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Understanding leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances: a Chilean case study

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SIMON CLARKE

During the last 10 years, research into schools facing challenging circumstances has attracted the attention of researchers around the world. The aim of this study was to understand the challenges that school leaders face as they per form their work, the nature of the context in which these challenges arise, the strategies school leaders adopt to deal with the complexities of their work and the reasons behind these strategies. For this purpose, we investigated a single case study of a Chilean K8 school achieving extraordinary success despite its adverse circumstances. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with the principal, the vice-principal, the teachers, the students and the management team of the school. The interviews were focused on the challenges experienced by the school community, and on the strategies implemented in order to face them. The findings are organized around three key themes: first, the importance of nurturing high expectations among students and staff; secondly, the importance of enhancing teachers' morale; thirdly, the importance of setting and sharing a common vision for a preferred future. These key themes have been instrumental to the success of the school may be enlightening to other schools, that are facing comparable challenging circumstances, especially in Chile.

Introduction

The Chilean system of education has experienced many important changes over the past few years that present considerable challenges for the processes of teaching and learning, as well as for school organization and management. Until 1980, public schooling was directly dependent on the Ministry of Education, which determined all national policy, including pedagogical and administrative responsibilities. The introduction of neoliberal policies in Chile during the 1980s, however, shifted the administration of all public schools from the Ministry to municipalities as part of a broader agenda of autonomy and local control.

Along with this process of decentralization, the system of funding schools was changed dramatically, through the implementation of a national voucher regime (Raczynski & Salinas, 2008). Stemming from market logic, the use of vouchers was designed to encourage competition

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between public and private schools, on the assumption that this would improve the quality of education (Carnoy, 1998). These policies of financial and administrative decentralization shifted educational responsibilities from the state to the municipalities, which were not adequately prepared for the challenge, and a 'neoliberal race' between the private and public sectors was begun (Raczynski & Muñoz, 2007). While this is not a unique scenario worldwide, it was particularly interesting in the Chilean case, because of the force and swiftness of the reforms implemented by a dictatorial government.

Thirty years later, the evidence is conclusive in demonstrating intense differences between the two sectors. In particular, public schools have become the lowest performing organizations within the education system, in stark contrast to the performance of private and semi-private schools, which have tended to attract more affluent students (Bellei, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2008). Moreover, the division between the public and private sectors has been associated with social and economic segregation that has strongly divided Chilean society. As such, public schools tend to cater for the poorest, semi-public schools cater for the middle class and private schools are for the wealthy (Mizala, 2008).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, education policies have sought to improve the quality of provision with an emphasis on equity. Such initiatives have included the National Teacher Assessment Programme (Law 19.961), the Professional Recognition Bonus (Law 20.158) and the Principals' Selection and Preferential School Subsidy (Law 20.248). Most of these initiatives served to increase school autonomy and the operational discretion of the principals in their schools according to a continuous improvement perspective. Especially relevant has been the implementation of the Preferential School Subsidy in 2008 (also known as the SEP Law 20.248), which improved the voucher by taking into consideration the socio-economic status of the students. This latest measure mainly benefitted the public schools, which tend to enrol a greater proportion of more vulnerable students (Redondo, Almonacid, Inzunza, Mena, & de la Fuente, 2007).

The implementation of the SEP is dependent on a school improving its performance. In order for a school to gain access to additional resources, it is required to implement an improvement plan aligned with students' scores obtained in national standardized tests. This improvement plan is expected to articulate appropriate changes to the structure and organization of the school, such as changes in the curriculum, resource allocation, human capital and organizational culture. For this purpose, the roles of principals and leadership teams are critical. Furthermore, the SEP explicitly designates the principal as being responsible for the design and implementation of the plan.

Given the current focus of the political agenda on enhancing equity and quality in education, principals have become crucial for ensuring school improvement, especially in the most vulnerable schools (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2014). Such schools in Chile face multiple challenges including not only pedagogical issues, but also those of an organizational and economic nature

(Bravo, Falck, González, Manzi, & Peirano, 2008; Valencia & Taut, 2011). Hence, investigating the practices and strategies implemented by school leaders in these kinds of contexts assumes great importance considering the implications of 'good' leadership for prospects of school improvement and effectiveness.

