



## Moving the school forward: Problems reported by novice and experienced principals during a succession process in Chile

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### ABSTRACT

This article identifies the main problems faced by two groups of Chilean principals involved in a succession process. Problems reported by novice public school principals ( $n = 94$ ) were compared to those reported by their more experienced peers ( $n = 120$ ). Data were gathered through an online survey and eight in-depth interviews. Findings showed that groups did not differ in the overall pattern of responses when problems were categorized at the system level (45%), interactions with people (33%), at the school and territory levels (15%), and within themselves (7%). Differences were observed when comparing the extent to which each group reported problems managing up (interactions with the municipal department of education and Ministry of Education) and managing down (initiating changes in the school's culture and structures). The high frequency and types of problems reported at the system level indicate the need to align policy reforms addressing leadership practices at intermediate and school levels. The findings also suggest guidelines for the professional development programs that extend beyond normative practices for effective school leadership, by also responding to country specific social and organizational structures.

### 1. Introduction

Increased societal expectations for schools to reach a more diverse student population, as well as national and international testing programs that rank schools and countries, have contributed to making the school principalship a highly demanding role (Cowie and Crawford, 2008; Crow, 2006; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). Increased demands on school principals are grounded in research that has shown a positive relationship between effective leadership practices and students' academic achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). Understanding their role as a pillar to support other school improvement initiatives, policymakers in Chile have become increasingly interested in public school principals. Increased privatization, decentralization, neoliberal forms of accountability, and the implementation of a more demanding national curriculum are key features of the educational system (Flessa et al., 2017; Montecinos et al., 2015).

Principals' key roles in the implementation of educational reform suggest the importance of understanding policy supports they need in meeting expectations (Crow, 2007; Pashiardis and Johansson, 2016; Shaked and Schechter, 2017).

The current paper examines this issue by (a) identifying the types of

problems reported by experienced principals ( $n = 120$ ) and novice principals ( $n = 94$ ) during their first three years leading municipal schools in Chile; and (b) by examining if the types of problems reported are associated with their career stages. These research objectives address a gap in the literature as an important body of work has examined the problems reported by novice principal, but little is known if these are different from, and if so how, those reported by principals in mid and late career stages. Research comparing these two groups of principals is very limited in quantity.

With the promulgation of Law 20.501 in 2011, Chilean educational policy has provided municipalities with new tools to manage public school principals' work. Following procedures established by the Civil Service, a more rigorous and transparent selection process (ADP) has been implemented. Among 3.993 public schools eligible to hire principals through the ADP process (*in Spanish: Alta Dirección Pública*), 1.492 (37%) had completed a selection process by 2015. An additional 422 (or 11%) schools initiated, but did not complete, this process (Errázuriz et al., 2016).

In a large number of public schools in Chile, therefore, over the last five years a principal succession process has taken place. The arrival of a new principal presents both an opportunity and a challenge to the school, as well as to the principal who seeks to move the school

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forward. Considering that the main practices advocated for effective school leadership, have been developed in “Western, industrialized countries and on their related social and organizational structures” (Floyd and Fuller, 2016: 251), research investigating school leaders’ experiences in different national settings is needed (Lumby et al., 2008). School leadership is sensitive to cultural contexts as well as to policy contexts “such as the legal framework in which a principal works, or a principal’s working status.” (OECD, 2016a: 17).

Understanding the problems principals in a specific context confront, when attempting to move their schools forward, may illuminate issues of recruitment, selection, preparation, and induction. All these have been identified as critical stages to develop effective principals (Bush and Jackson, 2002; OECD, 2016a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Examining these issues from a career stage perspective allows us to highlight contextual, as opposed to personal, issues that need to be addressed by system level interventions to support a decentralized approach to school improvement.

Next, we review research on the problems reported by school principals with a short discussion on issues that emerge during leadership succession and the problems typically reported in studies on novice and experienced principals. Key characteristics of the school leadership context in Chile are described, followed by a description of the methodology used in the study. The article continues with the results from the online survey, providing some excerpts from interviews conducted with eight participants. After a discussion of the findings and their implications for research and professional development, the conclusion summarizes key findings that suggest the need for policies to address other components of leadership across the educational system.

