

Normal schools and initial training: a social, historical and complex plot

Escuelas normales y formación inicial: una trama social, histórica y compleja

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher training for normal school teachers in Mexico, and throughout much of the world, has become one of the most recurring topics in the field of educational research. Analyzing and understanding its constitution and development requires situating it as a social, historical, cultural, and political construct. In this sense, this text develops a historical, relational view between the articulation of normal school teachers, the teaching profession, and initial teacher training. Based on this, it highlights the changes experienced in the configuration of Mexican normal school teacher training, based not only on the same social and historical developments, but also on the ideological positions supported by each government, on economic and political interests, as well as on the same international demands. Therefore, the intersecting power relations that shape and substantiate the training processes of normal school teachers are evident.

Keywords:

"Teacher training schools"; "Teaching profession"; "Initial training"; "Educational reforms"; "Power relations"

RESUMEN

La formación inicial del profesorado normalista en México y, en gran parte del mundo, se ha constituido como uno de los temas más recurrentes en el campo de la investigación educativa. El análisis y comprensión de su constitución y desarrollo, demanda situarla como un constructo social, histórico, cultural y político. En este sentido, en el presente texto se desarrolla una mirada relacional histórica entre la articulación de las escuelas normales, la profesión docente y la formación inicial. A partir de ello, se subraya los cambios experimentados en la configuración de la formación del docente normalista mexicano, en función del mismo devenir social e histórico, pero también de los posicionamientos ideológicos que abanderara cada gobierno, de los intereses económico-políticos, así como de las mismas exigencias internacionales; por lo tanto, se evidencia las relaciones de poder que se entrecruzan para dar forma y contenido a los procesos formativos del profesorado normalista.

Palabras clave:

"Escuelas normales"; "Profesión docente"; "Formación inicial"; "Reformas educativas"; "Relaciones de poder"

INTRODUCTION

Teacher training processes, in general, are situated as complex, permanent and unfinished processes, crossed by historical conjunctures; its expressions are reflections of the political, social, economic and cultural dimensions that circumscribe a country; but above all of its multi-referential condition of which its analysis is subject, understanding this as the plural reading, from different distinct and heterogeneous angles, that is carried out on a fact or situation in order to apprehend and understand it (Ardoino, 1988).

All around the world, and specifically in Mexico, the study of initial teacher training for basic education has become one of the most recurring topics in the field of educational research. Evidence of this is that, in the 2002-2011 State of Knowledge Report, for the first time in the history of the Mexican Council for Educational Research (COMIE), research produced in the field of initial teacher training is given a dedicated section entitled "Initial Teacher Training for Basic Education." Six axes are established that integrate the research produced in the field (Fortoul, Güemes, Martell, & Reyes, 2013).

The central point of these studies is their concern and interest in analyzing and, in some cases, issuing proposals for initial teacher training, viewed from the multiple facets and perspectives encompassed by the complex study of initial teacher training.

In this regard, some research studies such as those proposed by Mercado (2010), Monfredini (2011), Ducoing (2013, 2013a), Rojas Moreno (2013), and Prats (2016) converge in analyzing teacher training processes from the perspective of the relationship between teachers and the teaching profession, teaching work, and knowledge—also known as teaching knowledge or teacher knowledge. It is considered that these elements shape the profile of the teaching profession and are part of the development of teaching work in education.

Focusing on the content and meaning of initial teacher training processes in normal school teachers raises several key points of research. One of them, related to questioning the training provided to normal school students, especially

considering, as pointed out by Ávalos (2014) and Prats (2016), that, derived from international policies and demands and taking as a standard the low results obtained from standardized tests related to school learning that measure educational quality and academic performance, governments in different parts of the world have turned their attention to the initial teacher training in basic education, implementing a series of changes that allow them to respond to international guidelines and interests.

Analyzing the above mentioned, initial teacher training has undergone constant and diverse changes in policies, programs, and reforms that have been generated in order to impact the training processes that comprise it. This leads us to focus on the transformations that have been experienced by teacher training institutions, which in the case of Mexico are without a doubt, the teacher training colleges, based on a complex social, historical, and interwoven fabric between teacher training colleges and their initial training processes.