A number of studies have focused on the identification of principals' and management team skills in exercising leadership in the face of increasing demands for performance measurement and accountability. Nonetheless, recent literature in the field has tended to be critical of those models which are based on prescriptive principals' powers and which focus on an individualistic understanding of leadership founded on the influence of the leader over his/her followers. On this, a number of authors have advocated a more distributed approach to leadership for accommodating the multiple demands that are always present in schools (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Recently, for example, Spillane, Camburn, Pustejovsky, Pareja, and Lewis (2008) have adopted a 'relational' perspective for understanding leadership by assuming that the task, as well as the social relations involved, plays a mutual role. These authors also highlight the influence of both formal and informal leaders. This understanding of distributed leadership does not place the foci on the traits and behaviours of individual persons, but rather on the relationships between the people within the organization and on how these relationships construct task orientation. This research, therefore, has shifted the focus from the skills required by the principal to exercise leadership to the leadership practices exercised by the whole community associated with the school (Eacott, 2010; Raelin, 2011).

Leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances

There has been growing interest in investigating leadership in so-called 'schools facing challenging circumstances' (Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu, & van Rooyen, 2010; Van der Westhuizen, Mosoge, & van Vuuren, 2004). This development has been underpinned by the recognition that these kinds of schools are embedded in contexts in which teaching and learning may be adversely affected and therefore require the implementation of alternative strategies to succeed (Hallinger, 2003; Ylimaki, Jacobson, & Drysdale, 2007).

Recently, the challenges associated with student learning in these schools have been identified as comprising the deprived educational and cultural backgrounds of the students in question, distant parenting, poverty and a lack of adequate infrastructure (Bosu, Dare, Dachi, & Fertig, 2011; Conrad & Brown, 2011; Ylimaki et al., 2007). Another pertinent issue occurring in these kinds of schools tends to be ineffective teaching. For example, Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2012) identified that high need schools in California and New York were characterized by lower overall budgets, lower salaries and inferior working conditions, which affected the schools' capacity to attract and retain high-performing teachers.

Extensive research has also been implemented in developing countries in order to grasp a better understanding of the extraordinary challenges that schools in these locations face and the strategies that are implemented to overcome them. In particular, much attention has been devoted to examining the circumstances faced by schools in a number of African countries (Bosu et al., 2011; Bush et al., 2010; Ng'ondi, 2012). Some of the main challenges that have been identified in these contexts relate to the influence of HIV on the student population, distant parenting, limited access to the school, inadequate infrastructure and poorly performing teachers. The evidence would suggest that most of these factors are attributable to the low socio-economic level of the countries and communities in question.

Adverse contexts can also be found in the developed world (Archambault & Garon, 2011). For example, from an inequality perspective, Ylimaki et al. (2007) analysed the school systems of England, the USA and Australia. These researchers found that a significant proportion of schools were working under challenging conditions, especially relating to the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the students. In many cases, the students' families were of the first generation coming from a non-English speaking country. Ylimaki and colleagues' findings indicated that schools were not fully capable of implementing effective teaching processes, because of their weak teaching capacity and impoverished school resources.

Another line of research has stressed that the need to improve teaching in high need schools has become critical as the chief strategy to support and enrich the lives of the students. For example, Amrein-Beardsley (2012), on the assumption that great teachers equate with great teaching, argues that the key role for principals is to attract and retain excellent teachers. In his study conducted in Arizona, he identifies a number of factors relevant to policy-makers for attracting effective special needs teachers. These researchers found that one of the most significant factors affecting teachers' decision to join a school is the recognition that there is a competent principal. While, good salaries and benefits are obviously important for teachers, the prospect of exercising different roles and working with different people to improve learning is also crucial in determining teachers' decisions to associate with a particular school.

Given the prominence of schools facing challenging circumstances in Chile, this paper examines the challenges that school leaders face as they perform their work, the nature of the context within which these challenges and the strategies school leaders adopt to deal with the complexities of their work and the reasons behind these strategies. For this purpose, we report a single case study, which we believe, offers enlightening insights into the above considerations.

