Leadership for social justice: A study of directors of the National Pedagogical University of Mexico City

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Abstract

Leadership for social justice is a goal and a challenge for the National Pedagogical University (UPN) in Mexico City. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of UPN directors in the context of leadership for social justice. The focus of the study is on those who are responsible for preparation and continuous training of teachers (García, 2006; Jiménez, 2009). The research design was qualitative based on subjective interpretation from the meanings generated by the participants (Bisquerra, 2014). It describes and analyses the experiences of five directors of school units through in-depth interviews where both the person and the environment are of interest.

The findings were reported in the voices of the directors. Supportive factors included teamwork through building consensus and recognition of achievements, commitment to students, and critical awareness. The obstacles to leadership included the quality of facilities, vertical management, job uncertainty, the challenging profile of the students, and inter-institutional relations. This study of leadership of directors of UPN has the potential to strengthen the management of the UPN school units and enhance institutional objectives to promote inclusion and guarantee the right to education. It also has implications for the study of social justice leadership in other educational contexts.

Keywords: *Leadership; school director; social justice; Mexico; National Pedagogical University*

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of directors of school units of the National Pedagogical University (UPN) in Mexico City to analyse their conceptions of social justice; and to determine the supports and obstacles that they faced in the implementation of social justice practices. The focus of the study is on the directors who are responsible for preparation and continuous training of teachers.

This research is important to highlight their management activities and to analyse their perspective of social justice leadership. It has the potential to strengthen the management of the UPN school units and enhance institutional objectives to promote inclusion and education for all.

The study is not only important locally but has implications for other countries that have been part of the International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). The ISLDN network seeks to understand how the heads of educational organisations exercise leadership for

social justice in a variety of different regional and national contexts. For the last ten years, ISLDN has conducted interviews with school directors to explore how they understood social justice leadership (Barnett & Woods, 2021). Network members have studied leaders in elementary and secondary schools around the world (King, et al. 2021; McNae et al. 2017).

Each country confronts its own challenges to social justice. In New Zealand, for example, indigenous Māori students are subjected to a European education system that has suppressed local ways of knowing. While the quality of education is high, the level of equity is low (Slater, et al., 2019). The role of leadership is crucial to the advancement of social justice in all of the ISLDN countries. The study in this paper examines the case of one institution in Mexico City. The design follows the ISLDN research questions: what supports do school directors encounter and what barriers do they face as they strive to become social justice leaders?

Background: Teachers' colleges in Mexico and the Universidad Pedagogica Nacional (UPN)

The UPN is a teachers' college, which is sometimes called a normal school and has been common in Mexico and until recently in the United States, where teacher education has now been embedded in university programmes as is done in many other countries. Teachers' colleges have a long history in the struggle for social justice in Mexico. The first teachers' colleges were founded in the 19th Century to train teachers and bring education to urban and rural areas throughout the country. In the 20th Century Jose Vasconcelos, the father of Mexican education and the first secretary of public education, championed their establishment as a way to promote universal education (Marentes, 2000; Ruiz, 1963; Vaughn, 1982). The 31 states and the capital of Mexico each established their own teachers' colleges with an enrolment of 124,742 students in 2022 (Government of Mexico, 2023). These schools have been seen as an agent of change in Mexico and often described as centres of leftist activism in a challenge to the government.

In 1978, the National Pedagogical University (UPN) was created to professionalise the training of teachers (DOF, 1978). In 1984, there was a presidential decree called Agreement 23 that established that teachers' colleges would have the academic degree at the bachelor's level at the initial level (DOF, 1984), whereas it had previously been at the lower level of baccalaureate.

The UPN school units in Mexico City emerged from a political decision to confront social injustice in the educational field. The creation of the UPN was a teachers' union demand to strengthen continuing education and keep teachers up to date. Distributing these units around the country brought training close to the homes and workplaces of the students and teachers, thus promoting access to quality academic programmes. Geographical proximity was intended to ensure the incorporation of teachers in university and postgraduate studies. This format accommodated the schedule of teachers and helped to transform teaching practice. One model facility was built to serve as an exemplary building for teacher education. However, one of its limitations was its location in the south of the city, far from the centre and northeast where the largest population is concentrated.

