Challenges facing novice principals: A study in Colombian schools using a socialisation perspective

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This research examined challenges faced by novice principals in Colombia in connecting to their school communities through their socialisation processes. Interviews with 37 newly appointed principals in rural and urban schools revealed that the complexity of their school contexts accentuated the need to work on the relational dimension of their jobs. Forging relationships with teachers and parents based on trust and communication, introspection and knowledge about their school communities emerged as crucial factors to foster social justice and to transcend deficit views of their communities. The article questions the role of supporting services for novice principals, emphasises the importance of organisational socialisation, and stresses the role of preparation programs in providing principals with tools for learning during this phase of their professional careers.

Introduction

Besides struggling to balance managerial and instructional concerns, principals have to attend to numerous strains associated to the relationships with the school agents who influence school climate (Scott & Rarieya, 2011). Tensions stemming from lack of teacher engagement, poor relationships among teachers, and resistance to or even rejection of the principal's authority result in a weak organisational fabric that affects school performance. Such problems tend to be more evident with newly appointed principals (García-Garduño, Slater & López-Gorosave, 2010; García-Garduño, Slater & López-Gorosave, 2009). In developing countries, like Mexico and others, for example in South Africa, violent and unsafe environments exacerbate the social pressures faced by novice principals. Dealing with conflict resolution in such contexts is a pivotal concern, as principals believe a failure to do so negatively influences the prospects for student success (García-Garduño, Slater & López-Gorosave, 2010; Mentz, Webber & van der Walt, 2010). The literature repeatedly highlights the importance of principals nurturing teacher leadership and building positive relations with students and the school community, including parents and other stakeholders (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2009; Li, Hallinger & Walker, 2016; Steyn, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Ngidi & Qwabe, 2006).

Cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that an issue of concern for principals in trying to build a heathy and productive school climate is the need to understand the values and beliefs that compose that school's culture (Webber, Mentz, Scott, Okoko & Scott, 2014). Such comprehension is indispensable for nurturing the bonds between different members of the school's community. A review of literature on school climate underscores this understanding, as well as the need to appreciate differences between different contexts, as they shape people's experiences, relationships, and learning paths (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey

& Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Such realisations are likewise evident in Walker, Hu and Qian's (2012) review of studies on principals in China, which shows that principals there additionally tussle with contradictions between globalising tendencies embedded in policy reforms and local cultural traditions. In response to the pressures generated by this clash, they find that principals pay lip service to the reforms, though in fact make no changes in practice. In East Africa, novice principals also confront pressing issues of staff and student safety, lack of parental involvement due to illiteracy, and extreme poverty and limited resources that contribute to disillusionment and poor morale (Onguko, Abdalla & Webber, 2012). However, according to Scott and Rarieya (2011), there are more similarities than differences in the challenges faced by novice principals nowadays. In their comparison of East African and Canadian principal preparation programs, these authors hypothesised that globalisation results in many essential similarities in the complex situations surrounding the work of principals worldwide. Their work emphasises awareness about multicultural education and acceptance, and accommodation of multi-faceted forms of diversity that can enhance school climates.

This study responded to a call from various authors regarding the need for a more inclusive view on the study of principal leadership, as most research has concentrated on Anglo-Saxon contexts and perspectives (Oplatka, 2004; Weinstein & Hernández, 2016) and it addresses the absence of research regarding educational leadership and management in certain areas of Latin America (Aravena & Hallinger, 2018). It adds to current literature that examines the challenges faced by novice principals by bringing the perspective of principals in Colombia, where research has been hitherto non-existent. In addition, this study is significant because it adds valuable information for principals' professional development.

Our objective was to identify problematic issues faced by novice principals in Colombia in connection with students, teachers and the community, and to analyse these difficulties in the light of formal and informal socialisation opportunities. The overarching questions that guided our study were:

1. What problems do novice principals in Colombia face with their school community?
2. How do they confront them?
3. How do their problems relate to socialisation opportunities in their professional development?