Rationale for selecting the case study school

The school selected was already participating in a larger study comprising six schools, with the main objective of identifying and characterizing

leadership practices. We decided to work more specifically with the case study school because of its distinctive context and the nature of the work being conducted by the school principal. The school is located in one of the most vulnerable neighbourhoods in a large city. It is also, however, one of the highest performers, according to the national assessment system of students' performance (SIMCE[1]). SIMCE is the official national test that evaluates academic achievement in Language and Mathematics. It is administrated every year to fourth-grade students and alternately to those in 8th and 10th grades. The results for the school in question indicate a steady improvement over the last five years. Given this trend, we suggest that a systematic process has been implemented and that the school leaders have been partially responsible for it. In particular, the implementation of the SEP Law by the principal and the management team attracted more resources to the school but it also created more pressure because of increased demands for accountability. This development coincided with the appointment of a new principal who was instrumental in promoting change in the school.

In addition, we were particularly interested in the work of this school because of its location. The way in which the geography of the city in question has evolved has resulted in wealthy and poor communities existing in close proximity to each other. As such, the school is hidden away in a high poverty context, just one hill or thirty minutes away from the most affluent part of the city and only a few 'clicks' from the Central Business District (CBD). Therefore, we were keen to investigate the nature of the challenges faced by the school located in this most distinctive setting and the strategies employed by school leaders to deal with these complexities.

The school in question is a K8 school with 200 students (around 20 per class), and a staff of 20, including teachers, administrators and assistants. The school mission is articulated as 'the preparation of an empathetic, reflective, resilient and inclusive student'. It emphasizes the well-being of the students, and the integration of the school within its community. It also has a high level of student vulnerability with 80% of the student population (around 160) living in extreme poverty. Most of the teaching staff have been evaluated positively according to the national system of teachers' appraisal. The school has also achieved above average results in the national standardized test. By comparison with a national mean of 250, the school obtained an average over the last three years of 265, comprising 253 in Mathematics and 277 in Language.

Method

We conducted three interviews with the principal. The interviews were focused on the challenges experienced by the school community, and on the strategies implemented in order to face them. We also conducted one interview with the vice principal, one focus group with four teachers, one focus group with six students and one focus group with the three members of the management team of the school. Immediately after each

interview, narrative accounts were constructed collaboratively by two researchers, both of whom had taken notes during the data collection. We chose this technique to enable a comprehensive and rich understanding of the personal and social beliefs held within the school community (Beattie, 1995). The technique has been previously used to portray the work of school leaders because of its ability to capture the complexity and turbulence of their everyday world of practice (Clarke & Wildy, 2004).

The accounts were crafted according to emerging themes, using the verbatim talk from the interview material. For this purpose, we selected themes illustrating practices that appeared to have been instrumental in enabling the school to excel in the face of adversity, and especially if the theme also resonated with the pertinent literature. The audio recordings were replayed to check the accuracy of data and then the written accounts were given to the participants for their verification. In these ways, the researchers sought trustworthiness in matching the constructed realities of the participants with the reconstructions attributed to them.

Each of the three accounts included in this paper describes the actions and practices implemented by the school to deal with the challenges. These accounts have been organized according to three key themes as follows:

- Just 10 minutes from the CBD: the importance of nurturing high expectations among students and staff.
- Let's have some cake: the importance of enhancing teachers' morale.
- Washing the dishes together: the importance of setting and sharing a common vision for a preferred future.

Findings and discussion

Just 10 minutes from the CBD

In this first theme, which we have entitled 'just 10 minutes from the CBD', we discuss the disposition of a high need school community located just a few kilometers from the economic centre of a wealthy city. Geographical factors determined that the school should be close to everything but hidden from everyone. In this environment of extreme deprivation, including shortages of drinking water, electricity and even proper roads; students, parents and teachers experience not only constraints on their schooling but also constraints on their day-to-day lives. Not surprisingly, this extent of deprivation can undermine expectations of success within the school community. The following narrative depicts the disposition of the principal in attending to this intractable problem.

> Our students have great need for the most basic things. We have about 18 to 20 children per classroom, and we have to provide 18 to 20 pens, pencils, and notebooks. We also print everything for them, because we know that they do not have access to materials in their homes. In extreme cases, some students do not even have electricity or drinkable water. Can you believe that? Although we are very close to the CBD we still have students living in these conditions. To them and to us the school is so much more than teaching a series of subjects. We have

approached our challenges from an institutional perspective, and designed our improvement strategies considering the basic needs of our students. They always come first. (Principal Interview 2)

Although the school makes an unequivocal decision to enable at least the minimal conditions required for learning, it also encourages practices which promote high expectations of the students. Indeed, it appears to be an implicit assumption that the school's context of vulnerability should not be used as an excuse for students' low achievement.

