizational designs and models and the demands of training make teachers reduce pedagogical intervention to can nons such as “true” knowledge for themselves and their students as a demonstration of professional competence.

For other teachers, the definition of professionalization is based on individual action affirmed by institutional recognition. They “become” professionals by obtaining university certification or by passing the courses and examinations of continued training or of the teaching profession.

The presence of regulations and games in which teachers participate affirms the meaning attached to competence and the criteria for classifying performance through evaluation.

We’ve had problems because they started to notice who earns more. That if you earn more, you work more; that if you are studying, you must do the projects or the reports; that if you got the best evaluation, it should be seen in your work. Everything is criticized. But what I say is that if we already have the precedent, if we already know what we are going to be evaluated on and we want to be “on top”, well, you have to get involved, you have to prepare (EPE0899).

The exaltation of the value of individuality is due to personal affirmation and monetary retribution, which symbolize advantages over colleagues and emphasize differences through which only a few reach the “highest range” or a higher category.
In short, the teachers saw themselves becoming differentiated from others: as professionals attending to children or preparing themselves; because of their ability to carry out administrative prescriptions or direct school action; by using resources and relations to learn what they must “know” or by “teaching” what the context suggests as necessary. Rather than representing established nuclei of identification, however, these representations are tensions on which teachers build meanings and regulate their own action.

What such representations have in common is the tendency to limit the professional setting to responsibilities and commitments that refer to: a) specific knowledge of scholastic content, or b) performance subject to formal regulations, with the possibility of remaining subject to outside control. The instrumental rationality reclaimed by local processes in search of prestige and by outside evaluations, validates responsibilities that are restricted to showing immediate effects on prescribed goals as evidence of developed competence or “educational attainments”; therefore teachers accept translating their professional needs into the acquisition of knowledge and technical mastery for promoting and developing projects, transmitting projects or favoring their reconstruction.

The imposed pace of “compliance” with prescriptions and the exhaustiveness of the school day exclude processes of collective reflection and the good intentions of a professional community that discusses and defines its own programs of action. Time always has priority over activity and assignments. Asserting autonomy seems to be something sure for self-protection or for eventual freedom from competition. Teachers’ arguments maintain the centrality of “labor rights”, which reclaims discourse regarding the statute of salaried employees and accents the most visible elements: bureaucratic domination, corporative contractual relationships, predetermined tasks and hierarchical supervision, while studying the difficulties in thinking as a person with control over “professional” activity.

Teachers’ seeing themselves in a framework that tells them how to act or what they are obligated to do affirms the order that defines priorities from the outside. From this perspective, teacher circumscription to the specific and the immediate as a professional and institutional responsibility reduces the educating meaning of practice, since it separates concerns about social problems (located always outside of the school) and centers on indicators of “attainment”. This separation defines limits to the possibilities for teachers to be professional, as well as to a form of autonomy understood as a critical exercise of deliberation in a field of relations in which principles and educational purposes are defined, and in which teachers choose their direction of action and participate in configuring the community project. The recognition of others, as well as their interests and possibilities could favor reflection and a search for options in school governance. Teachers’ ability to distance themselves from the administration and statutes would aid in breaking down the guidelines that govern “compliance” with prescriptions as a basic form of relations and being a “professional”.

**In Conclusion**

Today, as the codes of neo-liberal proposals are erasing meanings and casting doubt on the existence of a national project, and union leadership has signed a “social commitment” that it ensures teachers will accept “unconditionally”, it seems inevitable that the defense of public schooling will begin to question the ongoing privatization of management (of which teachers,
although not exclusively, are a part). Such a position will emphasize—in defense of worker rights—the possibility of work as an ethically reasonable and politically possible option of constructing an alternative. In this sense, Susan Street (1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2001) has documented the struggles in the teaching profession to transform an authoritarian political system, has theorized the processes of constructing a popular democracy, and has emphasized the centrality of the individual in constructing a basic pedagogical project. “The problem of the alternative” and the new presentation of unionism as a creative force of democracy, she affirms, pass through the struggle for control of the work process:

If the struggle to control work processes passes through the question of autonomy, democratic teachers are probably some of the few in Mexico who present the necessity of not restricting this question to teaching as an individual practice. On the contrary, for them, the “problem of the alternative” passes through the formation of autonomous subjects and the creation of new autonomous social territories in the fundamental decisions of their communities (Street, 2001).

Participation in a community project creates the possibility to recognize the political and ethical components of the system in which teachers work, and of action aimed at individual development. In this sense, it is possible for teachers to create their own school project, even when the pressures of outside demands and internal competence mark projects’ short-lived stability.

Being a professional was expressed in incipient constructions by teachers who decided to play the governance and evaluation games as forms of resistance; or by teachers who felt the risks of regulations and decided to seek out conditions to reverse them. Coinciding interests made possible the governance of agreements that would open up spaces for discussion. From its beginning stages, such deliberation strengthened the possibility of responding to multiple assignments, as well as the collective outlining of a school project whose purposes would include teacher learning.

