

Teachers and the New Mexican School: A view through the experience of teachers in Jalisco

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss a number of events that converged around the implementation of the curricular proposal of the New Mexican School (NEM), ranging from the publication of the document “Curricular Framework and Study Plan 2022 of Mexican Basic Education” to the first months of activity of the 2023-2024 school year. In this period of time we address the socialization experiences that took place among Jalisco teachers from August to December 2022, the training provided in the first week of January 2023 and the subsequent sessions of the School Technical Council. With these events, we wish to offer a reflection on the training dynamics deployed by federal and state authorities in Jalisco among basic education teachers. The main support for these reflections comes from research conducted by basic education teachers and researchers from the University of Guadalajara, who took on the challenge of learning about the forms of appropriation of the theoretical and methodological contents of this educational modality experienced by the teachers.

Resumen

En este escrito exponemos una gama de sucesos que concurren en torno a la instrumentación de la propuesta curricular de la Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM), que abarca desde la aparición del documento denominado “Marco Curricular y Plan de Estudio 2022 de Educación Básica Mexicana” hasta los primeros meses de actividad del ciclo escolar 2023-2024. En este lapso de tiempo aludimos a las experiencias de socialización que tienen lugar de agosto a diciembre de 2022 entre el magisterio jalisciense, la capacitación que se brinda en la primera semana de enero de 2023 y las sesiones posteriores de Consejo Técnico Escolar. Con estos sucesos deseamos ofrecer una reflexión en torno a la dinámica de capacitación que desplegaron las autoridades federales y estatales en Jalisco entre los profesores de educación básica. El sustento principal de estas reflexiones proviene de varias investigaciones desarrolladas por profesores de educación básica y por investigadores de la Universidad de Guadalajara, que asumieron el reto de conocer las formas de apropiación que experimentan los maestros de los contenidos teóricos y metodológicos que incluye esta modalidad educativa.

The setting before the training

A working paper entitled “Curricular Framework and Plan of Studies 2022 for Basic Education in Mexico” (*Marco Curricular y Plan de Estudio 2022 de Educación Básica Mexicana*), drafted by the

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General Directorship for Curricular Development headed by Dr. Marx Arriaga began to circulate in educational spaces and social networks in July 2022. The document presents a proposal to change Basic Education in Mexico and states that this reform is a State proposal that seeks “a profound change in Mexico’s basic education, through a number of epistemic, methodological, axiological, pedagogical and structural transformations.” One of the most important modifications has to do with the link between the school and the community. The document “suggests that the community in its broadest sense becomes the space in which educational processes are articulated so that children and teenagers are able to be educated effectively as subjects of rights, within a framework of interaction entre la school y la community” (Marco Curricular, 2022: 5).

In accordance with this position of the community within the teaching work, “the teachers’ curricular autonomy is acknowledged as professionals of education and culture to decide on their didactic practice, their plans of study, and to establish a pedagogical discussion on the teaching and learning processes” (Marco Curricular, 2022: 5). As we can see, in this discourse it is admitted that administrators, teachers, students, and parents, engage in dynamics of interaction with institutional culture. Following this premise, it is proposed that in the school there are processes of appropriation that lead to ways of renewing the knowledge indicated in the school’s regulations.

The authors of this document rely on the theoretical contributions of Alfredo Furlán on the curriculum and Elsie Rockwell on the school as a space of cultural construction. This dialog with renowned researchers in the field of education science allows them to put forth a different view that recognizes the responsibility of the school in the emergence of educational paths and unequal learning processes in the students. In this theoretical shift, they begin to rethink the role of teachers within the crisis de la education. Thus, after having been seen as the main culprit of the educational debacle during the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), teachers begin to be viewed as beings with the capacity for agency, individual with the skills to create diverse cultural processes in their work spaces. With this shift, they stop being blamed and are instead vindicated as actors who can generate the changes required by basic education in Mexico. Thus, a different relationship with the school organization and the teaching and learning processes is proposed.

Besides underscoring the construction of knowledge that takes place in the space of the school, the authors introduce cross-cutting axes of knowledge aimed at recovering contents that allow students to learn to coexist with diversity and understand the world of the others, such as inclusion, equality, and gender. These axes, along with basic knowledge, must be re-introduced by teachers to design themes of learning and reflection that include the problems that affect the community and the knowledge known to the students, in order to generate a situated leaning in which such knowledge is revalued and enriched through a reflective incorporation of institutional and transversal knowledge.