> If you ask any teacher from kindergarten to grade 8, you will find the same attitude; we all have great expectations of what our students can achieve. We never say 'poor little thing, he is so poor, he is never going to learn'. They all have to meet the requirements, and especially if they are more vulnerable. The school presents the best opportunity for them to improve their lives. We are determined to prepare students for excellence. (Focus Group Teachers)

The teachers also stress the relevance of high expectations after the basic needs of the school are met. As such, the school's challenging context is not allowed to undermine the academic demands that are made on students' performance.

> Here the teachers are characterized by having high expectations of our students. Thus, I believe that we have an advantage because from the early childhood educator to the year eight teacher, we are always of the belief that every student has possibilities. We never say 'poor kid' or 'let's lower the demands on that child'. Everybody has to meet the learning objectives, everybody has to achieve their full potential. (Focus Group Teachers)

In this connection, one key matter for the school to consider has been its 'moral purpose'. Here, the school leaders reflect on the ways in which the school's values can be articulated congruently with the challenges imposed by the school's context.

> We have been discussing our values as a school and how we are going to promote them. We decided that the value of tolerance should be changed to empathy. Then we discussed wellbeing, including not only its psychological dimension, but also encompassing the importance of a healthy diet and the hazards of drug use. We have to include these topics because there are increasing problems with our eldest students (grade 8). Finally, we decided that one of our core values will be centered on role modelling that we as adults demonstrate to our students. We need to integrate in our daily practices a clear message that everything we do here is for their future. We do it because we want them to have a better life; we do it because we care about them. When the staff and the students share the same aims everything else gets easier. (Focus Group, Management Team)

The narratives above illustrate some of the major issues faced by high need schools in Chile. Given that public schools have the highest concentration of the most vulnerable students in contrast to private and semi-private schools (Cox, 2003; Raczynski & Muñoz, 2007), public schools tend to embrace a wider role that assumes responsibilities far beyond the classroom. This situation presents particular challenges and requires a distinctive set of capabilities on the part of school leaders. Specifically, principals in Chile are expected to increase their school's enrolment and therefore to know and connect with their school's context. In this regard,

Robinson (2010) has argued that effective school leaders need particular capacities in order to improve learning, including problem solving, building trusting relationships and assessing the students' surroundings. It is important, therefore, for effective school leaders in a Chilean public school context to understand the needs of their students, before deciding on any strategies of improvement to be implemented.

Certainly, in the case study school, where the students face fundamental day-to-day challenges, the priorities and aims of the principal's role appear to have expanded in order to accommodate the students' needs. Previous work has identified the role of school leaders in developing the organizational conditions of the school and sustaining and supporting the work of teachers (Leithwood et al., 2006). Nonetheless, in this work, the context of the school is not explicitly considered in describing the leaders' actions.

We found in the case reported here that the principal is not only concerned to support the basic needs of the students, but also to increase their expectations about their future prospects. Although we identified that the principal's concerns lay initially with providing the basic (living) conditions for students' learning, her endeavours do not rest there. Instead, she shifted her attention to enhancing the expectations students had about their own future, and this became her prime responsibility. Similarly, some other recent work has highlighted the critical role of raising expectations about students' well-being and performance. For example, Klar and Brewer (2013), in their investigation of high need schools in the southwest of the USA, identified that a critical task for both administrators and teachers is to secure trust and to motivate students to achieve challenging goals. In addition, (Kuurme & Carlsson, 2012) have argued that is not only necessary to emphasize high expectations for students, but also to articulate them according to positive values for guidance in their adult life. As such, teachers and administrators become a model for the students to emulate in order to achieve a better future (Ibrahim, Aziz, & Nambiar, 2013).

Let's have some cake

In this second theme, we illustrate some of the pressures that principals and teachers tend to face in a school located in a vulnerable context. While there is common agreement about the vital nature of teachers' work in its capacity to improve the lives of the students, there is also an explicit recognition that working in such challenging circumstances can have implications for teachers' well-being. Working with vulnerable students can become a heavy burden for many teachers, because of the additional demands that are imposed on teaching as well as on the level of pastoral care that is required to support students in their lives. It is in this connection that the role of the principal in monitoring and promoting teachers' well-being becomes crucial.

The following narrative examines some of the leadership practices implemented in the school reported here for enhancing teachers' morale.