Principal leadership in Latin America

When examining the panorama of research on principalship in Latin America, the scarcity of research is notable. A recent synthesis of school leadership initiatives in 8 countries of the region showed that the topic is beginning to gain attention, but that there is a remarkable absence of work on the situation of principals and the impact of school leadership strategies (UNESCO, 2014). Weinstein and Hernández (2016) stated that Western leadership models have often been applied without consideration for the political and social contexts of the region, thereby exacerbating dilemmas and tensions associated

with autonomy and authority, as most educational systems in Latin America are highly centralised.

Mexico and Chile are the two countries that concentrate the highest number of publications on principalship (Aravena & Hallinger, 2018). In Mexico, research done by García-Garduño, Slater and López-Gorosave (2011a, 2011b) and Patrón and Cisneros-Cohernour (2011) showed that familial unresponsiveness and lack of collaboration are factors that erode the kinds of support that novice principals require and that pre-service preparation is indispensable to strengthen their socialisation if school innovation and transformation is to be achieved.

Chile has developed the *School Management and Leadership Framework*, a government policy aimed at improving the quality of education in the country (Ministerio de Educación, 2015). The new framework strengthens management and administrative skills, but includes a pedagogical leadership component intended to provide teachers with the pedagogical support needed to enhance student learning (Muñoz & Marfán, 2012; Weinstein, Cuellar, Hernández & Flessa, 2015; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2013). However, factors such as principals' inexperience, constraints on their autonomy to select staff, and teachers' resistance have affected negatively the possibility to materialise the instructional leadership component, especially in low-performing schools, where principals have to prioritise administrative tasks (Leiva, Montecinos, Ahumada, Campos & Guerra, 2017).

Principals in Colombia: Context

In Colombia, the term *directivo-docente* (manager-teacher) is used to refer to all personnel who perform managerial duties, such as principals, vice-principals, coordinators, directors of educational institutions, or supervisors of education. The denomination implies that a person in any of these posts must have experience as both a manager (*directivo)* and a teacher (*docente)*. However, it does not necessarily mean that a given manager-teacher holds a professional degree in education. Thus, a candidate for a principalship position may be a professional from any field (e.g. lawyers, engineers, architects). Act 1278 (Decreto 1278, 2002) established that candidates for management posts in schools should have an undergraduate degree in either education or in any other field plus six years of professional experience in education. It is the responsibility of local governments or Secretariats of Education to select the principal for a given school. This person is appointed after an open, competitive selection process based on academic and professional merits. The Ministry of Education regulates the professional development process of teachers and principals, as well as their classifications in a career ladder that establishes ranks for their salaries.

In Colombia, undergraduate programs that specifically prepared principals ceased to exist after the promulgation of Act 272 (Decreto 272, 1998), which limited undergraduate degrees in education to the preparation of teachers in different disciplines for early childhood education, primary, and secondary levels. In the wake of Act 272, universities offered courses and specialisations in educational supervision, but there were no formal undergraduate programs granting degrees in educational administration or leadership.

Formal preparation programs for prospective principals are provided in postgraduate degrees. Currently, 24 graduate programs in the country emphasise educational management and administration or related areas. Out of these, 15 are specialisations that usually last a year and that have a strong emphasis on educational administration. There are nine Master's programs that offer a choice between emphases on school management or quality assurance, and only two of these are specifically targeted at training practicing managers and principals from schools and universities. The absence of formal preparation programs for school management and leadership in Colombia is noteworthy, and similar patterns likewise prevail in other Latin American countries (OECD, 2016).

Theoretical framework: Principals' socialisation process

Our study used socialisation theory because it focuses on the paths principals take in accommodating themselves to their milieu. This theoretical stance has its roots in van Genneps' concept of the "rites of passage" (1960), which proposes that individuals' lives are composed of passages and rites as they make significant transitions in their social and cultural groups. Such rites are attached to particular events — including marriage, parenthood, and death — but also may occur when an individual joins a particular group or organisation.

The study of principals has been marked by an emphasis on stages of socialisation as they transition into principalship (García-Garduño, Slater & López-Gorosave, 2010). Much of the research literature focuses on Hart's (1991) and Weindling's (1999) proposals that acknowledge three distinct stages of socialisation: professional, organisational, and occupational identity. The first occurs prior to assuming the role of principal and refers to becoming a professional in that field by gaining the knowledge and abilities required to perform the job. In this stage, both formal training and personal experiences are part of principals' identity development. The second, organisational stage, involves learning the values, norms, beliefs, and knowledge particular to the context in which the principal is situated (Steyn, 2013a). This stage connects to van Maanen and Schein's (1979) understanding that socialisation involves the transmission of information and values and, therefore, constitutes a cultural matter. The final stage or occupational identity refers to principals' self-appraisal and confidence in their competence to assume the authority in a school.

