Leadership Efficacy, Job Satisfaction and Educational Quality

In Chilean Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This paper is based on a national study of school leadership in Chile. Surveys were administered during the 2009 school year to school directors and teachers in 649 urban elementary schools across Chile’s three education sectors: municipal schools, government subsidized private schools, and non-subsidized private schools. While nearly all principals reported high levels of satisfaction and individual efficacy in the overall performance of their jobs, a substantial number expressed low confidence in their capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning, especially in municipal schools. Using correlation and regression analysis, the paper explores the relationships between survey measures of principals’ efficacy and job satisfaction, professional education, years’ experience, and practices in order to identify those factors that contribute to principal confidence in their ability to improve their schools. The analyses considers differences in school context (sector, size) and student performance (national achievement test scores) that may be linked to varying expressions of principals’ sense of efficacy. The findings confirm prior research concerning the task dependent nature of principals’ self efficacy in their work.

Keywords: principals, instructional leadership, self efficacy, job satisfaction, elementary school, Latin America
Leadership efficacy, job satisfaction, and educational quality in Chilean elementary schools

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This paper is based on the first phase of a national study of elementary school leadership and its relationship to teachers’ work and to student achievement in Chile. The study is being conducted by researchers associated with the Fundación Chile and the Centro de Estudios de Políticas y Prácticas en Educación (CEPPE). The overall study is grounded in research on effective school leadership practices (e.g., Leithwood et al, 2006; Robinson et al, 2009) and on factors that mediate the influence of leader actions, such as teachers’ motivations, professional capacity (knowledge/skill), and working conditions (Leithwood *ibid*). The paper also draws upon research on school leaders’ self efficacy and its relationship to leadership practices that contribute to the quality of teaching and learning in schools (e.g., Dimmock & Hattie, 1996; Imants & de Brabander, 1996; Smith, Guarnino, Strom & Reed, 2006; Louis et al., 2010).

Context. The Chilean primary and secondary education system is distinct in various ways. During the years of military rule (1970s-1980s), the government introduced a decentralized, market-based approach to the delivery of education, opening the door to the establishment of government subsidized private schools (as distinct from fee paying private schools) in competition with the public and private-fee paying sectors. The number of subsidized private schools (escuelas subvencionadas particulares) has steadily increased over the past 25 years. Currently about 49% of the nation’s schools operate in this sector. Many of these schools are free standing; that is, they are owned by a single proprietor, who may act as the school principal as well. Other subsidized schools are run in small clusters (ranging from about 2 to 9 schools according to our national survey of primary schools) by non-governmental organizations (e.g., churches). Another 44% of Chilean schools are government public schools managed by municipal authorities (average 28 schools per municipal jurisdiction). About 7% are tuition-based private schools serving the socioeconomically elite strata of society. Collectively, the municipal or private authorities that manage schools at the local level are referred to as sostenedores (supporters). Chilean researchers have documented the fact that middle and upper middle income parents are most likely to choose to send their children to the subsidized private schools, leaving the government public schools with a larger share of socio-economically disadvantaged students who present greater challenges to academic success. Not surprisingly, schools in the subsidized private sector outperform those in the government sector on national tests of student achievement, though the achievement gap is significantly reduced when student demographic profiles are taken into account. There is considerable concern in Chile about the comparative performance of schools in these two sectors, and about what can be done to raise the performance of low performing students and their schools.

Historically, Chilean principals are known to have played a predominantly administrative or managerial role (Weinstein, Muñoz & Raczynski, forthcoming)). There is growing pressure in the context of recent education reform initiatives and policies for school and local school authority leaders to undertake more responsibility for continuous improvement. The *Ministerio de Educación*, for example, released a set of standards for effective management (*Marco para la...*).
Buena Dirección) in 2003, which includes sections on leadership behaviors linked to school improvement planning and practices. In 2008, the Chilean government passed legislation (Ley de Subvención Preferencial) that provides additional funding per pupil for schools serving students from low income families, with the requirement that schools applying for these funds set school-wide multi-year targets for improvement in student achievement on the national tests of student performance (SIMCE) and submit school improvement plans outlining how they intend to accomplish those goals.

Another distinctive feature of the Chilean school leadership context is a form of dual principalship that pairs the titular administrative head (director) with a pedagogical head (jefe técnico pedagógico). Formally, this system marks a division of labor between those tasks associated with school management and those associated with providing instructional support. Research on the practices and the interaction between these roles is only beginning to appear, and was partly the rationale for undertaking the larger study from which this analysis draws.

