

## Perspectives on Principal Leadership Competencies: Two Case Studies in Southern Mexico

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of school principals and teachers about the principal leadership competencies. The study was conducted in two schools located in rural communities from the Southeast Mexico. Data collection involved document analysis and surveys addressed to principals and teachers. Findings of the study indicate that principal perspectives are different from those of teachers. While principals emphasized motivation and leadership competencies, teachers were more concerned about the principal school management competencies. Some differences were found on teacher perceptions about principal effectiveness in relation to teacher level of preparation and years of experience.

**Key words:** school principals, principal leadership competencies, Southern Mexico

### 1. Introduction

One of the main challenges for improving Mexican education is to provide education opportunities for all students, increasing the quality of educational process and the transition between educational levels, as well as improving the integration of the whole educational system (Mexican National Plan of Development (2001–2006)). These challenges are particularly important in the case of Mexican high school education.

High school education has a very important role in national development (PNE 2001–2006). According to the National Plan of Development (2001–2006), Mexico needs to improve the quality of this educational level by increasing innovation and providing more access opportunities for all students. Thus, administrators at this educational level need to innovate and provide quality education for all students, particularly those who live in remote rural areas. However, this is a challenge for most principals since most rural schools in Mexico confront serious educational problems, such as low academic achievement, lack of preparation of the administrative staff and limited resources (Blair, 2002). Given the important role of principals in school effectiveness and innovation, more research is needed on principal competencies. Particularly, more studies are needed on the competencies of principals of schools located in remote rural areas in Mexico (Fernández y González, 1997; Fernández, 1988; Cisneros-Cohernour, 2001; Cisneros-Cohernour & Merchant, 2005).

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## 2. Objective

This study focused on examining the leadership competencies of school principals from the perspectives of the principals and teachers from two schools located in rural communities in Southern Mexico.

## 3. Perspective or Theoretical Framework

Deal & Peterson (1994) and Lashway (1996), state that effective principals need to be well organized passionate and creative leaders. Stolp (1994), also state that school principals have to be both managers and leaders. As leaders, they have to promote a vision expressing the central values of the school. As managers they develop structures and policies that help to institutionalize the vision.

Kyrillidou & Blixt (1992) also examined the competencies of effective principals. They stated that all principals need to develop essential competencies required for effectively accomplishing their roles. Studies on principal leadership in Mexico found that most principals in elementary and junior high schools start their positions without having prior preparation in the required competencies for the position (Cuellar, 1989; Cisneros et al., 2003; Cisneros & Merchant, 2005).

Given the limited number of studies examining the competencies of school administrators in Mexico, Cisneros-Cohernour et al. (2005) conducted a study examining the competencies of school principals for elementary and secondary schools, as well as for higher education administrators in Southern Mexico. This study was part of that research, conducted in rural schools in Yucatan, Mexico.

## 4. Methods

This was a descriptive study conducted in two high schools of the Southeast of Mexico. Two questionnaires were used to collect information from the principal and teachers perspective about principal leadership competencies.

Participants were two principals and 79 teachers: school A = 37 teachers; school B = 42 teachers.

The survey addressed to principals was a self-assessment questionnaire designed by Cisneros-Cohernour et al. This survey was developed after a review of the literature on principal competencies that was later validated with a Delphi of experts from the US and Mexico who worked for the last ten years on principal preparation in Mexico. Then, the survey was validated with a sample of principals from elementary, junior high and high schools in southern Mexico. The final version of the survey has 110 items measuring the following nine competencies: management, communication and human relations; academic development; education for a globalized society; legislation; leadership; motivation; ethical, social and professional responsibility.

The second survey addressed to teachers was an adaptation of the Principal Evaluation Form Questionnaire developed by Kyrillidou & Blixt (1992). This survey includes 30 items focused on measuring the following competencies of the principal: management, professional development and personal characteristics.

## 5. Results

Findings of the study indicate that the principal of School A believed that she demonstrated in her work the competencies related with motivation and leadership. She believed the competencies she used less were ethical, social and professional responsibility and education for a globalized society. She added that she would like to

receive preparation in these two sets of competencies. Although this principal indicated that she considered all competencies to be important, she believed motivating school personnel and leading the school were essential for an effective school leadership.

On the other hand, the principal of school B stated that he used more in his job the competencies related to academic development and ethical, social and professional responsibility. He stated interest on receiving professional development about the competency related to education for a globalized society. Although this principal also stated that all competencies were important, but he believed that the essential competencies for an effective principalship were: motivation, ethical, professional and social responsibility.

Results from the teacher survey show that school personnel have a different perspective of the principals' competencies. Teachers gave a high assessment to the principals in the following aspects of the competency of professional development:

- Allowing an harmonious relationship among teachers
- Promoting a high morale of the staff
- Being respected by students
- Promoting harmony among school stakeholders
- Making the staff feel trusted by the administration
- Attends
- Attending the school every day

Both principals obtained high assessment from the teachers in relation to certain personal characteristics:

- Dressing in an appropriate way
- Demonstrating maturity and emotional stability

However, principals obtained lower scores from teachers in the following aspects of the management competency:

- Providing clear and consistent instructions to the staff
- Reducing non-academic work that affect academic responsibilities
- Having resources for schools to support school work available for teachers
- Organizing academic meetings only when they were necessary
- Establishing a working schedule according to the school and staff needs.

Of the two principals, the principal of school A was better evaluated by the staff in relation to her personal characteristics. However, teachers who had low experience in the job (1–10 years of experience) or high experience (21–30 years of experience) rated more positively this principal than did those with medium experience in the job (11–20 years of experience). It was also found that teachers who were less prepared (bachelor degree) provided a higher assessment of the two principals in the competency related to management than did those with a higher degree (graduate degree).

## 6. Conclusions

Findings of the study were consistent with the work of Cuéllar (1989), Cisneros-Cohernour & Merchant (1999) and Cisneros-Cohernour (2001) regarding the lack of experience and preparation of the principals prior to their appointment. It was also found that principals do not use all the expected competencies for their job, nor are prepared in all of them. Although both considered all the competencies as important, they were not interested in

receiving professional development in all of them.

Teachers evaluated higher the principal of school A than did the teachers of school B. These findings were consistent with School Department Officials who indicated that the performance of students in school A was higher than those of school B. The principal of School A also had a strong positive reputation within the community surrounding her school.

In spite of these findings, it is desirable for both principals to receive professional development in all the competencies, primarily in those related to school management, ethical, social and professional responsibility and education for a globalized world. Future studies could examine deeper differences in teacher and administrator perceptions and the challenges faced by principals in their real work. This research should use multiple methods of data collection and examine deeply the complexities of the school context and the reasons for possible explanations of principal behavior.

## 7. Educational Significance

The study is important because it adds to the literature on school leadership in Mexico, primarily on effective competencies for principals of rural schools in Latin America. This research is necessary given that most of the studies have been conducted in other countries and cultures. The inclusion of teachers and principals perceptions was important because it allowed examining similarities and differences between these two stakeholders at the school level. The research also permitted to validate findings of prior studies on school leadership competencies from abroad (Harris, Day & Hadfield, 2003; Checkley, 2000) as well as other studies on principal leadership conducted in Yucatan in other educational levels (Cisneros-Cohernour et al., 2003; Que, 2005). Results of the study can be used for designing and implementing professional development for school principals.

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