The teachers also proposed sharing locations in and outside of the school for self-training, based on their own agenda. Such collective processes, which provided direction in the face of bureaucratic demands and hierarchical pressures, demonstrated the possibility of the deliberate definition and appropriation of types of work and training rather than pedagogical strategies, due to the value of the reciprocity of exchanges.

Thinking like individuals in training, whose responsibility is to support the training of others and question the individualization of responsibility, allowed other teachers to consider possibilities of collective response. To begin, they transformed formal spaces into spaces for deliberation that transcended the immediate concern for preparing and preparing for examinations. This open possibility could lead teachers to reflect on the instrumental reduction of games in designing projects and in becoming professionals through continual training, teamwork, diversified tasks, and participation in school governance, but without creating a possibility to deliberate on the meaning and purpose of their work or the implications of management that objectifies them.

The position of these teachers represents a possibility for reconstructing the school as a space that promotes reflective action over practice, the product of work and outside relationships other than the instrumental relationships being formed. The appropriation of resources and
strategic agreements that allowed some groups of teachers to carry out collective action encourages the belief that questioning practical reasons can lead to the recognition of different guidelines for school action. And the recognition of newly constructed guidelines and regulations in which teachers participate daily, can lead to a means for teachers to act as subjects in defining the school’s work and the social and political meanings of schooling.

Notes

1 The research was carried out with backing from CONACyT. Felipe de Jesús Perales provided me with invaluable cooperation in the fieldwork and structuring of cases; I appreciate his dedication, thoroughness and willingness not only for this task, but also for the permanent discussion of ideas that gave shape to the ethnographic texts. I especially thank María de Ibarrola, Oscar González Cuevas and Susan Street for their meticulous reading and inquiring observations that permitted improving the project; as well as Beatriz Calvo, Elsie Rockwell and Jorge Bartolucci for contributing to the formulation of the definitive version of the thesis.

2 Educational investment as a percentage of public spending, indexes of coverage, average schooling, etc.

3 Matrixes of practical reason that allow subjects in a social space to organize their actions and give meaning to the existential conditions present. They are shared social constructions, formulations that translate classifying criteria into schemes, models, ideas from which actors articulate or confirm their ideological perspectives of the world.

4 The configuration of social constructions based on coinciding values and/or resistance, the effect of a complex network of relations between discourse and social practices, such as systems of rules and distinctions that organize and justify possible or “reasonable” actions or events in a social space.

5 Representations of complexes of social conceptions and values that acquire not only an informative dimension, but also a cognitive and identifying dimension that can orient behaviors or generate resistance. The productive capacity of emblems resides in how individuals identify with them and become committed to their purposes.

6 The reconstruction of micro-political dynamics implied considering the rules and norms that formed teacher’s field of action, as well as the ruptures and formulations produced daily; to analyze positions, interests and strategies in the show of power at school, and the forming of individuals. Stated in another manner, the guidelines that structure teachers’ field of action and in which teachers also participate.

7 The revaluation of the teaching function promised since the Acuerdo Nacional (national agreement) is based on the evaluation of professional preparation and performance, continual training and the certification of group achievement. These factors, in addition to seniority (at recently defined levels) are the mechanisms of a teaching career. Other local initiatives for evaluation are added, such as institutional auto-evaluation, bimonthly evaluations promoted by supervision, and contests organized by schools.

8 They are a reminder of the teacher’s position with regard to social problems. Moral obligation assumes teaching directed to individual and social emancipation guided by values. Professional competence is expressed by the development of analysis and social criticism and by participation in meaningful political action. Autonomy is defined as professional and social liberation, and as a
collective process aimed at transforming the institutional and social conditions of teaching. It implies a critical awareness of decisions and consequences as a way of orienting selection and defending what ethically leads to desired work.

9 The rupture in the ideal of equality of perception occurred years before, with the introduction of the system of basic education. The difference resides in the controls now established and the mechanisms for activating them. Participation in the "voluntary" program of teaching certification permits teachers to obtain "complementary items", subject to the results of examinations and evaluations and dependent on the budget amounts that establish the scale of qualifications and the classifications for entering or moving from category to category. However, the specifics of implementation and the conditions under which "volunteers" decide to participate diversify the effects of concrete proposals related to the program and in general to school action.

10 Social and cultural knowledge that teachers have constructed from diverse experiences and fields of action. Principles, conceptions, metaphors and images with various levels of integration and transformation of meanings. Knowledge assumes the relative, gradual and partial integration of scientific, ideological, and daily elements in interaction and practice; such elements are organized into systems of meaning and conceptual constructions that in a circular manner return to practice for guidance.

11 More than referring to a collective, obligatory pace imposed from the outside, I am referring to the effects of “programming,” a product of the devices that model “action” and the strategies to “ensure” control over the development of specific proposals, encouraging teachers to practice self-control. As presented by Foucault (1981), “it is about extracting from time increasingly more available instants, and extracting from each instant more useful strengths; it is not about employing time as a general framework of activity, but about using (and taking advantage of) the smallest instant.”

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