In 2022, the UPN had 72,714 students (UPN, 2023). Garcia Mendoza (2006) described the establishment of UPN school units as a way to provide continuous training and updating of education for teachers. Jimenez Nájera (2009) traced the organisational development of UPN as a state institution with a vertical organisation, as established by the Presidential Creation Decree of August 29, 1978: ARTICLE 1 with the aim of "providing, developing and guiding higher education services aimed at training education professionals according to the country's needs" (SEP, 1978). Its resources come from the Ministry of Public Education, which also approves plans and programmes. The functions are to promote quality in teaching, conduct research, and disseminate knowledge.

UPN school units are located close to the students: "They constitute the academic effort… to be closer to teachers as well as educational communities" (UPN, 2023) with 70 Units spread throughout the country. In 1992, the UPN Units were decentralised to the states to provide funding, but authority continued to rest with Ajusco, the agent of the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico City.

Sanchez (2017) criticised the decentralisation plan in terms of finance, structure and access:

> … there are three organisational elements in which sufficient investment has not been made and that limited the academic development of the units: first, insufficient financing and material structure, second, the administrative and government structure inappropriate for the development of a higher education institution (IES), and third, the lack of access to HEI improvement policies for the training and development of academics. (p. 179)

Pinto, Martinez and Cabrera (2021) studied leadership of UPN school units in three states. Vision and teamwork helped to expand academic programmes and link with other institutions. However, they raised social justice issues related to finances and organisational difficulties.

UPN school unit directors play a major role in addressing these social justice challenges. The functions of the school unit director are to supervise teachers, develop curriculum, prepare the budget, and establish the vision of the institution (UPN, 2018). The director proposes an Annual Activity Plan as well as a Budget Draft for the Unit and gives periodic reports.

This study is grounded in the importance of social justice for educational leadership and is based on the framework of the International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). The ISLDN research covered P-12 schools, but it has direct applicability to UPN school units because the role of the leader and the organisational structure are comparable. In each sector the school director has responsibilities for curriculum, supervision, evaluation, and facilities. The only differences are that the UPN school units are specialised in the training of teachers and have different connections with the community.

Literature review

In the following sections, we outline some key works that inform our approach. Then we examine challenges that school directors face internationally and finally we look at the context of the UPN school units in Mexico City. Social justice has been at the heart of the work of ISLDN. Research questions about supports and obstacles to the leadership of directors were developed with attention to their efforts to establish justice (Slater, 2017).

Key works in social justice leadership

Thus far, the emphasis in UPN has been on efficient operation of programmes in schools, but there is a more profound need to place the discussion of equity at the centre and put social justice into everyday practice. Dieterlen (2014) explained justice based on the utilitarian principles of Rawls (1971). Each person should have the right to basic liberties that are like those for all people, any inequalities should provide benefit for those who are less favoured in society, and all should have equal access and opportunities. Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2021) reviewed the literature to understand the social justice dynamics that undergird the formation of educational administrators and provide keys to improve education.

Corrales Maytorena, et al. (2021) addressed the historical development of the concept of social justice in Latin America. The contributions made by Murillo and Hernández (2011) identified three basic tenets of social justice: distribution, recognition and participation, which mirror those of Cribb and Gewirtz (2003). De la Cruz (2016) elaborated on each of these tenets. The first tenet, distributive justice, requires equal distribution of rights, opportunities and resources, particularly for those who have been excluded. The second tenet is recognition, which requires respect for the dignity of individuals. The third tenet is participation, which involves collaboration in decision-making. These notions can be applied to educational policy and the administration of schools.

Several theories in the field of education are particularly relevant for social justice leadership. Theoharis (2010) has been a pioneer in the field and one of the first to make the connection between educational leadership and social justice. He has studied leaders in schools where students have been marginalised and showed how they drew attention to unjust practices in order to disrupt them. They see themselves as responding to a call for equity and justice.

Shields (2010) has advocated for transformative leadership, which includes key principles of the distribution of social justice, namely, a critical perspective and confrontation of unjust social conditions. More recently, Shields and Hesbol (2020) studied the challenges of school leaders confronted with changing populations and examined how they conceptualised social justice and inclusion.

Transformative leadership requires moral courage and activism of school leaders, such as those reported by DeMatthews et al. (2016) and Crawford (2017). The social justice principle

of recognition is highlighted in culturally responsive school leadership described by Khalifa et al. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) includes critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, an inclusive school environment, and engagement with students and parents.