Normal schools and initial training: a social, historical and complex plot

To give an account of the present in which the initial training processes of basic education teachers in Mexico are circumscribed, commits to carrying out an analysis of its historical configuration and the link it has with the emergence of normal schools and the mandate received from the State to constitute itself as one of the professionalizing institutions of teaching, falling on this point, the meaning that initial training takes on, as a moment of the teacher training process.

According to some research developed in the study of the teaching profession in Mexico, including Ducoing (2013, 2013a), Navarrete-Cazales (2015), Sandoval (2016), as well as Medrano, Ángeles and Morales (2018), they point to the study of two specific facts. One, the configurations of initial training from its historical legacies that were generated from the integration of teaching as a profession of the State and the emergence of normal schools during the Porfiriato; both historical facts closely related; two, the impact that educational reforms in terms of curricula have generated in the entry, training and development of

the teaching profession in Mexico.

The beginnings of the path...

In Mexico, the signs of training for teaching are found in its emergence as part of an altruistic activity and a free profession (Arnaut, 1996). That is to say, the emergence of the regulation of teaching was due to the need to instruct the population, especially after the scenario of independent Mexico, its regulation was based on the establishment of the Lancasterian schools who, freely and independently of the State, regulated the training process of people, responsible for providing basic training in reading, writing and counting in the Mexican population. There were no prerogatives or formal or official guidelines that outlined the entry and practice of those who trained for teaching; that is why, Lafarga (2012) mentions that, the profession of teaching arises as an art of being a teacher, without clauses that determined who could teach or under what precepts to teach.

The above invites to pay attention to the context and conditions in which the profession or art of teaching began, based on two particularities. On the one hand, because it was the responsibility of independent corporations, the education provided to the country's population was alien to the interests of the State. On the other hand, because the act of teaching was free, framed by the guidelines of the art, each teacher carried out this activity according to their own criteria and postulates, without accountability or adjustments to curriculum plans and programs.

Over time, basic education in Mexico gradually began to gain importance and become the object of state intervention, focusing specifically on regulating the training of primary school teachers; thus, it went from being a free profession to being a state profession. This process was consolidated during the restored Republic and the Porfiriato, placing the focus of intervention on two points: teacher training, as well as the regulation of the education provided to the Mexican population (Arnaut, 1996).

The new status of teacher training colleges gives them a close relationship and dependence between their functions and scope and the objectives of the Mexican government. A clear example of this is found in the Cardenista period,

since in 1936 the teacher training colleges were transformed into regional peasant schools with the intention that teacher training college teachers would contribute to the development of the ejido (common lands), as part of the agrarian reform implemented during that six-year term (Navarrete-Cazales, 2015).

The second half of the 20th century is identified as the period of the apogee of teacher training in our country. The diversification of teacher training colleges for primary education teachers began, and the Regional Centers for Teacher Training (CREN) and experimental teacher training colleges were founded (Sandoval, 2016). Given the momentum that teacher training colleges were gaining, two important aspects can be appreciated. First, the modifications that teacher training colleges underwent based on the country's political projects and social conditions; second, as a consequence of the above, teacher training colleges demonstrated a great capacity for adaptation, diversifying their scope and attention. Evidence of this is that, when observing the evolution of teacher training colleges, we find a wide range of types of teacher training colleges that represent the diversity of educational, social, political, and economic intentions that the country has experienced. This allows to assume that the transformation of teacher training colleges is closely linked to the political positions and interests of the ruling power.

Despite the adverse conditions that began to emerge with the founding and operation of teacher training colleges in the country, teacher training colleges, both those established in cities and in states and rural areas, were legitimized as the regulators of teacher training for basic education in Mexico. One of the states with the greatest presence in teacher training was the Escuela Normal Veracruzana (ENV), founded and directed by Enrique C. Rébsamen (Arnaut, 1996).

A fundamental condition that has shaped the historical configuration of the Mexican teacher training college is its sense and scope of social transformation with which it emerged and expanded (Sandoval, 2016); in addition to finding in education a solid and important tool for consolidating its national ideological projects.

