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### **Problems Faced by Beginning Teachers in Private Elementary Schools: A Comparative Study between Spain and Mexico**

### **La problemática de las maestras principiantes en escuelas privadas de educación básica: un estudio comparativo entre España y México<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In order to explore the problems faced by beginning teachers in private elementary schools in the Spanish city of Madrid and in the Mexican city of Monterrey, questionnaires were applied to private school teachers just starting out in both cities. The results indicate that in both contexts, as beginners, teachers face problems of an academic, organizational, social, and material and technological nature. However, it stresses the fact that Mexican teachers perceive more problems in all the categories than do their Spanish colleagues. Similarity in the results was found in the category of social problems, which was the one mentioned least by the teachers in both cities. This suggests that the cultural nature of these two countries may be a factor to be considered in connection with fostering beginning teachers' adaptation process.

*Key words:* Beginning teachers, elementary education, private education, comparative analysis.

## **Resumen**

Con el propósito de explorar los problemas que enfrentan las maestras principiantes en escuelas privadas de educación básica de la ciudad española de Madrid y la ciudad mexicana de Monterrey, se aplicaron cuestionarios a maestras debutantes de escuelas privadas en ambas ciudades. Los resultados indican que en ambos contextos las maestras principiantes enfrentan problemas de carácter académico, organizacional, social y de material y tecnología. Sin embargo, destaca el hecho de que las maestras mexicanas perciben mayor cantidad de problemas en todas las categorías, que sus colegas españolas. La similitud en los resultados se encontró en la categoría de los problemas sociales, que fue la menos mencionada por las maestras de ambas ciudades. Ello sugiere que la naturaleza cultural de México y España pudiese ser un factor importante que coadyuva a una buena adaptación de las maestras que recién se incorporaran al ejercicio profesional.

*Palabras clave:* Docentes principiantes, educación primaria, educación privada, análisis comparativo.

## **Introduction**

Each year, thousands of students earn a degree that enables them to enter the field of teaching in different preschools, primary schools or secondary schools. For Mexico, according to information obtained from the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES, 2002), 6,765 students were graduated in education in 2000; of these, 515 were from the state of Nuevo Leon. In Spain this year, 36,056 students were studying Educational Sciences; 12,666 finished their studies. In the Madrid region alone, there were 1,139 who were graduated in Education or related fields (National Institute of Statistics, 2003). What kind of experience do these professionals have when they face the task of teaching?

The answer to this question has been widely documented in contexts other than those of Mexico and Spain. For example, Calliari (1990), catalogues the first years

of teaching under the title “Lament Of The Beginning Teachers,” which includes questions and statements like: “Why did nobody tell me this before? I didn’t know I had to do this! No, I did not read the manual for the new teachers! I had no idea that teaching was so demanding” (p. 260). More systematically, Dunn (2002) classifies the difficulties faced by novice teachers in four areas: a) problems in the academic area, b) organizational problems, c) social problems, and d) problems having to do with material and technology.

Among the academic problems, Dunn includes issues related with discipline and motivation, evaluation of student work and effective use of different teaching methods and assessment, among others. Regarding organizational problems, she mentions issues concerning the organization and planning of work, including those related to policies and regulations, to the conditions in which the teacher works, and in general, to the guidance and support offered by the institution.

On the other hand, Dunn (2002) highlights those social problems that concern the relationships established with parents/guardians, colleagues, directors and administrators; in addition to the ones linked to students’ cultural and religious diversity. Finally, as problems of material and technology, the author mentions those concerning scholastic and educational resources.

Apparently both the problems of an academic, organizational and social character, and those of material and technology are common to the profession, regardless of the country. In Australia (Ballantyne and Hansford, 1995; Tromans, Daws, Limerick and Brannock, 2001, Carter and Francis, 2001), Portugal (Flores, 2001), Norway (Fredheim, 2000), Great Britain (Brighouse, 1995), Japan (Myint, 1999), and the U.S. (Dewalt and Ball, 1987) the issue has been studied, and in some of these countries programs have been implemented to help beginning teachers in the first years of their professional life. Thus, one would assume that initial training has been unable to meet the demands presented by teaching practice.

