

## Teacher Assessment in Primary Schools in Colima, Mexico

## Evaluación docente en escuelas de educación básica en Colima, México

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### Abstract

In 2013, the process of education reform began at the primary and secondary levels. One of the central tenets is compulsory assessment of teachers, who can be dismissed if they fail to take it, or relocated to other areas of the school system if they fail to pass three times. This paper studies the opinions of 38 teachers interviewed in various municipalities of Colima, with the aim of finding out how they face this process. The main findings include: the deficient information and communication strategy used by the education authorities; the low credibility of the assessment process and the total lack of confidence that corruption would disappear; and the questioning of their job status, which caused fear and insecurity. In the immediate future, the teachers expect heavy supervision of their work and high competitiveness, in light of the uncertainty of implementing new educational plans and programs after the end of the six-year presidential period.

**Keywords:** Education reform, teachers, assessment, primary education, higher secondary education

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## Resumen

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En 2013 inició el proceso de Reforma educativa en los niveles de educación primaria, secundaria y educación media. Uno de los ejes centrales es la evaluación obligatoria de los docentes, que, en caso de no presentarse, podría traducirse en su despido, o bien, de no aprobarla en tres ocasiones, ser reubicados a otras tareas del sistema escolar. El artículo analiza la opinión de 38 docentes entrevistados en distintos municipios de Colima, con la finalidad de conocer cómo afrontan este proceso. Entre los principales hallazgos están: la deficiente estrategia de información y comunicación utilizada por las autoridades educativas, la poca credibilidad en el proceso de evaluación —así como la nula confianza en que la corrupción desaparezca—, el cuestionamiento a su estatus laboral que generó miedo e inseguridad. En el futuro inmediato, los docentes esperan una fuerte supervisión de su trabajo y alta competitividad, ante la incertidumbre de implementar nuevos planes y programas educativos al ocaso del sexenio.

**Palabras clave:** reforma educativa, docentes, evaluación, educación básica, educación media superior

### Education reform and teacher assessment

One of the first acts to be carried out in the six-year term of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012) was to promote an agreement between the country's major political parties: the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN), and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), which was termed the *Pact for Mexico*. The main points of the agreement were: "A society of rights and freedoms; for economic growth, employment and competitiveness; for security and justice; for transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption and for democratic governance" (2012, p. 2).

The reforms announced focused on the telecommunications, financial, and education sectors. The Education Reform (ER)<sup>1</sup> was the federal government's attempt to address the serious deterioration in the school system, repeatedly evidenced by results on international examinations such as the PISA test, which put our country in last place among the OECD member countries, at 53rd of the 65 countries participating (OECD, 2012).

The three objectives of the ER that were proposed were the following:

1. *To respond to the social demand to improve the quality of basic and higher secondary education.* To achieve this, work will be done on the professionalization of teaching, the establishment of minimum standards for the functioning of schools, the improvement of study plans and programs, the strengthening of programs aimed at improving facilities, the use of information and communication technology, and regular assessments of all components of the education system.
2. *To reduce inequality in access to education,* reinforcing programs that provide assistance to schools in areas with high levels of marginalization, as well as students with special educational needs.
3. *To involve the parents and all of Mexican society in the transformation of education* by means of participation councils at national, state, and municipal level, and in educational establishments, as well as by holding consultation forums on planning of the education system and regional educational needs (SEP, 2016).

Among the changes included in the ER, it was decided to create the Professional Teaching Service, to be responsible for the assessment, training, and refreshment of knowledge of teachers, managers, and supervisors. Also created was the National Education System, the responsibility for which fell to the National Institute of Educational Assessment (INEE), which was granted autonomy; in addition to an Educational Information and Management System, for which it was agreed that a census would be conducted of schools, students, and teachers (which did not exist); expansion of full-time schools, strengthening of school management, and regulation of the sale of food in schools to promote healthy consumption among students (SEP, 2015).

The ER involved compulsory assessment of teachers at the pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher

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<sup>1</sup> The reform includes all levels of pre-school, primary, secondary and higher secondary education.

secondary education levels, who would be unable to avoid this, being faced with dismissal if they did not take the assessment or relocated in other areas of the school system should they fail to be approved three times (SEP, LGSPD, 2013). The term of quality, as an expression of the government to condense the principles of the ER, was included in the Political Constitution: Article 3: "The state will ensure quality in compulsory education in such a way that educational materials and methods, school organization, educational infrastructure, and the suitability of teachers and managers ensure the maximum learning achievement of students" (SEP, 2015).

### Who and what is assessed?

The assessment of teachers is focused on pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher secondary education, which consists of about 1,200,000 teachers<sup>2</sup>. According to the General Law of Professional Teaching Service (LGSPD), the assessment of teacher performance includes: class planning, mastery of content, teaching practices, classroom environment, student assessment and learning, collaboration with the school, and dialogue with parents. The stages and aspects to be evaluated are the following: 1) Compliance with responsibilities (teacher's school participation and relationship with parents and community), 2) Evidence of teaching (teacher's practice based on students' work), 3) Examination of didactic knowledge and skills (through the solution of cases), and 4) Argued didactic planning (preparation of a class plan, which includes the diagnosis of the group and the social context of the school). In 2015, these assessments reached significant figures, as more than "360,000 teachers from basic and higher secondary education took entrance, promotion, and permanence assessments" (INEE, 2015).