Teaching... from a free profession to a state profession. Some implications

The emergence of teacher training colleges as those responsible for providing and regulating teacher training in the country, paved the way for the State to assume the direction of basic education, at the same time that it encouraged the development of stratifying practices within the teaching profession, reflected in the salaries of teachers, which depended on where they taught: city or countryside; for which institution they worked: private institution, city council, state or federal government; as well as the prestige derived from the teacher training college where they had studied: at the top were the graduates of the teacher training colleges of Veracruz and Mexico City, followed by Puebla and Coahuila, and then the other teacher training colleges located throughout the country (Arnaut, 1996). From the above, it is clear that an action inherent to the professionalization of teaching in the country was no longer simply the fact of offering tools to provide better and systematic education to the population, but also the ladder for better social, professional, and economic positioning, as is currently the case with the study of any profession.

The interesting aspect of the process of teaching becoming a free profession to a state profession is, on the one hand, the historical and social processes to which it responded, since it was the same social conditions that, little by little, led to teaching being assumed by the State and integrated as a key part in the consolidation of projects from a single nation to the recognition of a multicultural nation.

On the other hand, it is crucial to consider the changes in the meaning, significance, and development of teaching that have occurred historically (Arnaut, 1996). One of the first changes lies in the institutional space where teaching was provided, since previously it was carried out independently: parents paid teachers for their children's education; however, over the years, the trend was to provide this service in schools dependent on the city council, state, and/or federal governments, due to the salary received. Primary education is positioned as a right of children, with the State assuming responsibility for the

expansion, access, and quality of education; thus, "parents ceased to be clients and became right-environments " (p. 6), legitimizing the figure of the teacher as a public servant; therefore, the State was now granted the right to request results and establish parameters.

Another notable change that, according to Arnaut (1996), transformed the professional identity of primary school teachers was that the curricula implemented by teacher training colleges would integrate pedagogical subjects, focusing on technical training in how to teach. This would replace the emphasis placed on prior knowledge of the content; that is, knowledge about what is taught (disciplinary knowledge) would be replaced by knowledge of how to teach (pedagogical knowledge).

It is important to emphasize that in order to understand the configurative meaning of the teaching profession, it is necessary to analyze the social and ideological structures in which it was created, for which it is necessary to remember their involvement in the emergence of teacher training colleges, which responded to at least two mandates. One, to train, regulate and authorize the practice of teaching and two, to provide technical or scientific uniformity to primary education, both in the training received by teachers and the training they provided to students (Arnaut, 1996).

Based on the above, the influence exerted by teacher training colleges, since their founding, on teacher training and the corresponding regulation of basic education in the country is evident. From the outset, from the very fact that teacher training colleges emerged with the mandate of training basic education teachers, they acquired importance and power of decision and intervention in defining the meaning and content of the training profile of teachers throughout the country. For this reason, Rojas (2013) states that, historically, teacher training colleges in Mexico were constituted as a broad-based institution, which has resulted in the generation of vices and traditions in order to perpetuate the power possessed as an institution and, therefore, of the actors who have made and within it.

Teacher training colleges and initial training since the educational reforms of 1984 and 1997

Historically, in Mexico, teacher training colleges have operated through 20 curricula, each with distinct educational scopes. This is due to the variety of pedagogical perspectives within which they were situated, based on the conception of the figure and role of teachers, as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions to which each responded (Rojas, 2013). Recently, the 2022 curriculum was launched, applied to the different levels of basic education. This curriculum is based on a curricular model known as "the New Mexican School," whose founding approaches are "gender and human rights approaches, critical interculturality and attention to diversity, socio-emotional development, inclusion, physical education, arts, health, and sustainability" (SEP, 2022). Given the recent implementation of this curriculum, its formative impacts and implications can be analyzed at a later date.

Considering the above, the shift in visions, strategies, and scope of teacher training and, consequently, the training provided to Mexican children is evident, based on the ideological perspectives held by each government, as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that define each period.

According to the impact that curriculum reforms have had on the configuration of initial teacher training for normal school teachers in Mexico, two of them are those that have marked a milestone in the configuration of initial teacher training for normal school teachers in Mexico, namely: the reforms of 1984 and 1997 (Ducoing, 2013a). This does not mean that the other reforms have not impacted the current situation of normal schools in terms of training for the teaching profession. Rather, it emphasizes the mark that these two reforms have left on the academic, social, cultural, and political identity that characterizes the teaching profession today; especially considering that, underlying each curriculum reform is a vision of what it means to be a teacher and the corresponding image that is forged of their pedagogical and social role.