The cases of Mexico and Spain, in terms of teacher training, and more specifically of the training of preschool and elementary-school teachers, have marks of differentiation. In Mexico, the teaching degree given by what are known as *normal schools*, was radically changed in 1984, when it was elevated to a professional B.A. program (Miller, 2001). However, the B.A. in Education existed in Mexico long before, offered by some private universities. To get a bachelor’s degree in both normal schools and universities generally takes four years, with three years of high school as a prerequisite.

In universities the degree received is a BA or BS in Education, while in normal schools the level is specified; for example, one can graduate with a degree in Early Childhood Education or in Elementary Education.

In Spain the profession of teaching has been linked to universities since 1972 (De Finkel, 1991). Those interested in preparing to teach must complete four years of

junior high school, two years of high school (as for any major), and take a *selection examination*, which is a requirement for every college student.

*The Law of General Organization* of the Spanish educational system establishes that those interested in becoming teachers must have three years' training, and must choose among various specialties, such as children's education, special education and language, among others (De Finkel, 1991). Teacher-training in early childhood education and primary education is considered as the *first year*, i.e., the degree obtained is that of *teacher* with different specialties, and is recognized as a certificate (Organization of Ibero-American States, 2003).

In August of 1995 an educational reform declared that teachers with a certificate, such as those described above, if they want a BA degree, must take three more years of professional education in the fields of psychology, education or educational psychology through a course designated as a *bridging course*. Today, this option has been modified, and universities are asking students to decide right from the beginning of their professional studies, whether they are going to study the three years of specialty training in teaching, or the six years of undergraduate work in the branches already mentioned.

Given the differences in teacher training in these two countries, will there also be differences in the problems of beginning teachers (BT)? This question encapsulates the purpose of this paper. The aim is then to explore the problems faced by BT in the preschool and elementary levels, specifically in first, second and third grades, in two different contexts: Spain and Mexico.

It is expressed as a comparative study of BT in private schools in the city of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon (Mexico), and in the city of Madrid (Spain). Specifically, it seeks to answer the questions: a) What problems are faced by novice teachers in Monterrey and in Madrid? b) Are the problems of the BT related with organizational, academic, social or material and technological matters? c) Are there differences between the problems of beginning teachers in both contexts?

The answer to these questions is relevant for several reasons. First, it is common to observe disagreements between school principals and teachers who are just starting out. On the one hand the principals find it logical to assume that teachers have the knowledge and discretion to implement the necessary methodologies in each subject area or in special cases concerning students. On the other hand, it is not unusual to hear teachers acknowledge, among themselves, that they have some shortcomings—although few choose to express it openly. Knowledge on the part of school leaders regarding the problems faced by the BT leaders is an indispensable requirement for directing efforts of professional development and training.

Second, the role of teacher-training institutions should respond through their study programs to the problems faced by BT. The curriculum design necessarily involves

knowing the performance of graduates in a more succinct and explicit manner; Cornejo (1999) pointed out, concerning this topic:

What is expected of every innovative training process is that it help to forge, in those who participate in it, a set of capabilities, skills and attitudes, with the corresponding axiological foundations that would allow them to alternate, recreate and restructure continuously and lucidly their skills and competencies, as demanded by the requirements of the cultural, social and scholastic contexts in which it is given them to carry out their task, and in which their practices take place (1999, p. 60).

Finally, gaining an acquaintance with the problems of novice teachers in two Hispanic contexts, allows us to explore elements common or specific to the situation of these beginners.

