

Novice principals in Chile mobilizing change for the first time: Challenges and opportunities associated with a school's readiness for change

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Abstract

In a context characterised by triple sources of accountability demands, principals in Chile are required to mobilise change to raise performance indicators. School improvement is a complex endeavour—a complexity that is intensified for newly appointed principals, particularly when placed in a high-poverty, ineffective school. This article explores changes introduced by newly appointed principals placed in elementary public schools that were struggling ($n = 4$) and in schools that were sinking ($n = 5$). Findings show that all participants converged on actions to promote changes in: staffing, redesigning the organisation, and managing instruction. The quality of the actions, however, differed by type of school, highlighting the importance of defining policies for strengthening school leadership that take into account differences among schools. Induction will provide needed support at the individual level, but it might be insufficient support if other measures at the district level fail to create conditions, such as staffing, so the arrival of a new principal is indeed an opportunity to reverse a downward trajectory of an ineffective, high-poverty school.

Keywords

newly appointed principals, leading change, high-poverty schools, elementary schools, school leadership Latin America

Introduction

A growing body of evidence has addressed the work of school principals from a career stage perspective, paying attention to their first years in the role (Clarke et al., 2006; García-Garduño et al., 2011; Mentz et al., 2010; Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011; Oplatka and Tako, 2009; Spillane

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and Lee, 2014). Research interest in newly appointed principals (NAPs) is underpinned by two trends: (a) it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new candidates to the position (Northfield, 2013; Walker et al., 2003); and (b) as a consequence of the difficulties encountered, a significant proportion of new principals retire or are removed shortly after starting (Loeb et al., 2010; Stephenson and Bauer, 2010). Additionally, the evidence shows that schools serving low-income communities tend to be staffed with less experienced principals and there is greater turnover (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Spillane and Lee, 2014). Accordingly, the current study seeks to make a contribution to the growing body of knowledge on leadership succession which is increasingly recognising critical factors that support or hinder early headship among inexperienced principals (Bengtson et al., 2013; García-Garduño et al., 2011).

From his/her first day at the school, a NAP is expected to take on the full set of responsibilities and combine learning about the school's culture with introducing changes to move the school forward. Their initial understanding of the school's culture and the actions taken set a stage that can either advance or hinder NAPs' leadership legitimacy as far as various school stakeholders are concerned (Northfield, 2014). The purpose of the current study is to explore the actions taken to lead change reported by nine NAPs in Chile who were placed in high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools that differed in their readiness for change. Through in-depth interviews we examined their understandings of the problems to be worked on and the specific changes they had introduced or were planning to introduce within their first few months at the school.

Understanding the work of NAPs in high-poverty, low-performing schools is relevant for preparing principals for their roles and gaining an insight into resource allocation policies in places such as Chile, which has a highly socially segregated school system (Ahumada et al., 2016; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Maringe and Moletsane, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Over the last 35 years the Chilean educational system has experienced a steady decline in public school enrolment. In 1981, 80% of the student population attended a public school. This figure dropped to 39.3% by 2011 and further to 36% by 2016 (Elacqua, 2012; Santiago et al., 2013). This decline in enrolment has placed public education in a state of financial crisis because school funding is based on daily pupil attendance. Low-income students are concentrated in public schools, presenting their principals with the challenges associated with serving high-poverty communities. These are exacerbated when the capacity of schools and school leaders to fix social inequities is overestimated by policymakers (Copland, 2001; Higham and Booth, 2016).

As in other parts of the world, since 2005, successive governments in Chile have developed policies and allocated resources to strengthen school leadership in order to transform how schools work, with special attention to principals' and teachers' instructional practices (Malakolunthu et al., 2014; Peters, 2012). In schools worldwide, principals are gaining autonomy, concomitantly with increased external accountability for their performance (Destler, 2014; Holmes et al., 2013). As we have discussed elsewhere (Montecinos et al., 2015), in Chile, principals are simultaneously subjected to accountability demands from three different sources: market (parental choice); state (quality assurance system based on standardized testing and school inspection); and from the municipal government that employs public school principals (employment contract with pre-defined performance targets). This focus on performativity is in line with the quasi-market educational model for the provision of educational services that has operated in Chile since 1981, and with it the imposition of a managerial approach to regulate principals' work priorities.

In this article we first sketch the current school leadership landscape in Chile. Next, we discuss research on school change that calls for a situated perspective for leading school improvement and

take into account studies on the experiences of novice principals. After describing the research methodology, key findings are then presented. These results are discussed in terms of the differences in school readiness to change that merit consideration when the intermediate education leadership level (municipal department of education in Chile or school districts in other countries) allocates principals. Finally, the conclusion addresses the limitations of the study with suggestions for further research.

