# Systemic Corruption in Mexican High Schools: Fear and Favoritism Undermine Teacher Performance

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***ABSTRACT***

*Systemic corruption in educational institutions, according to the literature, tends to result from monopoly power in one-person decision-making organs (implying inadequate accountability mechanisms). The present study aimed to evaluate the exercise of power in a large public high school system in Mexico with well-reported poor educational outcome. Based on 27 in-depth interviews, there was abundant evidence of systemic corruption, in which the promotion of self-interest apparently takes priority over the educational mission. Consequently, an analysis was made of the mechanisms of a self-interested management style that are reportedly most detrimental to educational objectives. In this sense, the interviews strongly suggest that fraud is only a secondary mechanism, and that three mechanisms based on fear and favoritism undermine the academic initiative of teachers as well as the quality of academic programs: (i) favoritism is the main criteria for hiring/promoting teachers and selecting principals; ii) an atmosphere of fear, imposed by self-serving principals to protect corruption-derived benefits, causes many teachers to adopt a psychological self-protection mechanism, which begins with the avoidance of criticism of anti-pedagogical policies and eventually leads to a minimum effort in all professional activities; (iii) a self-serving management style triggers a power struggle by strengthening opportunistic coalitions; these self-serving groups prioritize political convenience in curriculum development and involve many teachers in the promotion of self-interest.*

***Key words:*** *clientelism, corruption, favoritism, fraud, mismanagement, teacher demotivation.*

Systemic corruption in schools is characterized by the promotion of personal interests at the expense of educational objectives. The present case study of a large Mexican high school system, based on 27 in-depth interviews, strongly suggests that self-interested management decisions predominate on most of the campuses. Consequently, an attempt was made to identify the mechanisms of systemic corruption that are most detrimental to the educational mission, especially those that lower the classroom performance of teachers and/or the quality of academic programs. The focus was on systemic problems rather than isolated incidents.

There have been many reports in the literature that mention teacher misconduct, poor classroom performance and/or high teacher absenteeism. The great majority either implicitly or explicitly portray these problems as compensatory mechanisms for inadequate salaries. Such mechanisms include bribery, unauthorized fees, obligatory private tutoring, lack of initiative by teachers, and high absenteeism (Azfar 2002, 9; Bennet 2001, 3-6; Chapman 2002, 4, 10-11 and 18; Hallak and Poisson 2002, 14 and 20; Hallak and Poisson 2005, 5; Heyneman 2004, 644; Meier 2004, 5-8). There is no doubt that in some countries or regions thereof, the inadequate salary of teachers leads to such unprofessional practices.

However, some school systems are plagued by teacher demotivation, poor classroom performance and high absenteeism of teachers in spite of providing adequate salaries (at least for a moderate standard of living). In developed countries this problem, when considered from a psychological perspective, is commonly called teacher burnout. It is usually addressed by giving workshops about how to cope with long-term stress. However, when viewed from a sociological point of view, it is referred to as teacher alienation. "Alienation is seen as having organizational and social structural roots and therefore should not be addressed by the teaching of coping skills, but rather through structural change" (Dworkin, 2001).

In developing countries, educational institutions are often characterized by an extremely vertical organizational structure. Meier (2004, 9) pointed out: "In many transition countries, authoritarian and centralized systems" stunt professional growth and leave teachers inadequately supervised. Similarly, Glewwe

and Kremer (2006, 10) said that teachers often "have weak incentives and little supervision" within the highly centralized school systems of many developing countries.

In Mexico, vertical organizational structure characterizes the public sector, including educational institutions (see section 1.3). Hence, the subject of the present case study, based on 27 in-depth interviews, is the question of the possible connection between an extremely vertical organizational structure and the well-reported poor educational outcome in the institution under study. This institution is a large Mexican public high school system known as the CETIS (Centro de Estudios Tecnológicos, Industriales y de Servicios).

The aim of the current contribution was to explore the existence of systemic corruption in the CETIS, and due to the abundant evidence of this malady, to analyze the causes, mechanisms and consequences of this problem. The main contribution of this study is a description of three mechanisms of a self-interested management style that could largely account for the apparent widespread teacher demotivation and inadequate curriculum, as well as the well-known poor educational results in the CETIS.

Bribery, unauthorized fees and obligatory private tutoring are not common practices by teachers in this institution, probably because teacher salaries are adequate for a moderate standard of living. Whereas administrative fraud and bribery exist, the study strongly suggests that in regard to a detrimental effect on educational outcome, they are only secondary mechanisms of systemic corruption. Three mechanisms of systemic corruption are identified that likely are important contributing factors in the well-reported poor performance of alumnae in universities and on the job.

This public high school system is characterized organizationally by all-powerful one-person decision-making organs (constituted by the general director at the central level and the principals on the individual campuses). The interviews strongly suggest that the extremely vertical organizational structure of the CETIS not only provides teachers with poor supervision, weak incentives and little opportunity for professional growth, but actually establishes an inverted incentive system. Due to favoritism in teacher hiring/promotion and an atmosphere of fear to curb teacher criticism of anti-pedagogical administrative decisions, the academic initiative of teachers is undermined. Moreover, the development and updating of academic programs reportedly revolves mainly around the political convenience of self-serving coalitions of administrators and teachers (the coalition of the principal or that of competing groups). The three mechanisms found to be most detrimental to educational objectives in the CETIS are the following:

1) Favoritism is the main criteria for the hiring/promotion of teachers and selection of principals.
2) Most teachers react to an atmosphere of fear, imposed by predominantly self-interested principals to protect benefits derived from fraud and favoritism, with a psychological survival mechanism that begins with the avoidance of criticism of anti-pedagogical administrative decisions and eventually leads to the abandonment of academic initiative.
3) The example of a self-interested focus in management triggers a power struggle between self-serving coalitions; these groups tend to involve more teachers in the promotion of self-interest and to use the development and updating of academic programs to promote personal interests and political convenience.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Monopoly of power and teacher demotivation

It is well recognized that an extremely vertical hierarchy based on a monopoly of power in one-person organs can lead to systemic corruption in educational institutions. Meier (2004, 10), Azfar (2000, 26) and Chapman (2002, 12) emphasized the importance of functional accountability mechanisms to avoid a monopoly of power and corruption. Tanaka (2001, 160) pointed out the opportunity for the abuse of authority when administrators have monopolistic powers. Heyneman (2004, 655-656) proposed the establishment of collegiate decision-making boards to reduce the opportunity for corruption and improve the system of rewards.

After a three-year campaign against education corruption, the experts of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) posed (Hallak and Poisson 2005, 2): "Monopoly power and lack of accountability

mechanisms favor the development of corrupt practices in the educational sector." Klitgaard (1998, 4) pointed out that within this context of a monopoly of power and inadequate accountability mechanisms, an important element of systemic corruption is a discretionary exercise of power.

Although the discretion of administrators is not necessarily negative under some circumstances (see Stephenson 2014), Klitgaard as well as Hallak and Poisson clearly refer to a *self-interested* discretionary exercise of power that favors personal interests and relegates educational objectives to a secondary priority. In this sense, Ferraz, Finan and Moreira (2012) found that embezzlement was statistically related to poor student performance on standardized exams. These authors evidence the connection between self-serving discretionary management practices (measured as the degree of embezzlement) and poor classroom performance in Brazilian schools. They associated high embezzlement rates with reduced resources for educational purposes (e.g., for computer labs, teacher supplies, and teacher education/training programs). The possible effect of this management style on teacher motivation, professional dedication and academic initiative was beyond the scope of the study.

Osipian (2007) reported that a vertical hierarchy in Russian universities resulted in a monopoly of power in deans, who imposed an atmosphere of fear among the staff to avoid opposition to corrupt practices and protect the benefits thus derived (see section 3.3.3). It can be supposed that academic debate was severely restricted and the docility of professors cultivated by this management style.

The present study attempts to explore several issues related to a monopoly of power in one-person decision making organs, including the tendency of this organizational structure to lead to a predominantly self-interested management style, and the mechanisms by which the latter may demotivate teachers and negatively affect their classroom performance. The connection between the academic initiative and classroom performance of teachers and their teaching effectiveness should be self-evident, but since some authors have challenged this point, a reference to a pertinent discussion is included (Kocakaya and Kocakaya 2014). Teacher demotivation, expressed mainly as a lack of academic initiative inside and outside the classroom (e.g., classroom performance, lesson preparation, design and updating of teaching strategies and course content), would logically affect all six dimensions of teacher performance defined by Wang and Cheng (2012): 1) professional ethics, 2) professional dedication, 3) assisting and cooperation, 4) effectiveness of teaching, 5) teaching values, and 6) teacher-student interaction.