Self efficacy theory and research. Given the expectations for school improvement focused school leadership in Chile, and the fact that Chilean school directors have not traditionally performed an instructional leadership role, it is important to investigate the director’s views about this new dimension of their work. Self-efficacy theory as originally formulated by Bandura (1977) provides a useful lens through which to analyze this phenomenon. Self efficacy refers to a person’s belief that they can successfully take actions that will lead to the accomplishment of some task or goal. Self efficacy beliefs incorporate two dimensions: first, the belief that one’s actions can contribute to the attainment of desired goals; and second, the belief that one has the personal capacity (i.e., knowledge, skills, resources) to successfully implement those actions. Feelings of self efficacy, according to Bandura (ibid), are influenced by feedback on performance, as well as by vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Bandura argued that sense of efficacy is not a general personality trait, rather a feeling of confidence in regards to the efforts one makes towards the accomplishment of particular tasks and goals in specific contexts. He also distinguished between individual and collective efficacy. In organizational settings (like schools), collective efficacy refers to one’s confidence about the combined efforts of members of the organization to accomplish desired goals. According to Bandura, beliefs about self efficacy affect how much effort people will spend on trying to accomplish specific tasks and goals, and how long they will persist in those efforts when they encounter obstacles.

The relevance of self efficacy theory for new expectations for school leadership in Chile are clear. If Chilean school directors do not feel confident in their capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, and if they encounter problems that they do not know how to effectively address when they try, the prospects for improvement in Chilean schools will remain dim, no matter how much money the government invests in schools or pays the directors, and no matter what actions the government mandates school leaders to perform.

Self efficacy theory has been applied in education to studies of teachers’ and principals’ beliefs in their capacity to effectively enact their professional roles. Much of this research has focused on teachers’ sense of efficacy and its relationship to student achievement and improvements in student learning, and on organizational factors that influence variability in teacher efficacy.
Research on teacher efficacy dates since the 1970s, and has demonstrated positive associations between high teacher efficacy and a variety of important outcome, including student achievement gains, implementation of new programs and practices, classroom management (e.g., see literature review in Imants & de Brabander, 1996). More recently, attention has turned to understanding the role, consequences, organizational conditions affecting principals’ sense of efficacy in regards to influencing the quality of teaching and learning in their schools (e.g., Dimmock & Hattie, 1996; Imants & de Brabander, 1996; Louis et al, 2010). Self efficacy research has also shifted from a focus on individual feelings of efficacy among teachers and principals to their relative sense of collective efficacy in the accomplishment of school goals for student learning (e.g., Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2004). In this paper we will focus primarily on the results of our current investigation of individual self efficacy among Chilean elementary directors, though we recognize that future research will need to take into account the relationship between school directors and school pedagogical heads, as well as teaching staff.

The study

Surveys were administered during the 2009 school year to principals, pedagogical heads, and five elementary teachers, in each of 649 urban schools, as well as to the chief supervisors for those schools. The sample includes 269 public municipal schools (of 1118 municipal schools in Chile), 290 government subsidized private schools (of 1570 nationally), and 90 private fee paying schools (N=327, total across the country). Our measure of student achievement is the average language and mathematics scores per school from the 2007-2008 national achievement tests. Test results reported by the government allow for comparison by average family income levels overall, across schools serving students at similar income levels, and by school sector (municipal, subsidized private, non-subsidized private). The school sample was selected to ensure variation in average student achievement over two years (2007, 2008) and student socio-economic background. The surveys elicited data on respondent characteristics (e.g., sex, age, years’ service, education), school context (e.g., sector, size, demographics), school leadership competencies and practices, and three factors that mediate the influence of school leaders on student learning (teachers’ motivations, professional knowledge/skill, and working conditions). In the surveys participants were required to rate their agreement with the content of survey items on a five point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The analysis here focuses on principal survey responses at the two extremes (strongly agree, strongly disagree).