Policies framing school leadership in Chile

In Chile, the municipal government administers public schools through funding provided by the state based on a daily attendance per pupil voucher. On technical–pedagogical matters the Ministry of Education regulates schoolwork centrally. The Law for Quality and Equity in Education (LQE), implemented in 2011, provides a regulatory framework of increases in salary, performance-based incentives and sanctions, and professional development for principals. It also stipulates new regulations for appointing public school principals through a competitive process, although each municipal government defines and prioritizes selection criteria (Weinstein et al., 2016). This law has afforded principals with greater autonomy over staffing and budgetary matters. For example, each year a principal may remove up to 5% of teachers identified as underperforming, through the national teacher assessment system. Once appointed, the principal is then allowed to appoint two key members of the leadership team.

LQE also gave municipal governments new tools to enable them to control principals' work priorities and processes (Destler and Page, 2016; Montecinos et al., 2015). Principals sign a five-year contract that specifies the attainment of performance targets. To achieve these targets, principals need to focus on instructional leadership in addition to administrative tasks. The most common targets are: raising scores in the national standardized testing system (SIMCE); increasing parent satisfaction; and increasing school enrolment. Meeting the targets may lead to a financial bonus; failing to meet them may lead to termination of the principal's contract. For schools serving a high proportion of socially vulnerable students these targets are also associated with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan, which attracts additional resources, as well as accountability demands.

Recently, the Ministry of Education released a new version of *The School Management and Leadership Framework*, which codifies the set of practices for successfully leading a school (Ministerio de Educación, 2015). The expectations for school leadership are defined with regard to the following dimensions: developing and implementing a shared strategic vision; developing professional capacities; leading teaching and learning; managing the school climate and the participation of the school community; and developing and managing the school. It specifies the personal resources needed for effective leadership (e.g. integrity, flexibility, trustworthiness, resilience).¹

Literature review

We locate our study at the intersection of research on leadership for change, leadership in highly challenging contexts and novice principals. These three bodies of interrelated work allow us to understand the novice principal's professional socialization in enacting his/her role in the specific school culture where he/she is expected to lead change (Crow, 2001, cited in Bush and Glover, 2005).

Leading school change

There is general agreement that a strategic intention for all school leaders, in particular principals, is to mobilize change in order to effect continuous improvement. Change is a dynamic relationship between transformation and stability, and an interplay between leadership and management: 'Stability is the goal of what is often called "management". Improvement is the goal of leadership. It is clear that both are very important' (Leithwood et al., 2006: 11). Key components that support school change towards improvement, among other things, include time, resources, shared commitment, and strong and stable leadership (Clement, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Harris et al., 2007; Holmes et al., 2013; Morrison, 2013; Mulford, 2006; Olsen and Chrispeels, 2009; Starr, 2011). Change that results in improvements has also been linked to a positive school climate, because staff's commitment and trust are key when dealing with the uncertainties introduced by change (OECD, 2016; Zayim and Kondakci, 2014).

Not all schools, however, have the same readiness for change (Bush, 2009; Meyer-Looze, 2015). Following Armenakis et al. (1993, cited in Zayim and Kondakci, 2014), readiness represents a school staff's cognitive and behavioural intentions regarding the need for organizational changes and their beliefs about the potential to achieve success if changes are implemented. This definition presents important tasks for school leaders in influencing their staff's understanding, emotions and behaviours and in developing a shared sense of purpose and fostering hope that improvement goals are attainable. Stoll and Fink (1996) operationalized differences in school cultures and schools' readiness for change along the dimensions of effectiveness and improvement, proposing a typology that includes five kinds of schools. The implication is that to devise appropriate change strategies, on arrival at a new school, the principal needs to understand the culture in order to determine the school's readiness for change so that he/she can deploy contextually appropriate practices (Hallinger and Heck, 2011).

How does effective leadership operate in schools that face challenging circumstances associated with poverty (Ahumada et al., 2016; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Maringe and Moletsane, 2015)? Naicker et al. (2013) interviewed principals in five successful high schools serving high-poverty communities in South Africa, concluding that when a principal is successful, he/she remaining at the school expands success further. These principals distributed instructional leadership and accountability among department heads and sought to strengthen the school by recognizing internal assets.

In their follow-up study of 14 Chilean elementary schools in poverty contexts that had been identified as effective 13 years ago, Bellei et al. (2015) concluded that strong leadership from the municipal government as well as stable school-level leadership teams characterized schools that were able to sustain improvement, a finding also reported by Ngcobo and Tikly (2010) in South Africa. In schools that had experienced a change of principal, the new principal sought to maintain the practices that had led to effectiveness, caring for the school culture, and providing an adequate balance between change and continuity. On the other hand, in schools unable to sustain improvement, the municipal government had not paid due attention to the professional qualifications of replacement principals. Changes introduced by the incoming principal created conflicts in schools that did not operate with a distributed leadership model. The current study expands on this latter finding by exploring the changes enacted by NAPs who had been appointed to turn around low-performing schools.