### 1.2 The poor educational results of the CETIS

The CETIS system was established in 1974 and currently operates 456 campuses around the country. It is overseen federally by the Secretary of Public Education (the SEP: Secretaría de Educación Pública) and is part of the network of vocational high schools that also includes the IPN (Instituto Politécnico Nacional, founded in 1936) and the CONALEP (Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica, founded in 1979). The majority of Mexican high school students study in one of these three institutions. The other public high school system in Mexico, which has a liberal arts curriculum, is centrally and autonomously operated on a national level by the National University (the UNAM: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), not by the SEP.

In the 2000 evaluation of Mexico, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that "nine of ten students who graduate from vocational high schools enter college," but that "the vast majority soon drop out" (Castañon and Seco 2000. 30). The SEP (SEP SEIT COSNET 2001, 14-15) reported that vocational high school graduates "have deficiencies in the knowledge and abilities required for college studies, meaning that they have to repeat subjects that were supposedly covered already." Didou and Martinez (2000, 44) observed that among vocational high school graduates, "less than one third manage to get and hold a job related to their studies; among those who do, most encounter difficulty in exercising their profession."

The PISA test applied to Mexican primary and middle school students by the OECD in 1994 indicated that low academic level is a generalized problem in Mexico (Castañon and Seco 2000, 30). The results of the PISA test in 2009, reported by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (the Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, or INEE, 2011, 186), revealed the continuing existence of the same problem. Thus,

the current study must take into account that the poor results in the CETIS could result from the poor level of incoming students, the detrimental effects of a monopoly of power on educational objectives, or some other factors. Didou and Martínez (2000, 40-41 and 197-199) concluded that both the low level of incoming students and the lack of collegiate decision making committees contribute in an important way to the poor outcome of a CETIS education.

### 1.3 Vertical organization and clientelist management practices in the Mexican public sector

It is pertinent to contemplate the organizational structure and administrative practices of the CETIS within the context of the organizational culture within the Mexican public sector as a whole. An extremely vertical hierarchy along with clientelist practices have characterized Mexican public sector institutions for over a century. Although there have been some recent changes, it seems that governmental institutions related to education, health, justice, and law enforcement continue to follow this long-established pattern.

From the late 19th century to the year 2000, Mexican presidents enjoyed a monopoly of power (except for 1911-1929, due to instability during and immediately after the Mexican Revolution). From 1877-1911, one man (Porfirio Díaz) consolidated and exercised undisputed presidential power, and from 1929-2000 a one-party system (with the president at the head) dominated the political life of the country. The organizational forms and administrative style that developed for over a century seem to persist today.

The 1917 constitution, adopted after 7 years of civil war, limited the presidential term to 6 years and provided for checks and balances between three branches of government. However, in practice the president had a monopoly of power, according to Rodríguez-Kuri (2004, 134-136), because this executive figure was the leader of the only relevant party in the system. Morris (2009, 2) posed that this extra-constitutional presidential power "crippled the formal mechanisms of accountability and rule of law, and fostered instead a pattern of corruption that actually contributed to the regime's longevity."

Presidential omnipotence reportedly led to a self-serving discretionary exercise of power. Morris (2009, 62) wrote: "Opportunities, individual rights, the law, benefits, and the like, rest largely on personal relationships, clientelist networks, favors, and one-time bargaining arrangements." Octavio Paz (1994, 40), the late Mexican poet, essayist and ambassador, stated in 1978 that the body of government functionaries is united by personal ties rather than objective laws or ideology, and that the president tends to consider governmental goods as his own personal property.

Hernández Muñoz (2006, 122-125) described clientelism in the Mexican (and Latin American) political culture, saying that it is the very discretionary use of government resources that enables leaders to give benefits, resolve problems and promise protection, providing their followers with an advantageous position in respect to others. Within this discretionary exercise of power, although citizen protection and governmental benefits are guaranteed by law, they are not provided in practice. Hence, many people seek to obtain them by becoming part of clientelist organizations (labor and campesino organizations, associations of taxi drivers or street vendors, groups that occupy land to establish homesteading settlements, the military, etc.). Hernández Muñoz (2006, 132) explained that not only in the political realm but also in public education, a monopoly of power in the absence of functional accountability mechanisms leads to the use of public resources for the purpose of patronage. Not surprisingly, the vertical organizational structure and clientelist administrative practices portrayed in the aforementioned reports on the Mexican public sector are evidenced in the CETIS by the interviews of the present study.

### 1.4 Recent changes in Mexico

Because the one-party political system was discredited by constant economic crises (1976-1994), among other factors, an electoral agency was established with representatives from the major political parties in 1996. Consequently, the formerly dominant party lost the mayorship of Mexico City in 1996 and the presidency in 2000.

Morris (2009, 58) observed that the end of one-party dominance began a process of change in Mexico, first evidenced as an increase in access to information that had been tightly controlled by the government. In 2004, a civil service reform replaced favoritism with a merit system for hiring and promotion in regulatory agencies. However, this reform has not affected other governmental institutions, such as those concerned with education, health services or justice (the courts and the police force) (Morris 2009, 278). The interviews of the present study are in agreement with this observation, strongly suggesting that clientelist practices (a hallmark of one-party rule) continue to predominate in the CETIS today. This illustrates the point made by Guerrero (2004, 125), that it is easier to change the way power is won or lost than the way it is exercised.

### 1.5 Mismanagement or corruption?

There is disagreement in the literature as to the definition of corruption and mismanagement. For instance, Ferraz et al. (2012, 10-11) described a community council entrusted with monitoring the use of federal, state and local government funds allocated for Brazilian schools. Due to the political maneuvering of the mayor (who received the funds), the council was dysfunctional. Either it did not meet or was led by a family member of the mayor. According to the authors, this practice is not corruption because it has no direct relation to fraud (diversion of public funds, over-invoicing, or public procurements without a fair bidding process).

The present analysis adopts the concept of corruption formulated by the IIEP and Transparency International and expressed by Hallak and Poisson (2007, 29) and Heyneman (2004, 637): the systematic abuse of authority (entrusted power) for private (personal as well as material) gain. This broader definition is very practical because it distinguishes between mismanagement/corruption characterized by the promotion of self-interest (e.g., fraud and favoritism, the manipulation of accountability mechanisms, and the imposition of an atmosphere of fear to protect benefits derived from corruption) and mismanagement that is not corruption (e.g., inadequate practices resulting from a lack of management experience, an inadequate educational background, prejudice, and other personal characteristics not suitable for administration). Hallak and Poisson (2007, 29-30) pointed out that this definition of corruption can be instrumental in establishing a link between systemic dysfunctions, self-interested management practices, and different types of teacher behavior that are detrimental to education.

## METHODS

### 2.1 The approach of the study

This is a qualitative, empirical, cross-sectional case study. It follows the World Bank's recommendation (Azfar 2000, 34) that case studies be conducted in government institutions of health care and education to determine the effects of corruption on service delivery. The CETIS high school system was chosen as the subject for study because it is representative of the organizational structure of Mexican public vocational high schools and has well-documented poor educational outcomes. Additionally, one of the authors (Cerecedo-Mercado) had observed strong indications of systemic administrative corruption in this institution.

One way of examining the relation between systemic corruption and the educational function is through data on the embezzlement of funds, and then associating this factor with the allotment of resources and the results of student evaluations, an approach used by Ferraz et al. (2012). Another method of exploring the connection between corruption and service delivery was employed in a study of a local Indonesian government carried out by the World Bank (Azfar 2000, 34), in which surveys were sent to households, companies and branches of government. Although this method of data collection is useful for probing the opinions of those who receive a governmental service, it is not appropriate for obtaining frank opinions by those who offer a governmental service (as in the present study). Since the latter case requires information that could jeopardize employment (i.e., giving opinions about the possible link between a self-serving discretionary exercise of power and the poor educational outcome in the CETIS), frank opinions by participants would be difficult to obtain through a survey. Hence the instrument used in the present study to obtain information from participants was an in-depth

interview, aimed at establishing a high degree of trust and guaranteeing confidentiality in order to obtain reliable data and protect the participants.