In the first few months of 2016, the programs for each of the priority lines of the ER began being presented: *The school at the center (escuela al centro)*, which will provide teachers in the areas of reading, writing, English, physical education, art, and special education, and which is intended to strengthen their management capacity, and technical and social participation guidance, as well as to make the school schedule and timetables more flexible; *Schools at one hundred percent (escuelas al cien)*, aimed at the rehabilitation of educational establishments with multi-million peso investments; and *Professional teacher development*, the so-called Strategy of Continuous Education of Teachers in basic and higher secondary education.

### The opinion of teachers in Colima

In Colima there were strikes at several dozen schools, especially in the port of Manzanillo. In 2015, more than 2,000 teachers were reported to be on strike from 112 schools belonging to Section 39 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), which left 12,000 students without classes (UnoTV, 01.09.2015). A few months beforehand, some media reported that more than 150 schools were on strike (Periodismo, 06.24.2015). At national level, the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) stated that it would fight for the ER to be repealed, carrying out public demonstrations in various states and suspending classes for several months in some primary and secondary schools, mainly in Michoacán, Guerrero, Chiapas, and Oaxaca states, where they have been present and organized for various years already.

This article is part of an ongoing research project at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Colima, the objective of which was to study the opinion, perceptions, and actions of teachers in primary education in light of the education reform in Colima. This text mainly addresses aspects related to teacher assessment, starting from the enactment of the ER to the publication of the results of the assessments conducted in March 2016.

The central premise is that it is necessary to glean the opinions of one of the main protagonists, teachers: How do they experience this process? What new challenges do they face in their profession? What changes are seen in their day-to-day lives at schools? What implications do they foresee? What aspects do they

<sup>2</sup> At the start of the 2014-2015 school year, enrolment in compulsory education was 30,793,313 children and young people. Of this figure, around 26 million were students in basic education (84.4%) and the remainder, 4.8 million, were in higher secondary education (15.6%). Schools in the three levels of basic education totaled 228,200 and around 1,200,000 teachers worked in them. In the case of higher secondary education, there were 16,162 establishments with 286,955 teachers (INEE, 2016, p. 26).

envisage regarding their permanence in the education system? In particular, after this long parenthesis, what will happen in classrooms? What attitude will the teachers have? Will they be convinced about the new educational proposal? And how will they implement it?

The work is divided into three large blocks. The first explains the conceptual bases chosen to conduct the analysis: teacher identity, reorganization of the basic education system, and the immediate future of the profession. Second, we describe the methodology used and characteristics of the sample and, finally, the main findings are presented.

## Conceptual bases

### The state as an assessor

The basis of the ER is built on a different form of state action, the *state as assessor*, which uses “the assessment of the system [as an] tool of the education reform, in the sense that it allows new forms of control to be established in a formally decentralized educational system” (La Bionda, 2004, p. 192). The process is oriented more towards a logic that favors accountability and results, established on the basis of efficiency and effectiveness parameters –which can be understood as sufficient or insufficient– in various areas within a framework at state, regional, and local level, where the complexity of relations, negotiations, and influences between the different stakeholders predominates when implementing a policy action, and which contains a high degree of uncertainty that is sometimes difficult to estimate accurately at the time it is set in motion (Kingdon et.al, 2014) and that goes beyond the educational field and ties itself with politics (Loyo, 2011, p.1083). It is in this sense that the assessment takes on a political nature, as Weiler states: “[...] the use of assessment as ‘compensatory legitimation’, that is, using the ‘scientific respectability’ of the assessment to give legitimacy to a political process” (cited by La Bionda, 2004, p. 192).

The formulation of a national education policy establishes general lines of action that are intended to achieve uniformity in the various aspects: assessment, permanence, or hiring of teachers; However, based on the qualitative investigation in this text, we intend to show its differential impacts and its contextualization because, as is known, it is not possible to talk about “teachers” to refer to a union that has specific characteristics and particularities determined by the socio-historical conditions of each region and at a certain time.

### Teacher identity

The contribution of the research on teacher identity provides elements of analysis that help to understand the complex network of aspects of which it is comprised, either to highlight elements of its constitution (Bolívar et al., 2005; Dubar, 2002; Giddens, 1997; Hiraoka, 1996), features associated with a specific profession or career (Güemes, 2003; Landesman, 2006; Landesman & Ickowicz, 2015), the position assumed faced with changes in the environment (Bauman, 2007; Bauman, 2009; Maffesoli, 2007), or the process of resistance and adaptations that result in their future, as in the case of education reform (Carletti, 2006). The concept of identity from which we begin establishes that: “[...] it is not an attribute or an intrinsic property of the subject, but rather it has an intersubjective and relational character [...] resulting from a social process, in the sense that it emerges and develops in the day-to-day interaction with others. The individual recognizes themselves only by recognizing themselves in the other” (Giménez, 1996, p. 14). On the other hand, constitutive elements of identity, such as the time, the activities, and the certainty of the work were altered with the ER, which translated into more demands and changes that affected teaching and the teaching staff as a whole (Hargreaves, 2005).