For example, eating a piece of cake or having breakfast or lunch together, represents an opportunity for the principal to lend support to her colleagues. In doing so, it is acknowledged that the students are not the only ones 'at risk', but teachers can be vulnerable too:

> There are moments when you just have to stop and take a break. You have to learn as a leader not only to hear them (the teachers) but also to communicate positive messages. Sometimes, I have to remind them how important they are for the school: 'you´re the best teacher in the city; I am very proud of your work'. These are the things you need to say as a way of cheering them up. It is especially difficult for them working under these conditions. On a tough day, we get together and share a meal. I bring a cake and we talk about our day and the difficulties we are currently facing. On some occasions, when there is a need, I invite the school's psychologist too. Sharing a cake is a moment, an opportunity, to allow us to celebrate the little things and to ease the burdens of our daily lives. It is almost institutionalized now, and serves as a reminder that a school leader always needs to be watchful of the emotional state of the teachers. (Principal Interview 1)

The next narrative illustrates the cardinal importance attributed to the welfare of the teachers in the school. It is the principal's belief that the school cannot function without its teachers. Therefore, from her point of view, there is an imperative to protect and support the teaching staff by recognizing their achievements, even the ones that are relatively insignificant. As the following commentary indicates, this strategy is manifested in specific practices that have been implemented by the principal:

> The way teachers feel about themselves is critical, without them, we are nothing. When I am not around, the school continues, if a teacher doesn't show up it's a disaster. Therefore, we must do everything to support them constantly. Every day we have some difficult situations … if not with the students it is with the parents, sometimes there is even violence. As a school leader, I must always be on their (the teachers') side. Curiously, it's not like I always do things, sometimes just being there with them is enough. At other times you have to build teachers' capacities, you need to prepare them to face difficult scenarios. In order to achieve this, I encourage them to take responsibility and to lead their own initiatives. They know they have my support in any endeavour they take, if it is aimed at benefitting the children. As we are few (teachers), I am familiar with the activities in which everybody is involved, so I follow each case. I talk with the teacher at recess or at the end of the day. We can then plan together the next step. It is important to make the teacher feel that I can empathize with each case and that the individual is the most important teacher in the school. In the same way we celebrate their achievements at the whole school level, we follow their progress and when they resolve some issues, even the most trivial, I personally recognize them in front of everyone. (Principal Interview 1)

Additionally, the teachers commented on the advantages of working in a small school, where there are strong personal relationships among the staff and a positive working environment.

> I believe that we have a 'virtue' as a school, being small with only a few teachers. Everybody knows everybody, even among kids and students. When someone (external) comes to the school and we are together for breakfast or lunch, they always say 'you have something special here'. Maybe it is because we know each other too well, so we can make jokes and laugh with everyone and everything is always fine. (Focus Group Teachers)

Likewise, the students stressed the relevance of the emotional and affective dimension of the school as being a key feature. According to

them, the school assumes the status of a second home, where the students learn about the reciprocity of human relationships. This was expressed by one of the students in the following comment.

> A part of me truly loves the school, because it is here where I stay with my friends most of the time. Also, I am often alone at home so I prefer the school where I can speak with the teachers and other adults. (Focus Group, Students)

A critical dimension of pedagogical leadership is building an awareness across the school community that student learning extends beyond just academic performance. A school in a vulnerable context also needs to take responsibilities for the emotional well-being of its members, especially for its teachers. Federici and Skaalvik (2014), for example, have analysed the emotional state of teachers who worked in a challenging context in Norway. They found that the teachers made a significant contribution to the esteem, self-efficacy and motivation of the students which, in turn, tended to correlate with higher academic achievement. They also, however, identified higher levels of teachers' 'burnout'. In other words, teachers in these contexts were playing an integral role in enabling students' learning, but the physical and emotional demands that were made on the staff were intensified.

Accordingly, previous studies have identified the critical role of school leaders in creating the organizational and social conditions that protect and promote teachers' well-being. In this regard, Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, and Salmela-Aro (2013) have argued that principals can contribute to teachers' satisfaction and retention when their practices are supported by professional recognition and constructive feedback. Likewise, Campo (1993) has advocated the main role of the principal as comprising the 'caretaker' of the well-being of the teachers which, according to her, is inextricably linked to the efficacy of students' learning.