NAPs

Studies on NAPs have centred on three themes: a characterization of the challenges they face; induction programmes to support them in confronting these challenges (Eller, 2010; Kay et al., 2009); and the practices they implement to lead and manage change. García-Garduño et al. (2011) summarized studies conducted in English-speaking countries that converge on the main problems of NAPs. These include unpreparedness, unexpected demands, the legacy of the previous principal, interpersonal relations and feelings of isolation. García-Garduño et al. (2011: 103) concluded that NAPs' challenges are similar across various cultural settings; however, the 'relevance, intensity, consequences and methods of handling conflicts' seem to be culturally specific. In China, Spain, South Africa, Thailand and Korea, they identified problems related to local boards and authorities, pressures exerted by educational reforms, teachers' absenteeism and motivation. Bush and Oduro (2006) explored the challenges of new principals in Africa, identifying economic difficulties, the struggles of war and the presence of HIV/AIDS, among other variables, as factors that made their work more demanding.

In Chile, Weinstein et al. (2016) reported that, upon arrival, NAPs face challenges associated with the way the selection process for principals has been implemented by the municipal department of education. The participants in their survey reported an absence of an induction process that briefed them about the school's challenges and opportunities as well as the municipal department of education's priorities and procedures. Principals arrived at any time within the school year and staff were unaware of who had been appointed as their new principal. It was not uncommon for the outgoing principal to remain at the school due to financial or administrative constraints faced by the municipal government. All these factors exacerbated the reality shock often associated with leading a school for the first time.

There are fewer studies exploring the actual practices of NAPs in their efforts to lead change and improvement (Spillane and Lee, 2014). A NAP requires organizational awareness and an increased level of leadership efficacy to facilitate change. They tend to focus their initial efforts on developing trust and reorganizing procedures and responsibilities (Northfield, 2014). Holmes et al. (2013) explored change-oriented actions of new principals, showing their struggle to balance the full range of core leadership practices. They were often sidetracked from their efforts to lead and maintain change by external influences.

Caruso (2013: 243) reported findings in a case study with two first- and one second-year middle school principals who attempted holistic educational change while confronted with severe budgetary restrictions. To comply with district-mandated goals, they sought to maintain control using 'coercive tactics, rewards, and sanctions to gain teacher compliance and implement educational change', which undermined their initial efforts to collaborate with teachers. External accountability pressures on NAPs have also been documented by Earley et al. (2013), who noted how they give early attention to cautious instructional changes, but postpone more strategic changes.

Method

The current study is part of a three-year longitudinal research programme with the aim of understanding workplace learning among NAPs. Workplace learning is the interplay between the socialization of the new principal into the existing school culture and the opportunity to identify potential for changing it. Each year, participating principals were interviewed to understand how

they lead the school. In this article, we draw data from interviews conducted during the first year to answer the following overarching research questions: How do participating NAPs characterize their new school's readiness for change? What are the actions they purport to implement to mobilize changes and improvements during their first year in the position? To what extent, and how, are the change priorities and actions associated with their understanding of their school's readiness for change?

Participants

The national database that maintains records of job posts for principals was examined from September 2013 to March 2014 to identify public schools within a region in Chile that were appointing a new principal. The municipal department of education for each school identified was then contacted to find out if the candidate selected was a first-time principal. Among the 14 principals referred by the departments contacted, 13 signed an informed consent form agreeing to participate in the longitudinal study. This article uses data produced in conjunction with nine participants working in elementary schools from four different municipalities. The remaining four high school principals were excluded from this analysis due to the fact that three of them had a vocational–technical curriculum that prepared students for the job market, and thus presented a different set of organizational and educational challenges. For example, a large proportion of the staff in these high schools do not have a teaching degree and about half of the curriculum involves workplace experiences in local businesses or factories.

All principals had self-selected to serve in the school by applying to the open position to which they had been appointed. At the time of this interview all were in their first year, and eight had been at the school for less than 80 days (see Table 1). All but Diego are females and all held a master's degree – characteristics of the new generation of Chilean principals as reported by Weinstein et al. (2016).

Schools

As presented in Table 1, all schools showed a high concentration of low-income students, according to the Economic Vulnerability Index (IVE), and in all but three cases, they showed a pattern of declining enrolment. Considering our interest in examining possible associations between school readiness for change and principals' change-oriented actions, based on performance in the SIMCE testing programme, these nine schools were classified as struggling or as sinking in accordance with Stoll and Fink's (1996) typology. This typology was chosen as it provided a useful heuristic method for understanding the challenges faced by an important and understudied group of principals for whom the normative literature on what leadership for change entails seemed far removed from their organizational socialization experiences (such as the professional competencies codified in Chile's *The School Management and Leadership Framework* (Ministerio de Educación, 2015)).