## 2. Review of research on problems reported by school principals

### 2.1. Principal succession

Understanding the performance of schools in a long-term perspective entails analysing the arrival of the new school principal, not just as an individual episode (Bengtson et al., 2013; Fink and Brayman, 2004; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). Hargreaves (2005) points out that leadership succession is a critical aspect of school improvement and it has to be approached from a systemic perspective, considering that it has effects on the entire staff (Dorman and D’Arbon, 2003). Principal succession is crucial because it intensifies efforts to maintain trajectories of school improvement based on long term practices rather than individual efforts, personal positions and change agents (Peters-Hawkins et al., 2017). A succession process changes the web of relations and power dynamics characteristic of a particular school culture ((Fink and Brayman, 2004; Hart, 1991; González et al., 2003).

Incoming school principals have to construct their own role and reconstruct their school’s culture and structure in this transitional stage. The school’s previous principal has defined what are acceptable work routines that may create problems that the new principal must confront (Crow, 2007). This implies that change and continuities need to be balance in a dynamic and cyclical process as each incoming principal may want to be different from their predecessors (Hargreaves 2005; Hobson et al., 2003; Northfield, 2013).

### 2.2. Novice principals

Challenges in meeting complex demands of school leadership and management may be intensified for novice principals, due to their lack of relevant experience and incipient development of managerial skills (Oplatka, 2012). A number of studies have identified the problems novice principals confront, as well as how they negotiate practices as they experience socialization into their new school’s culture, while simultaneously trying to transform cultural aspects that they believe hinder school improvement. García Garduño et al. (2011) concluded that the main problems of early headship, in countries such as

Australia, Canada, England, Scotland and the United States, are similar to those in the developing world (China, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand and Turkey). They summarized the problems into five main areas: (a) feelings of being unprepared; (b) unanticipated issues; (c) the legacy of the previous principal; (d) interpersonal relations with and among staff; and (e) feelings of isolation. Notwithstanding these similarities, the intensity of these issues differed by country.

Research on novice principals working in Africa suggests that interpersonal and personal issues appear to be less pressing as their main challenges are linked to social problems such as violence and poverty in the communities served and to the lack of resources (Bush and Odoro, 2006; Kitavi and van der Westhuizen, 1997; Mobegi et al., 2010). Kim and Parkay (2004) found that generating effective interactions with teaching staff was the most difficult problem to solve for six novice principals in Korea. In Hong Kong, based on a larger study on the work lives of 10 novice principals, Cheung and Walker (2006) found that one key challenge was self-regulation and self-management. Saidun et al. (2015), from their study with eight novice school principals in Malaysia, concluded that developing an identity as principals seemed key to helping them to understand the culture of the school they were leading. These studies bring to the forefront personal and interpersonal dimensions of principals’ work that represent specific challenges for novice principals.

Research on the problems of novice school principals in Chile is scant. Weinstein et al. (2016) surveyed 76 novice principals, with 81% reporting that their leadership role was “very difficult” or “difficult”. Three main factors accounted for this: (a) external demands (political and municipal restrictions and barriers, control and limited autonomy); (b) internal demands (the school’s cultural context, dealing with the staff, problem-solving skills, among others); and (c) personal skills (knowledge, competences and limitations of themselves as leaders). Galdames et al. (2018) examined the challenges faced by nine principals serving elementary schools that exhibited different levels of readiness for change. The conclusion of the study was that principals’ inexperience, coupled with lack of support from the municipal department of education, and a school’s culture characterized by lack of will and skills to improve, was the right mix to increase the likelihood of a failure in leadership.

### 2.3. Experienced principals

In contrast to research focused on challenges faced by novice school principals, research on the problems reported by experienced principals is scarce (Robertson, 2017; Rhodes and Brundett, 2009). This may be because, in some studies, the career stage of participating principals is not a variable of interest. Ulloa et al. (2012) concluded that the majority of problems reported by their sample of 44 principals in Chile could be attributed to external factors not directly connected with classroom-level processes. These included insufficient autonomy to make decisions on personnel and budgetary matters. They reported lacking time for pedagogical leadership, as they needed to meet administrative demands; a finding also reported by López et al. (2012). In Ulloa et al.’s study, the sample included principals with less than 5 years of experience, as well as those with more than 31 years of experience, but in López et al. that information is not provided.

Preston et al. (2013), through a systemic review of literature between 2003 and 2013, noted that in a rural context experienced principals faced a hiring disadvantage if they did not have a historical connection with the community. Additional challenges included juggling diverse responsibilities, lack of professional development and resources, gender discrimination, and issues surrounding school accountability and change. Robertson (2017) asserts that New Zealand’s experienced principals have to deal with internal issues, specifically with the transformation of their own professional identity and analyzing their personal growth. Cardno and Youngs (2018) cited several studies that reinforce the notion that experienced and long-serving

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