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Title: Considerations Regarding A Principal Leadership Program for the Mexican Context
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TF: Connie K. Chung
Noted education researcher Michael Fullan writes that the principal's role in school leadership is essential to the large-scale project of systemic educational reform. Fullan states “It is impossible to have moral purpose on a large scale unless we recast the role of principal as chief operating officer in transforming schools and school systems and, hence, the moral imperative of school leadership.” (2003, p. 28). Principal leadership in particular has been targeted by the OECD as a key item that Mexican stakeholders should focus on in order to improve the quality of public schools in the Mexican Republic (OECD, 2010). This is a particular challenge in the Mexican context, as any improvement in the quality of a given school's principal involves a contrast between international research supporting the key role principals can play in maintaining and improving the school under their watch (ibid), and a historical lack of Mexican principals' personal responsibility for the well-being and improvement of schools under their watch, for a variety of systemic reasons (Ornelas, 2006). Thus, it is incumbent upon anyone who rises to this challenge to be aware of the structural challenges found in Mexico that would serve as barriers to a participative program designed to improve the quality of in-service school principals.

This should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle. Elmore (2000) notes the importance of having standards-based reform as the base of systemic improvement efforts. Mexico has taken great strides in the past fifteen years to create and fine-tune the beginnings of a national standards-based registry for the SEP, with the founding of the INEE and participation both national and international standardized tests of academic achievement and critical thinking. Thus, the groundwork is already in place for the next step, which is working toward improving the quality of teachers and principals who work within the system. This paper focuses exclusively on principal leadership, as principals are a driving force in any school environment.
and set the tone for the daily atmosphere and standards in a school building. Principals have historically been union-appointed administrators within school buildings, but the changing nature of the practice of education requires principals to be much more than technocrats: Instructional and instrumental leadership will define the role of the principal as we progress in the twenty-first century (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). In the Mexican context, this position is even more critical as Mexico commits to improving the quality of its public education system as a whole.

**Review of the Literature**

The author found several books and pamphlets that were literature reviews in their own right of 1) Principal leadership projects, primarily in the United States and 2) School-based management projects on a global scale. While not a meta-analysis, what follows are summary overviews of the main takeaways of synopses in the public domain. The author found a substantial amount of overlap in these works, and is confident that they represent what is commonly viewed as “best practice” for these thematic areas.

“What works” in school leadership? According to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), many different specific aspects of school leadership work, to varying degrees. In their comprehensive meta-analysis of K-12 school leadership in the US, they isolate twenty one different factors of school leadership that statistically significantly improve students' standardized test scores. The r-values of each of these factors vary from 0.33 to 0.18; all are statistically significant, but none explain more than 10% of the total variance of any school's standardized test scores, and all have fairly large 95% confidence intervals. The list of leadership factors can be found in Appendix A; the author finds it to be a comprehensive list, but cautions against the wholesale adoption of all the characteristics when designing a school
leadership program for principals because of the need to critically assess which factors would be more or less relevant in any given context.

Comprehensive pamphlets relating to international school-based management practices (World Bank, 2007; Caldwell, 2005) give us a variety of definitions and a spectrum of practices related to school-based management design. Mexico is already included on the end of the spectrum with less individual school control and autonomy, and more centralized restrictions on individual schools' control of funding and financial appropriation, based on the technical aspects of its Programa Escuelas de Calidad (World Bank, 2007). Additionally, Mexico's AGES program purports to give more school-based power and decision-making ability to parents but does not provide a comprehensive mechanism for these stakeholders to be empowered (ibid). With these programs as the backdrop for school-based management practices in Mexico, attempts to improve individual schools' autonomy and to give power and ownership to non-traditional stakeholders in the field of education have been inadequate.

An interesting South African model (Witten, 2010) places the principal as a community leader in order to promote a new identity and scope of the principal's responsibility. With an education system similar to Mexico's in many striking ways, this project, based in Johannesburg, seeks to redefine the role of school principal to expand the scope and responsibility of his or her leadership and importance within the local community. While some of the specifics of the challenges facing the urban poor in Johannesburg and Monterrey differ (i.e. HIV awareness vs narcotrafficking), they are similar in their seriousness and scope, so perhaps this model would be an interesting lens through which to view any principal training program in Monterrey.