The in-depth interviews of the current contribution were conducted with 29 key actors in the CETIS and other institutions of Mexican public education (see supplementary material: Appendix B) — 24 in the original study (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004) and 5 in the follow-up study (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011). The trust established by the interviewer was pivotal for the reliability of the results. A reliability check (see next section) seemed to indicate that a high level of trust was indeed established.

The limitation of this study is that it focuses on explaining the causes of poor performance of CETIS alumnae in universities and on-the-job, without exploring other possible consequences of the apparent self-serving exercise of power, such as the high (50%) drop-out rate in the CETIS (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015), limitations on enrollment caused by the fraudulent use of funds, or the lack of opportunity for some young people resulting from favoritism in the selection of students.

**2.2 The interviews**

The sample of interviewees was not (and cannot be) representative in a study on systemic corruption. The experience of approaching possible interviewees at the beginning of the present study is illustrative of this point. The mere mention of the research topic caused people to react with fear and extreme caution. Therefore, to protect the interviewees and the researchers from possible reprisals, as well as to avoid biased data, the sample could not be selected in an open and random fashion.

Two CETIS principals who had heard about the study approached the interviewer and recommended contacting certain other principals from the CETIS, the IPN and the UNAM. Other contacts in the CETIS were made in a similar informal manner. The education and management specialists outside of the CETIS were contacted from a list provided by the Mexican Council of Educational Research (when informed of the research topic, 60% declined the interview). Ethical norms for research on human beings, established by the Declaration of Helsinki (1969; updated most recently in 2008) were strictly followed. All participants in the study signed informed consent previous to the formal interview.

As recommended by Azfar (2000, 35), a reliability check was devised to assure that fear did not significantly bias data collection. First, a casual conversation was established in a place where environmental factors guaranteed privacy, and at a later date a formal tape-recorded interview was conducted in a private office. In the first conversation all participants talked openly about corruption in the CETIS and/or other Mexican institutions of public education, but during the taped interview two participants (principal #12 in 2004 and assistant principal D in 2011) avoided any mention of corruption. Thus, 27 interviews are considered valid (23 in 2004 and 4 in 2011), which corroborates the interviewer's ability to establish trust with almost all participants. The interviews resulted in 164 (2004) and 44 (2011) pages of transcripts.

Eleven of the 24 interviewees in 2004 worked in the CETIS (principals #1-6, administrative worker #1, teacher #1, education specialists #1 and 3, and management specialist #2), as did all 5 in 2011 (teachers B, C and E, department head A, and assistant principal D). The other 13 participants in the 2004 study worked outside of the CETIS (principals #7-12, education specialists #2 and 4-7, and management specialists #1 and 3). Whereas all CETIS interviewees worked in Mexico City at the time of the study (no two from the same campus), many had previously worked outside of the capital, both in rural and urban areas. All interviewees from the CETIS were over 50 years of age and had been working in the institution for 20 to 30 years. Principals #1-6 were knowledgeable about management issues, the local problems of their school, and the history of the CETIS. All planned to retire soon, which in part explains their openness to participate in the study. The principals outside of the CETIS had similar characteristics. All the education and management specialists had doctorate degrees.

The formulation of interview questions (see supplementary material: Appendix C) was based on a review of the literature and exploratory conversations (not included in the results) with a CETIS teacher, a CETIS principal, and a management specialist from the IPN. These questions served as a flexible guide; the actual

questions employed varied according to the responses. The following issues were explored: the role of administrators and union leaders in the formal organization; the relation between the formal and informal organizations in decision making; the relative balance between academic criteria and personal interests in decision making; the effect of a particular management style (whether self-serving or professional) on the professional activity of teachers and administrators; suggestions for improving the quality of education in the CETIS.

### 2.3 Data analysis

Since the evidence of the present study is empirical, data were analyzed by using the grounded theory approach originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Accordingly, the number of interviews was considered sufficient when the interviewer began to hear mostly a repetition of the themes already mentioned.

The grounded theory approach also involves the method of constant comparison described by Jones, Manzelli and Pecheny (2004), an inductive approach to building a conceptual framework. After a first reading of the interviews, the researcher compiled a list of the ideas repeatedly mentioned, from which the first concepts became apparent. These tentative concepts were compared to one another and to reports from the literature (that had been read to form the interview questions) and organized into categories in 13 conceptual maps (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, main text, pp. 233, 236, 243, 250, 253, 263, 267, 271, 278, 283, 284, 295 and 296).

The interviewer then reread the interviews and an augmented list of reports from the literature, and the other two authors read these materials for the first time. Afterwards, the authors discussed the conceptual maps and formed a tentative theory (see the three mechanisms mentioned at the end of the introduction section). They proceeded to reread the interviews and the reports from the literature to organize the information into a coherent presentation, slightly modifying the tentative theory. The results of the follow-up study were later integrated into the text, which was translated by a native English speaker familiar with the field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 A monopoly of power

The founding charter of the CETIS provides for consultative academic councils with an advisory function, leaving exclusive decision-making power in one-person organs. Principal #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 10) said that all important decisions in the CETIS are made by the general director and principals.

When referring to the omnipotence of these one-person organs, many interviewees mentioned the weakness of the consultative academic councils and/or academic areas. Educational specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 121) explained that in general there is no real participation of collegiate organs in decision making within the CETIS. Didou and Martinez (2000, 197-199), contracted by the government to study Mexican vocational high schools and make recommendations, observed that one of the obvious shortcomings of Mexican vocational education (including the CETIS, the IPN, and the CONALEP) is the absence of functional accountability mechanisms, especially collegiate committees with decision making powers.

Even the advisory role of the consultative academic councils (at the central level and on each campus) is rather limited, as the general director and principals are very influential in selecting the members of the respective council. The true function is not really to give suggestions, according to principals #2 and 3, education specialists #1 and 5, and management specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, pp. 23, 26, 103, 132, and 161), but instead to validate politically sensitive decisions (e.g., the expulsion of a student) that the principal has already made so as to avoid the perception of arbitrariness. Management specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 161) explained that the academic areas also serve the purpose of legitimizing decisions already made by the principal.

Education specialist #1 (from the CETIS; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 104) said that one-person organs of power must be delimited by decision-making collegiate organs so that management decisions can be based on

an academic and institutional rationale. Otherwise, a clientelist management style predominates, in which the interests of the principal and his or her family, friends and collaborators tend to be given the highest priority. Education specialist #5 (from the IPN; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 130-133) explained this point in greater detail by contrasting the nature of the academic councils in the IPN and the UNAM. This is relevant because the organizational structure of the IPN, established in 1938, served as the model for the creation of the CETIS, founded in 1974.

Whereas the academic councils in the IPN universities and high schools are consultative, those in the UNAM universities and high schools are decision-making. This means that the one-person organs of power in the IPN have exclusive decision-making faculty, while the academic councils only make recommendations that can be heeded or ignored. Contrarily, the one-person organs of power in the UNAM must implement the decisions of the academic council.

This specialist emphasized that a decision-making collegiate council creates a greater tendency to place a priority on academic criteria and professional ethics, while a consultative collegiate council leaves a monopoly of power in the corresponding one-person organ, under which condition there is a strong tendency for decision making to be based on personal interests and patronage.

### 3.2 A self-serving discretionary exercise of power

The interviews strongly suggest that the monopoly of power in the general director of the CETIS leads to many self-serving discretionary practices, including influence peddling in relation to teacher hiring/promotion (see section 3.3.2), the solicitation of "gifts" from campus administrators (see section 3.3.1), and the favoring of those with close personal ties to central level administrators when selecting principals, conducting audits and campus supervisions, and interpreting student evaluations (the latter points are discussed in this section).

The general director selects principals mainly based on family and friendship ties, according to eight of the eleven interviewees from the CETIS in the original study (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004; principals #2, 3, 4 and 5, administrative worker #1, teacher #1, education specialist #1, and management specialist #2; pp. 10, 31, 41, 44, 51, 66, 106 and 152) and all four in the follow-up study (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011; department head A and teachers B, C and E; pp. 8, 14, 16 and 38). Teacher #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 66) asserted, "If there were academic criteria in the selection of CETIS principals, the system would be very different." Three of the four interviewees from the IPN (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004; principal #11, education specialist #5, and management specialist #1; pp. 99, 128 and 149) also emphasized the prevalence of favoritism in the selection of principals by the general director of their institution.