### The immediate future of the profession

Apart from the supervisory mechanisms that are established or the categories to account for teaching work, it is worth considering the opinion of teachers; judgments that are constructed from the information they possess, as well as from their beliefs (Pajares, 1992), experiences (Delory-Momberger, 2014), memories

(Correale, 2005), and values (Alducin, 1989; Frondizi, 1972), which make it possible to characterize some fact and interpret it (Geertz, 2006) and are a valid construct for the information regardless of whether it is true or false (Berger & Luckmann, 1997), a perception of the problem (Kandakai, et al., 1999), and a –temporary– reference on which their point of view is built. In the case of the teachers interviewed, they expressed uncertainty, fear, insecurity, and a lack of information, among other aspects that resulted in a difficult and confrontational situation between various education sectors: the teachers, the union, and education authorities.

### Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on interviews. The criterion to select the sample was to consider teachers who had already taken an assessment or who had already been contacted by the SEP to take the corresponding examination in the near future. We selected 38 teachers, 12 men and 26 women, from 11 primary schools and 8 secondary schools in various municipalities of Colima.

Table 1  
*Teachers interviewed by gender, municipality*

Teachers	Gender		Municipality	Schools	
	M	F		Primary	Secondary
3	1	2	Armería	1	1
5	1	4	Colima	2	1
9	2	7	Comala	1	1
4	1	3	Coquimatlán	1	0
3	1	2	Cuauhtémoc	1	1
2	0	2	Ixtlahuacán	1	1
2	1	1	Tecomán	2	1
4	1	3	Manzanillo	2	1
6	4	2	Minatitlán	0	1
38	12	26			

The sample type for this study was *non-probabilistic*, because we sought profound and detailed information, rather than quantity or standardization. The choice was of *standard subjects*, that is, their selection did not depend on them having the same probability of being chosen, but obeyed the specific characteristics of the research (Hernández, Fernández, & Baptista, 2006, p. 328); in this case, teachers involved in the reform.

Table 2  
*Teachers' years of service by municipality and gender*

Municipality	Years of service	
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
Armería	15	8
		22
Colima	22	5
		25
		12
		2
Comala	6	12
	18	15
		16
		6
		22
		7
		11
Coquimatlán	19	2
		1
		1
Ixtlahuacán		7
		15
Cuauhtémoc	16	12
		4
Tecomán	2	7
Manzanillo	14	2
		6
		9
Minatitlán	25	22
	14	11
	12	
	6	
<i>Minatitlán</i>	25	22
	14	11
	12	
	6	

In parallel with the implementation of the stages of the reform, we set ourselves the task of obtaining the opinions and assessments of primary school teachers in municipalities in Colima, in order to take stock of the reform, to find out about what kind of repercussions they perceived.

The protocol of the interview with the teachers consisted of explaining the objectives of the project and requesting their authorization to record their testimonies and later publish them. They were also informed

that their names would not appear in the paper, as what was important was the facts and narrative of the events. In all cases, teachers accepted without any restrictions, were in agreement, and were willing to cooperate. In August 2015, we began visiting the schools, attended meetings with teachers outside their workplace, and through individual and collective interviews we managed to form an overview of the positions and key moments in the view of the teachers. The interviews were conducted in schools or outside schools between August 2015 and March 2016. They were carried out as a dialogue with a semi-structured part (Cohen, et al., 2011) based on a script. The main themes in the interviews were: 1. Information and communication; 2. School and daily life; 3. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes; 4. Actions to address the reform; and 5. The future of the profession.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety and subjected to a process of analysis that consisted of the following: A conceptual map was designed for each interview and in each of them the phrases or keywords identified in the narrative of the teachers and which were linked to the objective of the research were marked in different colors. With the conceptual map of each interview, a matrix was designed of the pre-categories that were most frequently mentioned in the teachers' discourse –the most predominant colors– where the different points of view were contrasted, based on the teachers textual statements (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 197).

Table 3  
*Pre-categories and categories*

	Categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redefinition of work and social status</li> <li>• Continuous assessment</li> <li>• Social discredit, deteriorated social image</li> <li>• Job and personal insecurity</li> <li>• Individual and collective fear</li> <li>• Insecurity in institutional life</li> <li>• Suffering in the institution</li> <li>• Poor information and communication between peers</li> <li>• Limited participation</li> <li>• Deficient communication between SEP, SNTE, INEE, and teachers</li> </ul>	Teacher identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of the state: control, intimidation, threats, fear, coercion, layoffs, rewards, and punishments</li> <li>• Educational quality as the central axis</li> <li>• Technocratic discourse: insufficient, sufficient, good, outstanding, excellent (secondary education)</li> <li>• Control: assessment of results and not of processes, intimidation, fear, threats, coercion, dismissals</li> <li>• Control: evaluation of results and not of processes, intimidation, fear, threats, coercion, layoffs</li> </ul>	State as an assessor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They do not feel involved in the reform</li> <li>• Uncertainty about new content</li> <li>• A selective measure</li> <li>• Devaluation of the teaching role, only certain aspects are assessed</li> <li>• Job insecurity</li> <li>• Corruption that does not disappear</li> <li>• Prevalence of discomfort and nonconformity</li> <li>• Questioning of teacher autonomy</li> <li>• Distrust of the SEP, SNTE and INEE</li> <li>• Free competition with other professionals</li> <li>• Threat to their environment and permanence in the job</li> </ul>	The immediate future

The next step was triangulation, which consisted of comparing the discourses of the various participants, as well as the concepts reviewed in the theory in relation to the objective of the research. This is how we obtained the definitive categories developed throughout the investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 216).

