Spring 5-22-2021

A Qualitative Study Exploring State School Leaders' Work With Teachers In Argentina

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Abstract

Principals' influence on teachers' practices is the second factor, after classroom instruction, that most impact student learning and success. In Argentina state schools serve 70% of the students, therefore, state school leaders play a key role in the K-12 education of the country. The present study explored the experiences of six Argentinian state school administrators (principals and assistant principals) about their role in working with teachers. This qualitative study examined the following question: How do Argentinian state school administrators experience their role in working with and leading teachers? A qualitative, phenomenological research approach and two of the most prominent educational leadership models in the field – Instructional Leadership and Transformational Leadership guided the research methods. The experiences of six state school administrators from different provinces in Argentina were collected through semi-structured interviews. Three main findings were drawn: a) participants were struggling to enact instructional leadership, b) there were factors affecting and limiting their performance, and c) they were using specific instructional and transformational leadership strategies to deal with the challenges they identified. Finally, implications for administrator preparation, education policy, and future research are made at the close of this paper.

Key words: Argentina; school leadership; school administrators; instructional leadership; transformational leadership.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING STATE SCHOOL LEADERS' WORK

WITH TEACHERS IN ARGENTINA

by

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Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Educational Leadership

Syracuse University

May 2021

Contents

Introduction

School leaders play a critical role in creating and providing the required conditions and school environment to foster and ensure high levels of student learning and outcome. After classroom instruction, principals' influence on teacher practices and performance is one of the factors that most impact student learning and success (Day et al., 2016; Supovitz et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, I use the term principals to refer to the head of the school and the terms school administrators/school leaders to refer to principals and assistant principals. School leadership has been explored in the Anglo-Saxon countries for more than two decades (Felipe Aravena Castillo & Philip Hallinger, 2018; Flessa et al., 2018; Heck & Hallinger, 2005), and a considerable amount of knowledge has been produced about school leaders' characteristics (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003), actions that make a difference in school outcomes (e.g. drafting a school vision for equity, influencing school culture, driving change, building capacity, and sustaining school improvement) (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Saphier & King, 1985; Theoharis, 2007), and the kind of leadership they should exercise to elicit high-level teacher and student performance (e.g. instructional leadership, transformational leadership, collaborative leadership) (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

However, in the Latin American region, research exploring principals' leadership is scarce, especially in terms of their interaction with teachers (Peire, 2019; Romero & Krichesky, 2018; Veleda, 2016). Since state schools in Argentina are free of charge and serve 70% of the students (Buchbinder et al., 2019; Veleda, 2016), state school administrators play an essential role in the K-12 education of the country. Therefore, this study aims at exploring how K-12 state school administrators in Argentina navigate their role in working with and leading teachers by using a qualitative research approach.

School Leadership in Argentina

Research on Argentina educational leadership exploring the role of principals in terms of their work with teachers is limited. Available studies focused mainly on the working conditions, job regulations, and the kind of professional development opportunities available for school leaders in the country (Romero & Krichesky, 2019).

Context

In Argentina, each province manages its own education system through the Ministries of Education following guidelines set by the National Ministry of Education. Since the decentralization in the 90s, each of the 24 provinces handled its school education system through its own law of education, school policy and teacher statute, however, due to the strong influence of the former centralized system, the educational systems across the country do not differ much (Peire, 2019). For example, school personnel – principals, teachers, and other staff – are managed according to the guidelines in terms of obligations, rights and hiring requirements set by the teacher statutes which were designed based on the old National Teacher Statute created in 1958. Therefore, the context of performance of state school principals in the country is similar – demands on the role, hiring process, preparation, and incentives for the career affect principals alike across the country.

Demands on Argentinian Principals

The principal's role though is not differentiated from that of the teachers in the teacher statutes, is framed around three dimensions in the jurisdictional, legislative school regulations – administrative, pedagogical, and socio-educational (Romero & Krichesky, 2019; Veleda, 2016; Yelicich, 2019). Article Nº 1 of the Teacher Statute pertaining to one of the provinces, for example, states:

> "For the purposes of the present Statute, a teacher is anyone who delivers, directs, audits, or guides the general education and systematic teaching, technical or practical, as well as who collaborates directly with those functions subjected to pedagogical norms, in school buildings dependent on the jurisdictional or national government" (1960-AMPPyA- 1973, 2004, p. 1).

However, in the analysis of the school regulations conducted by Krichesky and Romero's (2019) building leaders respond to instructional, administrative, and socio-educational demands.

Within the pedagogical dimension of the role, principals are required to facilitate and promote the learning and teaching process, though the level of specificity in the tasks to perform varies across provinces. However, this is the dimension principals devote less time to since their time is mainly consumed by administrative duties, and daily emerging issues such as student conflicts and parent visits (Romero & Krichesky, 2018). The school educational project, curriculum development and class observation seem to be the most relegated tasks by administrators either because they lack the skills to do it or because it is not part of the school culture as in the case of class observation which is usually conceived from a punitive perspective by the teachers (Romero & Krichesky, 2018).

Regarding the administrative dimension, principals are expected to oversee the operation of the school facilities, enrollment processes, teaching personnel attendance, paperwork, and attend the demands from the Ministries of Education – jurisdictional and national. In this function, principals oversee teacher compliance, but they lack autonomy to select and hire teachers (Romero & Krichesky, 2019). In terms of ministerial priorities, the administrative functions are first in the line – not complying with the pedagogical duty is not as punishable as not turning in documents and paperwork on time (Veleda, 2016).

Finally, the socio-educational dimension seeks to close or reduce the access gap between advantaged and economically vulnerable students turning principals into "icons of social contention" (Manzione, 2010). This requires principals to establish relationships and work cooperatively with other civil institutions in the community absorbing social assistance responsibilities to reach out to every student, especially those in vulnerable circumstances (Peire, 2019; Romero & Krichesky, 2018; Veleda, 2016).

Hiring Process and Contract

The hiring process for school administration and contractual conditions of the position discourage the proper development of school administrators into effective leaders. First, the selection of principals is, despite being a meritocratic process, does not require special training in school leadership. Hiring focuses on applicants' seniority in teaching (Mezzadra & Bilbao, 2011; Peire, 2019; Veleda, 2016). Applicants' CVs are evaluated and scored – the more experience and certifications, the higher the score. The second is a training phase that consists of a final exam followed by either an interview or an oral defense of a school improvement project designed by the candidates. However, this formative phase varies across provinces not only because of the format but also in terms of its implementation: in some provinces and instances it is not inherent to the selection process (Romero & Krichesky, 2019; Veleda, 2016; Yelicich, 2019).

Remuneration constitutes another factor affecting the performance of principals and principal assistants in Argentina. Romero and Krichesky (2019) concluded that from the income perspective, principals lack incentives to perform their role at the highest level. While in most provinces the salary of a school administrator is 20% higher than that of a teacher, in other provinces the difference is less than

7%. Moreover, the highest pay raise is no more than 37% in the best cases and there are no incentives or extra pay for performance achievement or professional development level. (Romero & Krichesky, 2018).

Development Opportunities

In terms of school leadership professional development, although there are varied and diverse opportunities across the country offered in public as well as private institutions, it is an area which is still developing (Romero & Krichesky, 2018). Professional development is not systematic or standardized, having different foci and designed from different approaches, a feature which characterizes the Latin American region in general (Flessa & Weinstein, 2018; Veleda, 2016). On the other hand, some school administrators consider them overwhelming in amount and arbitrary not necessarily addressing their schools' particular issues (Peire, 2019; Romero & Krichesky, 2018; Veleda, 2016).

Principals' Instructional Work

In her study, Peire, (2019) concludes that even though building leaders claimed to request teachers' collaboration to define school annual objectives, there is no evidence that teachers take on responsibilities other than the assigned by the principals. Leadership is greatly concentrated on the principal. Peire argues that multiple factors such as inappropriate working conditions (e.g., poor teacher incentives and principals' overwhelming number of responsibilities) and principals' lack of leadership development prevent teachers from taking on leadership roles, working in teams, and constituting themselves into learning communities. On the other hand, Krichesky and Romero (2018) concluded the principals of their study enact "an interactive leadership" since they spend most of the time interacting with students and families troubleshooting daily problems in an attempt to maintain a healthy school climate for both students and teachers. The authors explained this leadership emerged from the need to create safe environments in a context of turbulent school climates. Therefore, they reported this might be the cause for principals' little interaction with teachers and devotion to instructional duties.