Favoritism is reportedly the main criterion for student and campus evaluations as well. The practice of favoritism, rather than the adoption of an academic logic, reportedly leads to many distortions in the attainment of institutional goals. Principal #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 9) commented that central administrators do not seriously review the results of student evaluations or respond to proposals that emerge from the schools. Likewise, Didou and Martinez (2000, 49) reported that "there is inadequate revision of results [of student evaluations], a process that can take 2 or 3 years. Consequently, significant recommendations and conclusions are unusual, and when made there is no follow-up."

Regarding campus supervision, principal #4 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 41) stated that if a principal is well-connected, central level administrators invent or modify information as needed so that the report will look good. On the other hand, "when a principal is not a relative or close friend but instead has earned his/her position with hard work, the central level demands more." In a similar sense, audits are also reportedly employed to favor principals in good graces with central administrators and punish those who are not, according to principal #4 and education specialist #5 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 41 and 128). The evidence from the interviews suggests that a clientelist rather than academic logic is involved in making all of these accountability mechanisms dysfunctional.

Hence, a monopoly of power in the CETIS general director seems to cripple formal accountability mechanisms (as reported in the Mexican public sector as a whole; see section 1.3). Management specialist #2

(Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 152) and Daniel Cossío Villegas (1974) explained that a self-interested management style at the top of the organizational pyramid sets the tone for the entire institution, because the exercise of power establishes rewards and punishments that either promote institutional goals or foment a self-serving focus.

Thus it is not surprising that 9 of the 15 interviewees from the CETIS (in 2004 and 2011) indicated that most principals prioritize their personal interests or those of their family, close friends and collaborators, relegating the promotion of educational objectives to a secondary priority (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004; administrative worker #1, principals #2, 4 and 6, management specialist #2, and education specialists #1 and 3; pp. 51, 3, 37, 45, 152/159, 104-105, and 121; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011; department head A and teachers B and E; pp. 3, 14 and 38). Comments in the same sense can be found throughout the text (especially in sections 3.1 and 3.3.2-3.3.4) by the other 6 interviewees from the CETIS as well as the 4 interviewees from the IPN (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principals #9 and 11, education specialist #5 and management specialist #1).

Whereas in the CETIS a self-serving discretionary exercise of power seems to predominate, there are exceptions to the rule. In the interviews there was mention of 8 cases of CETIS management teams (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004; principals #2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, and educational specialist #5; pp. 18, 32, 36, 43, 48 and 125; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011; teacher E and department head A, pp. 42-44 and 5-9) that had an academic focus in decision making. One of the ways of achieving this focus was the practice of uniting the staff around common educational objectives, using different forums for this purpose— the academic areas, assemblies, the academic council or simply good communication. Principal #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 45), who departed from the organizational model of a vertical hierarchy and monopoly of power, formed a decision-making council outside of the institutional norms in order to overcome the tendency of a widespread self-serving focus among the staff. "The purpose was not really to democratize but instead professionalize decision making." Management specialist #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 151-152) explained that although some teachers with an excellent academic profile have become principals in the CETIS, it is more common to find principals and union leaders who exercise power to favor themselves and their group of friends, causing educational objectives to be relegated to a secondary priority.

### 3.3 The mechanisms of a self-interested management style

Since the interviews strongly suggest that a monopoly of power leads to a predominantly self-interested exercise of power in the CETIS, an evaluation was made of the different mechanisms of systemic corruption and their relative influence on teaching and learning in the institution. The analysis begins with the mechanisms most reported in the literature on education corruption — fraud, bribery, and favoritism — and then proceeds with two other mechanisms, one scantly reported and the other absent in the literature.

#### 3.3.1 Fraud and bribery

Recent CETIS general directors have reportedly accepted bribes related to the selection of principals, according to principal #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 23) and teachers B and C (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 14 and 16). However, this mechanism apparently replaces the criterion of selecting principals based on personal ties (see section 3.2). In either case, it is likely that the candidate chosen is not the best suited for the job and will focus more on keeping in good graces with those above than promoting educational objectives.

Hence, in the CETIS this use of bribery seems to represent a mere alternative form of favoring personal interests, in which a monetary payment replaces personal ties as the criteria for selection of a principal. Another type of bribery, the demand by some teachers for gifts in exchange for a good grade, mentioned by principal #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 31), according to the interviews is practiced in isolated cases and not systemically.

The diversion of funds is commonplace in the CETIS, according to principals #2 and 3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 14 and 31). Principal #2 was explicit: "What are the political commitments of a principal? To find money

for the dinners and events, as well as the birthday present, Christmas present and new car for some central administrator. Where does the money come from? The invoices have to be invented."

Corruption in the use of school funds can lead to a lack of investment in infrastructure, as reported by Ferraz et al. (2012, 4) and others. However, funds designated in the CETIS for the purchase of equipment or the maintenance/construction of schools are closely tracked at the central level (perhaps because of the great emphasis on the physical appearance of campuses). According to principal #8 (from the UNAM high school level; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 84), although there is much better equipment in CETIS than the UNAM, it is inadequately utilized. This point was corroborated by teacher B (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 11).

The interviews strongly suggest that bribery and fraud are not the main mechanisms of systemic corruption that undermine educational objectives in the CETIS. The implication is that at the campus level, fraud is rather limited and in great part dedicated to accumulating funds for "gifts" to central administrators. On the other hand, favoritism is reportedly a very common form of clientelism practiced by principals. There is much evidence in the interviews that in the CETIS favoritism and two other mechanisms of a self-serving discretionary exercise of power are very detrimental to teacher performance and curriculum quality.

### 3.3.2 Favoritism in teacher hiring and promotion

Favoritism based on personal ties is the main criterion for teacher hiring on most CETIS campuses, according to principals #1, 2 and 6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 4, 12 and 47). Many other interviewees indicated the prevalence of this mechanism of teacher hiring and promotion (see the following paragraphs), meaning that the results of the present study are in agreement with the report in 2000 by the OECD (Castañon and Seco 2000, 30): "In Mexican vocational schools, the teaching staff is very in-grown in relation to hiring and promotion."

Principal #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 14) and teachers B and C (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 13 and 21) indicated that as a result of favoritism in hiring, some teachers lack the skills to perform their job. Principals #2, 6 and 9 (the latter from an IPN high school; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, pp. 15, 47, and 86) and teacher C (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 21) pointed out that teachers hired by favoritism tend to think that their main obligation is to pay back a political favor, not produce good results. Moreover, favoritism in the assignment of academic workload leaves some teachers with a very heavy schedule and larger than necessary class size, according to principal #4 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 39) and teacher C (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 19). The academic workload and class size of many teachers is also increased by the hiring of ghost teachers, which according to principals #2 and 3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 23 and 31) is frequently a result of pressure from central level administrators.

Promotions in the CETIS are based on evaluation processes corrupted by political pressure, according to education specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 123). Principal #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 47) said that certificates (e.g., for courses taken, a project with a positive impact on education) used to obtain promotions, bonuses or a sabbatical year are often invented to help friends. Education specialist #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 104) stated that bonuses are either granted to reward individual achievement (not teamwork) or to favor an interest group, and therefore in either case end up working against good teacher performance."

Hence, favoritism in the hiring/promotion of teachers tends to lower the average level of skills among the staff, encourage loyalty to corrupt administrators rather than commitment to educational objectives, and increase the academic work load and class size of many teachers.

### 3.3.3 An atmosphere of fear and intimidation

Both a democratic and authoritarian model of leadership can serve the educational mission very well, according to educational specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 121). The key to success is the principal's commitment to educational objectives and a gift for leadership. Contrarily, when personal interests are the priority of a principal, the school comes to be considered as his or her personal property, and the quality of education suffers greatly.

Although the authoritarian model of leadership can work, its structural foundation is constituted by a monopoly of power. As discussed previously (see section 1.1), a monopoly of power is well-recognized in the literature as providing a strong tendency to corruption in an educational institution. In the CETIS, this corrupt tendency is manifested as a self-serving discretionary exercise of power (clientelism), which according to all 15 interviewees from this institution (see section 3.2) is the management style practiced by most CETIS principals. According to education specialists #1 and 3 (from the CETIS; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 104 and 121), a self-interested discretionary exercise of power is nothing more than a normal and natural response within an extremely vertical organizational structure. Although there are exceptional CETIS principals with an academic focus in decision making, a self-serving focus seems to predominate.