Santamaria's (2014) concept of applied critical leadership (ACL) includes some aspects of the first two principles of social justice and emphasises the third principle of participation. ACL can be defined by the following practices: conducting critical conversations, assuming a critical race theory lens, building consensus, addressing stereotype threat, promoting academic discourse, honouring all constituents, leading by example, and establishing trust.

Figure 1 shows the relevant concepts of transformative leadership, culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), and applied critical leadership (ACL) as they relate to the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and participation (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003).
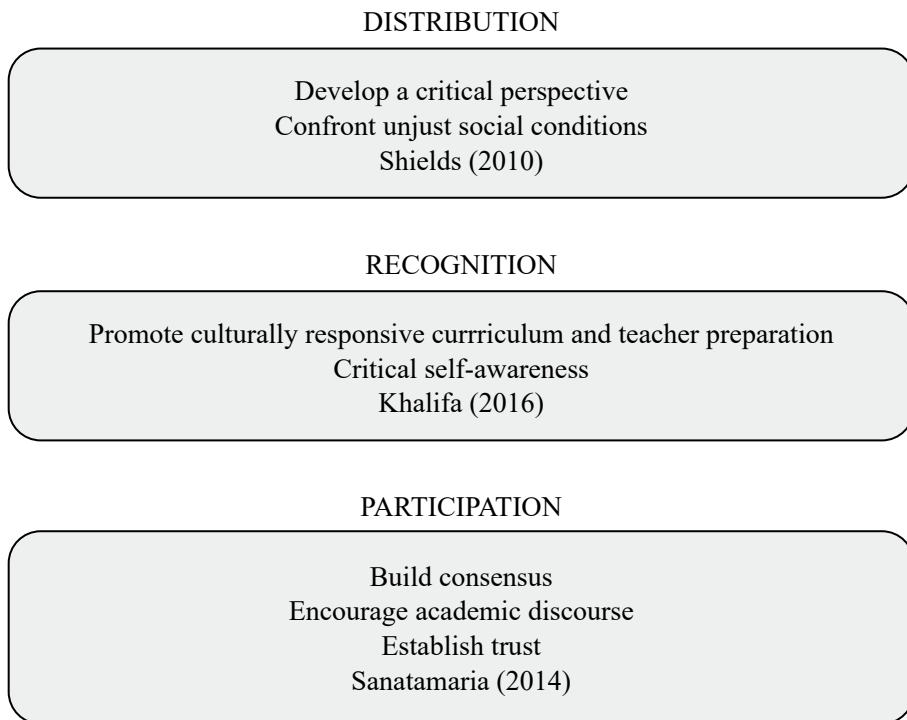
DISTRIBUTION

Develop a critical perspective
Confront unjust social conditions
Shields (2010)

RECOGNITION

Promote culturally responsive currriculum and teacher preparation
Critical self-awareness
Khalifa (2016)

PARTICIPATION

Build consensus
Encourage academic discourse
Establish trust
Sanatamaria (2014)

Figure 1: Social Justice and Leadership

Challenges of school directors

The issues of social justice leadership play out in the day-to-day work of the school director. Some of the challenges reported for principals in elementary and secondary education may have applicability to directors of programmes in higher education, particularly those directing UPNs.

Any attempt to implement these concepts of social justice confronts the daily reality of managing an educational organisation. Tintoré, et al. (2022) analysed studies of the challenges that school directors faced in 45 countries from 2013–2019. They included: difficulties managing relationships; balancing multiple tasks; challenges in managing the daily demands of the job; the predominance of a traditional management model over a model of pedagogical leadership.

Slater, et al. (2018) found similar results from a review of the challenges faced by beginning principals. Scholars from the International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) conducted studies in 15 countries: Australia, Canada, China, England, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Nigeria, Scotland, South Africa, United States, Tanzania, and Turkey. Directors encountered challenges from professional isolation and loneliness, the style of the previous principal, management of time, multiple tasks and priorities, the school budget, ineffective staff, implementation of new government initiatives, and problems with school buildings.