The above studies are of great relevance since they shine light on an area scarcely explored in Argentina as is principals' experiences in working with teachers. However, the studies included participants who underwent some kind of training provided by the Ministries of Education. Piere's (2019) sample included only participants who underwent the Educational Management development plan to train principals offered by the National Ministry of Education. The study showed that despite the training, the

participants were wrestling to conduct a close work with teachers to improve their practices. On the other hand, Krichesky and Romero's (2018) research was based on principals from Buenos Aires only. Therefore, the objective was to explore how K-12 state school administrators from different provinces in Argentina, regardless of their training, understand and experience their role in working with and leading teachers.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

An integrated approach to school leadership has resulted to be the key to sustainable improvement of learning and teaching at schools. Hallinger (2003) in his paper examined conceptualizations and empirical research on two models that have predominated for more than 25 years on educational leadership research. Hallinger proposes an integrated view of Instructional Leadership (IL) and Transformational Leadership (TL) as both are necessary conditions to elicit teachers' high levels of performance and driving school improvement. Whereas Instructional Leadership seeks to elicit first-order effects – those which impact directly on the quality of instruction such as setting school goals and supervising instruction, Transformational Leadership aims at eliciting second-order effects which focus on building the capacity of people in the organization to produce first-order effects on student learning (Hallinger, 2003).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership is a conceptualization of educational leadership that became relevant in the field in the early 1980s as the result of research on effective schools in the US (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). These schools focused on student academic outcomes and the improvement of instructional practices by aligning school goals, technology, and outcomes. Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) three-dimensional model is the most widely used in research about school leadership and improvement (Hallinger, 2003). This model is centered around the role of school leaders in defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and creating a positive school culture.

Defining the School Mission

School leaders work with their staff to define and set a path for the school direction. The vision is the school goal – the purpose of all the school business, where it is hoped to be in the future, whereas the mission is an overview of the specific steps the school plans to take to materialize the vision and reach

that future (Gabriel & Farmer, 2009). This dimension consists of two functions: framing the school mission and communicating the school goals.

Framing the School Mission. This dimension refers to the role of the principal in conducting student performance needs analysis to develop measurable goals that seek to improve current academic performance and are easy to translate into classroom practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The principal is expected to include staff and parent input in the development of the action plan and implementation of the school's goals. The model makes emphasis on focusing attention and resources around a few measurable goals(Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). As Schmoker, (2018) further claimed, defining a coherent, user-friendly curriculum which includes essential skills to be mastered by students increases the possibilities of a successful implementation and greater student achievement.

Communicating the School Goals. Instructional leaders walk the talk: they refer to the school goals in informal and formal instances to teachers and students, use the school mission when making curriculum decisions with teachers, and ensure the school mission is highly displayed and visible to all the stakeholders (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). DuFour and Fullan (2013) assert that one of the mistakes school leaders involved in conducting school reform make is failing to create coherence across the organization– that is when all the stakeholders are informed of and understand the school purpose – one of the elements conducive to school improvement.

Managing the Instructional Program

The second dimension of the model has to do with instructional leadership practices and behaviors aimed at managing the curriculum. This dimension consists of three functions: supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the school curriculum, and monitoring students' progress.

Supervising and Evaluating Instruction. Within this dimension leaders perform practices such as monitoring and evaluating teachers' instructional execution to ensure alignment among the school mission, classroom objectives, and teachers' practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). They do this by observing classes, reviewing student work products, and working closely with teachers providing feedback on weaknesses as well as strengths in their instructional practices.

Coordinating Curriculum. Instructional leaders set clear roles and responsibilities among the staff for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels. They make sure academic goals are translated

into common curricular objectives, use test results to inform curricular decisions, align special programs and activities with classroom objectives, and participate actively in the selection and/or review of curricular materials (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Monitoring Students' Progress. In this dimension the function of school administrators is to use test results to identify strengths and weaknesses in the instructional program so as to support students and teachers accordingly (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). They assess progress toward school goals, identify those students who need more support, and the kind of instructional support they need to improve their performance. Monitoring progress also involves that school leaders share test and school performance results with teachers and students in a timely fashion in order to address areas that need improvement by providing them with the right support (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Creating a Positive School Climate

The third dimension of the model is based on "the notion that effective schools create an 'academic press' through the development of high standards and expectations and a culture of continuous improvement" (Hallinger, 2003, p. 332). It refers to leadership behaviors that create a school climate suitable for teaching and learning and is comprised of several functions: protecting the instructional time; maintaining high visibility; providing incentives for teachers; promoting professional development; developing and enforcing academic standards; and providing incentives for learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Protecting the Instructional Time. School leaders oversee that class time is not interrupted and fully used for learning and practicing new skills and contents (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). They set up systems to prevent student pullouts, truant or tardy students, and announcements.

Maintaining High Visibility. Principals lead by example – they make time in their daily agenda to interact with students and teachers which has a positive effect on their behaviors. They make themselves visible and approachable on the school campus during recess and breaks, visit classrooms to discuss school issues with them, take part in extracurricular or cocurricular activities, cover classes for teachers when needed, and provide direct instruction to students. This gives principals the possibility to build

relationships, communicate the school mission in different ways, and understand the needs of students and teachers better (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Providing Incentives for Teachers. The model highlights the importance of school leaders in creating a work structure that rewards and recognizes teachers' job. Although they have limited authority to make decisions on salary or contractual conditions, leaders can motivate their staff by acknowledging and praising teachers' job which even though does not involve money is as critical in creating a positive school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Some practices include rewarding teachers in various ways (complimenting teachers in faculty meetings, written, orally, publicly, and privately) and recognizing exemplary performance with professional development opportunities (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Promoting Professional Development. Principals attend to teachers' needs and requests for training to enhance their practices. Some of the strategies include sharing information about in-service and professional development opportunities with teachers which are related to and consistent with the school mission and objectives; supporting the implementation of newly learned skills in the classroom; and using faculty meetings to provide staff with outside speakers, time to share and discuss instruction-related issues as well as in-service acquired skills and knowledge (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Developing and Enforcing Academic Standards. Instructional leaders define mastery level of basic skills per grade level and set high expectations necessary for student learning improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). They inform students what they are expected to achieve at each level, reinforce teachers' compliance with instructional time, and support teachers when enacting academic policies such as homework compliance, grading system, discipline, etc. (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Providing Incentives for Learning. Principals are key in creating and fostering a school climate where students value academic achievement and improvement since they can leverage students' performance in the class with school meaningful rewards and recognition systems (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Some examples include using assemblies to honor students for their work and/or behavior and calling parents to inform them about their children's accomplishments.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership (TL) is a conceptualization of educational leadership that emerged in the early 1990s in an attempt to seek more effective models of leadership to materialize educational

reforms of the time given instructional leadership had turned insufficient (Hallinger, 2003) . TL is a type of distributed leadership concerned with "building organization's capacity to select its purpose and support the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning" (Leithwood et al., 1998). Transformational school leadership affects teachers' perceptions of school characteristics, teacher commitment to change, and organizational learning, that is teachers' collective capacity development (Hallinger, 2003). Leithwood (1994) asserts that TL brings about higher levels of student engagement and identification with the school which in turn impacts their performance and outcomes. According to Hallinger (2003) the model most widely used in research is Leithwood et al. (1998). It consists of eight dimensions aimed at the development of purposes, people, structures, and culture toward school restructuring:

- building a school vision,

- setting the school mission and goals,

- providing intellectual stimulation,

- offering individualized support,

- conveying high performance expectations,

- providing exemplary model,

- building a collaborative school culture,

- and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood, 1994).

Developing a Shared Vision for the School

This refers to leadership practices that seek to identify and articulate collaboratively a vision of the future that is inspiring. School leaders initiate processes that engage staff in the collective development of a shared vision. They espouse their vision for the school, clarify the meaning of the school's vision in terms of its practical implications for programs and instruction, help staff understand the relationship between district and ministry initiatives and the school's vision, and communicate the school's vision at all times to all the stakeholders (Leithwood, 1994).

Building Consensus about School Goals and Priorities

TL leaders foster development and acceptance of common goals, promote cooperation among staff and assist them to work together toward those goals. Principals promote teacher engagement in

goal setting and follow up of progress toward goals related to the school mission and their own professional growth. School leaders help staff to ensure alignment of vision, goals, and individual goals, and use school goals to guide decision making processes (Leithwood et al., 1998).

Conveying High Performance Expectations

Transformational leaders convey expectations for excellence, quality, and/or high performance on the part of the staff. Transformational school leaders demonstrate an unflagging commitment to the welfare of students and demand high professionalism (Leithwood et al., 1998). They hold and espouse high expectations for professional growth, encourage teachers to be innovative and to try new strategies. They nourish creativity by establishing flexible boundaries and providing people freedom of judgement and action within the context of the school plans (Leithwood, 1994).

Modeling Good Professional Practice

Transformational leaders also set examples for staff to follow that are consistent with the values they embrace (Leithwood et al., 1998). School leaders show an interest for their students by working alongside teachers and getting involved in all aspects of school activities. Principals value multiple perspectives to problem solving and trust teachers' judgments (Leithwood, 1994). Moreover, school administrators exercising this leadership are open to feedback – they request feedback about own performance and respond constructively to it, thus, showing evidence of learning by growing and changing themselves (Leithwood et al., 1998). Other behaviors include working hard, being genuine in their beliefs, modeling openness, having good people skills, and even modeling good instructional strategies in the classroom.

Providing Individualized Support

TL leaders show respect for individual members of staff and concern about their personal feelings and needs (Leithwood et al., 1998). They have the pulse of the school; listen to staff ideas and concerns; follow through on decisions made jointly with teachers; and provide recognitions of staff work (Leithwood, 1994). Other behaviors related to this dimension are encouraging the use of new ideas, treating everyone equally, and being approachable, accessible, and welcoming.