According to Stoll and Fink (1996), struggling schools are characterized as ineffective because pupil learning is poor, although in some areas there is improvement and teachers show a will to improve. For the current study, based on each school's scores in both SIMCE tests, four of the participating schools showing an average performance in the language arts test and below

Table 1. Characteristics of participants and their schools.

	Municipality	School principal	Location	IVE	Type of school	Enrolment 2010 vs 2014	Enrolment % change 2010-2014	Language arts SIMCE 2014 compared with same group at national level	Maths SIMCE 2014 compared with same group at national level	Number of days in the position at interview time
1	VP	Claudia	Urban	86.57%	Sinking	166 vs 148	-11%	Below	Below	52
2	VP	Patricia	Urban	88.96%	Sinking	192 vs 170	-11%	Below	Below	49
3	MV	Fernanda	Urban	66.48%	Sinking	237 vs 180	-24%	Below	Below	41
4	MV	Francisca	Urban	76.11%	Sinking	136 vs 136	0%	Below	Below	35
5	MV	María	Urban	71.54%	Sinking	356 vs 257	-28%	Below	Below	37
6	LL	Loreto	Rural	87.68%	Struggling	166 vs 157	-7%	Similar	Below	72
7	MV	Viviana	Urban	54.71%	Struggling	488 vs 334	-32%	Similar	Below	52
8	SE	Diego	Rural	75%	Struggling	175 vs 222	27%	Above	Below	64
9	VP	Cristina	Rural	87.77%	Struggling	137 vs 188	37%	Similar	Below	239

Source: Ministry of Education school database (2014). Corresponding Municipality that administers the school.

average in the mathematics test were classified as struggling. Among these, three were located in a rural area.

Sinking schools are characterized as ineffective with poor performance in all areas of learning, and experience continuous decline and low teacher morale as they have come to believe that improvement is not possible or out of their reach. The other five schools, which exhibited below average performance in both tests, were classified as sinking. As evidenced in the results section, the classification based on pupil attainment as measured by the SIMCE testing programme assigned to each school was later validated, as principals spoke about their perceptions of teachers' will and skill and the organizational conditions in their schools.

We acknowledge the limitations of this typology as it oversimplifies the contradictions and tensions within an organization and ignores the content of policies that generate educational inequity (Starr, 2011). For example, it fails to account for individual differences among teachers who may be at different points on their trajectory of concern regarding changes introduced by the incoming principal. Teachers may have valid reasons to oppose a policy or believe that a practice introduced by their new principal will not deliver the outcome promised. Additionally, we conceptualize teacher morale as situational and context dependent, rather than as a trait. Moreover, as we show in this study, sinking schools are created through policies that treat school change as the individual responsibility of the school principal (Montecinos et al., 2015).

Data production

The interviews from which we draw data for the current article were conducted within the first three months of the school year. The questions asked about principals' initial assessment of the school culture, their goals for that first year and the actions they had implemented or planned to implement to achieve those goals. Interviews were audiotaped, lasted between 60–90 minutes and were conducted in the schools by a member of the research team.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed separately by two researchers. A content analysis using open coding was performed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Later, the two researchers discussed their initial analysis and defined a final coding scheme. The second round of coding was compared to identify discrepancies and agreements between coders. At that point, a third researcher entered the coding process to arbitrate any unresolved disagreements. Finally, the codes were grouped into thematic codes that captured three areas of recurring change-oriented actions. A portrait of each principal's characterization of his/her school's culture and readiness for change was later developed.

Results

Findings are organized in two sections: (a) principals' characterization of their school's culture; and (b) change-oriented actions. To address the school readiness for change variable, in each section the responses provided by principals in schools classified as struggling are separated from those provided by principals in schools classified as sinking (see Table 2). Exemplary interview

Table 2. Summary of principals' school characterization and first actions.

	Struggling schools	Sinking schools
Initial characterization of the schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well organized • Established administrative procedures • Enough staff to carry out these procedures • Positive attitude towards a change in leadership • Adequate readiness for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorganized • Lack of administrative procedures • Unclear job descriptions • Understaffed • Unskilled staff • Negative attitude towards feedback
First change-oriented actions	<p>Staffing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modifying procedures and task assignments • Changing leadership team's vision and goals <p>Redesigning the organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving existing practices • Strengthening school identity <p>Managing instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing classroom lessons • Involving parents 	<p>Staffing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointing personnel to the leadership team <p>Redesigning the organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating basic procedures <p>Managing instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing teachers' attitudes • Improving effective teaching time

excerpts are provided, identifying the principal (pseudonym) and page number from the interview transcripts.