This educational proposal began to be known by basic education teachers in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, through the Intensive Workshop of Ongoing Training for Teachers on the New Study Plans and Programs (*Taller Intensivo de Formación Continua para Docentes en los Nuevos Planes y Programas de Estudio*) held from August 22 to 26 2022. This event was organized according to an agenda preset by educational authorities. Thus, each one of the sessions in the preschool, primary and secondary schools addressed aspects linked to the teaching practice and emotions, with key concepts of the curricular framework, such as curricular and professional autonomy and fields of training, and with the Organization of the Study Plans and Programs for Basic Education 2022. In these activities, it must be mentioned, situations arise that generate tensions within teaching communities, since the workshop used alternatively state and federal guidelines. This ambivalence caused that less time was devoted to the contents of the curricular framework and that priority was given to the activities indicated by the state agenda, in this case the goals prescribed by the RECREA booklets. As an educator said about the training for preschool teachers in Jalisco:

Some resistance from a few teachers appeared in this first approach, due to a widespread perception that the application of the integrative projects of the digital Recrea platform would be the only work methodology allowed from now on in our classrooms (Gaspar, 2024: 44).

In September, teachers would only obtain information through exchanges with their peers: "In September the school did not promote anything. In my school we only learned a little more about the reform from our co-workers' comments" (Zamora, 2024, p. 48). It would not be until early October that the SEJ would promote a workshop to analyze the integrative projects, and especially the theoretical foundations of the project methodology. Thus, from the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, training events would address mainly the project model promoted by RECREA in the state of Jalisco.

This emphasis on the state government's educational proposal continued in the CTE monthly sessions. In the first meeting of the 2022-2023 school year, held at the end of October, most of the time was devoted to work on the proposals indicated in the RECREA booklet:

In the first session of the CTE [...] it had been planned to present a video as part of the Intensive Ongoing Training Workshop. However, the analysis of the results to draft the diagnosis of the school and the construction of the Ongoing School Improvement Program (Programa Escolar de Mejora Continua or PEMC) took most of the working time programmed for that day. Thus, this first session was structured according to the guide proposed by the SEJ, leaving out the development of the ongoing teacher training as established in the NEM (Olmos, 2024: 52).

In this start of the 2022-2023 school year we see not only a priority given to the training agenda fostered by the SEJ, but also an environment rife with rumors derived from the disputes on educational issues between the state government and the federal authorities. In the third week of October 2022, in several schools there were some expectations around the possibility that the project model would not be implemented, since the printed press already spoke of the suspension of the pilot application of the NEM in the schools selected throughout the country (Olmos, 2024; Zamora, 2024). Likewise, since the dispute has some resonance among educational officials, some school principals even said that “the NEM model would very likely be reversed since the legal appeals were still under way” (Olmos, 2024: 52).

Surrounded by rumors and controversies around the teaching models for basic education, December arrived, a month in which there would not be any CTE session and basic education teachers and principals would be informed that, in accordance with the school year calendar, the Intensive Ongoing Training Workshop would be held from January 2 to January 6 2023, with the principals’ training on January 2 and the teachers’ training from January 3 to January 6.

Training in cascade: the first week of January 2023

The Intensive Ongoing Training Workshop was held in the first week of January 2023 in all the basic education schools in the country. According to official documents, the course sought

that, through their teaching knowledge and practice, teachers embark on a co-design process based on the problematization, reflection, and discussion of the core components of the Plan of Study and the synthetic Programs (SEP, Subsecretaría de Educación Básica, 2023; Olmos, 2024).

This exercise, however, would be relatively altered by the particularities that came into play in each sector and in each school. To examine how this form of updating – known as training in cascade – took place, we rely on the observations made by some teachers about two sessions of preparation of the principals and the descriptions of the training workshops held in five basic education schools of Jalisco: two primary schools and three secondary schools.¹

The training sessions for principals took place on Monday, January 5 2023, conducted by the supervisors and the technical-pedagogical assistants. Through the observations of the teachers, we learned that the training work of the primary education principals was organized according to activities that they later replicated in their own schools: the distribution of the parts of the plan of studies by teams and the implications this plan has for their practice. The

¹ This ethnographic paper forms part of five Master’s Degree theses by alumni of the Master’s Degree Program in Education Science of the Higher Institute of Research and Teaching for Teachers (ISIDM, Instituto Superior de Investigación y Docencia para el Magisterio), ascribed to Jalisco’s Secretariat for Education Jalisco (SEJ). They were all linked to the project “La capacitación de los profesores ante la Nueva Escuela Mexicana en Jalisco”, coordinated by Luciano Oropeza Sandoval, Research Professor of the University of Guadalajara and the ISIDM.