Bonney (2022) studied the problem of continuing colonisation of school curriculum in Ghana and reviewed literature about principals who were overworked, understaffed and under resourced. They had little leadership training, and little support to implement government policies. Pietsch, Tulowitzki, and Cramer (2022) called for the principal to be ambidextrous, that is, to be able to do two things at once. They need to exploit resources in the short-run and explore to find additional resources in the long-run.

Methodology

Atkins and Duckworth (2019) have argued for the usefulness of a qualitative approach like the one taken in this study to understand social justice in education. It is based on subjective interpretation from the meanings generated by the participants (Bisquerra, 2014). It describes and analyses the experiences of five directors of school units where both the person and the environment are of interest. The design is also topical as it focuses on a particular theme.

Site

The UPN is composed of 71 teachers' colleges or school units distributed throughout Mexico. This study focused on Mexico City, where there are six school units headed by directors and the seat of government of the institution, which is headed by the rector. The school units are a kind of campus in which the three substantive functions that correspond to a higher education institution are developed, namely: teaching, research, and dissemination of knowledge.

The intention of the study was to cover the entire population of directors of the school units in Mexico City. This area is deserving of separate study because it has a different organisational structure, and it serves a highly populated and prosperous area with many social needs. Five of the six directors agreed to participate. Two of the researchers had direct experience working in these units. Table 1 provides information about the school units and the directors.

Table 1: Description of Units and Directors

| School Unit

Director gender	Students	Teachers	Years of educational experience	Education	Description of community
1
male	800	43	30	Doctoral Studies	Central historical area
2
male	600	51	30	Doctoral Studies	Large factories with trucks to transport goods
3
female	258	27	30	Doctoral Studies	Mountainouse region
4
female	315	40	30	Doctoral Studies	Food distribution with large shopping centre
5
female	902	48	30	Doctorate	Upper middle-class area

Research design and analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to carry out six interviews. Three researchers participated with the interviewees via Zoom in the Spring of 2022. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. One researcher served as the interviewer and asked questions. The other researchers observed and took notes. Examples of questions from the protocol included the following: What factors support your work as a social justice leader to reduce inequalities in your setting? What factors obstruct your work as a social justice leader to reduce inequalities in your setting? How do you adapt to external supports and hindrances? How do you mediate situations when your values and educational policies conflict?

After the interview, the researchers discussed the responses and made tentative comments about the content. The Zoom programme provided a transcription in Spanish, which was edited by the two native Spanish-speaking researchers. They listened to the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times.

The data from the interviews were reviewed seeking to find connections to the research questions. The first analysis of the results was elaborated, constructing analytical categories (Flick, 2007) to address the research questions. The researchers then wrote descriptions of factors that hinder and factors that promote leadership for social justice in the UPN school units and selected quotes to illustrate the analytical categories.

Positionality

Two of the authors are native to Mexico and have more than 30 years of seniority as teachers and administrators. They are attached to UPN and committed to its mission. They start from an informed overview that may seem pessimistic. However, understanding the institution with a critical view of management and the university community allows for the foundation of an optimistic future based on the work necessary to establish social justice. The third author is from the U.S. and has experience in teaching and conducting research in Mexico and in administration in the U.S.

The first author is currently a research professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. He has received a doctorate and is a member of the National System of Researchers, Level 1 in Mexico. The second author is a research professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. She received her doctorate in Latin American Studies and is a member of the National System of Researchers, Level 1 in Mexico. The third author is a professor of Educational Leadership in southern California. He has been teaching and conducting research in Mexico for the last 25 years. He is fluent in Spanish and English.

Findings

The research questions addressed the UPN directors' perceptions of supports and barriers that they faced as they strived to become social justice leaders. This section will begin with the first research question on directors' views of the supports and then address the second question on the obstacles that they encountered.

Conditions conducive to leadership for social justice

Besides the obstacles, the directors shared a diversity of leadership experiences that supported leadership for social justice: teamwork, commitment to students, and critical reflection.

Teamwork

The first condition that directors identified that supported social justice leadership was teamwork. It included subthemes of coming to consensus and recognising everyone's achievements.

1.   *Coming to consensus.* Despite differences in student population and location, all the directors of the five units agreed on the importance of building consensus among teachers and administrators as a favourable condition to exercise social leadership. Director 3 spoke about participation in decision-making, "I would like to exercise a horizontal leadership style, but you can't always do it. In fact, I try, but there are times when administration takes over."

