Novice principals’ instructional management practices in high poverty, low performing schools in Chile

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Abstract

The current study examines instructional management practices implemented by 13 novice public school principals in Chile. To ascertain participants’ reported practices, in-depth interviews were conducted at the end of year one and year two in the position. Findings show instructional management is a priority. They reported difficulties in materializing this priority due to lack of autonomy to hire needed staff, teachers’ sense of professional autonomy, as well as their own lack of experience. These findings suggest the need for induction programs to support novice principals’ fulfillment of this strategic priority and the support from the Municipal Department of Education.

Keywords: leadership practices; managing instruction; school principals; newly qualified principals; novice principals

1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years educational policy in Chile has increased its attention to school leadership. More autonomy along with more accountability for students’ achievement has been legally afforded to public school principals. The government has implemented a professional development initiative to strengthen principals’ leadership practices and develop an updated version of the Framework for Good School Management and Leadership (CPEIP, Mineduc, 2015). The framework defines a set of expectations for the principal as well as for the management team in the

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categories of: Developing and Implementing a Shared Strategic Vision; Developing Professional Capacities; Leading Teaching and Learning; Managing School Climate and the Participation of the School Community; and Developing and Managing the School. The framework specifies personal resources of effective leaders, such as resilience, teamwork, effective communication, and sense of efficacy, among others.

The Ministry directives emphasize that school principals should go beyond administrative demands, focusing their attention on instructional/pedagogical matters to improve students’ learning (CPEIP, Mineduc, 2011). This directive is based on a number of studies that show that a key to improve student learning is the principal’s capacity to promote teachers’ professional development, motivations, and work conditions (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010; Campos, Bolbaran, Bustos, & Gonzalez, 2014; Grissom, 2011; Montecinos, Madrid, Fernández, & Ahumada, 2014).

In defining the professional development initiative, Chile’s Ministry of Education has also emphasized instructional leadership (CPEIP, Mineduc, 2015).

2. Managing the Instructional Program to Improve Classroom Teaching and Learning

Anderson (2010), drawing on the work of Leithwood and Riehl (2005), described four categories of leadership that characterize effective schools, each one encompassing specific practices (see Table 1). Of interest for the current study is managing the instructional program, which directly addresses practices that focus on teaching and learning. Anderson identifies four key practices associated with this category. These include: (a) ensuring adequate staffing; (b) providing instructional support to teachers through supervision, assessment, and coordination; (c) monitoring teaching and learning; and (d) protecting teachers from distractions from their core teaching responsibilities. Anderson posits that these practices per se do not make a principal effective; rather, what matters is how these serve to develop a shared vision of high quality teaching and learning. School leaders need to be strategic in their implementation of practices that motivate teachers to sustain improvement as well as to enhance their capacities. Practices to manage the instructional program need to be coordinated so they are understood within the wider school improvement plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting Direction</td>
<td>Motivating others regarding their own work, establishing a moral purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing People</td>
<td>Building the knowledge and skills required by staff to achieve the organizations’ goals, while also building commitment and resilience; dispositions needed to continue to achieve these goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redesigning the Organization</td>
<td>Establishing working conditions that foster the development of staff’s motivations and capacities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing the Instructional Program</td>
<td>Improving classroom instruction through support and supervision, monitoring learning and protecting teachers from distractions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Monitoring practices need to go beyond formal evaluation to comply with contractual requirements. Monitoring teaching and learning should provide information about the strengths and difficulties to be overcome through a set of planned professional development activities. Effective school leaders use classroom observation to generate a meaningful dialogue with teachers, providing useful feedback to orient improvement efforts (Cardemil, Maureira, Zuleta, & Hurtado, 2010; Salazar & Marqués, 2012). Classroom observation is most effective when it considers peer observations that place teachers in charge of analyzing their teaching practices and students’ work.

A number of previous studies in Chile show that managing instruction tends to receive the least attention within the core practices identified by Anderson (2010). Weinstein and Muñoz (2013) showed that principals and teachers consider that principals worked on all the categories; however, managing instruction received the least attention. Ulloa, Nail, Castro, & Muñoz (2012) surveyed 121 principals working in high-poverty schools who reported as a recurring problem the lack of autonomy to administer school resources, including the selection of teachers. More attention was afforded to external demands than to the teaching processes in their school, a finding also reported by López, Ahumada, Galdames, and Madrid (2011). A question remains as to whether these priorities were associated with principals’ characteristics, such as their knowledge and skills, with school characteristics, and policy demands.
Since 2011, all newly-hired principals working in public schools in Chile sign a performance agreement contract that specifies yearly targets with sanctions and incentives associated with meeting those targets (Montecinos, Ahumada, Galdames, Campos, & Leiva, 2015). Most contracts involve raising the school’s scores on the national testing program of educational achievement (SIMCE), providing thus an incentive for principal’s attention to instructional leadership and management. The current study examined how 13 newly appointed principals conceptualized instructional leadership and the practices they reported implementing to manage instruction. Following Carroll, Levy, and Richmond (cited in Ahumada, 2012), the concept of practice refers to situated, relational, and collective discourse, narrative, and rhetorical elements of day-to-day activities that configure and are configured in leadership.