The 1984 curriculum reform marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Mexican

normal education, integrating it into the field of higher education with the granting of a bachelor's degree to basic education. This was the result of political and union negotiations and agreements, also a consequence of previous reforms and the country's current political and social circumstances (Ducoing, 2013a).

For this reason, this reform is considered the universitarization of teacher training colleges (Arnaut, 2013), which fosters a new social and academic configuration of Mexican teacher training colleges, mainly for four reasons. First, as of this reform, the main requirement is to have a high school diploma, which fosters a "transformation of the socio-demographic and cultural characteristics of future teachers" (Arnaut, 2004), since the population that teacher training colleges typically received were low-income students, and now requesting higher education would naturally limit access to this type of student population; therefore, the social mobility that was promoted with access to teacher training colleges during the 20th century was somewhat restricted. Second, the operation of teacher training colleges was gradually moved to the higher education subsystem, specifically under the General Directorate of Higher Education for Education Professionals (DGESPE), created in 2005 for this purpose.

Three, the curricular model integrated with the 1984 reform marked a difference with the curricula that preceded it (Ducoing, 2013a). The fact that a high school diploma was required for applicants to teacher training colleges implied a higher educational level for teacher training students and, therefore, a challenge for trainers. The curricular content evolved from a predominance of technical knowledge, "know-how," with which teacher training colleges emerged during the Porfiriato, to the incorporation of theoretical-disciplinary knowledge, as occurred in university degrees; special emphasis was placed on the training of teacher training college students as research teachers, following the model of the country's universities.

Fourth, it was attributed the three substantive functions that universities or higher education institutions possessed: teaching, research and

dissemination of culture (Ducoing, 2013a); functions that the normal schools, both in terms of organization and their training staff, were not accustomed to developing.

For all these reasons, the 1984 reform proposed several scopes and changes in the admission, content, and development of teacher training for normal school teachers; for this reason, starting with this educational reform, we began to talk about the professionalization of teaching (Ducoing, 2013a). And, therefore, the proper recognition of referring to a teaching profession instead of the teaching trade, a profession that, in theory and in accordance with the purposes set forth in the reform, is governed by the standards of any university profession. Although, according to this same author, the professionalization of normal school teaching still has much to do, achieve, and accomplish, since it is not only a matter of granting a bachelor's degree, but also of deeper and more complex training:

If professionalization meant exclusively granting graduates the bachelor's degree, the problem would be solved, and indeed it is, as has been the case over the years. However, if professionalization meant turning the normal school system into a kind of university teacher training system, one that adopted the precepts, directives, orientations, and purposes, as well as the specific academic life fostered and experienced in any university, this is perceived, after almost three decades of establishing the bachelor's degree, as a still very distant and bleak prospect. (p. 142)

This gap between what professionalization entails and what actually happens in teacher training colleges is due to multiple and diverse factors. First, it should be considered that the reform of the 1980s was the result of political-union negotiations and not the result of a mature and academic reality in the operation of teacher training colleges. Second, the scope of the reform entailed a 360-degree shift in the configuration and development of the teaching profession, a situation that most likely caught both educators and the authorities themselves, who were charged with implementing and making a reality of what, in

letter and intention, the 1984 reform stipulated. Third, as it has historically occurred when designing educational reforms, it is very likely that when drafting and implementing the stipulations of the reform, the unique dynamics experienced within and outside of teacher training colleges themselves were not considered.

In short, analyzing the impact and scope of the 1984 reform in teacher training colleges is complex, as they are the hegemonic rationalities and intentions that disrupt each of the educational reforms directed at these educational institutions and the teaching profession, as a construct of the same historical, political, and social development.