Stages of the organisational socialisation process

Gabarro (1987) provides a lens to analyse the second stage (organisational socialisation) that embraces five chronological phases: taking hold, immersion, reshaping, consolidation, and refinement (Steyn, 2013a). *Taking hold* refers to the first critical days when principals face their new realities. Some principals go through a period of reality shock in this stage, as they face an unexpected flurry of complex situations for which they are ultimately responsible and that could have consequences for them such as feelings of abandonment and isolation (Weinstein, Cuéllar, Hernández & Fernández, 2016). This stage is characterised by confrontation, evaluation, and adjustment. *Immersion* is a period of small changes based on assessment of the organisational climate. The *reshaping* stage involves

major adjustments based on a deeper assessment of the culture and practices of the school. In the fourth stage, principals attempt to *consolidate* changes, while in the final stage, *refinement*, learning results from the knowledge principals gain through everyday experiences. We selected this framework because of its centrality in understanding the experiences of new principals within the organisation.

These phases through which principals go involve the use of relational knowledge that is an essential component of the socialisation process. Sackney and Walker (2006) argued that socialisation for principals implies learning "how to behave and how to get things done in a new organisation" (p. 344). These authors added that this learning process implies building on knowledge, dispositions, and skills to perform certain social roles, which, according to Bristol, Brown and Esnard (2014) are derived from the conceptualisations communities built by such roles. Socialisation is a permanent process that demands principals to revise their ways of behaving and interacting and be attentive to contextual influences. In this sense, the process becomes iterative as the impacts from different sources of socialisation lead principals to continuously modify their visions of their contexts. More specifically, with regard to new principals' interactions with stakeholders, teachers, predecessors, other principals and even administrators from central education agencies, Sackney and Walker (2006) observed that many studies have shown that the accumulation of socialisation experiences accounts for increases or decreases in such interactions and for decisions regarding personnel.

Bristol, Brown, and Esnard (2014) suggested that newly appointed principals' processes of socialisation aid in the transitions or rites of passage needed to access their profession and consolidate their membership in it. They emphasised that competing forces emanating from managerial demands and national and international policies complicate professional opportunities for principals. To confront such complexities, principals resort to both formal and informal sources of socialisation. University degrees, in-service training, and other professional development programs are part of the dominant formal sources used by both Western and non-Western educational systems. However, the utility of these sources has been questioned, as they often tend to focus on managerial aspects at the expense of instructional components or other aspects of the school culture (Menzt, Webber & van der Walt, 2010). Informal sources embrace all the connections principals make with members of their personal and professional networks. In fact, Mentz, Webber and van der Walt (2010) found that novice principals in both African and Canadian contexts value the knowledge provided by their informal networks as much as that provided by their formal training programs.

Networks take shape within the school when principals and teachers work together, and the results of such efforts become fruitful when they enhance school capacity. Sleegers, Thoonen, Oort and Peetsma (2014) showed that there is a connection between school capacity building and teachers' instructional practices, as well as that teachers' level of motivation and engagement in professional learning activities is related to the organisational conditions at their schools. In their review of the literature, Yakavets, Frost and Khoroshash (2017) stressed that school capacity is central to making school transformation possible and translating education reforms into practice. The authors

emphasised the need for teachers to strengthen their personal capacities, or the possibilities for continuously updating themselves, and to develop interpersonal and organisational capacities. In their view, "school leaders need to develop the organisation of their schools in terms of roles of responsibility, structures of accountability, patterns of collaboration, evaluation procedures and the activities that support professional development" (p. 351). Such development would result in school transformation and improvement but, as Hallinger and Heck (2010) observed, the betterment of schools is a highly contextualised and adaptable process, as well as an area that requires further exploration.