## **I. The voices of reference**

In 1999, Cornejo reflected on the issue of beginning teachers, taking as his focus the reality of teachers in Latin America. In this discussion he alluded to how little this issue had been addressed in this region; unlike, for example, what had been done in the United States and in some European countries. Thus, the closest reference we have on the subject is expressed in the contributions from those countries.

This section features the voices that provided the framework for the development of the work. It is structured using as a platform the four categories—academic, social, organizational problems; and those of material and technology—which Dunn (2002) provides for classifying problems faced by BT. The classification has been used for analysis, although there is clearly an interrelationship between the categories.

### **a) Academic Problems**

One of the most obvious problems in BT is the inability to improvise creatively, respectfully and with knowledge, because they do not have the ability to teach and apply what they know—nor do they have the experience needed to know the difference between *teaching* and *studying* (Wilson and Ball, 1996). This concentrates the essence of academic problems involving everything related to being in charge of a group of students.

It has been found that BT have difficulties in areas such as controlling the group and maintaining discipline (Boreen and Niday, 2000; Zepeda and Mayers, 2001), and that they lack adequate teaching strategies (Frieberg, 2002). In reference to this, Reynolds (1995) assures us that BT lack the ability to create opportunities for all students to learn. In fact, Wilson and Ireton (1997) found in their study of beginning teachers' fears, that one of these fears involves not knowing how to deal with students who have learning disabilities. In addition to this, many BT lack

sufficient knowledge about how to plan the academic program (Phelps, 1990; Eilerman and Stanley, 1994), and even about the content of the subjects they teach.

### **b) Organizational problems**

Stansbury (2001) suggests that it is important to protect BT, because due to their own enthusiasm they are supersaturated with responsibilities, such as participation in extracurricular activities, clubs and committees. Johnson (2001), and Carter and Francis (2001) agree that it is common for BT to be given the classes that experienced teachers do not want; the most problematic children in the school; the most difficult duties and tasks outside the classroom classes; the evaluations nobody wants to make; and moreover, nobody supports them or monitors their progress. In relation to this matter, and particularly in Spain, Acevedo and Hornos Castillo (cited by Carmen, 2003) investigated the workload of teachers in public schools. These authors emphasize the problems of an organizational nature, relative to the support the school does or does not give to beginning teachers.

Regarding this area, the BT indicated the lack of adequate induction courses by the school (Johnson and Kardos, 2002). Vennman (cited in Bullough, 1989) adds that the BT expect that at the school where they work there will be rules everyone knows and respects; but often they do not find this information; they describe this as “the trauma of reality.” On the other hand, the principal’s help, so important during the first year (Brock and Grady, 1998), is not always available.\*

### **c) Issues of material and technology**

A problem that is lived day by day—one that may not seem very important—is that of the development of teaching materials and the decoration of the room, as well as the lack of appropriate materials for teaching. Eilerman and Stanley (1994) found that precisely this is a problem facing the BT in his\*\* first year of teaching. Similarly, Brock and Grady (1998) found a lack of knowledge among novice teachers regarding preparation and development of teaching materials.

### **d) Social Problems**

Merseth assures us that the school culture is characterized by a high value of autonomy and privacy. The BT quickly become aware of this aspect, and are hesitant to seek help for fear that they can be catalogued negatively (cited by Babinski, Jones and DeWert, 2001). This implies a problem of relationship

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\* Translator’s note: As the original English versions of the works originally produced in that language, and cited in this work, were unavailable for use in this translation, it was necessary to employ the technique of back-translation, for which we offer our most humble apologies.

\*\* Translator’s note: Before the feminist movement arose, in situations including both genders it was customary to use the masculine pronoun. Today, however, pronouns of both genders are used to avoid what is now seen as sexist language. To avert the awkwardness of continually using “s/he”, “his/her”, we shall, in this paper, sometimes use the feminine pronoun, and sometimes the masculine.

between colleagues, and leads some BT to experience a sense of isolation (Williams and Williamson, 1996, Wilson and Ball, 1996), and others to feel demoralized (National Education Association, 2000).