The key to create consensus is to avoid personal confrontations and promote joint academic work. Director 4 said,

> *Never, never attack anyone. Everything was about inviting them to work. It was all*
> *about not arming more conflict. On the contrary, what I wanted, personally was for*

it to be understood that we were doing academic work, and our ambition was to generate life into projects.

One of the ways that teachers express consensus is through collegial work. The faculty becomes a factor that fosters leadership for social justice. The directors sought to carry out work by consensus to better cope with structural adversities, and thus be in a better position to provide justice for all. Director 2 said that the director and faculty, "usually try to make collective decisions. I think that has helped me a lot to get the job done in a beneficial way."

According to the directors, the faculty prefer collegial work when making key decisions; one of those important decisions within the school unit is the case of hiring teachers who do not have a permanent contract (plaza en propiedad) but have a temporary contract (contrato eventual). Criteria must be followed in awarding these contracts. Some managers make this type of decision collegially. Director 3 said, "Even hiring is decided here [collaboratively in this school]."

2.   *Recognise everyone's achievements.* Working as a team and promoting social justice is a task which helped the leader to recognise the achievement of all members of the community. This recognition was a conviction that the directors clearly saw in the recruitment of teachers.

They are hired in ranks that vary from unit to unit; most teachers are on temporary contracts, without union representation and with weak labour benefits. These contracts culminate every five and half months and thus, they do not generate labour rights. This practice results in receiving a salary for only 11 months. Director 1 said that teachers, "who are hired run the risk of not being rehired. So, what I have promoted is that we do the impossible and distribute the positions evenly so that there is no reason for anyone to be left out." This labour inclusion generates a feeling of justice in the daily work of the school units. Director 3 said, "We all work, we are all important … everyone had opportunities, and everyone could aspire to the same thing."

At the same time, the directors included temporary contract teachers in decision-making and, as far as possible, in the use of the available resources. Director 3 assigned equipment such as computers, desks, and stationery to all teachers. In accordance with labour law, the institution is obliged to make provisions for all teachers, but temporary contract teachers have historically been left out. For this reason, Director 3, insisted on highlighting her decision to provide a computer and a desk to a contract teacher, because it promotes social justice in that institutional context, "Now that I am the director, contract teachers are being provided with a desk, a Mac, a computer."

Commitment to students

A second theme of major support for social justice came from the directors' efforts to support the interests of the students and their communities. All directors expressed commitment to students, the importance of attending to student needs and adapting the school unit to their working and personal conditions. Director 3 said:

> *That's kind of what I would say, helping students. Be aware of the needs of students*
> *attend to them. I mean, do you know how the student is treated, who gets along with*
> *whom, who pays attention to [the student], who listens to [the student]?*

Commitment to students was evident in how directors complied with the educational duty of attending to students: Director 1 reported "an attitude of openness towards their needs and an open door for whoever wants direction."

Critical awareness

In addition to teamwork and commitment to students, the directors also saw critical awareness as a support for social justice. Some of the directors said that promoting social justice required being careful of the complicated institutional relationship with the central authorities. They described the structural injustice of regulations, budgets and lack of resources. However, this care was accompanied by a critical perspective that made them aware of inequality and the possibility of closing the gap in favour of the school units. This critical analysis has the power to drive action, not freeze it. Director 1 said, "One can approach social problems or what is happening with our students, with fellow teachers and from there, generate an attitude of collaboration, solidarity, and empathy with the other. From there comes change."

The directors assumed that social justice was integrated into the practice of administering the units. They were clear about the ethical commitment of the units and, therefore, they believed that achieving their mission was an exercise in social justice and an effort to reduce equity gaps.

Table 2: Favourable conditions for social justice in the management of UPN School Units

Conditions	Agreement among directors of school units
Teamwork through consensus building	All
Teamwork through recognition of achievements	Some
Commitment to students	All
Critical Awareness	Some

Obstacles to social justice leadership

The directors highlighted the poor quality of the facilities in which academic tasks were carried out, the vertical management of the institution, uncertain working conditions and intra-institutional relations. The directors saw these obstacles as the result of inequalities in the conditions of the UPN school units in Mexico City.