principals arrived to this session without having read the curricular map, and other just copied the contents of this document in the activity they worked on in their teams.²

Following the order indicated, the conductors began to work with the principals on the list of activities of each one of the sessions of the workshop that they would later conduct with their teachers. This dynamic brought to the surface not only the principals' doubts about the instrumentation of the NEM projects but also their beliefs and values about some of the transversal axes, such as that of gender. About the latter, some expressed ideas that anticipated some of the socio-cultural obstacles that the teachers would face in the appropriation of the contents that this concept entailed.³ When it was addressed, it was said that "Here there is nothing else, they are either men or women" or "We don't have to deal with this issue, because our students are too young." Fortunately, the diversity of the participants' experiences and knowledge helped broaden how this axis was addressed, because others said that, in the case of gender, "It is not about promoting similar behavior but about having the children learn about the different expressions of gender so they learn to respect the range of its expressions" (Celis, 2024: 67).

The conductors of these sessions recognized that the lack of time led them to leave some topics out and address some of them – such as the teaching of mathematics – only in passing, which raised concerns among the teachers and revealed the difficulty that the supervisor and the technical-pedagogical assistant had to understand the formative fields proposed in the curricular grid.

These teachers admitted at the end of the session that the training in cascade had its limitations, because they themselves were not sufficiently prepared to understand the basic documents. After this *mea culpa*, they told the principals "Don't worry if it's not entirely clear to you, because what really matters is to bring your teachers a proposal for work, that they can work on the contents of the proposal, find out the synthetic plans contents, and what is required to make an analytical plan." They concluded with an explanation of the steps that need to be taken to make such an analytic plan, without specifying what each step implied.

In regard to the training session for the secondary school principals, the supervisor designed a work dynamic aimed at bringing the participants closer to the knowledge of the curricular proposal.⁴ After distributing tokens among the teams of principals, she asked them to find out the core topics of each item in the proposal, gave them a number of questions that they had to answer, and asked them to use their answers to make a presentation that synthesized the

2 Description of the primary school principals training session taken from one of the theses written by the alumni (Celis, 2024).

3 To understand the dynamics of appropriation experienced by the teachers about the theoretical and methodological contents proposed in the NEM curricular plan we relied on the following readings: Rockwell, E. (2018). Claves para la apropiación: la educación rural en México. In Arata, N.; J. Escalante; A. Padawer (comps.). *Vivir entre escuelas. Relatos y presencias. Antología esencial*. Argentina: CLACSO, 139-172, and Rockwell, E. (2018). La dinámica cultural de la escuela. In *ibid*, 305-330.

4 Description of the secondary school principals training session taken from one of the theses written by the alumni (Guzmán, 2024).

contents of each item. She then asked them to save these presentations because they would be used with their teachers' community in the intensive week.

When the team work was presented it was observed that the contents of the presentations was too broad, which revealed the scarce knowledge of the teachers about the curricular proposal. This became even more noticeable when the articulating axes and the analytical plan structure were addressed, when the principals did not know what these concepts consisted of.

When comparing the two training sessions offered to the primary and secondary school principals respectively, we see that there are differences in the expository style of the primary school and the secondary school supervisors. In the former there is more acknowledgement of her weaknesses, general explanations and a more horizontal interaction with her principals, who express their doubts and lack of knowledge about the problems. The secondary school supervisor, however, although he explained the structure of the workshop, presented it within a framework in which most of the participants accepted the contents of the course as known, even though their participation raised serious doubt about their knowledge of the curricular plan.

These two cases of training to primary and secondary school principals, which serve as a basis to describe the preparation given to principals of basic education schools before the intensive workshop, do not constitute a solid reference to generalize a specific image of these preparatory sessions, but do raise some concerns expressed in the following questions: Is it not time to review the efficacy of training in cascade? Shouldn't SEP and state secretariat officials examine the inconveniences of this form of training when the transmitters do not work properly? Wouldn't it be healthy to evaluate the quality of the knowledge transmitted in each level of the chain of command until it gets to the communities of teachers?

The operation of the training workshops

The day after the preparatory session with the principals, the intensive workshop for the communities of teachers began. To examine the operation and functioning of this training course we rely on descriptions of the activities conducted in the two primary schools and three secondary schools, which belong to both the federal and to the state subsystems. We begin with the following questions: How were the workshops conducted? Were there visible differences in their structure and functioning, and if there were differences, where did they come from?