## Findings

### The state as an assessor

**Teacher assessment.** Unlike other education reforms implemented in Mexico (National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education, 1992; or Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education, 2012), in this case it was decided to *retake* control of the system starting with the teaching profession. In reiterated statements, the head of the SEP stated this objective, given that for years he had been heavily influenced –in other words dominated– by the SNTE and in some states by the CNTE, as well as other groups with a different presence at national level.

For a long time, there was sufficient evidence on the problems of teaching and student learning in our country's basic education schools. Pioneering studies such as *¿México un país de reprobados?* (in English, *Mexico, a country of failures?*) (Guevara, 1991), or the results of the PISA tests, for example, were consistent with the poor academic results obtained by students. Likewise, various recommendations were made on strategies, training, and training for teachers and, indeed, the gap was highlighted between teaching and learning of content, so the question arising from the results of previous assessments (2015) was whether it was necessary to examine these characteristics with the expenditure that implied, as it was already known that there was a need to promote a new scheme of teacher training. For example, the courses that are currently offered and made available from mid-March could well have been offered regardless of the results obtained, so the phrase “made to measure” used by the education minister is questionable:

[...] made to measure, what nonsense, it's just to legitimize it [...], it's an open secret that the school, the teachers and everything was all going badly; did the people at the SEP or the INEE really not know? Year after year the same thing came out in all the tests, that they were poor in math, poor in Spanish [...] (Teacher interview, Villa de Alvarez No. 36/16.03.16).

**Information and communication problems for assessment.** Faced with such an educational policy measure of this magnitude, the communication strategy was expected to be effective and aimed at conveying a clear message to teachers. However, the common denominator is that not only was there a lack of information, but there was also a lack of staff in Colima state capable of answering the many questions that came up every day. The communication strategy left a great deal to be desired in the opinion of the teachers, as the reform was already taking its first action, and doubt and uncertainty among teachers was increasing as the date came closer to submit the first information to the platform as part of the first stage of teacher assessment:

When I was told that I had to take the test I swear I even cried. I said: there are lots of teachers in Colima, why me? Why did they look at me? [...]. Just imagine, not once since I left my degree course are you asked to take a test like that [...] It's a farce, but at least I asked everywhere and no one could tell me anything about the test; how would it be assessed? Who was going to do the assessment? I don't think they did it well [...] They really failed to inform us, and they didn't do it (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 11/12.11.15).

Between the teachers there was a confusing exchange of information and rumors of all kinds were generated by those who identified it as a simple provocation:

This thing about the reform is to scare us, you'll see! In the end everything will be just the same. It's the same every six-year [presidential] term, and nothing ever happens (Teacher interview, Colima, No. 06/22.09.15).

There were even some who described it as the end of their career as a teacher:

Now they've really given it to us! And what happens next is they get rid of us old [teachers] [...], lots of colleagues are saying the same thing, and that's what they want, the younger teachers will see, but at this stage of my life it's harder to get into these



things, they treat us all the same [...] If you've already got various years of service it's not in your interests to take a risk [...] (Teacher interview, Colima No. 07/22.09.15).

These comments show the latest concern about a process on which there was little information, but the common denominator was definitely job security.

**Job placements.** The teachers interviewed openly stated that they were not sure what was going to happen with their job placements, because there were lots of rumors, generated based on “what everyone heard” and which was arriving in schools by drip-feed. The focus of the concern was that the communication about the reform was done in a disorganized manner, with teachers saying that in states such as Colima “it didn't work at all”:

I'll tell you about how the information was shit! We were from the few schools that went on strike! Yes, on strike! We went to the marches, and you know, afterwards they came from the ministry to get our attention [...] The day they came we surrounded them and asked question after question [...] and they didn't know what to say, until they told us directly: “We don't have the information either, we don't know much, but they aren't going to close the school, because it affects them [...] How's this then? The authorities didn't know! [...] It was totally useless (Teacher interview, Colima No. 01/04.08.15).

The issue of the placements, and everything that involves: inheritance, sale, and negotiation, is one of the main concerns in all of the interviews. There is no belief that the allocation is free from corruption and is granted as part of a process of negotiation between the SNTE and the federal or state government. In this regard, the testimony of the teachers indicated that both the assessment and the sale of placements was and will continue to be part of a political agreement between the SNTE and the government:

Not all the teachers are assessed. Why do you think that is? [...]. The ones who are very close to the union aren't assessed. They already avoided the one from last year and now? Why? They met the requirements and everything? And? [...] They weren't assessed [...] This is politics, pure damned corruption [...] We're in Mexico and anything can happen [...] but it's pure corruption (Teacher interview, Tecomán, No. 34/02.03.2016).

Another similar testimony:

I think that you can't control the placements, to stop them being sold by dirty dealing. What does the fucking SNTE live on? That's what it lives on! Pure dirty dealing, that's their power. If it were legal, lots of contract teachers would have their placements [...] Look, a year ago we did the assessment and a recommended [teacher] was ranked in 117th place. Everyone saw the list, but as a relative of a powerful family, within a week they already had their placement, and the others who were much better than him were only offered a contract for a year. How's that? That's not right (Teacher interview, Colima, No. 35/15.03.16).