Method

This study was framed within a qualitative research perspective, as we wanted to capture novice principals' experiences and perceptions in a specific context. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) characterised qualitative research as a situated, naturalistic, and interpretative practice, signifying that researchers examine "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 4). In this study, principals provided accounts of their experiences as novice professionals, referred to the particularities of their contexts, and discussed the paths they took in confronting the obstacles they encountered. Our intention as researchers was to interpret the meanings those novice principals brought to the situations they described.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study. Patton (2002) observed that this technique enables the identification of information-rich cases, while Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) added that it likewise facilitates the selection of participants who are knowledgeable about a topic and possess experience about it. We selected novice principals from the Bogotá capital district and the Department of Cundinamarca, regions that contain the highest concentrations of schools in Colombia. The criteria for selection specified that participating principals must be newly appointed male or female principals with a maximum of 3 years' experience in their jobs, and that they be from both public and private, and primary and secondary, institutions. The Secretariats of Education from both Bogotá and Cundinamarca, which are in charge of selection processes for and contracts of educators and principals in the public sector for their respective regions, provided information about possible candidates.

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and only those who accepted and signed a consent form were interviewed. Because information about principals from private schools was not available in the SED, we used the snowball technique, which refers to the recruitment of other participants by means of referral (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, coordinators from two graduate programs in Bogotá were contacted and advised about the objectives of the research and selection criteria for participants and were asked for referrals.

A total of 37 novice principals, 16 males and 21 females, whose ages ranged between 31 and 55 years of age, participated in the study. Of these, 22 were working in public schools

and the remaining 15 in private ones. Of the 37 participants, 8 had been hired for rural schools in Cundinamarca. The number of students in participants' schools ranged from 176 in one private religious school to 3250 in an urban public school. There were two principals working in two small towns in Cundinamarca who managed urban-rural schools. All participants held at least a bachelor's degree; 29 had completed specialisations, 23 had completed masters degrees, and three were pursuing a doctoral degree in education. Table 1 summarises participants' profiles.

Table 1: Summary of participants' profiles

Months as a principal	n	Gender	n	Age	n	School category			
							n		n
1-6	8	Females	21	31-35	3	Rural	5	Public	26
7-12	8	Males	16	36-40	5	Urban	32	Private	11
13-18	8			41-45	8				
19-24	5			46-50	6				
25-30	2			>50	11				
31-36	6			No report	4				
Total	37		37		37		37		37

Instrumentation

In-depth interviews that "seek 'deep' information and knowledge" (Johnson, 2001, p. 104) were used. They ranged from 40 to 90 minutes in length and were conducted individually with each participant from September 2016 to January 2017. The interviews were done in Spanish and the researchers translated into English the samples selected to illustrate the findings. Two bilingual teachers of English revised the translations to ensure their quality. A preliminary version of the interview protocol was piloted with a principal whose characteristics were similar to those of the selected participants. Based on a preliminary analysis of the responses obtained in the pilot interview, modifications were made so that the final protocol centred on: (a) demographic information; (b) preparation programs pursued; (c) difficulties encountered in the first years as a principal; and (d) ways of confronting them. Depending on the responses from any given principal, the researchers asked further questions to obtain more information about their experiences during the first years in their positions so that they could voice their reflections freely and openly.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using the iterative proposal of Huberman and Miles (1994). Each researcher read and analysed the interviews separately, identifying themes that appeared repeatedly in the data. Working collaboratively, the researchers revised these themes and, subsequently, grouped them into categories. As the analysis progressed, we compared and contrasted new themes and modified the categories until we reached saturation of the data (Charmaz, 2006). To ensure the robustness of the analysis, we used researcher triangulation, which Merriam (2009) defined as the use of multiple perspectives — in this case multiple researchers —

on the same phenomenon. To ensure the participants' anonymity, consistent numbering is used to identify them in this article.

Findings

The results are organised around the main challenges faced by principals in relation to students, teachers, families and the community in general. Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate relevant aspects and to give principals a voice.