Providing Intellectual Stimulation

TL leaders encourage their teachers to evaluate and reflect on their practices. They challenge some of the assumptions about their practices and prompt them to readjust their performance without using pressure(Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood et al., 1998). They seek out many sources of new ideas and pass such ideas on to staff; prompt the search for and discussion of educational topic relevant to the school mission; encourage teachers to share their expertise by leading workshops and staff meetings; and chair and attend conferences and workshops to improve their teachers' performance (Leithwood, 1994). In addition, TL leaders publicly recognize exemplary performance and remove penalties for making mistakes as part of the effort to help school improvement (Leithwood, 1994).

Building a Productive School Culture

Transformational leaders encourage collaboration among staff and assist in creating a widely shared set of norms, values, and beliefs consistent with the continuous improvement of services for students(Leithwood et al., 1998). They perform actions such as clarifying the school's vision for teacher collaboration and for the care and respect of students, sharing with staff norms of excellence for both staff and students, fostering and supporting collaborative work by allocating resources, and creating projects (Leithwood, 1994). Hiring staff who fit with the school culture and engaging in frequent and direct communication to make the school vision known are also key elements of this dimension (Leithwood, 1994). These leaders share power and responsibility with others by working to eliminate boundaries between administrators and teachers and other groups, using symbols and rituals to express cultural values (Leithwood, 1994).

Helping Structure the School to Enhance Participation in Decisions

This dimension refers to leadership practices that create opportunities for all stakeholder groups to take part in school decision making. These TL behaviors entail distributing the responsibility and power for leadership widely throughout the school, taking staff opinion into account when making decisions, allowing staff to manage their own decision-making committees, and providing autonomy for teachers in their decisions (Leithwood, 1994). TL leaders also alter working conditions such as adjusting the school facilities, timetables, and the hierarchical organization to facilitate staff collaborative work (Leithwood et al., 1998).

Subjectivities Statement

My interest in this topic emerged from my experiences as a secondary school teacher (K8-12) in Argentinian state schools and in the British school system, and as an administrator of a small EFL school. Working as a language assistant in a state school in the UK, enabled me to identify differences between the way schools are managed in the UK and in Argentina. Compared to schools in the UK, schools in Argentina are less organized and have fewer resources. I perceived the school in the UK was highly organized with clear structures, roles, and expectations where everyone was informed about all the school events, meetings, schedules, and other school-related activities. Unless one is close to the administrative team, it is difficult to be up to date about the school business and learning about school events or deadlines over the clock, for example, caused me a lot of uncertainty. Additionally, setting up a small English as a foreign language school for adults and being part of the administrative team gave me the opportunity to experience what being an administrator entailed. This was a challenge because it required me to act as a leader. I learnt that having a clear vision that was shared by the rest of the team and fostering fluent communication were critical aspects to move the organization forward. Moreover, I realized that fostering staff ownership and accountability was also critical but challenging – I lacked the know-how. As a result of these experiences, I concluded I lacked the leadership skills to lead an organization and that I had a lot of questions regarding the organizational state of schools in my country, especially about the role of school leaders.

Research Design

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how Argentinian state school administrators experience their role in working with and leading teachers. Latin American literature on Educational Leadership and Management (EDML) is small compared to African and Asian literature volume even though publications on English language journals have had a significant increase in recent years (Felipe Aravena Castillo & Philip Hallinger, 2018). School leadership knowledge production on Latin America is uneven and reduced in topics being Chile and Mexico the countries accounting for 61% of the corpus published in the core English EDLM journals (Felipe Aravena Castillo & Philip Hallinger, 2018).

Latin American studies point out the lack of and the need to broaden the knowledge base regarding school leadership and its impact on teacher performance being teacher commitment, collective efficacy, and shared decision-making some of the gaps highlighted (Felipe Aravena Castillo & Philip Hallinger, 2018). Argentinean scholars have also highlighted the need for further research on administrators work with teachers suggesting areas such as teamwork (Peire, 2019), and administrator-teacher interactions: content, frequency, and impact on student learning (Romero & Krichesky, 2018). Therefore, this research project attempted to address the research gap by inquiring into how K-12 public school administrators in Argentina experience their role in working with and leading teachers.

Methodology

To address the research questions, this study utilized the qualitative approach to collect and analyze data in a period of four months. A semi-structured interview was conducted to school administrators in Argentina with the intent to produce conversation about their experience and perspective on their work with teachers. Some of the interview questions referred to difficulties they face when working with and leading teachers, decision-making handling, change management and preparation to enact their role. The study sought to answer the following research question:

How do K-12 state school Argentinian school leaders experience their role in working with and leading teachers?

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview data were collected from school administrators (5 principals and 1 assistant principal) using a questionnaire that consisted of 11 elements. The original plan was to do follow-up interviews to expand on topics mentioned in the first interviews, however, due to time and connection constraints I was unable to complete the second round of interviews. The interviews averaged about 90 minutes in length and were carried out from Syracuse, New York, United States via Zoom to participants located in different parts of Argentina. All interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed in the original language, Spanish, producing approximately 130 pages of single-spaced text.

Sampling. This study focused on the experiences of 6 Argentinian school administrators who met the following criteria:

Participants

- are 21 years of age or older,

- are state school administrators currently holding the position,

- are in Argentina,

- are from any province in Argentina other than Buenos Aires,

- speak Spanish or/and English,

- have access to an electronic device to have an online interview (computer, mobile phone, tablet, etc.), internet, and a Zoom account.

Participants excluded from this study:

- are private school administrators since they have more autonomy that state school principals, therefore, their experiences in working with teachers may not be the same.

- from countries other than Argentina.

- from Buenos Aires given the fact they have been the focus of most of the studies on Educational Leadership conducted in the country.

- under the age of 21.

- speak other languages than Spanish and English.

- do not have the means to access an online interview.

Table 1

Participants Demographic Information

	Participant	Role	Type of School	School Level	Years of experience	Total Teachers	Total Students	Province
1	Laura	Principal	Urban	K-9	36	96	387	San Luis
2	Yacky	Principal	Rural Boarding	K-12	16	20	60	San Luis
3	Orlando	Principal	Rural Boarding	K-7	23	7	21	Mendoza
4	Alessandra	Assistant Principal	Urban	K-12	15	60	600+	Santa Cruz

| 5 | Avila | Principal | Rural Boarding | K-7 | 34 | 12 | 25 | Santa Cruz |
| 6 | Juan | Principal | Urban | K-12 | 36 | 125 | 700 | Jujuy |

Data Collection Procedure. The participants were recruited indirectly **-** I sent an invitation note with my contact information to educational professionals in Argentina so that they shared it with their administrators, and those interested in participating contacted me or allowed the professional to share their contact with me.

Table 2

Data collection matrix

Data	Semi-structured interview
Predicted time	90 minutes
Predicted tool	- Semi-structured questionnaire (see appendix A) - Zoom
Respondents	Argentinian state school administrators
Procedure	1. Recruiting participants: I sent the invitation to participate in the study to educational professionals in Argentina who shared it with school administrators. Participants who were interested consented to have their contacts shared with me. They gave either their WhatsApp or their email information to the educational professionals. 2. Contacting participants: educational professionals shared the participants contacts with me and I contacted them via the channel they preferred: WhatsApp and/or email. When they were contacted, they were sent the oral consent script and the questionnaire for them to revise and make the final decision.

3. Setting up a meeting: once they read the documents I shared with them and accepted to have the interview, I set up the meetings according to their convenience.

4. I conducted and recorded the interviews via Zoom.

5. I requested the Spanish version of the interview transcripts on Kaltura through the Syracuse University Videos platform.

6. Finally, I downloaded the transcripts on Microsoft Word and labeled them with pseudonyms assigned to the participants.

Data Analysis. My analysis is grounded on the phenomenological qualitative analysis approach described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) that is "a stage during research when the researcher becomes aware of personal biases that might affect the study at hand and tries to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material" (p. 175). As a teacher who has always worked in state school settings, thus, under the leadership of different administrators, I started this study looking for answers to the flaws I perceived in the way schools are managed and organized. However, I was not cognizant of all the factors that interfered with the job of school administrators and finding those answers required me to take distance from my role as a teacher in order to understand the participants' viewpoints, thus, interpret the data from their voices rather than from my assumptions and attitude toward the issue.

The second step of analysis was to conduct phenomenological reduction – I went over the transcripts and the audios to identify general ideas that crosscut all the participants. I identified the participants were having difficulties to improve teachers' classroom practices and that they felt unsupported by those above them. Some of the first codes were teachers' instructional practices; teachers' perception of their students – deficit view; teachers' perceptions of their role; giving negative feedback/ avoiding conflict; lack of support from the system; a hiring system which does not require training; and building relationships and interacting with teachers (see Appendix B). In the third stage, with the guidance of Dr. Theoharis, I clustered the codes into three main categories: the struggle to improve teachers' instructional practices, factors affecting school leaders' performance, and leadership strategies

(see Appendix C). I revised all the statements extracted from the transcripts, and organized them according to the three themes, eliminating the irrelevant and repetitive ones.