Quality of facilities

The UPN school units lacked the appropriate infrastructure and equipment. The directors said that they had not had adequate facilities since their inception. They needed better academic facilities in terms of location, size, capacity, and services. They were located in leased and renovated houses, offices, or warehouses. Director 1 said, "The unit has gone through different spaces. We have been in a house with a floor and a half. Afterwards, we were in a small three-level building and then a family room of an apartment building."

There has not been an institutional policy to provide consistently for all the UPN school units. Each unit had peculiarities, and they were not in permanent locations. Director 3 said that the issue of facilities was, "very complicated, from having a building, to suddenly not having a building or it was difficult to have to share it with another unit. We were confronted with these complexities."

The lack of certainty of having a building for the school units to develop academic activities, in addition to the differences in terms of the facilities was due to the history of each school unit and the negotiation skills of the directors with the authorities as well as the relationship between the central authority and the school units.

School units 1 and 2 were in old buildings that had been renovated. School unit 2 was an old factory in the middle of an industrial neighbourhood, and school unit 1 was in the historic quarter with easy access to public transportation and many cultural offerings.

The directors said that the facilities did not allow comprehensive training of students with sports fields, lounges, or recreational spaces. Director 1 said:

> When we were in secondary schools, our population was above 750 students, [and we met] mainly on Saturdays, because they [our students] were teachers in service. When we began to enrol postgraduates ... we needed [additional space] during the week, and it is here where our own infrastructure was needed.

Two other school units had insufficient facilities to accommodate the number of staff and students. School units 3 and 4 were located in an upper-middle class shopping area. Both school units were housed in office buildings. Here they did not have space for cubicles, lounges, or complementary facilities. In order to teach their courses, they used classrooms borrowed from nearby secondary schools. Director 4 said that although the school had a small enrolment, it deserved more space, "because other school units already have their buildings which are spacious and satisfactory for teaching and development."

School unit 3 was located near the earthquake of 2017 and had to be moved to central facilities of a university in a small space that made it difficult to conduct classes. Teaching was restricted to the mornings when the rooms were not used by the university. Director 3 said, "Our situation seems to me extremely unfair because they do not allow us to teach adequately, and they do not give us a building. So, well, I keep insisting."

In general, the directors agreed that the issue of facilities was crucial for the development of academic activities. All of them had gone through the vicissitudes of searching for adequate space, solving operational problems, and seeking approval from the authorities.

Vertical management

The administrative framework of the UPN establishes the office of the rector as the central authority (Ajusco) in relation to academics, administration, and budget. The UPN school units were subordinated to the central authority. The directors felt that the administrative and academic dependence on the central unit was an obstacle to social justice. The organisational culture of UPN favoured vertical management and perpetuated inequalities in material conditions, high mobility of academic personnel, and inequity in the distribution of academic burdens. Director 3 spoke about institutional policies in this way:

> *You have to attend to them, you can protest, argue, [or] qualify, but you have to abide by them, although sometimes you reveal yourself. It is an injustice, how our work is being undervalued. There are colleagues who break their souls here in the unit and who lack the number of hours, making it seem that they do nothing and that is not true.*

The directors were clear about the regulations and the room to manoeuvre, but also that there were things that they had to abide by. The trade-off between prioritising the needs of their communities and heeding central directives often put them in a complicated situation. Director 2 considered that:

> *There have been many difficult things related to complying with management, and I disregarded [the directive] because there was no assurance that the building would bear the weight of what we had to do. I made the judgment to support the community and say no to authority.*

The directors' perspective was focused on their communities. They encountered obstacles that got in the way of social justice to the extent to which they received instructions from central authorities that were imposed without participation. When Director 2 was left without a building, he had this to say about relocation to the new headquarters, "The decision of the central authorities was not clearly calculated. And we didn't see it well. It was very complicated, we didn't agree. We put it to a vote and by one vote we relocated to the industrial zone."

The directors live their management as a complex relationship, and not infrequently they had to bury the differences that they felt with the central authority. This difference between the central authority and the school units was expressed in different ways, one of them revolved around the curricula. Although formally the school units can propose new curricula, approved proposals are those that come from the central authority and have the backing of the rector. The central authority did not always consider the participation of the school units.

One of the nodal points that the directors of the UPN Units faced was the vertical institutional management that limited participation in decision-making. They felt that participation was fundamental to leadership for social justice. Director 4 wanted to see an organisation with participation and collegial decisions, that is, management that promoted consensus as a valued norm.