Principals facing uncertainty in the management of students' behaviours and the disconnect with families

Novice principals in this study experienced a state of perplexity over how to respond to complex situations emerging from the weak relationships amongst students, that usually resulted in physical aggression and bullying. Part of the problem related to schools' infrastructural problems, overcrowding and the dispersion of the school buildings within a given neighbourhood or in the rural sector. Research has consistently demonstrated that overcrowding is associated with student achievement and with teacher and student absenteeism and that "school climate plays a mediating role in the effect that school building quality has on student achievement" (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008, p. 68). Novice principals in this study reported that a negative school climate emerged from frictions among students due to the tension generated in crowded classrooms and other school spaces: "there is overcrowding in the schools located in the city. Because of that, there are disputes and fights" (Principal 2). Another principal acknowledged the role the facilities played in generating a sense of belongingness with the school and paid particular attention to creating aesthetic spaces where students could feel comfortable:

> When I arrived at this school, I found an old, deteriorated building that is more than 60 years old. We began to use aesthetics as a means to educate children. We began with simple things like mowing the lawn to ensure that children could have a space to sit (Principal 33).

Although at first glance, school infrastructure plays a role in students' behaviour, there are deeper preoccupations for Colombian novice principals that are associated with what the literature calls the emotional reality of leadership (Riley, 2013). Public school principals participating in the present study observed that vulnerabilities of families were transferred to the schools and there crystallised into disruptive and conflictive behaviour. Much student resentment originated in family violence and abuse, lack of affection, and neglect. Public school principals referred to parental absence and its negative influence on children's behaviours. In many cases, grandparents or other family members had to assume the role of caretakers because students' parents were incarcerated or suffering from problems with substance abuse. Lack of affection and attention, coupled with the absence of appropriate role models, seems to instigate reactions of resentment, apathy, and sometimes aggression from students.

> Many homes are dysfunctional. If there is a father, there is no mother, or there is neither. There is a grandfather or grandmother, drug addicted fathers or mothers, incarcerated

fathers, incarcerated moms. They come from social environments in which they have no family model. They don't have affection and love, so they tend to be resentful towards many things (Principal 9).

Principals facing fragile relationships with teachers

Fraught relationships with teachers emerged as another main concern for newly appointed principals. Many were perceived as inexperienced or lacking sufficient knowledge to lead the school. Principal 37, for example, was 35 years old at the time of the interview and expressed that due to his age he felt that he "was not perceived as someone who could lead a group". Others perceived that some teachers were continuously challenging and questioning their authority and that tense atmospheres characterised by resistance to change emerged because of those attitudes:

> In the school, there were great difficulties and clashes. Lots of resistance to my authority.
> At that time, it was a challenge (Principal 24).

Whilst for principals in public schools, teacher absenteeism and the legal consequences of teachers' complaints taken to the Colombian teachers' union were main problems, principals in private schools had to confront problems with teacher dropout and mobility: "The challenge is to keep the teachers and to reduce turnover rates" (Principal 31). In the public school cases, new principals stated that dealing with these problems was time consuming and demanding. In the private school cases, the turnover of teachers influenced the continuity of school projects because of the difficulty to consolidate teams: "There has not been continuity and establishing a team has been difficult" (Principal 34).

Another challenge that principals faced was improving teachers' pedagogical practices and confronting their tendency to remain at a plateau. This situation generated tension because there was resistance to change, which could lead to weakened relationships. Principal 31 attested:

> Sadly, teachers do not want to leave their comfort zones. If you to help them get out of these, they will resist and complain.

Some principals referred to relationships of power that were at stake between them and the teachers. They felt coerced into taking certain actions because there was a tacit understanding that, in exchange for professional commitment, they needed to offer personal benefits to teachers:

> Teachers begin to lower their resistance when they feel that one is collaborating with their personal things. It is like a game. There are some forces, some relations of power there (Principal 18).

Interestingly though, the data suggest that many participants identified their challenges as being external to themselves. It was very infrequent in their discourses to find acknowledgements to their knowledge and skill development as novice principals, or lack of them and to how they may influence their actions.

Principals forging relationships with teachers in an environment of distrust

One of the areas that novice principals felt was important to tackle was negative images teachers had, such as that of the principal as an adversary. They began transitioning from that negative view to a perception of the principal as a source of support with whom teachers can jointly seek solutions to problems and work on the development of projects for the educational community:

> I have sought to build good relations in these thirteen months. I have dedicated myself to strengthening the fabric of relations and that they do not consider the principal as an enemy (Principal 9).