In the case reported here, we found that the principal is not just aware that the teachers are affected by the context, but she also exercises systematic support in order to facilitate their work and to improve their sense of well-being. In doing so, the principal made a clear connection between the well-being of teachers and their performance. The principal in this school employed a personalized approach for engaging with teachers in both their personal and professional challenges. Along similar lines, previous work has suggested that effective principals tend to embrace such strategies as maintaining high visibility, being easily approached by others and giving continuous emotional support (Khan, 2012).

Washing the dishes together

The third theme we explore relates to the significance of collaborative work for the school community. The metaphor of 'washing the dishes together' resonates with the shared sense of accountability that is attributed to success, as well as to failure, across the whole school community. As such, considerable importance is attached to having a common vision for the entire school. The following narrative describes the complications

involved in achieving such a common vision across the whole school community. In particular, it indicates that, external imperatives can restrict a school's capacity to enact its own agenda according to the interests and needs of its community.

> Being the principal is hard; you have to balance external requirements, with the school mission. The Ministry, but also the Department of Education (Municipality), puts a lot of pressure on us. They initiate their programs and we 'must' follow. It's not clear where our autonomy ends, or if we have it at all. I struggle to balance those things. For me the most important issue is to protect the teachers. Therefore, I evaluate if an action will make a contribution to them or whether it will be a burden. I have been able to say no to some things, however not to all. That's when the psychology of the leader enters the situation. You need to persuade the staff to participate in some initiatives, which are not always aligned with their expectations. You must always be extremely careful with the emotions of the people you lead if you seek their collaboration in the school's endeavors. (Principal Interview 1)

While external pressures appear to be a challenge for the principal, the situation tends to be ameliorated by the strength of the internal dynamics within the school. From a leadership perspective, the closeness of the staff allows for easy consensus and a shared sense of accountability. The management team and the teachers share a common challenge, namely, to achieve the well-being of every student. Additionally, there is a focus on the needs of each particular child. The following comment is indicative.

> We are always connected, as we are in a small school and we do not have a big enrolment. If we hear a student cry everybody is aware of it very quickly. Moreover, we are always discussing the progress of the students, so I visit my peers in their classroom or in the teachers' hall, to catch up, and gain an overview of the school. (Focus Group Management Team)

The next narrative conveys how the principal of this case study generates strategies and concrete actions to strengthen links with parents and students. The support from external constituency groups serves to heighten expectations of students' achievements, which is critical for accomplishing institutional goals. The principal has high expectations of the school's internal and external partners, and she invests a great deal of time planning and implementing activities on a collaborative basis.

> Our critical partners are the parents. We have a solid relationship with the parent center. They are active collaborators; and we work together on the design of many strategies in the school. To be completely honest we need them too, because they lead change across the rest of the parent community. Most of the parents do not participate in our activities. One reason for that is that many students do not have them. A large proportion of our students live with their grandparents or with an aunt. Few of them live with their mothers who work full time. We reschedule our parents' meetings in order to accommodate their commitments. It has been a slow process, but we are increasing their participation each year.

> We also work closely with the students' body; we are probably the only school in the city that has a student government. They (the students) run a campaign for a few weeks; they have their publicity and make public speeches, and even have a debate. Grades 5–8 vote and they select a president and a student leading team for one year. It is important for us to emphasize the importance of this activity among the students, not only to highlight the relevance of the democratic process, but also to bring the school together. (Principal Interview 1)

'Washing the dishes together', then, is all about engaging with the community and distributing influence across different constituent groups. As the following comment suggests, teachers also perceive and value the trust and the distribution of responsibilities which have been instigated by the management team.

> Because there is a distribution of responsibilities, some people work here (the teachers' hall) and others go outside. There is trust in that everyone is responsible and that each person will deliver. I believe that this is not casual, but that the administration wants to share responsibility among the teachers. (Focus Group Teachers)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the distribution of responsibilities also extends to the students who feel involved in classroom decision-making and believe that their voice is listened to.

> Some (teachers) have more time, others less, but most teachers listen to you when you have something to say. When we misbehave, the teacher sits with us in a circle and then she asks each of us about our responsibility. We make a deal and the teacher makes her own deal with us. (Focus Group, Students)

In setting and sharing a common vision for a preferred future, it is critical that social participation is linked with the learning purpose of the same community. Carrol, Levy and Richmond (2008) emphasize that community practices and a common vision demonstrate the social construction and the level of relationships among members of those communities. Similarly, previous studies have emphasized that in schools where students have formal representation and a strong leadership involvement, it tends to improve the school's identity and develops positive attitudes to learning (Lizzio, Dempster, & Neumann, 2010). The role and the degree of involvement of the people in the communities are closely aligned with the cultural context and the emotional level of the organization. Therefore, when people feel more connected with their context and they feel part of it, it is more likely that they will exercise an active role. The notion of involvement is associated also with the organizational design of the school. In this regard, it is likely that a horizontal other than a vertical structure will be more conducive to encouraging participation, social accountability and the identification of common goals (Raelin, 2011).