How do principals characterize their schools?

Principals' initial impressions of their school's culture were formed through their informal conversations, their observations and document analysis. They had not had contact with school personnel prior to their first day in the post. What they knew about the school was largely based on information provided in the job advertisement or, if they had been working in the municipality, hearsay. None of the four municipal departments of education involved in the study had any formal or informal induction programme to acquaint the principals with their new schools.

Struggling schools. In agreement with a characteristic of struggling schools, principals expressed satisfaction that the schools were already following a path towards improvement. These four schools were described as well organized, with well-established administrative procedures, and enough staff to carry them out. School staff showed a positive attitude towards a change in leadership, and principals found an adequate readiness for change:

This school is fully staffed. It has a lot of teachers and support staff. It even has a complete psychosocial department and a special education department. (Viviana, 8)

Everything is well organized, ok? [When I arrived] the workload was well distributed among teachers, including time for lesson planning and extracurricular workshops. Furthermore, the curriculum, lesson plans and the annual plans, had been elaborated. Everything was set, shared with the staff, and

implemented before I arrived. This is something that I believe is important to appreciate in this school. (Loreto, 27)

At that first moment, I felt very welcomed, a very good reception. Obviously, there was a level of curiosity and anxiety among the staff. I felt it too. That, I believe, is normal, I am new. (Diego, 11)

Sinking schools. In contrast to their peers in struggling schools, these five principals described a much more challenging situation. According to them, they arrived at a school that was disorganized. This was evidenced in unclear job descriptions and lack of follow-up on the work done by staff:

Considering what I have seen, there are zero responsibilities assigned. I mean anybody can do anything. If somebody does a good job, GOOD. If somebody does a bad job, BAD. Nothing happens! For instance, none of the support staff had clearly defined tasks. One of the first things I did was to give each a job description. (María, 42)

The school leadership team in Chile typically involves the head of the technical–pedagogical unit (UTP) who is responsible for curriculum implementation and an inspector who oversees attendance and behavioural matters. In the case of a school that had lost almost a fourth of its enrolment over the last four years, the municipal government was reluctant to appoint a full leadership team. Feeling isolated as she navigated through existing school practices, the principal understood that strengthening her relationship with teachers was a priority:

I am going slow, slow, trying not to break the relationships among the staff. I am feeling alone, because there is no support, I do not have a UTP or anybody else, just me. So, when I have to make a decision, I have no one with whom I can discuss. (Francisca, 18)

The most critical issue was the behaviour principals had observed among teachers. In agreement with a characteristic of sinking schools, teachers were characterized as showing apathy and lack of skills. Principals noticed that teachers were not coming to work regularly, violating their contractual obligations. The previous principals had not addressed these behaviours, a legacy that added complexity to the new principals' goals for strengthening their schools' instructional programmes:

[The teachers] are used to doing whatever they want to do. I saw a teacher talking in the yard during a time she was expected to be in the classroom. (Patricia, 143)

I noticed a critical issue during my first days; the staff have attendance problems. If . . . they decide not to come to work, they just call in, say they are not coming, and that is it. No formal procedure; a phone call is sufficient. (María, 123)

Based on initial classroom observations, some principals were concerned with the teaching strategies implemented. This concern was exacerbated when they experienced difficulties in engaging their staff in reflections about their practices or in getting them to accept the principal's support:

For me it is very difficult, because my teachers . . . are not updated on new teaching methods although they are so young! That makes me feel uneasy. Having so much support, and it is not being used. (Fernanda, 83)

Among NAPs in these schools, there was an overall perception that the school attracted ineffective teachers, which expressed and recreated the school's bad reputation in the community. In Chile, municipal schools suffering financial distress cannot afford severance pay so when teachers experience difficulties in one school they are simply transferred to another one:

I noticed that a few teachers, like three, had been let go from other schools. One of them had an ongoing problem with her principal and was sent here. Another had a legal issue for hitting a student and she was also sent here. (Francisca, 10)

First change-oriented actions

Independently of how long they had been at the school or the type of school, all participants had identified critical points for improvement and specific changes to implement quickly. The actions identified can be organized into three areas: (a) staffing; (b) redesigning the organization; and (c) managing instruction. As will be illustrated next, during this initial period, the focus was on management to create the conditions required to make an impact on instruction.