Once I had three major themes with their subsections, I continued with the third stage: analyzing the codes in terms of the models to classify them, especially the strategies, and find gaps between the participants' leadership performance and the leadership models from the theoretical framework. For the Instructional Leadership model, I guided the analysis with the elements of the survey Hallinger & Murphy, (1994, pp. 510–512) used to assess the instructional management behavior of principals. To identify the participants' transformational practices, I guided my analysis with the Synthesis of Transformational Leadership Practices which is part of the framework Leithwood (1994, pp. 510–512) used for his work: Leadership for School Restructuring.

Findings

The analysis revealed some of the main aspects that shaped the role of the participants as regard their focus on teacher performance. I begin this section by describing the main difficulties the school administrators of this sample were currently facing, followed by the barriers that make their task more challenging, and finish with the main leadership strategies they are making use of to deal with those challenges.

The Struggle to Enact Instructional Leadership

All the principals from the sample expressed they are striving to lead their teachers towards more innovative and inclusive instructional practices. Therefore, this challenge is related to their instructional leadership performance – they point out the existence of teacher-centered practices and claim they are wrestling to induce teaching practices which are more student-centered.

Traditional Lesson Planning and Delivery

They point to structured lesson planning and delivery. Principal Avila states, "When I took over the position in the school, there was a very traditional way of doing things and a way of planning lessons which was too **structured**, so taking them (teachers) out of those structures was hard", whereas principal Juan recalls, "in Spanish most of my colleagues teach the theory and that's it – it's left in the backyard". Principal Laura also says her teachers do not dare to plan and deliver lessons differently:

> Something that I keep on struggling with and insisting on is lesson planning (...) The issue is daring to do it. It's hard for the teacher to break out of that formality, that: "I have to teach this

because it's content". That's where I'm aiming. The teacher doesn't go out of the classroom and teach in the schoolyard because they're afraid the child will be distracted by the leaves falling off trees.

Assistant Principal Alessandra narrates it took her two years and lot of work to change her teachers' traditional way of teaching reading and writing:

For example, in 1st grade Spanish, I found it really hard to change teachers' typical: ma- me-mi-mo-mu, mi-mama-me-ama, mi-mama-me-mi-mima. I mean, it was difficult to modify that method and it was about reviewing lesson plans and suggesting them other activities without completely replacing theirs.

Teacher-Centered Behaviors

The participants also expressed they are striving to change the way teachers perceive and relate to their students. They give accounts of how behaviors which indicate deficit views and low expectations of students shape some of the teacher instructional practices in their schools.

Teachers' Deficit Perceptions of Students. Teacher responses to principals' feedback on their performance reveal another aspect of the "old paradigm" in terms of the way teachers perceive their students - succeeding or failing depends entirely on the students themselves and whether they have the right support, preparation, and inherited intelligence at home (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Assistant Principal Alessandra explains her teachers' resistance to adopt the new, mandated evaluation model which removed the option for students to repeat a year, "teachers ask that students be allowed to repeat (…) For them the problem is the student. It's the student who is not learning" concluding that "it is necessary to work that out". She further reflects, "if the child didn't learn to read and write, will I make him repeat the year to teach them to read and write doing the same thing I did before? It's not okay." In line with this perception, Principal Laura claims her teachers expect that students adapt to their instructional practices:

That's where I struggle a bit. Because the teacher goes "well, because Tomás, because Juan…" Teachers shield themselves a bit. They say "I have to follow the program. This is the way it is. They have to learn it the way I teach it". And we struggle there.

From his point of view, Principal Orlando argues teachers need to reflect on whether their instructional practices are meeting students' needs:

Sometimes the complex part is to try to make teachers understand the importance of incorporating new technologies, for example, to reinvent their teaching practices, empathize with the other: "Why is this child having difficulties to learn? Is it the child who has difficulties or Am I, as a teacher, trying to incorporate the information, or the way, or the how to reach him/her…?"

Lack of expectations. Rural school principals, Yacky and Avila perceive their teachers have low expectations regarding their students' potential. Even though Principal Yacky shows a strong commitment to her students' success, she struggles to make some of the teachers understand the importance of their role in shaping their future:

> The thing is that he's a really, really closeminded man…well many are like him – closeminded because they go like "well but this is a child from a rural area," but if we don't prompt and foster the expectation that they can go to college, keep advancing, and have a vision beyond that of being a woodcutter, a harvest worker, or someone living off social assistance, who is going to do it? if in many cases their parents are illiterate.

Likewise, when she became the principal in her school a few years ago, Principal Avila observed the future of students was implicitly determined by their parents' occupation:

> When I took over the position, I had to make a change because it was a school where students stayed together with the teachers - in an orderly and careful manner – but nothing was thought of or generated in terms of the students' future. I noticed the future of the children was to occupy the same position as their parents in the ranches.

Principal Orlando perceives the need for teachers to build relationships with their students from a more holistic perspective:

> There is a relationship built in terms of students' emotions but not all the adults build that with children and, sometimes, an educator must look for other strategies, as I was saying, of communication with those children to reach them…and empathize with them.

On the other hand, Principal Juan says he is constantly working on "innovating and deconstructing teacher methodology in terms of student participation and feedback on student performance: "[He] always tells them to write something on the student work sheets" and tells them, 'even if you read and don't mark it, say something to them" which suggests he sees the need for teachers to put their students at the center of their practices. Holding high expectations for students "…means teachers seeing children, all children, from an asset-based viewpoint and expecting them to learn challenging academic content" (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 47), which implies there must be a two-way relationship between teachers and learners.

Difficulties to Give Negative Feedback

Giving negative feedback or pointing out areas for improvement is another challenge these school leaders are experiencing as it seems to be associated with conflict which, they express, may influence the school climate. On the one hand, it seems they fear teachers' reaction to negative comments about their performance. Principal Laura claims, "sometimes I don't even mention it to the

teacher, because it mustn't be motivating for a teacher to be told "what's happening that the kids don't want to take your exams with you?" Later in the interview she states:

> Some may worry and some may say "well, I'll mind my own business and the kids will know what they have to do, like it or not". There we must admit, and act accordingly because if we admit it but don't do anything about it, we're still in the same situation.

She says, "It's hard for the teacher to accept they are wrong" and also admits that having the Ministry of Education check on teachers' online classroom activities during COVID-19: "...is nice because [her] piece of help is good, but there comes a point where teachers go like 'oh, the principal understands us anyway". Not only does this suggest teachers know she is more than understanding but also that she hesitates to be more demanding when it comes to instructional performance. On the other hand, Principal Alessandra claims:

> Despite [teachers] don't take the performance record book seriously, when we note down something they have to improve – what is negative, they get offended." She also expresses, "when you have to give them negative feedback, they immediately take it as "she mistreated me" (…) it's hard for me to point something that is not positive out to them.

She also brings up the dilemma her principal and her have at the end of the year when they complete teachers' evaluations and score their overall performance:

> I, for instance, I'm not afraid of reducing their score, but it's hard because my principal goes like "don't note those which are negative because it will upset him/her, they won't hand in students' final grades" or "don't do it because they don't deserve it, and so on" … hence that happens in every school.

In a different province, when asked about the way she solved her difficulty to ensure teachers made full use of instructional time, Principal Yacky claimed:

> I haven't solved it 100% because we will see each other all the year and some teachers have tenure, and we'll see each other for a long time. It happened to me with a teacher that I called her attention because she was using the phone during class. The fourth time I pointed that out to her she got angry, and it created an awful environment (…) she didn't even say hello to me afterwards.

Opposite to how the rest of the participants seem to experience conflict, principal Avila argues, "conflict is inevitable, and the secret is knowing how to address them." She also states, "for my role I took a lot of trainings on conflict management, values and community life but many years ago when I was a teacher. I think *that* was the most relevant professional development, the most revealing in my life."

Factors Affecting Leadership Performance

The efforts to enhance teacher performance are worsen by the top-down structure of the public school system in Argentina. Innovating and inducing instructional practices that meet the needs of a diverse student body seems an uphill endeavor due, mainly, to flaws in the implementation of mandated changes, factors hindering teacher performance, and insufficient leadership preparation for the role.

Mandatory Changes Implementation Flaws

The country is focused on diversity and aiming at making education more inclusive by issuing laws and policies which require a change in teaching practices, yet the drivers used to successfully materialize those attempts seem to be insufficient. Principals argue new laws and policies are issued without involving educators in the decision-making or providing them with proper support to ensure teacher understanding which makes their task in improving instructional practices arduous. The school leaders perceive that getting teachers to shift their practices entails providing them with professional development support.

Principal Alessandra observed, "in this country there are a lot of agreements, regulations, from the Ministry of education, here in the province from the Council of Education but I think they need to involve teachers and train them..." because she argues the new evaluation model, which has been in the system for 10 years approximately, "is not being understood…teachers go like, 'well that's it the student knows nothing, it doesn't matter she or he didn't learn to write or they have to pass anyway, I can't do anything because they can't repeat the year." Principal Juan coincides, "the issue is that this new evaluation model changes a lot of things…and demands teacher professional preparation to be able to articulate different subjects."