The “efficacy” question

In an investigation of the affective dimensions of leadership and educational change, Leithwood and Beatty (2008) identified five types of emotions that influence teachers’ work and disposition to change and which have implications for what leaders do to support change: job satisfaction, level of stress and burnout, organizational commitment and commitment to change, and sense of individual and collective efficacy. Items to assess these emotions were included in our teacher surveys, but also in our surveys of school directors and pedagogical heads (JT). We reasoned that similar emotions come into play in the professional work of persons in school leadership positions. Table 1 displays results from the director and pedagogical head surveys, reporting the percentage of directors and pedagogical heads who “strongly agreed” with the survey item statements (translated here from the original Spanish).
Table 1 Percentage of Directors and Pedagogical Heads (JT) that “Strongly Agree”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working conditions</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>JT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My workload is heavy</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My level of stress and burnout is high</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have little time to prepare for my work</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like my work as Director/JT</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational commitment</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like working in this school</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self and collective efficacy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My school leadership team (equipo de trabajo) is adequate to improve the school</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the skills needed to fulfill the requirements of my position</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Director/JT I believe that I can improve the work of teachers in this school.</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Director/JT I believe that I can positively influence the academic performance of students in this school.</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N (total number of respondents)                          | 649      | 614 |

These data prompted the (ongoing) investigation and analysis highlighted in this paper. We noted for example, that while about half of the directors reported a heavy workload, only about 15% declared that they felt overworked and stressed, and less than 10% said they needed more preparation time to get their work done. These responses seem consistent with the relatively high reported levels of satisfaction with their jobs and with their place of work. The overall high
levels of director satisfaction were surprising, in part, because the school sample included a mix of schools from different sectors with higher and lower student achievement on national tests.

What caught our attention in these data were the differences that appeared between these indicators of comfort and satisfaction in their current positions and work contexts, and their reported levels of individual (self) and collective efficacy. On the one hand, a slight majority of the directors (56%) reported a high sense of overall personal competency (efficacy) to fulfill their professional duties (95% of the respondents if we combine those that responded “agree” and “strongly agree”), which seems logically consistent with their high levels of job satisfaction. On the other hand, the proportion of directors who strongly believe in their personal capacity to influence the quality of teaching and of student achievement is substantially lower. They are somewhat more positive about the collective capacity of their school leadership teams to improve school performance (47% strongly agree), but there remains a marked discrepancy between their job satisfaction and overall confidence in their team to make a difference in school quality. Here, we focus on the data from directors. Similar results were obtained from the pedagogical heads (JT). The pedagogical heads, however, expressed even less confidence than the directors in the overall capacity of school staff to improve school performance.

These data led us to speculate that directors’ overall job satisfaction and sense of professional efficacy may be decoupled from the hard work of school improvement for a substantial proportion of principals. It may be that the directors define their work mainly in terms of the competent execution of their administrative duties, and only secondarily in terms of the leadership for improving and sustaining the quality of teaching and learning. It may also be that the directors attribute the quality of teaching and learning in their schools primarily to the personal characteristics of students and teachers, and less to their own influence as leaders. Whatever the reasons, this presents a challenging leadership scenario for school improvement. School directors who are generally satisfied with their performance and workplace regardless of variability in school outcomes (student achievement), and who lack confidence in their ability to influence the quality of teaching and learning, are unlikely to lead the way to better schools.

The following analysis examines findings from our (ongoing) efforts to understand what factors are contributing to variability in the school directors’ sense of efficacy, particularly in relation to the provision of instructional leadership to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

**Explaining the director’ sense of efficacy**

This analysis reports our initial explorations of school directors’ job satisfaction and sense of efficacy and their relationship to survey measures of school leadership practices, contextual conditions, and student results. The ultimate aim is to identify and understand factors that are contributing to the Chilean school directors’ confidence in their ability to improve their schools.

The analysis responds to three basic questions:

1. What explains variations in directors’ level of job satisfaction?
2. What explains variations in directors’ general sense of professional efficacy?
3. What explains variations in directors’ confidence in their instructional leadership?
We employed correlational and regression analysis to explore the relations between job satisfaction, general efficacy, and instructional leadership efficacy and a variety of potentially significant independent variables. These additional variables were constructed from survey items that assessed salary levels, professional education levels, years experience as a director, personal (or delegated) engagement in technical work of teachers, personal (or delegated) engagement in management of administrative tasks (personnel management, finances, material resources, etc.), school achievement results 2007-2008 (controlled for student socio-economic level), school size, school sector (government, subsidized private, fee paying private), and gender differences among the directors.

Job satisfaction

The directors’ survey contained two measures of job satisfaction (see Table 1): satisfaction with their work as directors, and satisfaction with their work in their present school. We examined each of the measures of satisfaction separately and together (using the average ratings across both as a general measure of job satisfaction) in relation to salaries, professional education, student achievement, general sense of professional efficacy, and personal engagement in administrative and/or instructional leadership work, school sector, size and director’s gender.