Szeto and Cheng (2017) indicated that the literature about leadership is replete with commentary on the positive influence that trusting, supporting, and interacting with teachers has on school progress. Similar observations emerged from several interviews in the present study. Building trust with teachers is concomitant with believing in their efforts and supporting their initiatives and professional development. This implied challenging prevailing hierarchical structures and resorting to bottom-up strategies in which teachers had the freedom to pursue their own professional development routes, as observed by Principal 30:

> Giving impetus to their initiatives… It is they who tell us how, where, and in which areas they want to have their professional development.

Principals' negative perceptions of their communities

In the rural sector, principals claimed that the government had abandoned them, and consequently, they felt isolated and disconnected from the schools they served. This last aspect led to misconceptions about the school community that were reflected in the negative imagery used to describe students and their families. They were portrayed as lazy, apathetic and unwilling to become involved with community development. Principal 2 stated:

> Nobody wants to do anything. The subsidy from Families in Action has increased that attitude. So, people just hang out and wait to receive the subsidy and use it to drink beer.

His explanation refers to policies promoted by the government for more than two decades and crystallised in a plan called "Families in Action", a government policy aimed at providing subsidies to families in conditions of extreme poverty. These included victims of displacement and members of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (Departamento de Planeación Nacional, 2000). Labelling the community as unwilling and passive denigrates rural contexts and their people while perpetuating negative stereotypes and deepening a socio-cultural disconnect.

Some other novice principals, although still holding a stigmatised view of their rural communities, reflected upon the influence of their school curricular practices on students' future opportunities and frequently mentioned the need to push for an entrepreneur spirit:

> Students need to become entrepreneurs. So, what is happening is that the kids finish high school, they migrate to the city. They become regular employees and begin to work. Therefore, we are contributing to a cycle that does not make sense (Principal 7).

Advocating for this spirit is apparently rooted in novice principals' desire to stop the migration of young people to the cities and the perpetuation of circles of poverty. However, these views raise questions about the extent to which families would like to change their identity pushed by a neoliberal version of the general society. This also suggests that novice principals need to learn about the values and beliefs of their communities and develop, as Harmon and Schafft (2009) stated, identities that help them to articulate their actions to the communities' ways of thinking and believing.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicate that newly appointed principals in this Latin American context are substantially conditioned by an entanglement of circumstances stemming from their relationships with all members of the school community. Poverty and other conditions rooted in deep social problems create a constellation of challenges that permeate their school contexts. Novice principals in this study were continuously dealing with at-risk students from vulnerable family and social backgrounds. This situation is additionally concerning, as most schools are insufficiently prepared to provide the support these students require. Such results are comparable with those of Tapia-Gutiérrez, Becerra-Peña, Mansilla-Sepúlveda and Saavedra-Muñoz (2011), who found that lack of support for diverse populations in highly vulnerable Chilean contexts was a factor that inhibited both learning and principals' leadership. Their study showed that limited health and psychological services, along with deficient learning support for heterogeneous groups of students, create tensions for newly appointed principals. Crow (2006) emphasised that permanent changes in students' demographics, coupled with evolving complex environments, require a support structure involving different types of educational and socio-psychological services. The results of the present study support this idea and suggest that greater leverage is needed to create the organisational conditions for an equitable educational system that would provide appropriate learning conditions for all students. This also implies a revision of government policies regarding the mechanisms to guarantee the necessary types of support services for principals.

Reduced family participation in students' educational processes constituted another difficulty for the novice principals in this study. Family disintegration, child abandonment, apathy, lack of affection, and even child abuse are situations that negatively affect students. They unleash their fears and psychological and physical mistreatment through rebellious and aggressive behavioural patterns that affect the school climate negatively. Navarro, Vaccari and Canales (2001) emphasised that dialogue between families and the school, as well as active participation, are critical to achieving schools' educational goals. It is therefore imperative that principals create alliances with families to increase their participation in school initiatives. Parents influence students from their earliest years, leaving either positive or negative marks on them. Workshops for strengthening parenting

skills as well as the incorporation of counselling and other support services, as mentioned earlier, could facilitate new principals' efforts to attract and engage families.