Uncertain working conditions

The UPN contracts with professors in two ways. The first way is through a competitive process. If professors pass, they obtain job security, and their position is either de base (permanent) or en propriedad (five and half months with the possibility of renewal).

The directors said that contracting staff was an important challenge. High mobility of staff, unbalanced teaching loads, and discriminatory standards resulted in unequal working conditions. They felt that some teachers did everything while others only stood in front of the class. Director 1 pointed out that only about 50% of teachers have a full-time continuous contract. Director 3 said that the challenge is to promote an even distribution of work, and there is no reason for someone to be left out.

Leadership for social justice lies in the dilemma between applying the norm and, as Director 3 put it: "doing what is in your power to improve from one's own place in the system." The directors were torn between the conflict of obeying central directives and working for the good of the school unit. They looked for conditions under which they could relax the rule.

Profile of UPN students

The educational plan of the Central Unit (Ajusco) is different from the rest of the UPN Units. Ajusco offers programmes to high school graduates from Monday to Friday. The UPN school units offer programmes to elementary education teachers in service, with educational programmes in a distance modality and in classes from Tuesday to Saturday. The main activity takes place on Saturdays as they are the days off for practicing teachers who are students of the school unit.

The student profile has changed over time. Director 1 said, "Students come to classes with their children. To address this, a long time ago we implemented a childcare centre. Our graduate students provided service to attend to the children of these teachers." The students are primarily women and the director said they are "…made up mostly of teachers with low salaries who received baccalaureate degrees in pedagogy and educational psychology."

The change of profile entails new needs for undergraduates, teachers in service, and postgraduates. These programmes require adequate infrastructure to implement classes during the week, in addition to Saturdays. Director 4 argued in favour of social justice when he said that all of these students "have rights to be cared for with dignity" in whatever facility they are attending.

Unequal intra-institutional relations

Obstacles to social justice also come from intra-institutional relations. The UPN school units are dependent on the central unit, to determine regulations, manage the organisation and allocate the budget and resources. There are inequalities among the school units. For example, Director 3 spoke about getting second-hand furniture handed down from the Central Unit, "When the central unit (Ajusco) changed furniture throughout the building, the [school] unit directors went to the Ajusco dump to rescue a desk, a table, chairs, to enable work in the units."

According to some directors, the Central Authority ignores the school units. It does not equate the UPN school units with the Central Unit. Director 2 said, "We have earned the title of campus in our own right. No, no, no, we are not [just] areas, we are campuses." Table 3 summarises the obstacles that the directors reported.

Table 3: Obstacles to leadership for social justice

Obstacles	Agreement among the directors of the units
Quality of facilities	All
Vertical management	All
Job uncertainty	Some
Student profile	Some
Intra-institutional relations	All

Discussion and conclusion

This section begins with the obstacles (Research question 2) and then addresses the supports (Research question 1). The tone of the description of the obstacles is frank and critical to assure that the problem represents the gravity that the directors intended. At the same time, the supports show the positive activities of the directors that have the potential to increase social justice. These possibilities lead to suggestions for next steps and recommendations for future research.

Obstacles

The directors experienced wear and tear when they tried to fulfil their functions. The main tension stems from opposing institutional factors within UPN. Institutional policy from Ajusco, the central authority, is not sensitive to the nature and functions of the school units. On the contrary, the central authority conveys a feeling that discredits the work of the units and thus, the work of the directors of the units. The central idea perceived by the directors was that Ajusco assumes that they do nothing. The directors saw their performance differently, and they felt excluded. The obstacles to leadership

for social justice have their origin in the structural conditions of inequality that are replicated in all areas and institutions (Reygadas, 2009).

Table 4 provides a conceptual view of the obstacles faced by leaders for social justice that builds on the concepts of social justice and leadership presented in Figure 1. They have their origin in the inequalities listed in the first column. Each inequality can be understood as an aspect of social justice described by Cribb and Gewirtz (2003): lack of access to education prevents participation, low socio-economic conditions result from unequal distribution of resources, and gender oppression relates to lack of recognition. Gender came up as an important factor affecting access to education, and socio-economic condition at the end of the study. It is listed as a factor in column 1. The enrolment of UPN is made up mostly of women, who in recent generations have come from precarious contexts. Some are heads of the family and have unstable jobs. These factors determine their access to education and their continuing progress toward graduation (Santos, 2005).