Although the directors’ job satisfaction was not strongly correlated to any of these variables, the two measures of work satisfaction were highly correlated. The regression analysis, however, revealed distinct explanatory models for the measures of satisfaction. This suggests that the directors’ general satisfaction with their jobs and satisfaction with their work in their current school are distinct aspects of work satisfaction, despite their strong correlation.

The primary explanatory variables for general satisfaction with work as a director consisted of high sense of general professional efficacy (competence to carry out the requirements of the job), level of professional education, and employment in the subsidized private school sector (all positively related to satisfaction with the role). The combination of these three variables, however, only explained 16.9% of the variability in directors’ satisfaction with their role (which suggest that other factors, as yet unidentified are significantly influencing their role satisfaction). These findings are not particularly surprising. One would not expect directors’ who feel that they lack the skills to do their work, for example, to report high levels of satisfaction with their jobs. For this analysis we sorted the directors into three categories of professional education (high, medium, low) combining survey items that assessed their participation in specific forms and levels of professional education (degrees, in-service PD). It seems noteworthy, that while a medium level of professional education contributed to satisfaction in the director’s role, satisfaction does not necessarily increase with higher quantities of education. There may be diminishing returns in job satisfaction for ongoing professional development once a certain level of competence is attained in the context of current prevailing norms and expectations for director’s job performance in Chilean schools. The association of employment in the private subsidized sector with satisfaction with the director’s role is not surprising, particularly because salary levels and student results tend to be better on average in those schools in comparison to schools in the government sector. Those relationships notwithstanding, neither salary levels nor student achievement (as independent variables) were strongly correlated to directors’ job
satisfaction, nor did they figure into the regression model as explanatory variables for this measure of satisfaction with their work. These null findings are of interest, as well. In particular, if directors’ satisfaction with their jobs as school directors is not strongly linked to indicators of the impact of their work on student learning, that is cause for concern in terms of future prospects for school improvement in Chile.

Interestingly, the regression model that resulted from our second measure of director job satisfaction (“I like working in this school”) highlighted a somewhat different set of independent variables (the explanatory power of the model was significant, but low, explaining only 6.1% of the variability in satisfaction working in the director’s school). In this model, the directors’ general sense of professional efficacy to perform their jobs and school sector continued to exercise significant positive relationships to job satisfaction. However, their level of professional education did not figure into the model. What did appear was a positive relationship between satisfaction working in their schools and the propensity to delegate responsibility for instructional leadership (apoyo pedagógico “pedagogical help”) to others (e.g., the pedagogical heads). This finding also raises concerns about Chilean school directors views about their role in school improvement, because it suggests that generally, the directors may be happier with their work in their schools when they do not have to get personally and directly involved in providing instructional leadership support for teachers. This result may also be related to the fact that Chilean school directors in the municipal sector are not allowed to remove/hire teachers (these actions are controlled by municipal school authorities unionized teacher contracts). The implication is that whoever is in charge of pedagogical assistance is constrained to work with a given staff of teachers who might be more committed to maintaining the status quo than to changing existing practices. Again, we note that the level of student results on national tests did not show a significant effect on directors’ job satisfaction.

**General professional efficacy**

For the analysis of factors contributing to the director’s general sense of professional efficacy (“I have the skills needed to fulfill the requirements of my position”), we examined the relationships between general efficacy and the same variables considered for job satisfaction. However, to this we added a single measure of self efficacy in providing instructional leadership (averaging their responses to “I believe that I can improve the work of teachers” and “I can positively influence the academic performance of students in this school”). We reasoned that directors’ confidence in their instructional leadership influence would be positively associated with their overall sense of professional efficacy. The regression analysis yielded several significant models for general professional efficacy, but the explanatory power of even for the best model was low (7.2% of the variability among directors in general professional efficacy), which suggests that other factors are at play which we have yet to identify in our ongoing work.
The findings from this analysis confirm the expectation that directors’ overall sense of professional efficacy is positively associated with their confidence in their effectiveness as instructional leaders (influence on quality of teaching and learning). It is not surprising then, that direct engagement (rather than delegation) in instructional leadership work with teachers also shows a positive association with general professional efficacy. In short, directors who get personally involved in helping teachers with their professional work in classrooms express more confidence in their instructional leadership capacity as well as their overall effectiveness. We know school director’s in Chile have not traditionally acted as instructional leaders, and that their professional knowledge about how to enact that role are has not been a focus of their professional education. Perhaps, those that take on this role in the workplace actually become more aware of and confident in their capacity to help teachers and influence student learning.

