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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TEACHERS IN CONTEXTS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

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Abstract: In 2017, the law creating the public education system was enacted, transferring municipal schools to Local Public Education Services (SLEP). As Ball and Maroy (2009) point out, the implementation of educational policies implies tensions between the objectives of the reform and their translation by educational actors. Likewise, a characteristic feature of Chilean rural schools, among others, is their organization into Microcenters, that is, groups of territorially close schools that meet monthly to share pedagogical experiences, in order to improve their teaching. In such a context, this paper seeks to analyze how microcenter meetings provide professional development opportunities to those in charge of rural schools (RSE) during the implementation of an educational reform that changes their labor dependence. Based on 31 reflective interviews, it is concluded that the current microcenter meetings have a fundamentally administrative nature and the instances of exchange of pedagogical practices have been reduced. Due to the above, teachers consider that their autonomy, opportunities for peer learning and professional development have decreased. These results tend to confirm the observation of Ball and Maroy (2009) and empirically exemplify such tensions.

INTRODUCTION

In Chile there are 3,509 rural schools, distributed throughout its territory. 12% of the country's teachers work in them and 8% of the national enrollment is educated. In most of them, the classroom is multigrade, that is, it includes students from various educational levels. Likewise, according to the number of classrooms, these schools are classified as single-teacher, two-teacher, three-teacher or multi-teacher, depending on the number of classrooms and grouping of students in them. The nature of multigrade classrooms, attended by a single teacher, generates important challenges from a pedagogical point of view (Santamaria-Cardaba and Sampedro 2020). Hence the importance of providing rural teachers with effective and continuous professional development, which guarantees the learning success of all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) and gives them access to equitable, high-quality education; which constitutes both a human right (Adams and Woods, 2015; Fullan, 2015) and a moral imperative (Fishman, 2015).

Various authors have investigated the characteristics of effective teachers. In this sense, certain common characteristics have been identified: self-efficacy (Hattie, 2010; Nyangau, 2020), mastery of the content to be taught and, finally, having developed instructional skills (Weinhandl, Lavicza, Hohenwarter, & Schallert, 2020), which allow them to address the diverse needs of all students and close learning gaps (Marques & Xavier, 2020; Olagbaju & Popoola, 2020; Yang & Baldwin, 2020). Along with the above, rural education presents challenges due to its geographical condition, as well as the social and cultural characteristics of the territory (Juárez and Rodríguez, 2016; Smit, Hyry-Beihammer and Raggi, 2015). To the above, it is necessary to add that rural schools have the following six characteristics: a) low enrollment; b) few teachers; c) few students in each room; e) few students at each level of education and f) students from various educational levels share a classroom (Thayer, Havens and Kido 2015).

Given the characteristics of effective teachers, identified by the literature and the particularities of the teaching profession in rural contexts, this study aims to analyze how microcenter meetings provide professional development opportunities to rural teachers during the implementation of an educational reform that alters their labor dependency.

The text presented below is divided into three sections. In the first, a framework of reference is presented, in which the main characteristics of Law 21,040 are developed, the concept of professional development and its relationship with the role of microcenter meetings is analyzed. The second section presents the methodology of the study and the third shows the results.

REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

EDUCATION REFORM

Law 21,040 is the largest reform of the educational administration model in Chile (Donoso, 2019). Establishes the creation of 70 SLEPs, of which 11 are being implemented, on which various studies have been developed (Muñoz, 2021, Uribe et al., 2019), mainly focused on urban schools, with little presence of teachers and those in charge of rural schools (EER). This highlights the importance of this research, since, as various authors suggest (Pini and Mills 2015; Santamaría-Cárdaba and Sampedro 2020), there is a shortage of studies on education in the rural world. Likewise, it must be considered that the implementation of educational public policies implies tensions between the external demands of implementation, on the one hand, and the translation carried out by the various educational actors, on the other (Ball and Maroy, 2009).