Another example is the implementation of the Comprehensive Sex Education law which Principal Yacky stresses as "very complex" and asserts, "we are not satisfied with the training they gave us." In line with this, principal Laura perceives the kind of professional development teachers are provided with does not meet their needs or is insufficient:

> …We need something more practical. I mean strategies. But strategies that we can take to the classrooms; that we can implement on the students. I'm not talking about grabbing a magazine with activities that we have to pull from there and hand them to our students. We need tools that allow us to create.

When asked about strategies which do not work when leading teachers, Principal Orlando referred to the acquisition of mandated policies which are not accompanied by teacher training:

> What doesn't work, for example, is sending them an email with documents about certain regulations or policies. I've reached the conclusion that it's important to gather, share the reading of the document and talk about it. So, what is difficult is to have the policies and regulations as well as protocols at the forefront.

He also reflected on how COVID-19 pandemic shook the top-down organization of the educational system, forcing policymakers to seek solutions in schools which, he highlighted, made them feel valued:

> It has also been hard to change the structures of the state that have had to readjust because the same ministry had to seek some solutions in teachers. When they asked us for advice, when they interviewed us, when they asked us for action plans, and then, the Ministry made decisions…that has made us feel important too...when our superintendent asks us for advice on decisions which have to do with the school business and the students' welfare. But it is a temporary situation...

The participants perceptions resonate with what Dufour and Fullan assert, "whole system reform requires *collective coherence*; in other words, leaders need to cultivate *shared mindset* among individuals within the system" (2013, p. 23). Hence, it is critical that policymakers focus on capacity building and involve teachers as well as school leaders when issuing and implementing new policies and laws.

Factors Hindering Teacher Performance

Participants also identified external factors that limit the possibilities for teachers to improve their performance. Participants refer to a lack of instructional accountability from the supervisors' end, demotivating salaries, and lack of resources and incentives to reward extra work.

Instructional excellence is not a priority. The main difficulty, most principals pointed to was influencing teachers' instructional practices, I questioned them on how they dealt with those challenges and what they did when all their strategies failed, given they do not have the autonomy to manage their school human resources. Principals' accounts of extreme cases revealed that the way the supervising entities respond to issues related to complying with the instructional duty is not a priority. Principal Juan concluded:

> I must find the way because politically, beyond sanctioning the teacher that I don't like, I can file a warning, ask for a suspension, politically they don't support that.

Principal Yacky reported she has not been supported when the issue has been related to teachers' instructional duties:

As regard not complying with the instructional duty, it has happened to me…I reported it to the superintendent and, unfortunately, I didn't get any support in that instance. She told me I had to understand the teacher (…) depending on the seriousness of the situation the teacher can be made redundant, but it must be an extreme issue.

Assistant Principal Alessandra concluded, "You are not given the sack for bad practice. If that could be done, we'd have a different educational system in the country." She also added that they get support depending on the superintendent in charge of the school:

There are superintendents that do not respond because like for principalship to get that position you need seniority not qualifications or winning a competition. There are superintendents that you'd better not call them because they will complicate your life and there are others that are worth it because you know they will help you. Besides, superintendents are shifted from schools.

Low salaries. A factor that some of the participants experienced as hindering their attempts not only to improve teachers' instructional practices but also to comply with mandated requirements was low salaries that discourage teachers to improve their performance in different ways. Principal Juan explained, "as regard the salaries, the national teacher parity agreed on a 45% pay rise, in our province we only got 10% and it's one of the provinces with the lowest salaries for teachers." Teachers must have parallel jobs to meet ends which leaves them little time continue growing professionally for example:

I like working with and training grade teachers … working with them and asking them to read or do research on something, but once a teacher told me, "how easy it is for you Mr. to do that (studying and reading), if I don't work as a plater after teaching, I can't survive Mr." and when they tell me so I give up "what can I demand from them?"

Principal Yacky also argued, "our salary is very low and so even though we have a stable salary with health insurance, the fact that the salary is low is discouraging." For Assistant Principal Alessandra, "it's complicated to make the decision to report teachers' absenteeism because one knows it will affect their salary and sometimes, we know about the teachers' difficult economic situation." Besides, she explained their role is also about meeting teachers' basic needs for resources to carry out their task, which was even more important during the pandemic when education switched to online mode:

We must look for strategies – what to say, what to offer because they come up with problems such as not having a computer or internet connection, that their phone broke, and so it's very limiting because they are telling you they don't have the tools to work. We try to get them computers and I have even told some of them to come and work from my home if they don't have internet connection.

Therefore, the lack of economic incentives seems to position principals in a dilemma – prioritizing students while being sensitive about teachers' working conditions.

No incentives for extra work. Not only are principals' endeavors hindered by discouraging salaries, but they are also restricted by their difficulties of managing the school budget and setting up school structures that enable them to improve their schools' performance.

Principal Juan explained that in order to facilitate the management of teachers' syllabus reviews so as to give them feedback, he implemented the system of subject coordinators, however, he explained:

> What is the problem? That the coordinator is not paid – it's voluntary. They only get a minimum score in their meritocratic record at the end of the year; hence, it is formed by those members who are willing to take on the responsibility.

For principal Laura, given the lack of autonomy to manage the school budget, it is about finding the balance between teachers' extra work and absences so as to recognize the help she gets with organizational issues for instance:

> I conceded those two absences - and not as a favor - because I know that this teacher, when the schedule-change decree - which is about a whole institutional reorganization- was elaborated in our school, Luciano spent many hours at the central office with Mrs. Ley rearranging our decree. He was there until around three or four in the afternoon, and those hours were unpaid.

Principal Yacky suggested, "there should be what is paid in the private sector, an attendance incentive as a way of motivating teachers." Consequently, principals and assistant principals seem to find themselves in the middle of a gap between the demands of educational policies and the shortage of resources and authority to elicit high level teacher performance to meet those demands, thus, ensure student success.

Insufficient Preparation for the Role

In addition to factors that are out of their control such as education policy enforcements and factors affecting teacher performance the school administrators of this study, reported weaknesses in the preparation for the role. Flaws in the application process in terms of the preparation required and/or provided to get the position and gaps in skills and knowledge both to enact instructional leadership and to influence teachers toward the enhancement of their practices.

Application Process Flaws. When asked about the preparation for the role before they took over their positions, almost all the participants pointed out some flaws in terms of the way the educational system manages the application process. For example, Principal Avila argued, "here school administrative positions are not acquired by competition which sometimes is a problem because not

everyone is prepared to perform. Getting preparation for the role is a personal decision so to speak"

whereas Assistant Principal Alessandra highlights the downside of it:

> By scoring anyone can get the position and sometimes one ends up working with people who don't know how to do the paperwork, are not updated pedagogically so as to give a justified opinion about what should happen in classroom instruction. People who manage based on what has already been done or what they did in the classroom when they started as teachers, which happened many years ago.

In addition, Principal YR recalled when she started as a principal "[she] didn't imagine how much

it involved, how much responsibility…" and said:

> The only training that I was required to do was 5 years ago to get tenure because getting it depended on our performance in that training but, no, there isn't professional development specifically for administrators, unless you want to pay for them, but from the Ministry of Education it is not provided.

Moreover, Assistant Principal Alessandra also said that "the qualifications [she has] obtained is

because [she] paid for them herself, [she] did it because she wanted to and looked for the institutions

which provided that type of professional development". On the other hand, Principal Juan said "[he] is

lacking professional development mainly in school management not so much in instructional skills

because [he] has always been a great reader of pedagogy."

However, the hiring process for principalship varies across provinces. Some provide training as

part of the application process as is the case of one of the participants who stated having been prepared

in aspects related to school leadership:

> It was very useful because it had a lot of administrative and accounting content, how to manage a school, teamwork strategies. It also had leadership content, the history of education in Argentina, other types of education in other countries that have to do with the sociocultural and political aspects of the communities, and a pedagogical part because we had to design a project about the school we envisioned.

Professional Development Needs. Participants' answers to what they would add to the trainings

they took or what they consider they need to be trained in indicate the need for professional development

grounded on instructional as well as transformational leadership. Principal Avila reflected, "sometimes

even though you have experience in the classroom, you are not in all the grades and not having that

clear, all the content selection and articulations is what, maybe, took me a lot of time – to do research,

search…" which indicates trajectory in teaching does not necessarily translate into effective instructional

leadership. Likewise, despite Principal Laura admitted she was not prepared for the instructional part of

the role, she expressed,

>...it wasn't the course itself that maybe had to teach me about an educator's instructional duties (…) what's important is your trajectory. I'll be honest. I don't agree with the idea of a teacher becoming a principal overnight. I believe you need a career…"

This reveals the belief that teaching experience is enough to manage the pedagogic dimension of their role, thus, enact instructional leadership.