In addition to problems in relating with colleagues, new teachers also experience problems in relating with their superiors: they feel they are scarcely heard by these, and lack their support, as Weasmer and Woods (2000) suggest. This situation, coupled with organizational problems, leads logically to emotional exhaustion and stress (Futrell, 1988). In Spain, the latter has generated some programs; for example, Calvete and Villa (1997) worked on the Deusto project, which is based on the stress-inoculation paradigm, and aims to develop effective coping skills in high-school teachers.

On the other hand, social problems are also related to the changes today's society is experiencing, and which affect teaching. In this sense, Wilson and Ireton (1997) held that changes in society such as migration and immigration (which result in a more heterogeneous school population), the change and emphasis on the issue of values, together with today's violence, certainly must be involved in the problems faced by teachers.

Furthermore, these authors found that beginning teachers expressed fear about their relationship with [students'] parents/guardians. In this regard, Love (1996) and Johnson (2001) agree that the relationship established with parents/guardians causes distress and anxiety for the BT, since they do not know how to handle situations that arise.

Also catalogued as a social problem might be described the lack of a vocation for teaching in members of the profession, as described by Heck and Wolcott (1997).

All in all, the voices of reference indicate that there are academic, organizational, and social problems, as well as problems of material and technology. All these, naturally, have an impact on teacher performance, both as concerns burnout, and as related with the desire to continue or not to continue in the profession. Many become discouraged and give up teaching. Boreen and Niday (2000) indicate that 50% of U.S. teachers leave the profession in the first five years of practice, and 80% drop out after 10 years.

## **Methods**

To explore the problems faced by novice teachers in the contexts of Madrid and Monterrey, questionnaires were applied to teachers in private bilingual schools, seven in Madrid and eight in Monterrey. Private bilingual schools were selected because of the work experience one of the authors had in this type of institution. The schools were selected in terms of their reputation for high quality, according to the prior opinion poll, so as to control a little of the interference that some variables associated with this attribute may have. The selection of teachers was based primarily on three criteria: a) the years of study they had to have finished (between

one and three); b) that they be working as head of a group, and c) the level at which they were teaching. In all, 24 novice teachers from Monterrey and 26 from Madrid answered the questionnaires.

The questionnaire included the four variables of problems derived from the review of the literature—academic, organizational, social problems, and those of material and technology. The BT were asked to indicate how often they had encountered difficulties in their teaching practice in relation to a number of items (39 in total) for each variable. This frequency was indicated by a Likert scale of four options (with value of 1 to 4): frequently, occasionally, rarely or never, where 4 represented the perception of greater difficulty.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included an open question designed to obtain information in addition to that presented in the section of closed questions. The information collected was analyzed descriptively, and the resulting average was obtained on the scale for each of the variables.

### **The voices of Monterrey and Madrid**

The overall results present a different situation with respect to the frequency with which the BT of Madrid and of Monterrey report having faced problems when starting to work, as shown in Table I.

Table I. Overall results related to the BT

<b>Category</b>	<b>Spanish BT</b>	<b>Mexican BT</b>
Academic problems	2.81	2.92
Organizational problems	2.67	2.85
Social problems	1.67	2.12
Problems of material and technology	1.90	2.95
Overall Average	2.26	2.71

While the average for the Mexican teachers was 2.71, that for the Spaniards was 2.26. Moreover, the types of problems received different emphasis in the two groups. For the Mexican teachers, the most common problems were those relating to material and technology, but for the Spanish BT this category represented a problem emphasized less.

The particular results per variable are interesting. Table II presents the results relating to academic problems.