Another concern from newly appointed principals who participated in this study was that mistrust, individualism, and resistance to change, particularly from teachers, characterised their working environments, which are patterns that have likewise emerged in other international studies of novice principals (García-Garduño, Slater & López-Gorosave, 2010; Patrón & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2011). When teacher's actions and behaviours are driven exclusively by their own rights and interests, fragmentation and weakening of the school' relational fabric tends to occur. This situation can escalate into an atmosphere of tension further aggravated by concealed issues of power in the relations between teachers and new principals, an issue that also deserves further analysis. Bidirectional dialogue, as well as reciprocal empathy and recognition of the individualities and potential of each person, are central elements that both principals and teachers must cultivate to foster a more positive school climate.

Although some novice principals, both in the rural and urban areas, discussed the importance of fostering bonds with parents and other members of the school community, their statements did not show traces of self-interrogation and introspection to question their own beliefs and how they connected to the beliefs of their school communities. Many of the activities they described, such as recreational events and meetings with families, aimed at not being perceived as outsiders. They emphasised that cultural rapprochement implies being open to the community and creating empathy with its members, but specific information about how this was done and if there were self-initiated actions to examine their own views, were absent in the data.

This leads to reflecting upon the role of principals in promoting social justice practices in rural areas, and highlights the need to examine novice principals' beliefs and identities in relation to those of their school communities. Çiftçi and Melis (2017) argued that rural education should be more sensitive to its communities' cultures and identities, and in the light of that argument, this study questions the extent to which novice principals are aware of their own beliefs and imagining about students and their families in the rural area. This awareness is indispensable to align all members of the community in both protecting the cultures of the communities while advancing in the achievement of their goals.

Novice principals in this study recognised that they must exercise leadership that fosters relationships of trust, respect, and empathy with teachers, students, and parents to achieve educational goals. Leithwood (2009) observed that leadership is closely linked to changing social environments that demand direction. Despite the adverse conditions in their schools, principals need to forge relationships with teachers, parents, and the community in general by prioritising a reculturing of their schools (Fullan, 1998). This implies that principals have to disencumber themselves of images they had created of teachers and parents and try to enter and live in the students' own communities to understand their views and values.

In connection with such socialisation processes, new principals who participated in the present study were going through a transition from the *taking hold* to the *reshaping* stage (Steyn, 2013a). They were absorbing the complex situations they encountered, but still needed to build awareness of the importance of reflecting upon themselves and the idiosyncrasies of their communities. As suggested in previous research (Gillett, Clarke & O'Donoghueh, 2016) being knowledgeable about the school community is crucial to gain understandings of its people and culture and, thereby, for better serving them. This study suggests that contextual knowledge and reflection upon the school culture, in combination with personal traits, such as deep inner personal drives to make change possible, openness and tolerance to others, willingness to communicate, and a strong sense of justice for better opportunities are necessary to guide principals in their transition from initial shock to taking proactive actions. The actions taken by principals in this study highlight the relevance of organisational socialisation and the need to incorporate tools to learn about it in preparation programs. The knowledge they accumulate from their experiences could serve as an important scaffold in their professional development and could be a valuable asset for informal support programs provided by local government, a type of initiative also stressed in other Latin American contexts (Weinstein et al., 2016).

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Interviews for novice principals in Colombia

Aspects	Purpose	Questions and prompts
Demographics	Specify some demographic characteristics of the participants (age, sex, education (degrees), place of work)	Please tell me your: - Age - Education: degree, institutions - Status (married, single, divorced other - Describe the place where you work as a principal (characteristics of the institution such as geographical location, number of students and teachers, mission and vision of the school)
Preparation programs	Describe the preparation programs the novice principals took part in	Describe your preparation for the principalship: Formality of program Type of preparation institution (if applicable, certification requirements, emphasis, methodologies, evaluation, etc.)
Challenges as a novice principal	Identify challenges, tensions, dilemmas, problems newly appointed principals confronted	What were the main difficulties you faced in your first years as a principal? (Critical moments, people involved, causes of the problems, consequences) How did you confront those difficulties? (Critical moments and examine strategies used, values, roles assumed, management of relationships, role as a leader)

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