Staffing

Struggling schools. Principals reported having enough personnel, so staffing changes involved modifying procedures and task assignments. With respect to the leadership team, principals' efforts were geared towards reorganizing work priorities in line with their vision. Usually, this meant adding more resources for instructional work:

One of my priorities this year is to improve the pedagogical area. Thus, I took away some responsibilities from my UTP so she can focus 80% of her time on pedagogical tasks. (Diego, 2)

This reorganization aimed to distribute leadership in order to protect the principal's management time. Strengthening the leadership team allowed principals to build a shared sense of purpose and to refine the quality of their decisions. Changes were also introduced to improve collaboration among staff and avoid duplication in their work:

Some students go to the special needs room to work with the psychologist once per week, and the counsellor comes twice per week to work with other kids . . . However, they do not work together and that is what we want to change – articulate these two positions. (Viviana, 29)

Sinking schools. Principals at these schools reported that positions on the leadership team were either vacant or filled by someone the principal considered to be poorly qualified. When principals resorted to the legal provision that allowed them to appoint key members of the leadership team, the municipal governments' responses generated delays and difficulties. Appointing staff in accordance with the schools' needs involved much time spent, often unsuccessfully, working with the municipal department of education. In the meantime, principals found solutions, but in doing so were often distracted from working on their own priorities:

Supposedly, the playground coordinator should be in charge of that, not me. I need my time to manage the school, not to watch kids during recess. So, I went to the education department to talk about this. I told them, 'You're paying me to be the principal, not to do this.' Now we are moving forward. (Claudia, 34)

So I arrived here, and the person in the UTP position is incompetent. During the last four years, he has been unable to produce anything at all. So I am waiting for a new one to arrive. The law says that I can bring my own team, but the [municipality] has not yet worked on this. (Francisca, 10)

Redesigning the organization

Struggling schools. As formal procedures were, to varying extents, well established, principals sought to improve existing practices, usually building on previous successes. For instance, the following principal speaks about pushing for a cultural change:

Now we are working on our Conduct Handbook. We have a meeting each Wednesday to clearly define rights and responsibilities for the whole community. This has also involved changing the content of faculty meetings. Before it was all about complaining about specific students; now we are analysing our shared responsibilities for each student. (Viviana, 35)

Principals in these schools discussed actions that entailed a long-term perspective. For example, they engaged with staff and parents in developing the mission or identity of the school:

We are working on defining our strategic plan for the next five years. There are a few processes that need time to settle. (Diego, 8)

I told them, 'We have to change our "face". We have to define our identity, what distinguishes us from other schools. It is critical for us, and for parents and students as well, to know who are we.' We are working on that. (Viviana, 22)

Sinking schools. In contrast, these principals reported a lack of procedures for addressing several situations. Violence and other behavioural problems among students were a recurrent issue that required immediate attention. They found a school that did not comply with legal regulations risked sanctions from the Education Superintendence:

So checking the disciplinary process, I noticed that they did not have a procedure to sanction students' misbehaviours. I ask them, 'So what do you do in these cases?' 'Well, we decide at that moment. We have always worked like this.' Therefore, I had to invest two whole days with the teachers to define clear protocols in the Conduct Handbook. (Claudia, 34)

Managing instruction

Struggling schools. Principals described working on improving the quality of the instructional programme by supporting teachers through classroom observation and building a shared vision for the school curriculum. Parents were included as well, and their support as key stakeholders was sought:

I want to improve the [standardized test] performance so I have to tackle the curriculum. I noticed that we have a lot of math and literacy but not so much other things. I am especially keen on working on

values with the students. So, I met with the parents, we talked about it, and we moved forward the introduction of artistic workshops for students from preschool to level 2. (Loreto, 52)

For me, the best strategy to improve learning is classroom observation. Professional development is expensive, and teachers do not always get the time for that. If I want to improve their teaching, I need to observe them teaching. (Diego, 13)

Sinking schools. In these schools, principals noted an urgent need to change teaching practices. Well aware that this could create conflicts with teachers, they first worked to influence teachers' attitudes. In contrast with their peers in struggling schools, these principals were cautious and subtle when presenting change to teachers. Whereas in struggling schools, principals focused on strategic aspects, in these schools principals' attention was given to instrumental aspects, such as developing a common lesson plan template:

I spend a lot [of] energy convincing teachers that it is important for them and not only for the students to improve our performance [in standardized tests]. I am trying to raise their commitment to the students in order to improve their teaching. (Claudia, 59)

I spoke with them [teachers], 'I am not going to [the classroom] to supervise you. I am not aiming to give you a bad assessment but to help you. Please tell me how I can help you.' (Claudia, 61)

For example, to protect instructional time, principals encouraged teachers to be at their classroom on time and to avoid distractions. This became a source of conflict when it clashed with the legacy of the previous principal:

After every recess I observed how my teachers went back to their classrooms. I started talking with them, 'You miss every day 10 minutes, after a week, a month, and a year, and it's a lot of time that students are missing.' It is difficult to change their mindset because they have normalized these practices. (Cristina, 76)

Discussion

Morrison (2013) argued that the opportunity to lead change is one of the main drivers for people who assume the headship of any organization. The current study shows that participating principals were actively committed to the local policies that enforced fast change to show improvement quickly. Principals' change-oriented actions were moderated by the school conditions and their own priorities (Klar and Brewer, 2013; Sun and Ni, 2015). These principals encountered different types of constraints with regard to leading change, which largely stemmed from discrepancies between the autonomy afforded by national policies (e.g. the LEQ) and pseudo-autonomous practices afforded to principals by their municipal department of education. As we discuss next, although policy documents emphasize strongly the part effective leadership by the principal plays in learning, the conditions that make such effective leadership possible are largely dependent on the municipal governments or intermediate-level leadership. At this level, the financial priority creates contradictions that have to be managed by the NAPs, particularly by those working in sinking schools. We found that as they juggled diverse and complex responsibilities for which they were often underprepared, their initial response created tensions with teachers who were ultimately blamed for the slow pace at which the principal could move as they sought to lead change.

Differences in internal conditions that affect leading change

Possibilities for change were associated with the legacy of the previous principal, as this impacted on the school's readiness for change. Initially, change efforts focused on three key areas associated with effective leadership: staffing, redesigning the organization and managing instruction (Leithwood et al., 2006; OECD, 2016). NAPs in struggling schools found better conditions (staffing, structures and teaching), more time, and space to think and build on the successes of the previous leadership (Bellei et al., 2015). The metaphor of 'sinking' schools depicts accurately a public school system that faces a financial and credibility crisis after over 30 years of being a market model for the provision of educational services in Chile (Montecinos et al., 2015). New leaders in under-resourced schools faced challenges working with teachers who are depicted as showing apathy and lacking the will to improve, aspects that these principals seemed underprepared to address (García-Garduño et al., 2011; Maringe and Moletsane, 2015). The paradox is that quicker changes are needed in sinking schools to interrupt a downward spiral, but readiness for change was much more fragile here. Additionally, instead of empathizing with teachers who had experienced a history of failed efforts and spending time talking with them to create a shared sense of purpose for change, principals in sinking schools focused on mobilizing them around narrow instrumental aspects of instructional leadership.

Developing a new image and identity for the school in order to improve enrolment, developing procedures to maximize instructional work as well as fostering a safe school climate were tasks prioritized in both types of school cultures, priorities also reported by Weinstein et al. (2016) in their study with NAPs in Chile. Improving instruction was the most recurrent concern as it was accepted that much needed improvements in students' learning needed to be mobilized. In addition to principals' intrinsic motivation to serve students, this could be also associated with the performance-based contract signed by NAPs that specifies yearly increases in SIMCE scores. This requires principals to focus their efforts on instructional leadership, independent of the specific management and leadership demands they identify as a priority for their particular school (Montecinos et al., 2015). What was required in these two types of schools to raise SIMCE scores, however, was quite different.

First, raising scores entails setting long-term objectives for improvements in students' achievement and making this a key leadership task (Leithwood et al., 2006; Sun and Leithwood, 2015). For NAPs in sinking schools, as compared to their peers placed in struggling schools, this was a greater challenge. In struggling schools, principals spoke of engaging with teachers and parents to design and implement an instructional improvement process. In sinking schools, principals had to invest their time persuading teachers about the need to improve. An additional demand in this type of school was planning change with teachers who had experienced years of failure, and trying to simultaneously address the collective need of the school as a whole along with individual aspirations and the short- and long-term goals. Moving forward a school in which learned helplessness – a low level of motivation attributed to the belief that nothing anyone does will make a difference (Peterson et al., 1993) – prevails, requires knowing how to change beliefs over time. For example, setting easy-to-achieve goals, with short-term indicators within reach, can restore teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Focusing on SIMCE scores will hardly motivate teachers' day-to-day actions, because this requires a long-term, collective effort. Issues of teacher motivation need to be addressed through induction and preservice preparation programmes for principals that address the highly contextual nature of leadership.

Second, a large body of evidence addresses the importance and advantages of having an effective leadership team for creating a common purpose and improving decision-making (Bush and Glover, 2012; Hall, 2001; Olsen and Chrispeels, 2009). Whereas in struggling schools principals spoke of

working with a leadership team, in sinking schools the new leaders were alone or with staff they deemed underprepared. This represented an important difference in the internal support structure available to participating principals for helping them to address the problems encountered. This difference was deepened when municipal departments of education failed to support principals' requests for filling vacant positions. This failure is linked to the financial crisis faced by municipal departments of education which is largely due to declining enrolment. This creates a vicious circle: lack of enrolment engenders lack of adequate staffing, which is likely to perpetuate low performance, which in turn perpetuates low enrolment. Placing sole responsibility for breaking this circle on the shoulders of the principal is not only unfair but also a recipe for failure when the municipal government, which in Chile administers public schools, fails to create conditions to enhance the likelihood of success.