When examining the narratives about the operation of the workshop in the five schools mentioned, we see that most of them started the activities in the same way: on Tuesday, January 3, the conductors of the event began by presenting the general objective:

That, through their knowledge and practice, the teachers start the process of co-design based on the problematization, reflection, and discussion about the core components of the Plan of Studies and the Synthetic Programs (Olmos, 2024: 75).

Likewise, in three of the five schools the agenda to be followed through the four work sessions, from January 3 to January 6 2023, was specified. In these three cases, the last activity coincided with the general objective: ending with the design of the analytical plan. In the other two cases, the contents of the agenda did not differ from the structure of work proposed on Monday, January 2 by the supervisors to the principals, but some small variations were introduced to make the work more enjoyable. For instance, in one of the secondary schools where the conductors of the sessions were the teachers themselves, they already sent their peers the first part of the "Curricular Framework of the Plan of Studies" on January 2 so they could read it individually and bring all the questions and doubts about terms they were not clear about after a first reading to the session on Tuesday (Guzmán, 2024).

In that first session, the organizers appealed to team work and the use of materials that helped them guide and delimit the dialog of the teachers with the contents of the new educational proposal, although the use of these resources was different because only the main parts of this document were distributed to the primary schools. This procedure allowed the teachers to socialize this knowledge, but left aside the general review of it. On the other hand, there were secondary schools where videos provided ad hoc by the educational authorities, such as the video *Características del nuevo programa de estudios Nueva Escuela Mexicana*, were used, and in others they relied on Educaplay, "a device that allows them to work on the principles and foundations of the NEM interactively, whose dynamic incentivizes the participation of the teachers and relaxes them as well" (*Ibid*: 88).

This varied use of resources to recreate the elements of the Plan of Studies shows the degree of autonomy and the capacity of action of principals and teachers, since they do not restrict themselves to replicating the training course ordered by the educational authorities.

In the Wednesday session, principals and teachers addressed the synthetic plan, and especially the link between its contents and the drafting of the Analytical Plan. On this day, almost all the schools used audios and videos to explain the NEM' curricular grid. Thus, all the schools used the audio *¿Qué es un programa sintético?* by Marx Arriaga, and the video *Codiseño*, by Rosa María Torres. These materials helped to describe the contents of the Synthetic Plan and to specify the steps required for drafting the Analytical Plan. However, the presentation of these materials did not clear all the teachers' doubts, so the conductors of the workshops left this issue for subsequent sessions, and decided to address the elements that form part of the co-design the following day, so that the progress on the review of the main parts of the educational proposal allowed them to offer more foundations on the steps that they should follow when making the Analytical Plan.

It must be mentioned that in the two schools where audios and videos were not used they used diagrams. In one of the primary schools, the principal projected an image that helped her explain the curricular development process, from the contents of the Synthetic Plan to the parts that make up the Analytical Plan, using interactive activities with mobile phones such as projec-

ting a QR code on a screen so that the teachers could access a quiz in the Mentimeter application to review the knowledge acquired in the previous session and link it with the contents of the Wednesday session.

Once again, we see the continuity of the work structure suggested in the training session with the principals, particularly the use of the materials indicated by the educational authorities and the application of more versatile dynamics in which teachers and principals introduced other materials that make the activities livelier and make it easier to understand the main topics.

On the Thursday session there were some differences in the agenda. Although in the five schools they sought to address topics that helped understand the curricular development process, different topics were addressed. In two schools, a primary and a secondary, the study of the formative fields and the articulating axes were prioritized, in order to identify each one's pedagogical approach and didactic implications. In the other three, the organizers focused the activity on the input required to make the Analytical Plan, so they worked on the Synthetic Program, the school diagnosis, and the community diagnosis.

As in the two previous sessions, working teams were organized to review the fields of knowledge and the articulating axes, as well as examine the diagnostic documents drafted weeks earlier about the school and the community. Also in one of the schools, a secondary school, they relied on the Marx Arriaga and Rosa María Torres videos mentioned above, which had been used in the other schools on the Wednesday session (Valenzuela, 2024).

In this third session there were not only slight differences about the topics addressed, but also different forms of participation that reveal the uneven preparation and commitment of principals and teachers about the new educational proposal. Thus, in one of the primary schools, the principal showed a visible lack of knowledge about the Analytical Plan, a situation that generated unease among her teachers:

From the beginning of the session the flow of information never stopped. Formats for the Analytical Program were shared wholesale, which led the principal to intervene and say what each teacher had to do, because by the following Monday we had to implement it with our students and that was how it had to be planned every week. This proposal was not well received by the participants since some teachers work two shifts and the information they had was different. A teacher who works in the same zone in another school in the afternoon shift mentioned that her principal had said that one Plan had to be made by each school, another said that it had to be made by each teacher but that it was not going to be implemented yet... So many doubts arose that the principal withdrew her proposal and said that she would speak with the supervisor and ask her (Zamora, 2024: 84).