A self-interested management style de-emphasizes educational objectives because of prioritizing personal benefits for a certain group, which creates a political problem for the corrupt principal. That is, anti-pedagogical decisions by a self-serving principal naturally lead to criticism by teachers committed to educational objectives. Several interviewees commented that a principal resolves this problem by the imposition of an atmosphere of fear among the staff. Principal #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 15) made an interesting observation when referring to when he began working as a principal: "I accepted the despotism of the central authorities and replicated the same attitude on my campus. I was lax with those in my favor and strictly enforced the rules against those who were not. This is very common among CETIS principals, which compromises education."

Education specialist #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 104) stated that a principal that exercises power in a clientelist manner feels obliged to try to control academic leaders because they do not share the same goals. Management specialist #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 153-154) said that the rules of a self-interested management style are never explicit, but are understood by everyone. "If I advance, if you support my ideas and my political ambitions, then everyone in my group will advance… If you oppose me, you will meet the consequences." This specialist expounded on what happens when a teacher criticizes a self-serving principal (whether that is done to promote academic or personal interests):

> "There is a total freeze. The teacher is sent to a place where he/she can do nothing. If the teacher asks for permission [to take a Master's program or special course, take a day off, make a change in his/her schedule, etc.], it is never given. The principal's group will even invent gossip to criticize the teacher… everything to get him/her to resign. While some can handle this treatment, others cannot."

Education specialist #5 (from the IPN; Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 131) asserted: "A principal can take reprisals against a teacher without violating the rules by assigning courses that a teacher has never taught or designating the worst schedule or classrooms." Teacher #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 62) suffered reprisals after criticizing the principal for suspending a student. "I was assigned nine groups with six different subject matters. All my time was occupied in the classroom. When I walked from one classroom to another and arrived one minute late, the prefect was there to record my late arrival and report it [resulting in deductions from my paycheck]."

Hence, the current results strongly suggest that the use of reprisals to create an atmosphere of fear is an integral part of a self-serving discretionary exercise of power. Osipian (2007, 19-20) portrayed the same mechanism in Russian universities. He stated that there is "a high risk of punishment for opposing illegal [or inappropriate] practices rather than for violating formal rules. The degree of monopolization and discretionary power is high… The level of tolerance of corruption is high, with corruption accepted as a norm… Vertical hierarchy is characterized by silence because of fear of being reprimanded or dismissed."

The interviews suggest that many teachers go through a typical cycle when confronted with successive corrupt administrations that impose an atmosphere of fear. They begin with some degree of professionalism and dedication to the educational mission, but soon learn that academic initiative leads to criticism, which in turn results in reprisals. Sooner or later many teachers reportedly tend to avoid criticism.

Given the pervasiveness of self-serving management decisions that compromise educational policy, it is very difficult for a teacher with academic initiative to avoid criticism of a predominantly self-interested management style. Under this type of leadership, favoring friends and relatives reportedly takes priority

over promoting educational objectives not only in teacher hiring/promotion (see section 3.3.2), but also in the assignment of teachers to courses, the establishment of course schedules, and the determination of teaching strategies (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principals #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, and teacher #1; pp. 4, 18, 28, 37, 43, 46, and 60; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, teachers B and C; pp. 12 and 19). On the other hand, many interviewees indicated that with a self-interested management style, the development of curriculum and course content revolves around the political convenience of the dominant group (see section 3.3.4).

Since academic initiative inevitably leads to criticism of anti-pedagogical policies and practices, the avoidance of criticism obliges teachers to eventually abandon their academic interest and professional responsibility. Hence, the psychological survival mechanism of avoiding criticism tends to minimize the professional dedication and academic initiative of teachers. Principal #4 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 36) observed, "Most teachers and administrators in the CETIS are either pursuing personal interests or just trying to survive the atmosphere of intimidation."

All of the CETIS principals interviewed (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principals #1-6, pp. 6, 18, 30, 36, 43, and 45-47) stated that one of the main problems for a principal committed to improving educational results is the demotivation of teachers. Education specialist #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 125) explained that a principal with an academic focus must recognize that demotivated teachers have learned to give a minimum effort for a good reason — they are showing their inconformity with and/or adaptation to successive corrupt administrations.

Principal #4, educational specialist #3, management specialist #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 38, 125 and 154) and teacher E (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 42) emphasized that principals can overcome the demotivation of teachers by setting an example of commitment and inviting teachers to join this effort. Moreover, principals committed to educational objectives, according to these interviewees, need to offer teachers the opportunity for continuing education as well as publicly recognize them in case of good academic performance. The principals interviewed agreed that apart from offering teachers opportunities for continuing education, the most important rewards for good performance are non-material (e.g., recognition in assemblies). Recognition and self-satisfaction obtained by teachers was also mentioned by Wang and Cheng (2012) as the most important rewards that can motivate teachers to improve their teaching effectiveness.

Hence, the interviews strongly suggest that a self-interested management style leads the majority of teachers to abandon academic initiative and give a minimum effort in their professional activities. In a similar sense, principals with a predominantly academic focus (although apparently a minority in CETIS) can reportedly overcome the demotivation of teachers by establishing academic criteria in management decision making. It therefore appears that the demotivation of teachers in the CETIS is directly related to a self-interested exercise of power by predominantly self-serving principals.

Eleven interviewees (9 from the CETIS and 2 from the IPN) indicated that most teachers eventually abandon academic initiative and adopt an attitude of minimum effort (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principals #1, 3, 4, and 9, teacher #1, education specialists #3, 5 and 6, and management specialist #2; pp. 5-6, 31, 40, 89, 60, 125, 128, 137, and 153; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, teacher E and department head A; pp. 42 and 5). Several examples were given in the interviews of this lack of academic initiative by teachers. Teacher #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 60) said that of the eight subjects constituting a semester, three are often not given because of the priority placed on non-academic activity. Other subjects "are not given well, because instead of entering the classroom with the idea of teaching, most teachers only do the minimum necessary to get paid, such as telling jokes or chatting with the students."

Principal #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 31) spoke in the same sense: "Teachers often arrive late, do not give the full class, spend class time chatting rather than giving the lesson, or want to cancel classes for any reason, such as the World Cup soccer tournament." Principal #4 pointed out (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 40): "Many teachers do not take courses to update their knowledge and give lessons with notes written on paper that is yellow with age." Education specialist #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 137) stated that teachers look for excuses to justify not making an effort, such as blaming students for their very low academic level or the authorities for

a deficient library (instead of making copies of good materials). Principal #3 and education specialist #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 26 and 137) explained that the meetings of the academic areas, which should be forums for improvement of teaching strategies and program content, are used mainly for complaints (about the infrastructure and students) and the promotion of personal interests.

The aforementioned examples clearly describe what is meant by a lack of academic initiative by demotivated teachers. Even though the consequences are devastating for education, the reported minimum effort of most CETIS teachers can be considered as "a reasonable adaptive response to a difficult situation." This is the same explanation given by Chapman (2002, 19) in regard to the solicitation of bribes to compensate for low teacher salaries. Education specialist #5 posed (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 131): "Between the complicity of most teachers and the obstacles faced by a minority [who maintain their academic initiative], there is a general lack of productivity among the teaching staff." Aguilar and Block (1977, 107), who analyzed Mexican vocational education, stated: "To the extent that a teacher is reduced to just trying to survive [the atmosphere of fear], the possibility of professional commitment is limited."

Teacher #1 pondered (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 60): "What do most students learn in this environment of fear and minimum effort?" She explained: "They tend to adopt the same attitude as many of their teachers." Teacher C (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 60) was in agreement with this statement, observing that within an environment in which a minimum effort predominates among teachers, students also tend to minimize personal effort and look elsewhere for success (e.g., personal ties with influential people). Education specialist #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 140) asserted that CETIS schools tend to undermine rather than reinforce positive values among students.

Reports in the literature corroborate the tendency of a corrupt educational institution to undermine the values of young people. Rumyantseva (2005, 84) wrote: "Corruption undermines incentives that motivate young people to work hard while teaching them that there are easier ways to achieve success," an idea also expressed by Meier (2004, 2). Tanaka (2001, 160), Heyneman et al. (2008, 3) and Hallak & Poisson (2007, 24) also stressed that a corrupt educational system teaches students to accept corruption as normal.