Third, collaboration is key for moving schools forward (Bellei et al., 2015; Caruso, 2013; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Principals in struggling schools described a collaborative school culture, whereas principals in sinking schools described a minefield of potential conflicts if needed changes were introduced too fast. Principals in sinking schools believed that accelerating change would most likely create conflict with teachers but felt frustrated by a pace that would probably allow them to gain trust but not generate urgent changes in teachers' practices. Their concerns were not unfounded: trust in the principal and among colleagues has been reported as relating to teachers' readiness for change (Ngcobo and Tikly, 2010; Zayim and Kondakci, 2014). Open discussions among teachers and the leadership team can reduce uncertainty and enhance self-efficacy in relation to the implementation of new practices, but this is difficult to achieve if either party sees the other as incompetent. Differences in these schools' readiness for change took an emotional toll on principals in sinking schools, an aspect that ultimately impacts on their health, wellbeing and effectiveness (Spillane and Lee, 2014).

A sinking public school system engenders sinking schools

The current policy for strengthening school leadership in Chile has focused on issues relating to recruitment, selection and professional development, and has developed regulatory frameworks to increase accountability and autonomy. Findings from the current study add evidence regarding the relevance of context when assessing the possibility of this policy for strengthening leadership in high-poverty, low-performing, schools (Chapman and Harris, 2004; Draper and McMichael, 2000; Goldring et al., 2008). Further research is needed to understand the set of leadership skills and external supports needed to lead a process of change in Chilean schools that lack readiness for change.

Our findings show that policies need to appoint the right principal for a specific school culture as well as address the specific supports that will increase his or her chances of success in turning around a low-performing school. At the municipal government level, this can involve providing an induction or briefings on the history of success and challenges of the specific school, planning the recruitment process so that principals start at the beginning of the academic year and affording principals greater autonomy to appoint needed staff (Weinstein et al., 2016). At the national level, the funding of induction programmes will also increase the likelihood that appointing a new principal will help and not hinder a school's improvement trajectory (Bush and Oduro, 2006). Support is needed by NAPs in all schools, but support appears to be crucial in sinking schools.

Turning around an ineffective school is a task that will not be accomplished merely by putting pressure on the principal to implement fast changes. It requires addressing structural issues both at the municipal department of education and at the Ministry of Education that lead to a lack of full commitment to turn around a school. The results of this study suggest why it is inadvisable to appoint a

principal with no previous experience to a highly challenging school without understanding that they may need extra support (Earley et al., 2013). In the absence of this support, asking a NAP to lead change in a sinking school would seem to increase the likelihood of failure both for him/her and the school.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. It was based on data derived from a small number of elementary school principals, who are not necessarily representative of NAPs in Chile, working in high-poverty, low-performing schools. The study did not examine the appropriateness or effectiveness of the changes they proposed to implement. Principals' perceptions of teachers' willingness to embark on changes were not explored by, for example, simply asking the teachers. Our own understanding of the challenges principals faced in both types of schools is, therefore, limited to our informants' perspectives, notwithstanding, at least theoretically, the descriptions provided by them corresponded well with a different set of challenges identified by Stoll's and Fink's (1996) typology as well as with findings from other studies in the Chilean context (Bellei et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2016).

The current study found that inexperienced principals were placed in ineffective schools, a practice reported in studies conducted in the United States (Burkhauser et al., 2012). Previous studies on turnover of principals are conclusive in describing a decline in performance following the arrival of a new leader (Miller, 2013). Sinking schools, their students and professionals who work there can hardly afford repeated changes of their principal. For this reason, it is important to appoint principals who are more likely to succeed and stay because the challenges, although severe, do not exceed their capabilities. Municipal leaders and local authorities need to create the conditions and give the necessary support to ensure that the new principal can succeed. Otherwise, a failing principal reinforces teachers' beliefs that improvement is not possible, increasing the risk that the next principal will blame the teachers for their lack of will. We end on a note to give food for thought: by the end of their second year in the post, one of the principals from one of the sinking schools had left and two had been removed.

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Note

1. This framework, similar to the Ontario Leadership Framework (see https://iel.immix.ca/storage/6/1380680840/OLF_User_Guide_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 5 March 2017), is intended as a tool for guiding: school leaders' self-assessment and reflection; the process of selecting a principal; the introduction of professional development programmes; and the identification of exceptional leaders.

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