In this sense, the implementation has not been without difficulties. Among the problematic aspects of this new structure is the complexity of school administration: since SLEPs are public services, they are naturally subject to greater rigor and regulatory complexity than municipalities. In this sense, the research by Garretón et al. (2022) concluded that the challenges of SLEPs cover the financial, organizational and institutional learning spheres.

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Law 20,903 (2016) creates the teacher professional development system. In its article 11 it establishes that "...education professionals have the right to free and relevant training for their professional development and the continuous improvement of their knowledge and pedagogical skills." Furthermore, it specifies that its objective "is to contribute to the continuous improvement of the professional performance of teachers, by updating and deepening their disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, reflecting on their professional practice, with special emphasis on the application of collaborative techniques with other teachers. and professionals, as well as the development and strengthening of competencies for educational inclusion." To achieve these purposes, the law has specified that teacher professional development must contribute to the educational project and implementation of the school's Educational Improvement Plan, and that the CPEIP is the body in charge at the national level of providing free continuous training to students. all teachers in the country.

However, before the promulgation of Law 20,903 (2016), one of the most important milestones in terms of teacher professional development was the creation of the basic rural MECE program. This, through decree 477 of 1995, established the creation of microcenters, which are made up of professionals from geographically nearby multigrade rural schools and meet monthly, alternating the host school. In turn, their purpose is: a) to collaborate in the design and improvement of teaching, having as a special focus the design of curricular activities; b) exchange experiences and hold discussions that allow reflection on certain topics; c) both inform yourself about innovative teaching forms or approaches, and examine teaching

and learning materials to decide their possible use in the classroom; d) rehearse with the group of colleagues the use of certain work strategies in the classroom and e) overcome the isolationism typical of the rural teacher's situation, strengthening self-confidence and recognition of their abilities as a professional (Ávalos, 2003), elements that coincide with those identified in the literature as relevant in teacher professional development.

Studies on microcenters are scarce and are focused on their contribution to teaching processes and the professional development of teachers. For example, Cárcamo's (2016) research concludes that the operation of the microcenter is restricted to a set of technical-instrumental devices, whose purpose is planning to achieve goals proposed at the ministerial level. On the other hand, a study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) posited that teacher professional development does not systematically translate into strong student learning outcomes.

This same study identified seven components of effective teacher professional development (a) focused on content, (b) incorporates active learning, (c) supports collaboration, (d) uses models of effective practice, (e) provides coaching and support expert, (f) offers feedback and reflection and (g) is of sustained duration. Along with these characteristics of training, it is necessary to consider the following conditions: (a) shared vision, (b) the use of data to establish objectives and advance student learning, (c) aligned resources, (d) development of continuous leadership and (e) sustainable training through effective change management (Learning Forward, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that uses the reflective interview technique (Denzin, N. 2001). 31 managers of rural schools, belonging to three local services, were interviewed, with an average duration of one hour, which were later transcribed. Based on the reviewed literature on teacher professional development, categories of analysis were developed and, using the constant comparative method, various common categories have been identified in the stories of the interviewees. Table 1 shows the number of Rural School Managers (RSE) interviewed, associated with the type of school and the respective SLEP. 70% are male and 30% female. At the same time, they all have a basic teaching degree and can be classified as veterans in their position, that is, with more than 15 years of experience.

SLEP	Unidocentes	Bidocentes	Tridocentes	Average rural manager experience
A	1	0	5	15 years
B	11	0	4	21 years
C	0	0	10	17 years

Table 1. *Characteristics of the interviewees*

RESULTS

When beginning the analysis, it is important to highlight that the EERs interviewed belong to long-established microcenters, some of them have operated for the last 20 years and with little teacher turnover. Consequently, an atmosphere of reunion between teachers prevails in them and it is customary for the host school to prepare to receive its colleagues: it provides breakfast and lunch to the participants and has the active collaboration of parents and other members of the community. These practices of welcome and reunion between teachers are a consistent characteristic of microcenter meetings. This climate must be considered when analyzing