Additionally, from a cultural perspective, Coleman (2012) has explored the role of school leaders in the construction of a trustworthy environment. In considering trust as one of the most important variables in school effectiveness and improvement, he concludes that trustworthy leadership is relational in nature, and is based on leaders' consistent modelling in their daily activities. Trustworthy leadership is especially relevant to high need schools, since it can mitigate leaders' and followers' vulnerability in times of uncertainty and tends to support risk taking.

Another important issue relating to setting and sharing a common vision is the role of families in high need schools. International evidence suggests that when the parents are distant from a school's policies, there is a detrimental effect on the students' learning process (Pansiri & Bulawa, 2013). In Chile, Montecinos, Sisto, and Ahumada (2010) examined how

teachers and parents represented themselves as valid agents in school improvement. In schools oriented towards improvement, parents, teachers and students participated actively in the life of the school. Far from being a random form of behaviour, this level of participation was bolstered by internal school policy, which emphasized democratic governance and a sense of agency among all members of the school community. Likewise, the leadership actions depicted within the case study reported here did not only aim to establish a common and positive vision for the future, but also sought to build it in collaboration with the various constituent groups associated with the school. For this purpose, the principal encouraged the development of organizational structures, which enabled the dispersal of authority and responsibilities. This strategy is likely to foster the development of shared accountability as well as support for a common vision across the school community.

Concluding comments

Given the general agreement that high need schools require different strategies in order to ensure students' learning, the aim of the study reported here was to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on educational leadership in high need contexts. As such, we have presented the case of a vulnerable Chilean school and examined the strategies implemented by the principal in accordance with the circumstances being encountered. Our findings suggest that Chilean public schools are expected not only to ensure appropriate and effective teaching and learning, but also to take care of the basic needs of the students. This responsibility affects the role of the school's staff, who are required to perform not only as teachers but also as family figures. While this situation may be true for the teachers' role more generally, it becomes especially critical when the students in question do not have access to food and clothes, or may even feel endangered in their own homes.

We identified one school leader who was receptive to the challenges and demands of the context in question, emphasizing in her leadership an awareness of the priorities and needs of the school. For her, leadership was mainly about improving the opportunities available for students' learning, which was pursued by means of supporting the teachers. Her leadership actions were focused on setting a common direction and recognizing that a unified school community would be stronger and better prepared to face the challenges encountered. She was also aware of the potentially negative impact this challenging environment was having on teachers. Indeed, in some ways, the principal became a 'safety net', which at an operational level, served to catch and pull back the staff into line, but may also be portrayed as a powerful symbol of support for the teachers.

While the research reported here presents some methodological limitations, especially in terms of its generalizability, it might serve to illuminate the challenges faced by other Chilean public schools and the kinds of strategies that may be implemented by school leaders for dealing effectively with these challenges. In this connection, it is instructive to

refer to the notion of 'user generalizability' (Burns, 1994). According to this notion, the study reported here may serve to encourage readers to reflect on their own experience in similar situations and enable them to derive new insights, understandings and meanings.

From a broader perspective, the findings of the study reported here suggest that it is difficult and maybe impossible to understand leadership devoid of its context. It is fair to say that the featured school leader's understanding of her role is inextricably linked to the vulnerable context of the school and its community. From this perspective, we would advocate that leadership learning should take into consideration context in processes of school leadership preparation and development. Additionally, research into school leadership would benefit from depicting the 'lived experience' of practitioners and describing accurately the realities of their work in given contexts. Such a portrayal of 'lived experience' can be used to inform the content and pedagogy of principal preparation programs. Relatedly, we argue very strongly that such descriptive theory should be premised on the belief that, if things are described accurately as they are, there is more likely to be agreement on changes that will create things as they ought to be. This paper offers one small step in that direction.

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1. In Spanish 'Sistema de medición de calidad educativa'.

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