On the other hand, Principal Juan stated, "I think I need training to handle administrative staff better and be more strict," and Assistant Principal Alessandra claimed, "I'd like the trainings to teach us how to work with teachers…" she also said, "I'd like to improve teamwork – that they can include the rest of the teachers because I am struggling to achieve that..." which reveals weaknesses when it comes to bringing about staff accountability and ownership.

Survival Leadership Strategies?

Finally, participants' accounts about the actions they take to handle the difficulties and improve teacher instructional performance were analyzed in terms of the leadership approaches described in the literature review section: Instructional Leadership and Transformational Leadership. Amid the factors that limit their performance, participants seem to be appealing to some transformational as well as instructional leadership skills to influence teacher practices without disrupting the school climate or prompting conflicts with the faculty. As regards their IL, behaviors mainly point to managing the instructional program and maintaining high visibility whereas their transformational practices aimed primarily at supporting teachers, stimulating them intellectually, and attempting to share decisions with some of the faculty.

Instructional Leadership Strategies

All the participants stated their role in working with teachers was pedagogical – guiding and supporting them to ensure academic improvement. The participants' practices focused on supervising and evaluating instruction that correspond to the second dimension of the model – managing the instructional program and maintaining high visibility that has to do with the third dimension – creating a positive school climate.

Supervising and Evaluating Instruction. All the participants noted they monitor teachers' instructional duties through informal class observation and revision of student works. However, most of

the participants claimed to observe teacher practices without informing teachers in advance or afterwards unless they need to point something out to them. Principal Yacky stated,

> I'm constantly doing class observation, I visit classrooms constantly, request student notebooks, and I do a daily, monthly and annual tracking of the student as well as the teacher performance. Teachers don't even know I'm observing them; however, I'm constantly evaluating them.

Principal Avila and Assistant Principal Alessandra also approach class observation informally, but also collaboratively. Assistant Principal Alessandra described, "I come into the classroom to work with the teacher. I don't stay at the back of the room observing what's going on." Since she thinks that scheduled observations lead teachers to interpret it as a controlling behavior, she does it informally, "sometimes they don't even notice that I'm there to observe them so when I give them feedback afterwards, they go like 'oh I didn't know you observed me." Principal Avila says, "I come in and out of the classroom all the time. I sit with students and help them if they are struggling. If I observe something, I call the teacher afterwards."

On the other hand, Principal Juan uses a different strategy to know what happens in the classroom without having to enter:

> Many times, I call the teacher when they finish the class or during breaks or free times slots, I approach them and ask, 'how did it go today Mr/Ms? What did you teach today? And how is it useful for students?' so that they tell me how it is relevant for students (…) that way, I don't need to enter the classroom with the checklist.

Nevertheless, it is not clear whether these practices aim at ensuring school goals and classroom practices are aligned and progressing. Moreover, an element of this dimension is providing feedback – highlighting not only teachers' strengths but also their weaknesses, an area the participants stressed they are striving in.

Maintaining High Visibility. All the school leaders expressed behaviors which show they focus on being approachable and visible in the school not only for the students and families, but also for the teachers, thus fostering positive interactions and relationships. Visiting classrooms informally and collaboratively seems to be one of their strategies. They also make use of break and recess time to informally interact with teachers around different topics and concerns. Like Principal Juan, Principal Orlando takes advantage of free time during the school day to interact with teachers, "sometimes we share lunch time, break time, Special Ed periods, so there are moments, spaces for us to interact and talk about any difficulties." When asked about the way they addressed the challenges they face, Principal

Yacky responded, "what also helps me a lot is chatting with them (teachers) individually" whereas

Principal Avila stated, "I talk a lot". On the other hand, Principal Laura asserted:

> Fluency comes from talking. I try hard to go for communication…I may provide the solution or not, but I will always listen to the teacher. Many times, they appreciate that, they even tell me so, that's extremely important for me. What's important is that you listen to them.

> Principal Juan also admitted the importance of being visible and approachable, "being present.

When they see you in the school, and they see that you support and listen to them, it changes, it

changes."

Transformational Leadership Strategies

The participants also described transformational actions and behaviors which they perform on a

daily basis to lead and work with teachers. In terms of the TL model, they focus on intellectually

stimulating their teachers, providing individual support, and sharing decision-making with teachers to

certain extents.

Providing Intellectual Stimulation. Participants encourage staff to try new practices without

using pressure. Most of the administrators' value training and professional development opportunities

regardless of their focus and describe themselves as being constantly learning. Therefore, they are

sources of new ideas which they pass on to their teachers.

Principal Avila recalled encouraging teachers to develop themselves professionally was also an

issue with her teachers when she started off as a principal:

> I motivated them by searching free training opportunities and sharing the information with them via our WhatsApp group, preparing workshops and delivering them myself, asking them to attend conferences along with me, and now there are teachers doing postgraduate degrees.

> Assistant Principal Alessandra described her trial and error during the pandemic to help teachers

navigate online teaching:

> I'd make tutorials of everything. Until one day I got tired and ended up doing like a recipe, a list of the steps: step one, click here, step 2, select this, because they wouldn't watch the tutorials or read the material I found, and I sent them. So one day did an instructive list and that's what was most useful for them. Therefore, we also must think what is going to have an impact on them to be able to work.

> Participants stimulate the search for and discussion of new ideas, and information relevant to the

school business. Principal Juan likes giving talks and eliciting discussions about instruction and education

when teachers are gathered in the teachers' room:

Chat, I chat a lot with them. Sometimes I do it in groups in the teachers' room, I try not to be the center of attention. I always try to start the topic so as to engage another teacher in leading the discussion. I prompt it…

He also functions as a coach by either helping teachers who seek his advice or ensuring teachers are instructionally performing as he expects. For example, he makes emphasized on how teachers relate to the students in terms of their academic development:

In regard to student participation and the teacher methods I always tell the teachers, give students feedback on their work, "write something on their work sheet, even you read without marking their mistakes, but write a message for the student or if orally tell them, "look this and that are good, but you need to work on this or that" and guide them…

Principal Yacky makes sure new teachers reexamine their assumptions in terms of the students' academic level so that they build their practice on students' previous knowledge:

I try to make the teacher understand that it is not about starting and delivering the class as they would normally do in other schools, because they don't know whether the children have acquired the knowledge necessary to perform well at the level they expect. Since I know all the students and their issues…

Providing Individualized Support. All the participants reported behaviors which show how they care about teachers by providing moral and/or technical support, thus, fostering a culture where teachers know they can count on their principals.

Principal Laura noted the focus of her interaction with teachers is their motivation:

Most of the times I talk to teachers, it's for motivation. I don't want it to drop. I always go "how are we?" "how is it going?," "we can do this," "don't stop," "if you are confused, we're here to get confused together!."

Similarly, Principal Avila declared she has "always created a sense of belonging in [her] teams because that makes them work better and like their workplace, it brings about their commitment, they wear the school T-shirt." When implementing changes mandated by the superiors, she evaluates how they will affect her staff, and complies with them to the extent teachers will be able to take them in which shows she prioritizes staff wellbeing:

As regards orders that come from the top, I evaluate them, see if they must be implemented or else, and see what is likely to be done…because I know very well what my teachers will do if I impose something to them.

Assistant Principal Alessandra explained that when she makes decisions she considers, "the students, whether it's going to favor them, and also teachers because [she] need[s] to have people who are happy to work in the school, people who want to be in the school." She goes on to argue:

It seems that when teachers are not comfortable, they are sick…as though they are sick and always have a reason to skip work. And when they are comfortable, even if they've had a finger cut off, they go to work anyway, and make all the effort to be there.

In line with the rest of the administrators, Principal Juan claimed, "my objective it to have teachers who are willing to work in the school, to assure them that no one will mistreat them in the school because I always say, teachers are badly treated all over the country" and argued, "…if you mistreat teachers, you weaken the essential pilar of education."

Apart from making use of break and recess time at school to interact with teachers and listen to their concerns and difficulties, Principal Orlando described they "communicate through a WhatsApp group constantly, through which I motivate them, we meet every morning, we support each other with inspirational phrases, videos…" especially when COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

Principal Yacky recalled how she learned to use the educational platform to help her teachers navigate online teaching at the beginning of the pandemic:

…since there are teachers who resist technology and they couldn't sign in, they didn't know how to, and even though I don't know much of computing, but clicking here and there and with the support of my daughters who helped me because children are savvier about that, so they taught me and I taught my teachers – how to sign in, what's more, I had to create many of the online classrooms.

Teacher Participation in Decision Making. At different levels, all the school leaders reported to share decision making with their teachers. However, this involvement in decision-making seems to be more associated with a survival strategy given the restriction in autonomy and resource management that shape their performance rather than with a purposeful action to empower teachers. Most of them mentioned having a support system comprised of the most committed teachers and including teachers in some decisions.

Having a Support System with the Most Committed Teachers. Given the barriers and factors that characterize the job of these school leaders, they end up leading with the support of those teachers who are more committed to the school and/or to them. In turn, they report this works as a snowball effect since many others are motivated to join and collaborate likewise. Principal Yacky spoke about the group of teachers who have supported her since day one:

This group of teachers [who used to travel to the school with her when she was a teacher] is unconditional and over time other teachers have followed them. Even though they didn't know each other, seeing that this group supported me, they joined. Thanks God there are only two or three [out of 29] who pushback.