The obstacles in the first column are expressed in the structural conditions listed under indicators in the second column: income of families, retention in the programme, and terminal efficiency toward graduation. The third column shows the challenges to leadership for social justice. The directors are part of their communities. Initially, directors carried out institutional management from the perspective of assigned leadership but during their trajectory, they built a leadership towards social justice; they developed an ethical commitment to their school community

Table 4: Obstacles and support in leadership for social justice

Lack of social justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003)	Indicators of inequality	Leader action for social justice	Principles for social justice
Access to education (Participation)	Family income Retention in programme Efficiency of graduation	From assigned leadership to ethical commitment (Shields (2010)	Equity and critical self-awareness Khalifa (2016)
Socio-economic condition (Distribution)	Students in contexts of poverty	From vertical management to distributive leadership Santamaria (2014)	
Gender (Recognition)	Precarious context and unstable labour		Participation and democratic decision-making Cribb & Gewirtz (2003)

like Shields' (2014) concept of transformative leadership. They assumed a critical and self-critical stance (Khalifa, 2016) that allowed them to promote participation with the purpose of building consensus. They were following distributive justice towards the equal distribution of rights and opportunities (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; De la Cruz, 2016). The directors were moving from top-down management, bounded by regulations and institutional bureaucracy, towards participatory

Supports

To perceive inequality is to recognise a social reality where students and families live, and this reality is often ignored in schools (Dieterlen, 2014). The logic of the system makes inequality appear to be natural. Thus, the leader must act counter to the norms to advocate for social justice and the right of students to an education.

Although the directors engaged in critical self-awareness and an inclusive environment described by Khalifa (2016), there was little evidence of culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation. While Mexico has many different cultural groups, identifying students by culture and attending to differences has not been a system-wide priority.

The directors in this study were sensitive to working conditions, and they knew their communities. They promoted the principles of Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) for participation in decision-making, search for consensus and response to the needs of students and the community. They carried out critical and auto-critical exercises to provide appropriate responses to the daily life of problems they faced.

In this study, each director developed a leadership for social justice and implemented actions according to it. Their actions were consistent with reports of moral courage displayed by directors in the U.S. (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Crawford, 2017). In New Zealand, Slater et al. (2019) reported a case of a principal who reshaped school culture to raise expectations and instituted collaborative processes. She encouraged staff to reflect on practices that marginalised students.

The UPN professes a form of social justice for teachers in service of preschool and primary education to confront inequities and offer opportunities for access to higher education in the teaching field. The approach is like the principles of Murillo and Hernandez (2011) with an orientation toward recognition of human dignity, distributive justice, and participation.

Barriers negatively influenced the work of directors, but they were not insurmountable. According to the directors, empathy with students and teachers was more important than resources. It could even be said that the precariousness of the Units made their directors more sensitive to social injustices and the struggle to obtain better working conditions.

One element that may be sustaining these factors that foster leadership for social justice is the building of community. In the midst of overwhelming challenges, the directors persevered. and maintained community. They strived for cultural dynamism over institutional balkanisation (Hargreaves, 1994), and they did what could be done to resist and not to disappear.

Recommendations for directors and future research

Columns 3 and 4 offer a map of supports that are needed for UPN directors to become social justice leaders. They need support to see the position of director as more than an assignment of tasks but rather as an ethical commitment to promote equity and improve the conditions of teachers and students. The development of critical self-awareness can come from networks of support and a clear institutional mission. The leader also needs support to overcome tendencies toward vertical management and move toward the distributive leadership that is necessary for participation and democratic decision-making.

Similar recommendations come from Gurr et al (2021) whose team included researchers from New Zealand who emphasised social justice. They recommended clarity of purpose with the establishment of shared vision, development of relationships as a central part of improvement efforts, taking action with a sense of urgency, and leading for the transformation of learning. They also recommended research that would delve more deeply into the role of leaders in promoting these activities.

Other research can investigate the social conditions that are obstacles in column 2 of Figure 4. Researchers can examine what institutional practices help overcome low family income and conditions of poverty and unemployment in order to increase student retention in programmes and move more efficiently toward graduation.

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