**Interviews with Educational Experts**

Six professors at the Harvard Graduate School of Education were consulted as part of the
research for this project. These informal interviews were not recorded. Although the author took notes during the majority of the interviews, they were fairly unstructured. The primary goal behind consulting different researchers in person for this project was to explore elements of a project related to principal leadership that might not be evident from a literature review. These professors were: Fernando Reimers, Jim Honan, Lee Teitel, Pamela Mason, Deborah Jewell-Sherman, and Monica Higgins. These professors all have expertise in school-NGO partnerships, principal/teacher leadership programming, and/or social entrepreneurship. Meetings with each professor lasted between fifteen minutes and half an hour, with the exception of the meeting with Professor Jewell-Sherman, which lasted an hour. The author explained Via Education's “Calidad Educativa” project to each professor as background, focusing on the inclusion of a particular professor's area of expertise in the project description. She then left the conversation as an open-ended discussion, clarifying questions the professors had and discussing potential challenges the project would face as well as things professors had seen useful or helpful in the past on similar projects they had each worked on.

One area that several professors independently mentioned, and agreed upon, was the importance of truly knowing and understanding both the climate of the schools and the needs of the people who would be served by the program. One professor mentioned his experiences with a similar program on principal leadership in South Africa, and said that his visit to a school there really changed his understanding of the challenges faced by the community in terms of levels of violence and insecurity in the school atmosphere. Additional comments regarding school-based management techniques included validating the principals' concerns and frustrations with their challenging environments, but also not allowing that to become a barrier to discussion on how to improve their schools. The overarching recommendation related to this theme was to not assume
that you as an outsider had a good understanding of what principals need until you go and talk with them, and ask them what they need.

Another area in which there was a great deal of consensus surrounded the importance of consensus-driven goals for the teams the principals would be working with upon their return to their schools. In colloquial language, principals need to be on the same page as their staff, and the book needs to be open, particularly with regard to the goals principals would like to accomplish for the school, and the means by which they will achieve these goals. While there does not need to be 100% agreement on the goals that should be accomplished, there do need to be goals that are set, and a working plan in place, with specific and strategic benchmarks in place en route to meet these goals. Faculty and staff need to be aware of the direction the principal is charting for the school and the students, and be able to predict what the principal would do or recommend in order to achieve those goals.

A third key area that was repeatedly referred to involves the importance of any program external to the school environment having a method to ensure continued support and professional development opportunities for participants, among themselves, as peers. This supports the ongoing professionalization within the field of education for its workers, in this case specifically for school principals. There are a variety of ways that this can be done, either online or in-person, but any program should have a mechanism to foster continual participation for past participants to promote an ongoing exchange between practitioners in the same career, to act as an advice and support system for each other.

Finally, one very interesting element emerged during the interview with Professor Jewell-Sherman, which the author feels justifies her ongoing concern for the generalizability and applicability of educational best practices in the US context to another context. During this
interview, which was the longest and most fruitful of all the conversations with the educational experts, Professor Jewell-Sherman was shocked to learn that her previous role in the system of education, as a district superintendent, does not exist in Mexico. The absence of a structural layer that is designed 1) to facilitate the business of principals' running a school to the best of their ability, and 2) to serve as a mediator between a principal and bureaucratic channels of governance and policy, is something that cannot be taken lightly. Professor Jewell-Sherman's look of confusion upon learning that school principals report to the state department of education in Mexico, not an intermediary, cannot be overstated. The technical aspects of what a principal in Mexico is expected to do administratively, as opposed to what a principal in the US is expected to do administratively, is very different, and it is also difficult to assess just how different without firsthand knowledge of both systems. Thus, it is imperative that we bear in mind systemic differences between different education contexts as we adopt and adapt best practices in educational research.

**Recommendations**

The author recommends a principal leadership program with three main components to target different facets of the roles principals will need to address in order to target different aspects of their evolving roles as school principals and leaders. These three components would be curriculum implementation, school-based management techniques, and personal leadership training. This is similar to a program outlined by the OECD (2010) which takes place in the state of Jalisco. The incorporation of curriculum implementation and leadership in this program speaks to the necessity of principals needing to have a diverse group of strategies at their disposal to successfully work with teachers at imparting the national curriculum to reach all learners, which to the author's knowledge has been lacking in previous iterations of professional
development for teachers and principals in Mexico.

It should be addressed that, as recommended by many of the educational experts interviewed, there should be focus groups conducted prior to the sessions for the target audience (low income school principals in the Monterrey area) to discuss what they would befit from in a training program. The following recommendations are based on best-practice programming, but as previously discussed in this paper, more needs to be known and taken into consideration of the principals' working environments before offering them any sort of professional development course. At best, the following recommendations for content-area development can be seen as a rough draft, and if stakeholders in focus groups disagree with what the author has outlined in this paper, careful consideration needs to be given to these differences in opinion.