Table II. Academic problems

Item	Spanish BT	Mexican BT
Need for experience and wisdom	3.65	3.54
Limited repertoire of educational strategies	2.92	3.54
Discipline and control of the group	2.57	2.96
Training of colleagues and administrators	2.6	3.04
Students' motivation	2.15	2.58
Creativity for improvising	2.27	2.50
Evaluation by various methods	2.54	3.00
Individual treatment of the student	2.27	3.21
Effective use of different methods of teaching	2.34	3.25
Knowledge of material	1.77	1.92
Treatment of learning problems	2.34	3.08
Students' cultural diversity	2.34	2.60
Involvement of students' parents/guardians	3.04	3.00
Planning and production of teaching material	2.1	2.58

Both the Spanish and the Mexican BT perceive that their knowledge about the subject they teach is appropriate, since they give this aspect the lowest score of all items relating to that variable—1.77 and 1.92, respectively. Obviously this result is consistent with the level—preschool and early primary school—the work area of the teachers surveyed.

On the other hand, teachers in both cities gave the highest score to feeling the need for the experience and wisdom to use in teaching (3.54). In fact, this was the item with the highest average in the entire survey. Given the generality of the item, it could be considered a category that includes the others within it.

In the open question, six Spanish teachers amplified their response in this regard, and stressed the need to improve their training. Two of their comments are illustrative: “You get lots of theoretical information and little practice in college.” “The university needs to teach resources and strategies for everyday practice.”

It is important to emphasize that in all the items related to academic problems, with the exception of one (*involvement of parents/guardians*), the Monterrey teachers indicate having faced greater difficulty than do those in Madrid; however, none of the Monterrey teachers alluded to this aspect in answering the open question.

Concerning problems of an organizational nature (see Table III), the Spanish BT, unlike the Mexicans, show indices of stress due to their higher perception of the insufficiency of time available (3.42), and the difficulty of facing groups with a higher number of students (3.35). This was reported by Marcelo, in 1991 (quoted in Marcelo, 1999), in his study of new teachers in Spain, which study indicates that the difficulties still persist.

Table III. Organizational problems

Item	Spanish BT	Mexican BT
Lack of training or induction courses	2.31	3.37
Support and orientation regarding methodology	2.00	3.21
Lack of support on the part of the school	2.04	2.66
School policies and regulations	1.81	2.71
Time to plan classes	3.35	2.25
Heavy work load	2.77	3.04
Availability of time	3.42	3.00
Organization of work	2.34	2.58
Number of students	3.35	3.16
Exclusion of important activities	2.46	2.50
Use of curriculum guides and books	2.42	2.12

These results can be explained by considering that, although in the Spanish schools studied, the average class size is between 24 and 26 students—much like the average class in Mexican schools—teachers do not have the support of assistant teachers as they do in Mexico. Furthermore, swimming lessons are commonly taught in many Spanish private schools, and it is the teachers who are required to prepare the children's clothing for these.

Moreover, the school day in Madrid schools runs from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., unlike the school day in Monterrey: 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. This contextualizes the lack of time claimed by the Spanish teachers. However, as shown in Table 3, the Madrid teachers indicate fewer problems than their Monterrey colleagues on the subject of facing a heavy workload (2.77 and 3.04, respectively).

As shown in Table IV, concerning the results of the category social problems, Madrid teachers perceive less emotional exhaustion (2.0), and fewer desire to leave their profession (1.54) than do their Mexican counterparts (2.71 and 2.04 for these items). This is probably due to the fact that more novice teachers in Madrid expressed having a vocation for teaching. Thus, we might suggest that in spite of feeling that they have little time, and that they have too many students, they feel less frustration and emotional distress because of the presence of a higher calling.

Table IV. Social problems

Item	Spanish BT	Mexican BT
Leaving the profession	1.54	2.04
Relationship with colleagues	1.38	2.16
Relationship with directors and administrators	1.27	1.87
Isolation from colleagues	1.61	2.54
Adaptation to the professional role	1.65	2.08
Adaptation to the responsibilities	1.50	2.08
Community problems	2.31	1.96
Social changes	2.11	1.92
Weight of values	1.42	2.08
Relationship with parents/guardians	1.88	2.37
Vocation for teaching	1.31	1.66

Finally, Problems of material and technology represent greater difficulty for Mexican teachers, whose average for educational resources was 3.21, in contrast with 1.85 for teachers from Madrid (see Table V). Spain's economic situation is probably a decisive factor in the private schools' ability to purchase materials, especially considering the fact that bilingual materials and resources must be purchased abroad.