**The role of the union.** Although, the SNTE leadership was, in principle, openly opposed to the educational reform, the union changed its attitude and announced it was backing the changes and decisions made by the SEP. However, in the schools the question was: “Where is the union?”, “How are they going to support us?” And with the implementation of the reform, the two sections of the SNTE in Colima: number 6 with 9,824 members, and number 39 with 2,989 members (SNTE, 2015), were late in reacting, although soon thereafter they offered courses and support, but not immediately:

I remember [...] the teacher [Elba Esther Gordillo, a leader for many years] jumped up against them and, right, off you go to jail bitch! [...] and then the new guy arrived, really docile [...], taking care of himself (laughs) and fell into line. You want to know more, or shall we leave it at that? [laughs] (Teacher interview, Villa de Álvarez, No. 09/08.09.15).

Another similar testimony went as follows:

[...] in the union they didn't know much either. They'd tell you: we're investigating and soon we'll call you to inform you, but there was nothing! They never came [...] (Teacher interview, Villa de Álvarez No. 10/09.09.15).

The lack of information and the issue of distorted messages created a tense atmosphere, created dynamics and long waits at schools with concern and inconformity, even among experienced teachers:

I've been through four or five reforms I think, I can't really remember [...] We, the teachers were accustomed to finding out about the changes quickly from colleagues, union members, supervisors, but this time it wasn't like that [...] The first ones to be hit by the reform were us, we were called on to be assessed by them, and I swear that came down like a bucket of cold water

in the schools [...] terror among the fellow teachers, the schools aren't going to be the same, and certainly lots of teachers are going to be angry –you'll see– wait until the results are made known. I hope it's not me, because it makes me panic! [laughs] (Teacher interview, Colima No. 04/11.08.15).

In the opinion of the interviewees the announcement did not mean “anything important” and some teachers even described the measure as “just another reform,” without any detailed knowledge of what was to come in the following months. However, the changes in the SEP-SNTE relationship, with the detention of the teachers' leader and the entrance of the new education minister, Aurelio Nuño (2015), who replaced Emilio Chuayfet (2012-2015), were two significant events and a clear message that things in schools were going to be different. It was a specific announcement that the consequences of not taking the assessment would have serious repercussions:

[President] Peña brought in his reform for basic education [...]. I started to think that things were going to be tough and that it was really serious when [...] they arrested Elba Esther! I'm not defending her (laughs), but she was very powerful [...] That's when I started thinking that anything was possible, they showed their strength and then came the assessment [...] We saw clearly [...] and where the thing was coming from [...] (Teacher interview, Tecomán, No. 03/ 09.09.15).

The arrest of the teachers' leader was seen as a show of strength:

[...] I couldn't believe they'd arrested Elba Esther! I didn't believe it! And I even thought it was an agreement with the government and that they'd soon let her go [...] If they did that to her, then what could we expect? [...] That can happen to them [...], a real bastard of a warning to the teachers, a show of strength, wasn't it? (Teacher interview, Villa de Álvarez, No. 10/09.09.15).

### Regarding teacher identity

#### On the redefinition of the work status

A significant amount of the studies on identity emphasize the importance of analyzing the complexity that manifests itself in the face of innovations, that is, to take a closer look at the processes that are generated during this process and to characterize the ways in which to consolidate these proposals for change or not; aspects of the cultural resistance that are generated in relation “to the socio-historical-political context [which] entails a social and cultural construction and reconstruction of teaching activity (Alaniz, 2014, p. 31), and, obviously, the acceptance or rejection of organizational changes that undermine institutional cultures that had guaranteed a sense of belonging to identity (Hargreaves, 2005). The change promoted by the reform created a schism in the teachers interviewed, who immediately questioned its origin and provenance, discrediting it because they did not feel acknowledged and involved. In this regard, Robalino (2005) states that this is a common denominator in other reforms “It's not new for most reform processes to be designed well away from teachers, where everything or almost everything is predetermined in manuals, guides, teacher books, workshops (cited in Escobar, Bernal, & Hernández, 2015, p.16).

In this context, the issue of participation acquires an interesting characteristic because the teachers interviewed point out that their role in this process has been reduced to taking the test and fulfilling the requirements to be assessed.

#### Job and personal insecurity

Unlike other reforms, this time the measures to follow were immediately stated and the novelty was that the first actions were aimed at teachers. The assessment quickly created doubts and lots of questions among teachers, but if anything should be highlighted it is the lack of clear and precise information, because what circulated very volubly were all sorts of rumors: “It's part of a sweep operation”; “It's a way of making mass dismissals of teachers”; “They want to privatize education”; “What they're trying to do is to close public schools”; among others, which generated widespread discontent and, obviously, a fear of uncertainty in light of what the examination would entail. Some teachers expressed it thus:

This reform did speak directly to you [...] the threat to the job and the threat of dismissal was what caught my attention [...] The first few days were like hell, because no one knew anything! It was a disaster! And the rumors were that they were going to get rid of everyone (Teacher interview, Villa de Álvarez No. 07/10.12.15).

Similarly, this observation indicates how fear was the prime motivator in the first few days:

This stuff about the assessment is scary. I really don't know what they're going to come out with [...] imagine that they suddenly tell you they're going to rate you [...] it throws you, it's scary, right? Because I don't know what's going to happen to me. What do I do if I fail? I'm the only earner in my house (Teacher interview, Coquimatlán, No. 5/ 15.12.15).