Principal Juan explained, "I implemented the system of subject coordinators (…) So I require the areas to choose their coordinators and it's generally the most committed teacher. And so, I always work on and make decisions with the coordinators."

When asked about the process by which she made decisions, Principal Laura reported:
I always call the assistant principal and my three deans of students "my", because they are a part of me. I told them they're like my canes. I have a WhatsApp group with the three deans of students: Laura, Marcela, Pablo, and Odilia, the Principal Assistant. I called them "my canes" because I can lean on them. I ask for suggestions to them for many decisions. Not opinions, though, because everyone is ready to say their opinion. I tell them, "Give me a suggestion and explain to me why it should or should not be like that."

Principal Assistant Alessandra said, "[she]'d like to improve teamwork…so that the same way I can rely on some teachers and if there is a new teacher, I know they will guide him/her, I'd like to rely on all the teachers" indicating the existence of a group of teachers she relies on to lead.

Including Teachers in Some Decisions. Most administrators consider teachers should be included in some decisions. However, administrators admit that there are decisions for which they do not need to seek their opinions. Principal Avila assumed:

I think there are decisions which must be agreed upon when they involve all the staff and there are other decisions which I can make perfectly alone, if I am the one involved in the issue. But those which involve all the staff must be made by all.

On the other hand, Principals Orlando contended, "decisions are not personal, they are team-made according to the areas" and, also highlights the importance of training his teachers on the emergency protocols because that enables teachers to make decisions when he is away:

For example, last year there was a wildfire near the school, so the teacher informed me what she was doing and deciding while I was in a meeting with the Principal Advising Team in another department far from the school. And so, what did she know? The first thing she knew was that we have a contingency plan designed by the PE teacher who assigned a task to each of us in case of an emergency, in the case of Mendoza it's about earthquakes, rural wildfires, so she knew she had to follow the guidelines.

Assistant Principal Alessandra argued that involving teachers in decisions brings about more commitment:

I try to involve them in everything or ask about their opinions (…) decisions that have no room for discussion, no, but thinking collectively what projects we are going to work on, how we are going to meet with the families, what we are going to tell the families – that is discussed and done jointly because I think that way, they become more involved in.

However, Principals Yacky and Laura try not to involve teachers in major decisions unless it is an issue which involves them. Principal Laura thinks she should not make teachers accountable for

mistakes, "most of the times I make them [decisions] alone. Why? Because I don't want to make anyone else responsible for my mistakes," and Principal Yacky follows Ministry's advice on not involving teachers:

Generally, I make decisions alone or along with the teacher who is involved in the issue (…) but from the Ministry they want that I make most decisions alone and avoid asking teachers what they think because they sometimes may not know how to guide me.

Finally, Principal Juan reported, "I always work on and make decisions with the coordinators" indicating not all the members of the teaching staff are involved in the school decisions.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

This study sought to explore how K-12 state school administrators in Argentina in experience their role in working with and leading teachers through a qualitative research methodology. The results show state school administrators in Argentina are striving to serve students with inclusive school practices which align with the demands of education policies at different levels in a context that, on the one hand, limits their authority to manage the organization of their schools and, on the other hand, provides them with insufficient leadership preparation to work with their teaching staff. This study highlights some of the major challenges the participants face in their everyday work with teachers, the structural and contextual factors that affect their performance, and the leadership strategies they are making use of to influence instructional practices and raise student attainment.

The main finding suggests that there are weaknesses in the school leaders' capacity to enact instructional leadership. Participants struggle to influence their teachers' practices in terms of lesson planning and delivery and views of students toward more student-centered and inclusive instructional practices. Due to their difficulties to provide constructive feedback, participants are striving to get their teachers to innovate in their instructional methods and strategies so as to meet the needs of all the students and become aware of the deficit views and low expectations they hold for their students. Their leadership practices seem to focus mainly on supervising and evaluating instruction and maintaining high visibility that correlate with but do not include all the subdimensions of managing the instructional program and school culture building.

As opposed to Romero & Krichesky's (2018) assertion that states the principals in their sample conduct little class observation, the participants of this study seem to be quite aware of what happens in

the classrooms since they supervise and evaluate instruction through regular, informal classroom visits and monitoring. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether this practice is closely tied to ensuring alignment of school goals with teachers' classroom objectives and instruction. One of the main characteristics of the IL model is that it is goal-oriented, and the role of principals is to couple all their actions with the school mission. Besides, an essential part of this subdimension is giving feedback and pointing out specific weakness in teachers' instructional performance is an area the school leaders of this sample are wrestling with. Therefore, it is difficult to define how effective their performance is in terms of instructional improvement and consequent impact on student performance. In regard to maintaining high visibility, it is clear the administrators try to build a positive school climate by establishing positive relationships with their staff through a fluid communication and constant interaction as opposed to what Romero and Krichesky (2018) assert, "we do have evidence, within this sample, of a low interaction with teachers" (p. 350). This can be interpreted as a difference between school administrators' experiences in Buenos Aires and the experiences of administrators in the rest of the provinces in Argentina. Nonetheless, creating a proper climate to foster teaching and learning requires behaviors related to other subdimensions such as focusing on the school goals, providing incentives, and developing and enforcing academic standards which do not appear to be in the focus of the participants' leadership within this sample.

On the other hand, interestingly, the school administrators seem to be appealing more to transformational leadership strategies – they are specifically making use of three strategies that constitute the TL model exposed in this study: providing individualized support, stimulating teachers intellectually, and somehow sharing their decision-making with them. Their accounts show they do everything in their power within all the limitations under which they operate to support their teachers and foster a climate suitable for teaching and learning – they have the pulse of the school, prioritize teachers over central office enforcements. They try to encourage teachers to keep learning by acting as sources of knowledge filling gaps in knowledge and skills and/or seeking other resources like free professional development. Still, a critical part of the TL model is empowering teachers by involving them in decision-making processes an area which seems to have plenty of room for improvement yet. All the participants claim to involve teachers in decisions at different levels, nevertheless, these seem to be survival strategies given the complexity of their role and the lack of autonomy that shape the context of performance of school

leaders in Argentina. They lead schools with the support of the most committed teachers and/or staff and tend to share decisions with teachers who are directly involved in the issue at hand. For their leadership to impact on teachers' performance and enhance their instructional practices, it is necessary that school leaders set up structures to distribute their leadership and make use of teachers' assets by providing them autonomy to make decisions and come up with solutions for problems. As stated in the literature review, prompting teacher leadership takes sharing power and providing the conditions for collaborative work among teachers. This implies practices such as eliminating boundaries between administrators and teachers, allocating resources, creating interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary projects – building a collaborative culture.

Likewise, for school administrators to shift from a survival leadership and develop into effective leaders, they must be provided with the right support and structural conditions in terms of preparation and professional development opportunities, mandatory changes implementation, and autonomy to encourage and ensure high teacher performance. Both models, IL and TL require leaders to have certain independence to organize their schools and set up structures toward the distribution of leadership and empowerment of teachers as well as the enhancement of the instructional program toward school goals. As Assistant Principal Alessandra argued, the country is issuing more and more policies to meet the demands of a diverse and changing world, however, not much is being done to support and adapt the school system to these changes, which makes the implementation of such changes an uphill job for school leaders.

Implications

In light of the literature on educational leadership models and the results of this study, there are specific gaps in school leaders' practices which need to be addressed in order to enhance student performance and outcomes. Therefore, I have identified a series of implications for administrator preparation, education policy, and future research.

Administrator preparation, as highlighted in the Argentinian school leadership literature, is in desperate need of attention. Attention needs to be paid to pre-service, hiring process, and ongoing preparation programs for school administrators. First, teachers who aspire to become principals should count with a variety of professional development opportunities in different formats regarding school

leadership competencies. Second, it is necessary that the hiring process ensure systematic and standardized candidate preparation on school leadership qualifications related to transformational and instructional leadership competences since, as exposed in the literature review, the combination of these competences is conducive to sustainable school improvement. In regard to ongoing development, these programs must be designed according to a needs analysis of current principals and assistant principals' performance so they are meaningful and practical for the school administrators. A needs analysis helps identify gaps in skills and knowledge that guide the design, development, and evaluation of suitable and effective formative processes.

Preparation programs must be supported by education policies that, informed by research, ensure not only the structural conditions needed to enact leadership focused on improving student learning and school performance. Education policies which support the systematization and standardization of administrator programs are critical in turning teachers who apply for school administrative positions into effective school leaders. Furthermore, another aspect education policy should focus on is providing incentives for teachers to take on more leadership roles such as coordination positions that enable school administrators to organize their schools better and distribute their leadership. As indicated by Argentina school leadership studies and the results of this research work, the instructional dimension must be prioritized if the goal is to enhance student learning and attainment. This means providing school administrators the support or/and the authority to elicit teacher instructional excellence and accountability. Finally, mandatory changes in instructional practices such as the new evaluation model and the Comprehensive Sex Education law should be coupled with the right support – be it professional development or other resources – to foster understanding among teachers and administrators.