Attention to the practices of novice principals is important, as research shows that in this group the complexities associated with school leadership are intensified (Northfield, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). When a novice enters a low-performing school and lacks the skills to meet these challenges, the consequences for the school can be serious, such as increasing the vulnerability of low-performing, high-poverty schools (Bellei, Morawietz, Valenzuela, & Vanni, 2015; Mentz, Webber, & van der Walt, 2010). A new principal may invigorate change and innovation in a school, opening possibilities for improvement.

3. Method

3.1. Design

The study used a multiple, case study longitudinal design, following a qualitative interpretative paradigm (Valles, 1997). The following research questions oriented data production and analysis:

- How do principals define instructional leadership?
- What practices do principals implement to manage the school’s instructional program?

3.2. Participants

The national database for job advertisements for principal posts was examined during the last semester of 2013 and the first semester of 2014 to identify public schools within a region in Chile that hired a new principal. The Municipal Director of Education for each school identified was then contacted to learn if the candidate selected was a first-time principal and to request they invite all of their novice principals to be part of this study. Among the 14 principals referred by the Directors and contacted by the research team, 13 (11 women) signed an Informed Consent agreeing to participate in the study. Among them, 92% had a masters’ degree, and all had experience as classroom teachers.

Table 2 summarizes key characteristics of the schools that illustrate important challenges, as most are low performing, have experienced enrollment declines, and concentrate high proportion of vulnerable students. These schools are typical of most Chilean public schools, as the provision of education is highly segregated by social class (García-Huidobro, 2010).

3.3. Data sources and analysis

Data were produced through in-depth interviews that were conducted in the principal’s office. Interviews lasted about 120 minutes, were audiotaped, and later transcribed. We focus here on two interviews: one conducted at the end of their first year in the position and one conducted at the end of the second year. Interview transcripts were subjected to content analysis (Valles, 1997). Using NVivo 11, segments were coded as these made references to the practices identified by Anderson (2010) within the management of the instructional program category.
Table 2 Characteristics of the Schools Lead by Participating Principals  
Source: Developed by Authors, 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School ID</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Vulnerability Index</th>
<th>Enrollment Percent Change 2010-2014</th>
<th>Trend SIMCE Mathemic Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comprehensive K-12</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>100% / 83.61%</td>
<td>-46%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>-38%</td>
<td>Above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Comprehensive K-12</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>92.57% / 88.75%</td>
<td>-47%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>-32%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>-24%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>Below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Results

Results are organized in relationship to the practices identified by Anderson (2010) as associated with managing the instructional program. Exemplary interview excerpts that illustrate the rationale and actions participants had implemented or were planning to enact are provided.

4.1. Conceptualizations of instructional leadership

Participants entered the position knowing that their practices needed to be closely linked to what was happening in the classrooms. They needed to know how teachers taught and how much students learned. All acknowledged that they needed to work with teachers, with some emphasizing instructional leadership as a distributed function. The notion of teachers as instructional leaders, however, was absent:

*Instructional leadership involves mobilizing a team towards an objective and in that mobilization, there is continuous learning to reach the objective.* (D6, year 1)
*I think the principal has to go into the classroom, must support teachers but not just the principal, it is the whole management team.* (D7, year 1)
*I think an instructional leader gives opportunities for effective participation and is directly involved in defining, implementing, monitoring, assessing, and providing feedback on the learning processes.* (D11, year 1)
*I am responsible if students learn or not. Whether students learn involves me.* (D1, year 1)

4.2. Managing the instructional program

A) Staffing

Although the 2011 educational law included provisions to allow principals greater decision-making regarding staffing matters, in practice they found that the central office made these decisions. This represented an obstacle because they could not hire teachers aligned with principals’ understanding of the school’s needs. Instead, the
central office would send teachers who needed to be reassigned due to low enrollment or because of a conflict with their principal. These teachers did not necessarily fulfill the profile needed by the principal to move the school forward:

> We are told that the Corporation [that administers the municipal school] … follows an economic criterion “you will not hire additional staff”. Therefore, I cannot hire the Inspector I want, I cannot hire the teachers I want. I will get teachers who have been transferred. As a consequence, I will not have people who have the qualifications I want. (D8, year 1)

> Look, this year I had a problem the size of a cathedral. On march 3rd I had the resignation of a language teacher, thirty hours, thirty-two hours. I had to call the [municipal department of education]…. Instead, I should have had a pool of teachers that I could hire, [but] nothing. (D9, year 2)