### A deteriorated social image

“We teachers look very bad now,” is an opinion shared by various teachers. They are aware that there is a marked loss of social status. The factors that they identify are, for example, that they are being blamed for the state of education in the country and they say the criticism is not fair, because the heavy bureaucratic structure of the SEP is not mentioned, as well as the decisions that are made and which have a negative effect on teaching, that is, administrative and political issues that are not always the responsibility of teachers.

Everyone says it's our fault, but we didn't make the reforms. You remember the reforms of [former presidents] Fox, Calderón [...], they didn't work either. Who's fault is it? [...] Fox and his wife how they did business with Gordillo, or Calderón let Gordillo's whole family get into the government [...] the son-in-law in the SEP, that's shameless, right!? No one wants to remember that now (Teacher interview, Villa de Álvarez No. 08/14.12.15).

On the other hand, it is common for teachers to make summary judgments; reference is made to *the teachers* negatively, as if they were a single entity: “the teachers of Oaxaca”, “the teachers of the Coordinator”, “the teachers of Chiapas”, “the teachers of Colima” “the teachers are a bunch of idiots,” etc., which translates into a fictitious uniformity. In addition to this situation, the teachers perceive that they have a somewhat unedifying image: “*idiotic and vandalistic teachers; teachers* [sic]”, derived largely from the protests and vandalism that some groups of teachers have carried out in certain states of the republic that which the mass media has repeatedly shown as an example what the behavior of “the teachers” was like:

On the news they don't give a shit now, they always say we don't care about the children [...] and that the teachers prefer to go to their protests and marches [...] so the students don't have classes, but they don't say anything about the rubbish they show on television [...] just series about drug traffickers, just soap operas! That's good education, right? (Teacher interview, Colima, No. 02/0408.15).

### Individual and collective fear, intimidation

Several of the interviewees considered that the date on which they took the examination or which they were close to taking was the corollary to a process loaded with suppositions, rumors, but above all, very great pressure that they had rarely experienced throughout their careers. Unlike other states of the country, In Colima, patrols took place outside the assessment sites as a preventive measure, although there were some incidents inside, where the teachers took the test:

They didn't let me take photos of the examination screen [...] I had the right, didn't I?? It was banned, they said [...] and that it was an offence [...] they even pushed me because they wanted to take my phone from me [...] Other colleagues wanted to make recordings and they didn't let them [...] They treated us very badly [...] the people applying it they were very authoritarian [...] I was very scared and I really felt under a lot of pressure [...] (Teacher interview, Coquimatlán No. 35/15.03.16).

Day-to-day life in schools was transformed into tensions derived from the emphasis on the assessment. For example, by complying with certain aspects of their educational practice, such as the evidence requested in the assessments carried out, the teacher's margin of autonomy was reduced, since the main concern was to comply with the evidence and achieve the results imposed and guided by the phenomenon of compliance with criteria and tasks, “standardization” (Hargreaves, 2003).

## Mistrust

On the other hand, mistrust about the assessment was always present. The questions were about the objectives and the consequences that the results would have:

I don't trust the SEP. There's a saying in Colima [...] something like: 'I'm a teacher and I'm not scared of the assessment, I'm scared of corruption'; it was everywhere, on cars there were signs like that too [...] I had a bad feeling about it from the start because I don't know what they want to see? What we knew or what they wanted to see? [...] The argued planning, the evidence and what the hell else, everyone was confused and we've done planning our whole lives [...] but it was to provide justification when cuts were made (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 38/09.03.16).

### Technical problems:

Where I had to take the examination the power went out twice, and the examiners told me: it's all saved teacher, continue, it's all saved teacher, continue, but it wasn't true, they didn't know [...] and then the machines were all messed up and it took a long time to progress, they were frozen for a long time [...] (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 38/09.03.16).

### And on the duration of the examination:

An eight-hour examination, you're shitting me! Nothing to do with teaching, it's nonsense. It's just endurance! Supposedly the people from the INEE know about assessment and education and they do an eight-hour examination? And the worst thing is that they were things you'd never seen before [...] You always do planning, but not like that (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 37/09.03.16).

## Discomfort

As the results of the assessments of teacher performance were disclosed, the news about teachers who were not competent was very quickly revealed in the educational institutions, and some parents asked about the teacher's results. For example, a primary school principal from Tecomán said that the teachers who had failed were not the best option for their children: "Two parents came and [...] told me that if their children's teachers were the ones that had been failed, then they'd have to change their class." Another immediate effect was the dynamics between colleagues in schools, which also had very noticeable repercussions:

There are problems everywhere, aren't there?? And you get on well with some and others less well, but it looked very bad for the colleagues who failed. Then everyone found out their grades and there was lots of ugly jokes [...] dumb teachers and things like that [...] this has got a long way to go [...] (Teacher interview, Tecomán, No. 34/02.03.16).

Another testimony highlighted the impact of the results in the school, but also as a warning to establish strategies in view of the fact that the assessment would be a part of teachers' lives from now on:

Look, here at the school we did a little badly. Three teachers got low results in their tests, but we've already told them that we're going to get them ready and prepare whatever they ask, so they ask and that's it [...] if they want argued planning, then argued planning is what they'll get, just as they say [...] so, whatever they ask for is what they get, no more and no less [...] You've already seen that that they don't care about anything else that's done (Teacher interview, Manzanillo No. 37/09.03.16).