Dimension	Number of references	Example or comment
Incorporate active learning	10	"I am implementing the Problem-Based Learning methodology in a project about the vegetation here."
Support collaboration	60	"With colleagues we develop joint projects to strengthen reading and writing in our children."
Provides expert training and support.	8	"A while ago a teacher from the ministry came and gave us good examples for the classes"
Conditions		
Shared vision	30	"We developed the educational improvement plan trying to find similarities and then carry out joint activities."
Popup Categories		
Solution to administrative problems	42	"They don't leave us time to do administrative activities, before we consulted and resolved in the microcenter meeting, now there is no time!
Share experience	50	"Before we had more time to share work experiences with our students, now it is more administrative, that was lost."
Education policy information	72	"The technical pedagogical advisor of the SLEP organizes the meeting and tells us the ministry's guidelines and they ask us to prepare documents."
We can't decide it	102	"Now they tell us what topics we will work on in the microcenter, we cannot decide"

Table 2. *Categories and segments*

the EER interview and the role of microcenters as a space for professional development, since it can be an inhibiting factor to feedback, as will be mentioned later.

Using the proposed analysis methodology, the 31 interviews were analyzed, identifying a total of 374 segments, of which 78 are associated with the dimensions developed by Darling (2017), 30 with the conditions specified in Learning Forward (2017) and 269 segments that emerge from the EER discourses. The results are illustrated in table 2.

As it can be seen in Table 2, the largest number of segments is associated with the emerging categories, which express the opinion of the EERs about the transfer from the municipality to the SLEPs and how this has changed the way microcenters are organized, decide the issues and lead them. It is evident that the EERs consider that they have lost autonomy, which is expressed in the loss of the coordinator's powers to organize the agenda and prioritize activities associated with sharing experience with peers and collaboratively planning synergistic activities between schools. The activities planned by SLEPs are considered to be more bureaucratic and oriented to the demands of public policy.

The second group of segments with the highest number of mentions is that associated with Linda Darling's effective professional development categories, with a total of 78 segments. Among them, it is worth highlighting the support and collaboration between teachers. EERs believe that, in microcenter meetings, they have opportunities to collaborate with their peers and receive support to solve their problems. To a lesser extent, they consider that they learn active teaching practices or receive direct training. However, the missing dimensions are: a) giving feedback and reflection, b) using models of effective practice, c) support to delve deeper into the content to be taught and d) there are no references to receiving training on a sustained basis over time. Although the reports show that the EERs are interested in sharing experiences, no instances of feedback are identified. This is an understandable aspect, since the microcenter-based teacher professional development model can inhibit direct feedback on practice, prioritizing the

care of interpersonal relationships between EERs.

Regarding the training conditions, it is evident that they are focused on the construction of a shared vision, expressed in the importance that the EERs attribute to the coordination of actions on their PME and the actions derived from it. However, in this dimension, there are no references associated with the use of data, learning resources, development of leadership skills or sustainable training through effective change management. In this sense, perhaps such shortcomings can be explained given the scarcity of resources, isolation, challenge of multigrade classrooms, etc.

However, it is also possible to consider that the microcenter model itself as a professional development strategy contributes to them. This is because, in such a model, innovation and development depend almost exclusively on its members, with little external support that could energize discussions and prevent routinization.

These results present challenges for the continuous training of rural teachers. On the one hand, microcenter meetings are professional spaces in which EERs, especially single-teachers, find support and collaboration with peers. In this sense, it allows them to share experiences and inhibits isolation. However, on the other hand, they fail to energize their professional development and practice through feedback and enriching discussion among peers. Furthermore, this conspires with the bureaucratization of the microcenters after the creation of the SLEP, to weaken their training role. Therefore, it would be important to analyze strategies to boost peer training and strengthen the leadership of the microcenter coordinator.

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