It is also of interest that the directors’ reported general sense of professional efficacy is more closely tied to their engagement in instructional leadership work than to carrying out their administrative tasks. This finding does not support our original hypothesis that directors’ sense of professional efficacy in Chilean elementary schools is more dependent on their perceived administrative competence than on their engagement in instructional leadership activities.

**Instructional leadership efficacy**

We constructed our measure of instructional leadership efficacy from two survey items (“I believe I can improve the work of teachers in this school”. “I believe I can positively influence the academic performance of students in this school”). To investigate what explains variability in directors’ confidence in their instructional leadership, we examined the relationship of instructional leadership efficacy to our measures of professional education, salary levels, years of experience, student achievement, personal engagement in administrative and/or instructional leadership tasks, school sector, school size and gender. In addition to these variables, we looked at whether the directors’ individual instructional leadership efficacy was influenced by their confidence in the competence of their staff. For this measure we used the survey item “My school leadership team is adequate to improve the school”, and hypothesized that directors who are more confident in the professional competence of their leadership team would likely report higher levels of confidence in their own instructional leadership actions and influence on teaching and learning.

A regression analysis on the influence of these variables on instructional leadership efficacy produced a significant model comprised of four variables, though the model only explained 10.1% of the variability in instructional leadership efficacy (again suggesting that other as yet unidentified factors are also influence their sense of efficacy). The four variables in that model are confidence in the school team (positive relationship), student achievement on national tests (positive relationship), and employment in either the subsidised or fee-paying private schools.
Clearly, directors in schools whose students score higher on the national tests of student performance have a justifiable basis for claiming that they are capable of influencing the quality of teaching and learning, and for expressing confidence in the quality of their teachers work. The combination of a strong sense of instructional leadership efficacy with confidence in school leadership team competence, suggests that in the directors in these schools may attribute the positive results in student learning to the collective effort of their leadership team with the support of the director. We are uncertain at this stage of our analysis whether student academic results depend on directors’ confidence in their capacity to influence teaching and learning and confidence in teachers, or whether information on positive achievement results simply creates feelings of competence (regardless of whether directors are actually taking effective actions as instructional leaders). The directors’ direct engagement in instructional leadership actions did not figure into the regression model as it did with the more general measure of efficacy. In our continuing analysis of the survey results we are exploring the links between instructional leadership efficacy and the enactment of more concrete instructional leadership actions, as self reported by principals and as attributed by teachers in their schools.

Concluding remarks

Through our ongoing analysis we hope to come to a better understanding of the complex and seemingly contradictory relationships among these variables. The picture emerging at present is that a significant group of directors in Chilean elementary schools are quite satisfied and feel generally competent in their jobs and schools, but that their sense of satisfaction and competence is not influenced by personal engagement in instructional leadership work. Those that do take on (rather than simply delegate) instructional leadership tasks in their support for teachers, however, actually experience a stronger sense of efficacy in their professional work, but that sense of efficacy is not necessarily accompanied by higher levels of satisfaction. It may be that direct engagement in instructional leadership work creates greater awareness of the challenges of improving the quality of teaching and learning, thus reducing overall satisfaction, but also contributing to motivation to make changes in one’s behavior to improve performance.

Our findings at this stage appear to confirm Bandura’s claim that sense of efficacy is context and task dependent. The school director’s general sense of professional efficacy in satisfying the requirements of their jobs appears much more positive than their self confidence in regards to their specific influence on teaching and learning (instructional leadership). Prior research on principal self efficacy has noted a differentiation between principal efficacy in the execution of school administrative tasks and instructional leadership tasks (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996). Imants and de Brabander (1996) made an even finer distinction between basic school administrative tasks, school improvement-oriented tasks at the school level (e.g., setting goals, school improvement planning, structuring the workplace to support teacher collegiality), and principal involvement in more pupil-oriented tasks, such as teacher supervision and feedback. Our general
measure of school director confidence in their overall competencies for their job did not specifically discriminate administrative tasks from other leadership tasks associated with school improvement. In our continuing analysis we are exploring the relationships between school leader and teacher survey items that assess specific dimensions of school leadership (e.g., setting directions, developing people, structuring the workplace, managing the instructional program), drawing on Leithwood et al.’s (2006) transformational leadership model and Robinson et al.’s (2009) synthesis of school leadership practices that affect student learning.

References