The lack of accurate and accessible information is a constant that hangs over the whole process experienced over these months, but we saw clear examples in various opinions generated in the days after the application of the examination, where a large number of teachers expressed doubts about who would mark their exams, as well as the delay in delivering the results:

I think this is where the problem was [...]. We don't know who marked us [...] How were they were going to review everything that was sent? If they did it well they didn't get much time, there was a shitload of exams! And straight up, there were teachers who sent lots of things, which I think were designed to impress. Do you think they read them? No way! [...] Some colleagues got zero in some parts and others did well. (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 38/17.03.16).

None of the interviewees know for sure about the 77 instruments used to assess teacher and managerial performance, as well as the training process followed to certify the assessors. That is, the teachers interviewed who had taken the exam did so without knowing how they would be assessed.

## Uncertainty

The testimonies of the teachers interviewed agreed on three main aspects. First, the violence and poor treatment suffered, which produces resentment and staff that are highly sensitized and worried about further assessments:

This served as a warning to us, but I swear to you that they went too far [...] They were really annoying [...] and they just treated us with fucking threats, like fools, they kept treating us like idiots and then with pure pressure [...] (Teacher interview, Colima, No. 33/01.03.16).

They didn't give a fuck, they wanted to get rid of anyone they could. There was a lot of violence against the teachers from all sides. I think they wanted everyone to fail [...] (Teacher interview, Comala, No. 22/12.03.16).

A second aspect was that mistrust prevails despite the various statements made about eliminating corruption in the assignment of job placements:

The sale of placements is going to continue, but now it's going to be harder to fight for one, or they'll get more expensive. You'll see that that's going to happen! Because everything was left in a smaller group [...] the placements are going to go up a lot more, but the corruption never ends. In Mexico it's something that's never going to disappear (Teacher interview, Colima, No. 31/01.03.16).

And thirdly, there is a feeling of uncertainty due to the announcement that any professional will be able to compete for a placement in the following call for assessment in the second half of 2016:

Everyone wants a placement [...] Now, with how difficult it is, with so much poverty [...] who doesn't want to enter a placement? Everyone, of course! But not all of them are teachers and that's where the problems will be [...] What's very certain is that it's going to be a real bitch [...] (Teacher interview, Manzanillo, No. 37/09.03.16).

## The immediate future

**School and day-to-day life.** The day-to-day life of the school was transformed after the very announcement of the reform, because it produced two situations. The first was that teachers sought organizational alternatives to address it, with some of them almost immediately calling meetings to exchange information in the evenings or on weekends. These first meetings were characterized by being cathartic: with complaints, demands, anguish, and exchange of information, among many other things, which marked a new dynamic that teachers had not experienced:

I don't remember us having met for something like that, with a *defensive wall of teachers* [laughs] Everyone was working where they agreed, but here, like for everyone, we realized due to making an effort and sharing our sorrow [laughs]. The little that we knew (Teacher interview, Minatitlán No. 15/24.11.15).

In light of the short time available and the demand for information from the SEP, a connected phenomenon appeared in schools related to the attention of the group, as various teachers shortened their school days even more, first because of the provision of urgent information and the administrative procedures, and second, because of the lack of available time to study, some of the teachers had to do so during their working day:

There's no time and I let them go over certain activities again or I have them do group work [...] to give me time to study [...] Lot of colleagues are in the same boat as me and we can see only see each other here at school [...] (Teacher interview, Minatitlán, No.17/24.11.15).

The issue of the reform motivated the organization of study groups and meetings that also served to share information and questions:

[...] and so we started organizing ourselves, and we started to meet on Saturdays to talk and study the reform and the laws. I can tell you that it dawned on us that we had to meet to find out what to do. It was like the fear of failure. We were just like the students [laughs] (Teacher interview, Minatitlán, No. 16/24.11.15).

The meetings also served to share concerns and reflect on what was happening:

[...] I'm just noticing everything that's lacking [...] but that was because they didn't give us any information for so long [...] and because we didn't read [...] We were accustomed to going to training and that was it [...] (Teacher interview, Minatitlán, No. 17/24.11.15).

To others, it was the place that had the most trustworthy information, despite the rumors that were circulating:

[...] I don't know if this happened everywhere, but here in Colima we found out through the colleagues with whom we met to talk [...] It was a very serious problem, because you didn't know, where to ask for reports? And I didn't really understand the stuff about the page that they told us. The supervisor helped us a lot in understanding the law [...] (Teacher interview, Coquimatlán, No. 27/18.01.16).

### **And the parents?**

In the opinion of the teachers' interviews, the focus of the parents' concern was not so much on whether the teachers would take the exam or carry out the specific activities of the reform, but whether their children would have no teacher and no classes:

What were they going to care?! One mother told me directly that what she cared about was that her daughter couldn't stay at home alone, that was what she was worried about! (Teacher interview, Suchitlán No. 22/12.03.16)

In a similar vein, one headteacher says that the parents' meeting had no idea what the education reform was about, as they thought the exam would be done under her responsibility, or so they said:

All we ask is that if the teachers take an exam then it can't be midweek, so the children don't stay at home (Teacher interview, Manzanillo No. 12/13.11.15).

The message to the parents also left a lot to be desired, because although the reform includes various actions, the most visible, which caught the attention of the public, was the assessment of the teachers, which put the other actions in the background:

The parents think it's just a matter of going and taking the exam, but no, they don't know how many things they've asked from us at the last minute [...] and I tell my teachers to leave an activity to the students and we should work to do what the SEP is asking from us. They brought us to the career, and now we're quite fed up! [...] (Teacher interview, Tecomán, No. 03/09.09.15).