### 3.3.4 An opportunistic power struggle

If a principal does not "make a clear analysis of the problems of the school at the beginning of an administration and build consensus among the staff around goals to resolve those problems, there is fertile ground for self-serving coalitions; these interest groups gain power due to the moral vacuum created by the lack of academic focus by a principal and the lack of a plan with which he or she could unite the community," according to principal #3 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 32). Principal #4 and management specialist #2 emphasized (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 41 and 151-153) that the example set by a principal with a self-interested management style triggers the formation and strengthening of self-serving coalitions. Indeed, according to nine of the fifteen CETIS actors interviewed (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principal #1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, and management specialist #2; pp. 6, 18, 27-30, 36, 43, 45-47, and 153; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, teacher E and department head A; pp. 42-44 and 5-9), there are two main difficulties for a principal who attempts to establish an academic focus in a CETIS school — the demotivation of teachers and the strength of interest groups.

Although a power struggle between self-serving coalitions is not the intention of a principal with a self-interested management style, it is an almost inevitable result in the CETIS. Only two of the 15 interviewees from the CETIS (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, teachers B and C; 10 and 21-23) mentioned that the predominantly self-interested management style of a principal did not result in a power struggle between self-serving coalitions. In these two cases, the consolidation of power by the respective self-serving principal avoided a power struggle. One of these principals was very authoritarian and had maintained his position for many years, while the other belonged to the same coalition as the previous two principals on the same campus.

What is the nature of a power struggle between self-serving coalitions? "Coalitions are groups of friends around administrators, union representatives and teachers, leaders who are more interested in maintaining their position and winning the struggle for power than educating people," according to management specialist #2

(Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 151-153). This specialist went on to say: "In the CETIS, groups with a genuinely academic focus are less numerous and generally have less power than those focusing on self-interest."

Teacher E, with 32 years of experience in Mexican vocational education, stated (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, 36 and 38): "Whereas the main focus should be on academic matters, in reality it is on personal interests and the convenience of coalitions… Despite the recent changes in Mexico (see section 1.4), the priority in the CETIS is still on the interests of one or another group struggling for power to benefit itself."

According to principal #4 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 37), although all CETIS principals claim to exercise power with a pedagogical rationale, "due to one-person organs with a monopoly of power the most important decisions generally revolve around interest groups rather than pedagogy." Education specialist #6 observed (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 136): "Whereas one-person decision-making organs pretend to provide spaces where teaching and learning can take place, I think that decisions in Mexican vocational education tend to revolve more around interest groups than educational policy."

Hallak and Poisson (2007, 43) depicted a power struggle between self-serving coalitions as "fragmented clientelism" — the building of a personal following by several politically insecure leaders. Hernández Muñoz (2006, 125) pointed out that this personal following is created by appropriating and distributing public money, "converting it into the material base for their own personal or group projects." The latter author emphasized that in all democracies, political parties to some extent compete for power to favor their base of support with governmental resources. However, in the absence of a monopoly of power, these resources are generally assigned to public programs rather than appropriated by leaders to exclusively favor their followers (129).

Since a self-interested management style creates fertile ground for opportunistic leaders to promote the interests of their coalition, self-serving groups become established and must be taken into account by a principal in order to maintain political stability. Through these interest groups, more teachers are brought into the realm of self-serving administrative decision making. This actually has an implicit benefit for a predominantly self-serving principal because involving more people in the realm of a self-interested focus creates the conditions for maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks associated with corruption, as mentioned by Gong (2002, 88).

The tendency of teachers to join self-serving coalitions can be seen as a logical extension of the psychological survival mechanism of self-protection that begins with the avoidance of criticism and later turns into the abandonment of academic initiative. Teachers in a coalition can criticize management decisions affecting their group because they have a leader to protect them. On the other hand, teachers who maintain their commitment to educational objectives and criticize self-interested decision making based on academic criteria are opposed by the full spectrum of self-serving coalitions.

Education specialist #6 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 138), when describing the lack of academic focus in the CETIS, stated that teachers act as if the real purpose of the schools was not to teach students. "It seems that administrative functions and the convenience of coalitions are the real focus of teacher activity." Likewise, 5 interviewees inside and 1 outside the CETIS (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, principals #1, 2, 3, and 11, and management specialist #2; pp. 3, 12, 26, 98, and 156; Cerecedo-Mercado 2011, teacher B, p. 11) commented about the tendency to emphasize administrative functions within an atmosphere of self-interested administrative decision making. They indicated that administrators tend to fill the meeting time of academic areas with excessive administrative paperwork to fill the void created by the lack of an academic focus. Meanwhile, as aforementioned (see section 3.3.3), teachers tend to use these meetings to promote personal benefits and the political convenience of their interest groups.

Education specialist #5 and management specialist #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 128 and 156) explained that with predominantly self-serving decision making, the struggle of ideas becomes only another tool used by coalitions in their power plays to gain advantage, which in turn creates an atmosphere of distrust. Aguilar and Block (1977, 103) posed that within the context of Mexican vocational education, "An atmosphere of distrust makes it difficult to commit oneself to more than the promotion of personal interests." Hence, the distrust created by a power struggle seems to have a synergistic effect with the atmosphere of fear, as both encourage teachers to withdraw from academic initiative, abandon professional dedication, and in many cases adopt the promotion of self-interest as the main focus of their activity in the institution.

Apart from strengthening a self-interested focus among the staff, according to management specialist #2 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 151), self-serving coalitions "fight to take control over academic programs and utilize them to justify the existence of their group… not to implement them adequately in function of the needs of society." Education specialists #5 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 128) also emphasized that when the exchange of ideas primarily serves to promote power plays, program development usually revolves around personal interests and political convenience. If academic programs are not developed or updated with an academic logic, it is likely that they are constituted by obsolete and/or irrelevant course content. In this sense, Didou and Martinez (2000, 41) reported that the obsolescence of study plans plays an important role in the poor results of Mexican vocational education.

### 3.4 Alternative explanations for the poor educational results in the CETIS

Overall, the interviews of the current contribution strongly suggest that most CETIS principals exercise power in a predominantly self-serving manner, prioritizing personal interests over educational objectives. Within this management style, there is reportedly a strong tendency for teachers to abandon academic initiative and professional dedication, for curriculum to be developed and updated in function of personal interests and political convenience, and for students to minimize the importance of personal effort and accept corruption as normal, as indicated in Figure 1. This perspective provides a coherent and compelling explanation for the poor educational results in the CETIS. However, it is convenient to consider other possible reasons for the poor performance of CETIS alumnae in universities and on-the-job. Possible explanations include the low academic level of incoming students, the lack of teacher education in Mexican vocational education, the high poverty rate in the country, and the level of teacher salaries.

Teacher salaries are low compared to developed countries but adequate for a moderate standard of living in Mexico. Whereas the three mechanisms of a self-interested management style herein emphasized were frequently mentioned in the interviews, only two interviewees referred to the level of teacher salaries as inadequate. Furthermore, according to the literature on education corruption, extremely low teacher salaries tend to lead to compensatory mechanisms, including bribes, irregular fees, and private tutoring to compensate for poor teaching. The demand for irregular payments to teachers by students (in the form of money or gifts) was only mentioned once in the interviews, indicating that this is not a systemic problem in the CETIS.

Regarding the level of poverty in Mexico, it is generally recognized to be quite high. According to the World Bank (2010), the poverty rate was 47.0% in 2005, 47.8% in 2008 and 52.3% in 2012. The CIA (2008) estimated it to be 47.0% in 2008 and 52.3% in 2010. Among CETIS students, however, the level of poverty is probably attenuated by the high drop-out rate, assuming that the poorest students are disproportionately represented among those who abandon their studies. According to a study on the drop-out rate in Mexican high schools (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015), the principal reason for dropping out of school in Mexico is a lack of financial resources. By the age of 16 (when students enter the CETIS), 50% of Mexican youth have already dropped out of school (Castañon and Seco 2000, 18). Additionally, by the time CETIS students graduate and meet university or on-the-job challenges, another 50% have abandoned their studies (SEP 2001, 37).

Perhaps the percentage of students who must work while studying represents the best indicator of the level of poverty in the CETIS. Castañon and Seco (2000, 173) reported that among all students in Mexican public high schools, 17% feel obliged to work. Even if it is supposed that the proportion of such students in the CETIS is higher than the average (say 20-25%), there is still a great disparity between this percentage and the data reported by Didou and Martínez (2000, 44) and Castañon & Seco (2000, 30): (i) the vast majority of CETIS alumnae fail in their university studies, and (ii) almost all CETIS alumnae experience difficulty finding or keeping a job related to their field of study.