On the other hand, in the secondary school where the teachers took on the role of operators, they only intervened to organize the analysis of the formative fields by working teams, because their colleagues had reviewed those contents the day before:

Interestingly, when the teachers asked questions or had doubts about the fields, the conductors didn't have to intervene to solve them, since in most cases the team that presented them was able to answer and solve the questions or doubts (Guzmán, 2024: 89)

In spite of the disparities, in most of the schools the operators concluded this session with diagrams or graphics that helped them present more clearly the features of the Synthetic Program and the Analytical Plan, as well as the stages to be followed by each educational community when drafting the second project.

To conclude the session, [...] we completed a double-entry table where we wrote and summarized the main features of the Synthetic Program and the Analytical Plan. With this activity it became clear that the Analytical Plan was not a lesson plan, and that therefore there was not a format to incorporate its elements (*ibid*: 90).

In the last session of the intensive workshop there was a consensus in the five schools about the specific purpose of that day: to build an outline of the school's Analytical Plan based on the input analyzed in the previous sessions, such as the school and the community diagnoses, as well as the Synthetic Program.

This purpose was not achieved, but it did allow the teacher communities to make approaches to the methodology to be followed to draft the Analytical Plan, as it was done in the three secondary schools. However, in the two primary schools the time was used to make up for the mistakes made, as in the case of the principal who was not able to explain to her teachers the use of the Analytical Project:

The Friday 6 session began with a visit from the supervisor, who had been asked to attend by the principal due to the many questions that had been raised in the previous session. The group asked her all the questions they had about the Plan of Studies, the Synthetic Program and the Analytical Plan. The supervisor began her explanation with the scheme of the curricular structure, pointing out that it had to be seen from the inside out and that the disciplines would no longer be studied one by one but by working on projects. She also mentioned that she had had her training on Thursday in the last working week in December and she considered it to be insufficient, which was reflected in her intervention since she did not explain clearly what the Analytical Plan consisted of or when it would be implemented (Zamora, 2024: 85).

To end this session, the operators emphasized that the Analytical Program would not be finished that day and that what they sought was to have a clearer picture of the stages and ingredients required to build the Analytical Program in each school, which would be further explored in the monthly meetings of the Technical School Council (CTE, Consejo Técnico Escolar).

The review of the curricular proposal in the CTE

According to the ongoing training activity calendar established from the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, the training gaps were addressed in the monthly sessions of the Technical School Council (CTE) in the months following the intensive training workshop. This was a good decision, because it allowed them to go over the aspects that had generated the most confusion among the teachers. In most of the schools examined, the core parts of the curricular grid, such as the formative fields and the articulating axes, were studied in greater detail, and exercises were conducted to make teachers familiar with the preparation of each school's Analytical Program.

This initiative, however was hindered by the replicating tradition that exists in the forms of updating used by the Secretariat of Education in Jalisco: in the CTE meetings, instead of presenting examples of the most complicated topics, they repeated the same scheme of the training workshop, a dynamic which practically reproduced the expository scheme used in that workshop, without any didactic experience that illustrated more clearly the use and application of the key concepts. As an educator said:

The dynamic that they used was very repetitive, with a short time to carry it out and little practical application. I remember they were like readings – “Read this, watch these videos, analyze them and then we talk about them – but the truth is that we devoted very little time to it and paid more attention to other Technical Council issues (Gaspar, 2024: 94).

Along with the Council meetings, some school supervisors organized forms of training with teachers more familiar with the topics in the curricular grid. These courses helped to broaden the teachers' understanding of the key concepts, but they did not clarify their use in teaching activities. In other cases support was provided by CAM advisors, who helped the teachers understand and instrumentalize the integrative projects as a teaching methodology.

These monthly sessions of the CTE helped the teaching communities to learn more about the teaching proposal of the NEM, especially in regard to the construction of the Analytical Program, a product that combines not only the ability to diagnose the conditions of the school environment and the community, but also how to structure a teaching proposal founded on community knowledge. Nevertheless, this dynamic reveals aspects that must be evaluated, such as the way in which knowledge is reproduced in the CTE sessions and the forms of participation of teachers and principals, because the experiences in each school show that the disposition and convictions of each teaching community member have an impact on the solidity and efficacy of training processes.

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