## Discussion

In the context of a broad and complex reform with various objectives<sup>3</sup>, as in the case of the one we are discussing, actions are included that affect teaching work other than teaching, which produce desired and unexpected consequences and which usually remain outside the big national debates; decisions that are taken in the privacy of the institutions, but it is essential to systematically recover the “omitted history” (Alexiévih, 2015, p. 44), because these are expressions of the way in which decisions on national educational policy are –specifically– implemented. If someone is going to implement the guidelines of the reform it will be the teachers and much of the success of this proposal lies in the conviction or resistance they show in their daily tasks.

The phenomenon of education reform in different parts of the world is a constant, a sort of “epidemic” (Levine, as cited by Ball, 2001), which has influenced and modified teaching duties, teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 2003), as shown by the testimonies of the teachers interviewed. However, as Ball points out: “The novelty of this reform epidemic is that it does not simply change what people do, as educators, academics, and researchers, but it changes who they are” (2001, p. 2). In this sense, it is important to identify the elements that question the form and organization in which teachers were accustomed to conduct their work, as they are confronted with an assessor state that establishes “[...] judgments, comparisons, and exhibitions as means of incentive, control, exhaustion, and change based on rewards and punishments (both material and symbolic),” which Ball denominates as aspects of *performativity*.

The interviewees identified rivalry for placements in the immediate future, a change in the rules and regulations, as well as comparative judgments and a different system of remuneration, where: “[...] it is no longer simply a problem of distribution of resources, but also adds a fundamentally new dimension, with the paranoid evolution favoring the politics” (Kernberg, 1998, p. 97), which can be seen in the testimonies from the first days of the ER, through manifestations of fear and uncertainty, but not specifically because of the contents, but the procedure followed.

Although discontent is the common denominator in the testimonies gathered, many of the opinions agreed on the lack of timely information about the process, which generated rumors and problems that the institutions responsible for communications, such as the SEP and SNTE, did not address quickly, resulting in an already hostile environment in which there was a state of individual and collective paranoia at times. One example is the lack of information for parents, for whom the ER is a strange and alien process, because they cannot understand what is happening to the teachers of their children.

The teachers’ perception of their identity was seriously challenged. First by the threat of the loss of material security and the erosion of the criteria that regulated the workforce, that is to say, to “systems of security” (Bauman, 2003), regardless of their years of service or the way in which they were doing their work, provoking a tense situation of uncertainty, both cognitive and emotional, and as a corollary an immediate future that they perceive as an insecure and highly competitive environment (Guiddens, 1997). Experiences in the international scenario have identified “that standards-based reforms changed the relationships of the teachers with other people, especially with their colleagues” (Baker & Foote, 2003, p. 111), which was indicated in some manner by the teachers interviewed.

After a long process in which positions have been contrasted, it is worth asking about teachers’ attitudes and their willingness to carry out the actions that remain to be implemented from the day-to-day practice in the classroom, since the road traveled will be of little use if there is no real commitment from teachers to continue with the ER. In other words, they have to resolve their relationship with the new scheme of assessment and training that the reform implies, as well as their degree of adherence to the values proposed. However, the commitment of teachers may not be obtained, and this translates into processes of simulation, the purpose of which is to “comply” with the objective of obtaining a certain score, or passing an assessment, undermining much of their autonomy and creativity, neglecting many actions that are less interesting and are no longer carried out as part of the multiple actions that emerge in the teaching-learning process, because they are not taken into account. International research has shown that

<sup>3</sup> Fortification of the school; 2. Infrastructure; 3. Educational equipment and materials; 4. Professional teacher development; 5. Study plan and programs; 6. Equity and inclusion; 7. Administrative reform; 8. Education and labor market ([www.gob.mx/7prioridadessep](http://www.gob.mx/7prioridadessep)).

standards-based reform limits teacher creativity: “In general, teachers are not addressed and not allowed to develop as highly skilled and high-capacity knowledge workers, but as producers of standardized, submissive, and closely controlled actions” (Baker & Foote, 2003, p. 110).

According to Hargreaves (2003), the teaching culture is in constant tension between instruments of change, on the one hand: “[...] compulsory and teacher-proof curricular guidelines; the imposition of standardized tests to control what they teach; the saturation of new teaching methods whose effectiveness is considered to be proven; bribes related to the progress of the professional career through teacher leadership programs linked to economic remuneration and incentives and market competitiveness between schools [...]” (Hargreaves, 2005, pp. 39-40), and, on the other, old routines and inflexible bureaucratic processes that have prevailed for years in the teaching world.

One sign of this tension is the change in the institutional arrangement between the SNTE and SEP that had remained intact for years, which had not achieved credibility among teachers, since it failed to convince them that corruption in the management of placements –the most visible case– would disappear, but also failed to generate confidence in the process of assessment to which they were subjected.

It is important to reflect that, although in a short time it is possible to learn many educational aspects, in contrast, it is not so easy to achieve comprehensive training, because it takes time for the teacher to get to know, interpret, and appropriate the new proposal (Rockwell, 2013). On the other hand, time is a key factor to consider, because there is no guarantee that the ER will go beyond the six-year presidential period (2012-2018) and that what has been done so far will be maintained and consolidated.

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