B) Providing instructional support to teachers through supervision, monitoring and professional development

Participating principals were committed to supporting teachers’ learning. They proposed a combination of strategies that involved peer learning, self-assessment, bringing outside expertise and surveys so teachers’ input regarding their perceived professional development needs could be addressed. Conducting classroom observation, using an agreed-upon protocol, was understood as critical to enhancing teaching. This practice, however, was a terrain of potential conflicts with teachers and a few delegated this to the curriculum coordinator. Some teachers held strong beliefs about their autonomy on pedagogical matters or some externalized the responsibility for poor results. Principals’ own inexperience added complexity to classroom supervision. For example, they tended to focus almost exclusively on needs, while ignoring assets.

> The technical unit has identified several themes that came up in a survey and we have been working on those thorough self-assessment.... For example, how teachers evaluate their students, looking at diversifying the assessment procedures.... We have had about 8 sessions of technical assistance in which we work with the [teachers] as a group to strengthen [classroom assessment]. (D5, year 1)

> We will have a course on classroom observation, because it is not easy to supervise in the classroom. It is perceived [by teachers] as punitive rather than as a stage for building, and ... we are worried because we see that teachers have given-up... disenchanted... so we need tools to conduct a process for supporting teachers (D3, year 2).

> I love the pedagogical aspect, that is why I am feeling impatient; but I have been advised to wait otherwise teachers will gang-up against me... (D7, year 1).

C) Protecting teachers from distractions from their core responsibility

Regarding this component of managing the instructional program, participants did not mention specific practices. Notwithstanding, some principals expressed concerns regarding the fact that classes at their school did not start on time. Principals would gently insist on the need to fully use all the instructional time:

> After every break I saw how my teachers went back to their classrooms. I start talking to them “you miss every day 10 minutes, after a week, a month and a year it is a lot of time that students are missing”. (D 12, year 1)

5. Discussion

The current study analyzes how a sample of 13 novice principals reported engaging in instructional management to move their schools forward. Management of the instructional program was at the forefront of participants’ strategic intentions. They spoke about the different strategies they would use to enhance teachers’ capacities so the school could improve students’ learning. This represents a shift from prior studies that showed that principals in Chile paid less attention to instructional matters (Ulloa et al., 2012; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2013). Perhaps, this attention mirrors public policy and the accountability targets placed on raising SIMCE test scores that exert control over principal’s subjectivities. Managing instruction, however, appeared to be difficult for some of our participants.
working in chronically low-performing schools. In these schools, principals had to deal with more administrative tasks to normalize the school. This tension between administration and instructional leadership has been reported elsewhere (Styron & Styron, 2011).

Focusing on instruction requires the cooperation of teachers, a factor not always available at these participants’ schools. This, plus attention to other priorities created tensions that these principals were figuring out how to resolve. This finding is in agreement with Anderson (2010) as well as Hall and Hord’s (2006) assertions that change in practice involve processes rather than events. As novices, at times, some felt underprepared to support teachers’ instructional work. Principals expressed concerns about the negative consequences of moving too quickly, too soon in response to external pressures to meet accountability targets.

Learning to lead a school with a focus on instruction involves attending to the conditions, motivations, and capacities that need to be mobilized to foster improvement towards a shared vision (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Our participants tended to focus more on capacities, then on motivations, and least on conditions. For example, little attention was paid to organizational factors that could distract teachers. As beginners, they were searching for strategies and tools to coordinate various processes that encompass instructional improvement, but without sufficient reflection on why teachers had developed apathy, understood classroom observations as punitive or on what were teachers’ own motivations. Reflecting on these aspects with teachers is key so that teachers can come to understand, co-construct, and experience the innovations brought by a new principal as a coherent set of practices with a clear and shared sense of purpose. In the absence of such coherence, change is even harder. If teachers’ strategic priorities are not considered in defining that purpose, the complexity of change increases if they perceive change as a threat.

6. Conclusions

The functions associated with instructional management are clear in the expectations of the various public policy instruments regulating principals’ work in Chile. For example, they are required to conduct formal classroom observations for the purpose of providing feedback to teachers. The policy instruments regulating teachers’ work, however, do not make provisions to make this assessment by their principal mandatory. Thus, principals must negotiate with teachers to convince them that observation has a formative, rather than a punitive intent. This, in turn, requires building trust between teachers and the principal. Trusting relations are built over time. Building trust is assisted when the principal can show that he or she can get resources to address teachers’ needs. In these schools the support of the Municipal Department of Education was key, as it manages staffing budgets, an element missing in some of these schools. For principals to generate changes in poor work conditions that may have affected teachers’ morale, the role of external supports needs to go together measures, such as performance targets, that pressure them to introduce change.

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