Another important factor in the CETIS is the level of incoming students, which is generally recognized to be quite low. Education specialist #6 pointed out (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 138): "Those who enter vocational education master about one third of the knowledge that is established as the profile for incoming students." The evaluation of students entering Mexican vocational education from 1995 to 2000 (Didou and Martínez 2000,

40) revealed that between 56% and 73%, depending on the campus, "did not have the capacity to reason about a hypothesis or a concrete proposal, making the comprehension of math, physics, chemistry and social sciences very difficult."

To address this problem, in 1997 the National Agency for Vocational Education (COSNET: Consejo Nacional de Educación Técnica) recommended propaedeutic courses in vocational high schools for bringing incoming students up to the appropriate level in formal reasoning and math, and "in 1999 proposed another course for improving verbal abilities. However, there are no mechanisms for follow-up on these proposals" (Didou and Martinez 2000, 41). This lack of follow-up on proposals to meet grave problems in education is consistent with the internal logic of a school system organized primarily to serve the personal interests and political convenience of small groups. Proposals are made by interest groups in need of legitimizing themselves. Since these proposals have an underlying logic of a power struggle rather than the attainment of educational objectives, they are soon forgotten after achieving their purpose of gaining political advantage.

There is another example of a grave problem in Mexican vocational high schools that is well-recognized, yet has remained unresolved for many years. Teachers have an undergraduate university degree in some field, but are not required to undergo preparation as an educator. For this reason, the 8 CETIS management teams that reportedly established an academic focus in decision making (see end of section 3.2) all mentioned the importance of promoting opportunities for the continuing education of teachers. Moreover, Didou & Martinez (2000, 199) recommended an integral approach for the training of professionals as teachers. However, this academically sound proposal, just like that of propaedeutic courses, has been met with inaction at the central level of the CETIS for many years. It is likely that this inaction is yet another manifestation of the logic of prioritizing personal interests and political convenience rather than educational objectives.

### 3.5 Perspectives

The interviews strongly suggest that the incentive system is currently inverted in the CETIS, encouraging minimum effort and discouraging academic initiative among teachers. A renovation of this incentive system would be pivotal for achieving good teacher performance. It has reportedly been possible to overcome teacher demotivation in the CETIS when a principal establishes an academic focus in decision making, begins to work with the most professionally dedicated teachers, and invites demotivated teachers to join this effort. At the same time, these principals have offered teachers educational opportunities as well as recognition for good performance, according to principals #2, 3, 4, 6 and 10, teacher #1 (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004), department head A and teacher E (Cerecedo-Mercado 2011) (see section 3.3.3). In the same sense, the importance of a positive reward system for increasing teacher motivation was one of the most common themes at the IIEP conference of 2001 (Hallak and Poisson 2002, pp. 20, 27, 47, 52, 67, 74-76, and 79). Wang and Cheng (2012) affirm the importance of a positive system of rewards and punishments for teachers, although they pose the question as to whether the teacher evaluation is better done as a self-evaluation or an administrative evaluation. Unfortunately, posing the latter question is irrelevant as long as decision making on a campus is characterized by personal interests and political convenience.

In order to change the reward system for teachers, the entire institutional reward system must be reoriented. The former secretary of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, speaking at the 2001 IIEP conference (Hallak and Poisson 2002, 74), stated the best way to limit corruption is to change "the existing reward system and structure of incentives," both for teachers and administrators. Chapman (2002, 18) also spoke of the need to address underlying structural or operational flaws in the educational system, which "may require efforts to change the incentive systems that fuel corruption." The interviews strongly suggest that a monopoly of power in one-person decision making organs is the underlying problem that fuels a self-interested management style in the CETIS.

Didou and Martinez (2000, 199) proposed a three-pronged solution to the problematic of Mexican vocational education: 1) propaedeutic courses, 2) an integral approach to teacher education, and 3) decision-making collegiate organs. According to the present analysis, the third proposal is pivotal to changing the negative

incentive system that de-emphasizes the attainment of educational objectives and encourages the promotion of personal interests. Hence, the implementation of the former two proposals would depend on the success of the third, since the inertia to positive change in the CETIS seems to be based on the omnipotence of one-person decision-making organs.

It therefore seems that an essential step for making any substantive change in curriculum, teacher motivation and teacher performance would be the creation of decision-making collegiate councils at the central level and on each campus of the CETIS. With decision-making collegiate organs there is reportedly a much stronger tendency to make policy based on academic criteria, which would help the CETIS begin to implement important proposals already made (such as propaedeutic courses for students and an integral approach to teacher education) as well as to make existing accountability mechanisms (audits, student evaluations and campus supervision) functional. Among other duties, the collegiate decision-making council at the central level should select principals, since the proper selection of these leaders is key to establishing and maintaining an academic focus in decision making on the campuses.

Administrative specialist #2 said (Cerecedo-Mercado 2004, 154): "Only when the principal has a genuine identification with the mission of the school will he or she be able to dismantle groups with negative influence in the academic environment and favor those teachers who have a genuine commitment. Such a principal can form alliances that renovate the path of education through real development of academic programs, and in this way revert the negative effects which self-serving groups have left." This is what Fullan (2003, 30) described as the "moral purpose" of educational leaders, and was the objective of the eight management teams described in the interviews that attempted to establish an academic rather than self-serving focus in administrative decision making.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study strongly suggests that a predominantly self-serving exercise of power is practiced by the majority of principals in the CETIS, resulting in a priority on promoting personal benefits and political convenience. According to the interviews, the main cause of this problem is the monopoly of power in one-person organs due to the absence of decision-making collegiate committees and other functional accountability mechanisms (e.g., audits, campus supervision and internal student evaluations). The original contribution of the present study is that it identifies three mechanisms of a self-serving discretionary exercise of power that seem to gravely undermine teacher motivation, teacher performance, the quality of academic programs, and the personal effort by most students. These three mechanisms are favoritism in the hiring/promotion of teachers and selection of principals, the imposition of an atmosphere of fear by principals to avoid teacher criticism of anti-pedagogical decisions, and a struggle for power between self-serving coalitions that is triggered by a self-interested management style. The atmosphere of fear seems to lead to the adoption a defensive posture and minimum effort by most teachers, which is contrary to the creativity and academic initiative required for good teaching.

Overcoming the clientelism reportedly practiced by most CETIS principals will require structural change (i.e., the creation of decision-making collegiate committees), policy change (e.g., the implementation of teacher education at all levels and of propaedeutic courses for incoming students), and cultural change (e.g., respect for multifaceted leadership, the development of a participatory culture with an academic focus, and the correct use of accountability mechanisms). It would seem that the first step is to create the political will for change by establishing professionalized collegiate decision-making organs rather than continuing to give a monopoly of power to one-person organs. Further case studies are needed to determine the relevance of the current findings to other educational institutions with an extremely vertical organizational hierarchy.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix A