Table V. Problems of material and technology

Item	Spanish BT	Mexican BT
Basic materials and resources	2.04	2.92
Teaching materials	1.85	3.21

In contemplating the items with higher averages, that is, those that fell under the options *frequently* and *occasionally*, we observe that for the Spanish teachers, these represent only five examples distributed in the categories of academic and organizational problems. They were: *having the experience and wisdom needed for giving classes* (3.54), *time available* (3.42), *having a large number of students* (3.35), *lack of time for planning classes* (3.35), and *parental/guardian involvement* (3.04.) Regarding the latter, seven Spanish teachers added in the open question that they have problems with parents/guardians, One teacher in particular said: "It is difficult to match up the child's standards of conduct at home and those at school."

The number of items listed by teachers in Mexico under the options frequently and occasionally was much greater, 14 in total, distributed as follows: 8 academic problems; 5 organizational problems; and 1 problem concerning material and technology. In relation to organizational problems, 8 of the Mexican BT alluded on the open question to the lack of support received from school officials. They indicated such things as: "The director often thinks that the teacher knows everything, and does not offer help, support or training." It is noticeable that in both contexts, the category of social problems did not have high scores.

## Conclusion

There is an obvious need for studies in which more private schools would be involved, and therefore, more teachers. It is also necessary to consider schools in the public sector. However, using this study it is possible to detect the concrete needs that indeed call for a response derived from the questions that gave rise to this work.

Regarding the first question on the problems faced by novice teachers in Monterrey and in Madrid, the results indicate that the BT's problems are varied. On the one hand, the teachers say they face difficulties because they lack the experience and wisdom they need to give their classes, and they have problems in getting parents/guardians involved in their children's education.

Furthermore, they state that they have too little time to plan their classes, and that the large size of the groups they have to deal with presents further difficulties. Out of this comes the need for teacher-training schools to emphasize practice teaching during professional studies, as well as to offer as part of the curriculum, courses in certain skills, such as time management.

The preceding also carries with it the need for establishing strategies within schools to promote a more participatory culture on the part of parents/guardians.

Regarding the second question, as concerning the difference between the problems posed by the teachers in the contexts of Monterrey and Madrid, in general terms, its answer lies in the emphasis Mexican teachers give to the lack of material resources and technology, and the mention of a greater number of academic and organizational problems.

Teachers from Spain, like those in Mexico, allude to the fact that they have faced greater difficulties in academic and organizational aspects. To a lesser extent, they consider the social aspect to have been problematic. In this regard, the cultural nature of the two countries could be a determining factor in the social relations. What is conspicuous is that both the Spanish and the Mexican teachers perceive the relationship with colleagues, principals and parents/guardians as not very problematic. In terms of school administration, this could be used as leverage with which to offset the other problems; naturally, this would involve reinforcing the social environment that already exists.

Moreover, if efforts were made by the schools and universities themselves, it would be possible to reduce other problems, as well as to provide teachers with a more positive sort of entry into their professional practice.

Taking action in response to the above would not only improve teachers' first years of work in their chosen field, but would also improve the education of our children.

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<sup>1</sup> This endnote, in the Spanish original, has to do with Spanish grammatical word endings indicating gender, and is in its original form, inapplicable to the English translation. Simply to satisfy the curiosity of those who may be interested, we give here the translation of the endnote: "The term maestros (male teachers) is used regardless of gender throughout the text, except where there is direct reference to research. In those cases, the term maestras (women teachers) is used, because the population of this study, inherently and naturally, consisted of women."