Additionally, based on a general summing up of best practices in the field of principal leadership and professional development, the workshops should both implicitly and explicitly work in many ways to improve the principals' sense of self-efficacy in their roles, as well as build communities of learning and professional partnerships and working relationships between the principals themselves. In general terms, the environment should be convivial, with plenty of time allotted for participants to interact with each other and discuss their working environments and professional lives. There should also be ample time allowed for debriefing and processing of participants thoughts on and reactions to the professional development experience they are a part of.

**Curriculum Implementation**

In general terms, the part of the professional development program dedicated to curriculum implementation should focus on different strategies principals can use with the teachers at their school to improve students' learning of the national curriculum. Since the
national curriculum in Mexico is standardized at a very central level, there is little flexibility principals would have at the school level to design their own curriculum. What their instructional leadership for curriculum implementation should then focus on, would be differential techniques associated with different learning processes to maximize the types of strategies used to creatively teach the national curriculum. It might be useful to start with Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, for example, and then use that framework to address more practical notions of how to incorporate these very abstract and academic notions into lesson planning under different subjects studied by students.

**School-Based Management Techniques**

One of the challenges of encouraging school-based management in the general Mexican context is the fact that, as previously mentioned, past attempts at school-based management programs have not been successful in truly promoting ways through which school-based management efforts can be genuine in either their accountability or the power transfer to the individual school level. With this as the backdrop, perhaps it would be worthwhile to brainstorm with principals what school-based management would mean to them. International definitions and standards taken from references such as the ones mentioned in this paper can be incorporated, but an ideal of school-based management techniques is patently useless without a reasonable definition of what that means to the context of the principals in the professional development program. This is because they will then be going back to their jobs to employ whatever they have learned over the course of the professional development program. If principals develop their own definition of school-based management within the parameters of their working environment, this could be much more useful both for in their short-term working environments and for promoting long-term support for the greater idea of school-based
management as being both important and sustainable within the context of low-income Mexican schools.

The “Balanced Score Card” was suggested by Professor Jewell-Sherman as a good model to promote principal accountability and responsibility for school-based leadership. Although primarily used in business models, this model's “performance measurement framework that added strategic non-financial performance measures to traditional financial metrics to give managers and executives a more 'balanced' view of organizational performance” (Balanced Scorecard Institute, n.d.) can and has been used in other contexts, such as public school environments. If this model is not necessarily the most applicable to the context in which Via Education finds itself working, perhaps elements of its approach could be taken and adapted to better fit the context.

**Personal Leadership Training**

Personal leadership training for the principals will undoubtedly be a draw for the program participants. Suggestions for content include Marshall Ganz's (2010)“Story of Self” exercise and Ronald Heifitz's “Leadership Without Easy Answers” (2007) framework to encourage the principals to think both about their personal goals and story as well as where and how they feel they fit into a larger picture of education reform in Mexico. There should also be discussion about different types of leadership and leadership styles, with participants analyzing and discussing the role of different types of leadership at different points in both their professional and personal lives.

Reflective practice, a methodology that has been used in the past to assess the roles and orientations of principal development (Sergiovanni, 2001) can also be incorporated with leadership training. Program participants can be encouraged to keep a journal of their daily
thoughts and feelings about their experiences in the program. This behavior should be encouraged when they return to their normal working environments, to better understand and assess their roles and decisions as leaders, and to improve their meta-cognitive abilities in this respect. Since the professional development program established by Via Education should be ongoing, these journal entries can also be discussed at future workshops.

**Conclusion**

The business of systemic education reform is a tricky one, made even more difficult when the available research is conducted in a substantially different context from that which it is being applied in. Since the majority of research around education and leadership has taken place in the United States, we must be very careful in adopting these recommendations for a context that differs structurally, linguistically, and culturally, as does the context in Monterrey.

However, we can take some available studies, particularly those in developing contexts with parallel issues to those in the context of investigation, to triangulate these plans with best practices in developed contexts and come up with a model that is applicable to our area of focus. The South African model of the principal as a community leader and the school as a community focal point gives us much to consider as we work to create something useful and practical for principals of low-income schools to develop their own leadership in Monterrey.

Ultimately, any program focused on principal leadership must involve its target audience from the beginning, in the form of focus groups to direct the substantive content knowledge and instrumental leadership skills that principals feel they lack in order to better execute their responsibilities. The ideas generated from these groups should then be compared with recommendations given in this report, to better inform a holistic program to tackle improvements in principal leadership that unquestionably need to be addressed.
References

Balanced Scorecard Institute. (n.d.). *What is the balanced scorecard?* Retrieved from:


Appendix A

School Leadership that Works factor analysis – The 21 Responsibilities of a School Leader

21 Responsibilities listed in order of correlation with student academic achievement (Figure 4.2, p. 63)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation with achievement (r)</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>Situational awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monitoring/Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contingent rewards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectual stimulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>Ideals/beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