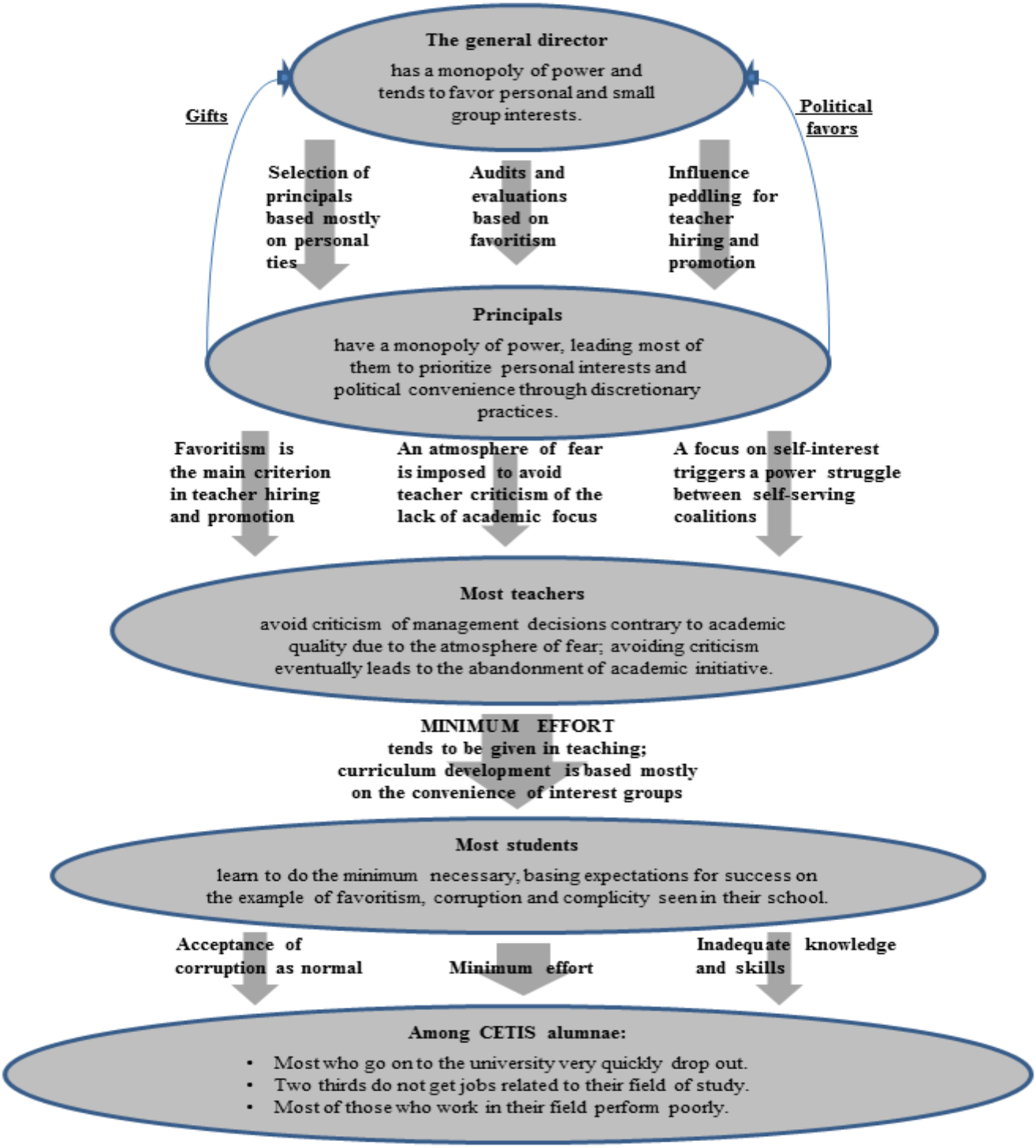


**Figure 1. Discretionary practices by principals undermine teaching and learning.**

Source: Elaboration based on the results of the current study

**Supplementary material: Appendix B**

**The key actors interviewed**

**In the original study (2004)** (all page numbers cited refer to Annex H of the thesis)**:**

| **From the CETIS** | **page numbers** | **valid/invalid** |
|---|---|---|
| 1) Principal #1 | 3-9 | valid |
| 2) Principal #2 | 10-25 | valid |
| 3) Principal #3 | 26-35 | valid |
| 4) Principal #4 | 36-42 | valid |
| 5) Principal #5 | 43-44 | valid |
| 6) Principal #6 | 45-49 | valid |
| 7) Administrative worker #1 | 51-55 | valid |
| 8) Teacher #1 | 56-67 | valid |
| 9) Educational specialist #1 | 103-106 | valid |
| 10) Educational specialist #3 | 121-125 | valid |
| 11) Management specialist #2 | 151-160 | valid |

| **Outside of the CETIS** | **page numbers** | **valid/invalid** |
|---|---|---|
| 1) Principal #7 | 69-77 | valid |
| 2) Principal #8, UNAM | 78-85 | valid |
| 3) Principal #9, IPN | 86-95 | valid |
| 4) Principal #10 | 96-97 | valid |
| 5) Principal #11, IPN | 98-99 | valid |
| 6) Principal #12 | 100-101 | **invalid** |
| 7) Educational specialist #2 | 107-120 | valid (without reference in text) |
| 8) Educational specialist #4 | 126-127 | valid (without reference in text) |
| 9) Educational specialist #5, IPN | 128-135 | valid |
| 10) Educational specialist #6 | 136-141 | valid |
| 11) Educational specialist #7 | 142-147 | valid (without reference in text) |
| 12) Management specialist #1, IPN | 149-150 | valid |
| 13) Management specialist #3 | 161-164 | valid |

**In the follow-up study (2011)** (unpublished interviews)**:**

| **From the CETIS** | **page numbers** | **valid/invalid** |
|---|---|---|
| Department head A | 1-9 | valid |
| Teacher B | 9-16 | valid |
| Teacher C | 16-27 | valid |
| Assistant principal D | 27-35 | **invalid** |
| Teacher E | 35-44 | valid |

**Supplementary material: Appendix C**

**The interview questions for contacts inside the CETIS**

**A) Formal organization**: 1) Who defines the real role of authority in a school, and how is this done? 2) What is the real role of collective organs in the schools? 3) Do you consider that one-person organs, such as the principal, the assistant principals and department heads in the CETIS, lead to decision making based more on academic or political criteria? If so, how? 4) What is the role of the teachers' union? 5) What are the main strategies that you would propose to generate results within the formal organizational structure?

**B) Informal organization**: 1) Do you think that there are informal groups in the schools that exert power in decision making according to a political logic of negotiation and alliances? 2) In your opinion, are decisions about teacher schedules, assignment of classrooms, and/or program development and implementation made according to pedagogical criteria, or do they reflect a logic of personal and/or small group interests? 3) (For principals) What were the principal conflicts that you confronted during your

administration and how did you resolve them? Please mention at least two. 4) What are the main strategies that you would propose to generate results within the informal organizational in the school?

**C) School administration**: (for principals) 1) How did you put your team together? Do you consider it to be a high performance team? 2) How do you stimulate the teaching staff and support workers that have good performance? 3) How did you introduce changes in the organization of the school and what factors did you take into account? 4) What do you do when you have dissidents on your team? 5) How do you carry out the processes of communication and decision making? 6) Do you think that the school administration should stimulate the participation of parents, social organizations and other actors? 7) What do you consider to be the five most important characteristics of a principal? 8) What are the main strategies that you would propose in order to generate good results in school administration?

**D) Recommendations**: 1) How can the school administration be exercised with efficiency without leaving aside the questions of equity and social responsibility? 2) Should the government recover the philosophy of high school education through strategic planning of public policy? 3) What are the chief obstacles that would have to be overcome to improve management practices and lead to an efficient exercise of power? 4) With the aim of improving school management, what would you suggest in relation to criteria for selecting principals?

**The interview questions for contacts outside of the CETIS**

**A) Formal organization**: 1) What are the principal factors that influence the administration of a school? 2) How do teachers, parents and other sectors participate in collective decision making? 3) Who defines the real role of the authorities in a school? How is this done? 4) What is the real role of the school council and other collective decision making organs? 5) Do you consider that one-person organs, such as the principal, the assistant principals and department heads in the CETIS, lead to decision making based more on academic or political criteria? How is this done? 6) What is the role of the teachers' union and its representatives? 7) What are the main strategies, taking everything into account, that you would propose in order to obtain good results from the formal organization?

**B) Informal structure**: 1) Do you consider that certain negative practices exist in Mexican public high schools, such as the trafficking of influences, paternalism and nepotism? (If the answer is affirmative) How could they be overcome? 2) In the relation of principals to teachers, what are the classic practices for rewarding or sanctioning the latter? 3) How do alliances, coalitions and pressure groups influence decision making by a principal?

**C) School administration**: 1) Do you consider that the mechanisms of awards and bonuses for good job performance are adequate to motivate personnel in the school? 2) What would you do if you were a high school principal? 3) How do you think a principal's management practices should be evaluated? 4) In what way are high schools supervised and controlled, according to your experience? 5) What are the five most important characteristics that a principal should have? 6) What would you propose as a good strategy for improving school administration?

D) **Recommendations**: 1) How should a principal use his or her power to fulfill the educational mission of a school? 2) What are the principal obstacles to be overcome so that a principal could efficiently exercise power and fulfill the educational mission of the school? 3) What mechanisms exist that support a principal in an efficient exercise of power to fulfill the educational mission of the school?

**Supplementary material: Appendix D**

**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| *CETIS* | A vocational high school system |
| *CONALEP* | A vocational high school system |
| *IPN* | A vocational high school and college system |
| *UNAM* | A liberal arts high school and college system |
| *SEP* | The Secretary of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) of the federal government |