In terms of future research, a dimension of relevance in both leadership models used in this study is the management of school vision and mission. Due to the limitations of this work, I could not inquire in-depth about the participants handling of school goals and objectives, hence, I believe it would be important to get a deep insight into this area. It would deepen the knowledge about the struggles they are facing found in this study and facilitate the design of more effective formative programs on educational leadership.

To conclude, for public schooling in Argentina to provide more inclusive educational practices, meet the needs of each and every student, and boost their learning outcomes, there needs to be more focus on school leadership. The role of school administrators calls for reforms. This implies rethinking the way the K-12 school system is organized and considering bottom-up strategies which give voice and foster the leadership of those dealing with everyday educational challenges in schools. The role of state school administrators needs to be empowered for these key actors to be able to distribute their leadership and empower their staff in order to enhance student achievement and foster more socially just school experiences.

Appendix A
Semi-structured Questionnaire

1. Please, describe your current position and role: what does it entail?
2. What led you to become a principal?
3. What is your role in working with teachers? How much autonomy do you have?
4. Please, tell me about how you interact with teachers regarding:
    a.   Communication with teachers?
    b.   Supporting teachers in their teaching practices?
    c.   Supporting teachers working together?
    d.   Involving teachers in the decisions regarding the direction of the school?
    e.   When to involve teachers in making decisions about curriculum?
5. What do you find to be difficult in your work leading and supporting teachers? Can you give me an example of that?
6. Why do you find these things particularly challenging? What makes these situations challenging?
7. How do you address those challenges? What has helped you or made it more difficult to address those challenges?
8. How do you introduce changes that involve teachers? Can you give an example?
9. When leading teachers, what works and what does not? Why?
10. What drives your decisions? How do you make decisions?
11. Please tell me about your preparation and training regarding working with teachers? What has been helpful? What was not helpful? What would you have liked to know before you started this position? What would like to get better at in your work with teachers?

Appendix B
Data Analysis: First Coding

Difficulties in Working with Teachers
- Teamwork / interdisciplinary work
    - Teachers didn't know what teamwork meant
    - Teachers resisted interdisciplinary lesson planning and sharing
    - Teachers need PD to understand and be able to work interdisciplinarily.
    - Teachers' schedule don't facilitate teamwork
- Instructional practices: teacher-centered practices
    - Traditional lesson planning
    - Dependance on manuals and coursebooks
    - Lack of innovation and use of new technologies in the classroom.
- Teachers' perceptions of their students
    - Lack of diversity consciousness
    - Lack of learning is the student's problem
    - Students' future determined by their parents' jobs
    - Low expectations of students in rural areas
    - Lack of awareness of students' reality
- Teachers' perceptions of their role
    - Lack of commitment with the teaching duty
    - Teachers try to avoid the teaching task
    - Teachers don't feel responsible for figuring out solutions and making decisions
- Giving negative feedback / avoiding conflict
    - It is not motivating
    - It creates a negative climate
    - Teachers get offended
    - Teachers do not accept when they are wrong

Addressing Challenges: Strategies
- Building relationships / interacting with teachers
    - Having individual conversations
    - Supporting them individually
    - Listening to them
    - Drawing on the humanist side
    - Being visible
    - Being approachable
    - Sharing recess time with teachers
    - Caring about their motivation
    - Treating teachers well
- Encouraging teachers to continue learning
    - Coaching them
    - Seeking free professional development
    - Sharing information about relevant content for their practices
    - Prompting discussion about education
- Choosing teachers strategically
    - Assigning responsibilities to those teachers who are reluctant to collaborate.
    - Assigning responsibilities to teachers according to their willingness and suitability for the task.
    - Asking teachers for help according to their knowledge in the matter at hand
- Having a support group to lead
    - Close former colleagues committed to them
    - Most committed teachers

Lack of Support from the System
- Lack of incentives for both teachers and principals
    - Low salaries
    - No pay for extra work

- No attendance incentives for teachers
- Lack of support from the system
  - No support to foster accountability (political interests)
  - No consequences for lack of instructional compliance
  - No two-way communication with the Ministry of Ed

The Dilemma: Prioritizing Students and Understanding Teachers' Situation
- Reporting absenteeism means affecting teachers' salary
- Teachers have more than one job

Mandatory Implementation of New Laws and Policies
- Changes are mandated without providing support to foster teacher understanding
- The evaluation model is not being understood
- The evaluation model requires teacher preparation to be implemented
- Comprehensive Sex Ed training was not sufficient

A Hiring System which does not Require School Leadership Qualifications
- School administrative positions do not required preparation
- Getting specific PD is a personal decision
- Principals are prepared to give a justified opinion on the instructional program
- The position is not at stake for lack of ongoing development

Appendix C
Data Analysis: Final Coding

The Struggle to Enact Instructional Leadership
- Traditional lesson planning and delivery
- Teacher-centered behaviors
  - Teacher deficit views of students
  - Teacher lack of expectations of students
- Difficulties to give negative feedback

Factors Affecting Performance
- Mandatory changes implementation flaws
- Factors hindering teacher performance
  - Instructional excellence is not a priority
  - Low salaries
  - No incentives for extra work
- Insufficient preparation for the role
  - Application process flaws
  - Professional development needs

Survival Leadership Strategies
- Instructional leadership strategies
  - Supervising and evaluating instruction
  - Keeping high visibility
- Transformational leadership strategies
  - Providing intellectual stimulation
  - Providing individualized support
  - Teacher participation in decision-making
    - Having a support system with the most committed teachers
    - Including teachers in some decisions

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EDUCATION

Educational Leadership M.S., May 2021.
Syracuse University School of Education, Syracuse, NY, United States.

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Syracuse University School of Education, Syracuse, NY, United States.

Teacher of English as a Foreign Language Bachelor's Degree, December 2011.
Instituto de Formación Docente Continua Teacher Training Center, San Luis, Argentina.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Fulbright Masters Scholarship issued by the Argentine Fulbright Commission, August 2019 – May 2021.

Foreign Language Assistant Scholarship issued by the Argentine Government and the British Council, October 2013 – May 2014.

HONORS and AWARDS

Burton Blatt Scholarship Recognition, Syracuse University School of Education, May 2021.

SERVICE and PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Experience in Leadership

Administrative Team Member, English-Net School of English, San Luis, Argentina, June 2015 – June 2019.
   Perform academic and administrative tasks such as:
- Planning academic calendars.
- Handling student recruitment.
- Liaising with teachers and other staff.
- Designing lesson materials.
- Designing and editing final written and speaking exams.
- Adapted and applied objective writing and speaking assessment criteria from recognized international institutions.
- Instruct and supervise teachers on assessment criteria.
- Manage Social Media: Facebook: Englishnetsanluis
- Supervision of facility operation.

Teaching Service

Instructor, English-Net private school of English, San Luis, Argentina, June 2015 – June 2019.

EFL teacher, Escuela Hogar Nº 2 Gobernador Laureano Landaburu rural state school. San Luis, Argentina, May 2018 – present.

EFL teacher, Nº 7 Constancio Carlos Vigil urban secondary state school, San Luis, Argentina, October 2015 – present.

Spanish Language Assistant, Coombe Girls' School, Kingston Upon Thames, London, UK, October 2013 – May 2014.

Instructor, Target English Solutions private school of English, San Luis, Argentina, March 2012 – August 2013.

EFL teacher, Escuela Nº 6 Santa Maria Eufrasia state school, San Luis, Argentina, May 2012 – October 2015.

Instructor, William Shakespeare private school of English, San Luis, Argentina, August 2011 – August 2013.

Professional Development

Basic/Refresher Course – Human Subjects Research; Collaborative Training Institutional Initiative, Syracuse University; October 2020.

Universal Design for Learning: Foundations and Applications; Syracuse University Hall of Languages; February 2020.

Text Grammar from a Functional Perspective and Possible Applications, especially to English as a Foreign Language Teaching Certificate; Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Mendoza, Argentina. July – August 2017.

Training for Spanish Language Assistants (20 hours); Spanish Council of Education in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. October 2013 – May 2014.

Tracking the Ups and Downs of Language Teaching since 2002; British Council, London, UK, November 2013.

Safeguarding Training; Coombe Girls' School, Kingston Upon Thames, London, England. October 2013.

Core Learning Priorities for Teachers of Foreign Languages Certificate; Teaching Training Center Instituto de Formación Docente Continua – San Luis, Argentina. March – June 2013.

International Conference of Education; San Luis City Government, Argentina San Luis, Argentina. September 2011.

Volunteering

Marketing team member, Masters Argentina student organization, October 2020 – May 2021.

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SKILLS

Language Skills: Spanish – native; English – proficiency; Portuguese – basic understanding.

Computer Skills: ongoing learning of Word Processing, Power Point, Spreadsheets, Movie Maker, Audacity, Adobe Photoshop, Lightroom, Microsoft Outlook, Google Pack, Canva, Zoom, Airmeet, and social media apps.