Continuing with the complexity represented by the design and implementation of educational reforms aimed at teacher training colleges, thirteen years after the implementation of the 1984 reform, the 1997 reform was implemented. This reform was part of the Program for the Transformation and Academic Strengthening of Teacher Training Colleges (PTFAEN) developed during 1996 and 1997 (SEP, 2002), which in turn was a product of the demand to encourage educational quality promoted by some international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), Organization of American States (OAS), International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), among others (Barrón and Pontón, 2013). Thus, we realize the ideological, social, and political pressure and influence exerted in our country and materialized with the implementation of the 1997 reform aimed at the training of teacher training colleges.

One of the objectives of the 1997 reform was to consolidate teacher training colleges as higher education institutions, a concept already established in 1984 but not yet fully established (Medrano, Ángeles, & Morales, 2018). For this reason, the reform reintroduces several of the former's postulates with the intention of strengthening teaching training. This educational reform's distinctive feature was its emphasis on the development of competencies, grouped into five areas: specific intellectual skills, mastery of teaching content, didactic competencies, professional and ethical identity, and the ability to perceive and respond to the conditions of students and the school environment (Barrón & Pontón,

2013).

Another important difference between the 1997 reform and the 1984 reform is the concept of teacher training in terms of its consolidation process. The 1984 reform had a terminal concept of teacher training, considering it a closed and completed process that teacher training colleges achieved in a specific space and time (Ducoing, 2013a). For its part, with the 1997 reform, within the framework of teacher training, for the first time there is talk of initial training and continuing training, conceiving teacher training as an open, permanent, and unfinished process. It is recognized that the work carried out in teacher training colleges constitutes the initial phase of a permanent process that involves the professional practice of the teacher (SEP, 2002).

It is important to emphasize that the 1997 reform responded to a national assessment but was conducted with an international focus, considering that the objective was to meet the guidelines established by the aforementioned international organizations. For this reason, it is not surprising that, since this reform, we have begun to talk about competencies in teacher training that respond to the country's educational and social "needs." Underlying this reform is the idea of focusing on teacher training as a means to promote the desired quality of education as a link to the country's economic and social development.

One aspect considered important to highlight as a merit of this reform, aside from the scope and limitations achieved during its implementation, is the recognition given to teacher training as an ongoing process that is not restricted to training provided in teacher training colleges, thus giving meaning and significance to the terms "initial training" and "continuing training." The merit given is not only due to the incorporation of both terms, but also to the underlying conception of teacher training as a continuous, open, uncertain, unfinished, and permanent process and, therefore, the recognition of the complex work that constitutes the teaching profession.

It is clear that any educational reform, in this case, one that impacts the configuration of initial teacher training for normal school teachers, must be analyzed within the social, political, and

historical contexts that shaped and gave it meaning, thereby understanding the rationales that underlie and define the type of individual being trained as normal school teachers, in particular, and as Mexican citizens, in general.

CONCLUSIONS

Up to this point, according to the social and historical framework in which the dialectical relationship between teacher training colleges and the initial teacher training of teachers is situated. Its winding, uncertain, open, and problematic path is evident. In the words of Arnaut (2004), he mentions that the history of teacher training in Mexico is "integrated by institutions that appear as a series of superimposed geological layers sedimented over more than a century" (p. 7). Geological layers that, at the same time, represent changes, also manifest historical tradition and, consequently, are the basis for an analytical perspective that allows, on the one hand, to understand the how, why, and purpose of teacher training in Mexico; and, on the other hand, enables to analytically articulate these events in order to account for the sense and meaning that teacher training colleges institute in the here and now within the framework of changing social, cultural, educational, and, of course, political scenarios.

Within the historical and hybrid relationship between teacher training colleges, the teaching profession, and initial training, it is clear that this relationship goes beyond the simple juxtaposition of conceiving these institutions as those responsible for providing initial training for the teaching profession. Their relationship emerges as a complex construct encompassing conflicts, challenges, resistance, secrecy, power, interests, and conveniences that mean that the teaching profession and all its training implications constitute a pending and ongoing task, becoming more complex with the passage of time.

Finally, this brief historical overview, outlined above, highlights the changes in the configuration of Mexican teacher training, stemming from the social and historical developments themselves, but also derived from the ideological positions supported by each government, the economic and political interests of the Mexican State, and international demands. Thus, the intersecting

power relations that, through educational reforms, shape and content the training processes carried out in teacher training colleges are evident, impacting the formation of the Mexican citizen they seek to educate.

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