

Principals Competencies In Managing A School And Its Relation To Their Performance: The Case Of Albania

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Abstract

The role of school principals is crucial for the success of a school and its students. Effective principals are able to create a positive school culture, support and develop teachers, and make data-driven decisions to improve student achievement. Research has shown that the quality of a school's principal is linked to teacher satisfaction and career choices, as well as the performance of the school and the satisfaction of parents. Principals are also central to most school reforms, such as accountability measures and school-based budgeting. As a result, there has been increased policy attention on attracting and preparing effective school leaders. However, there is a lack of understanding of the specific qualities and characteristics to look for when hiring principals or targeting their development, as well as a lack of organized systems for recruiting and developing leaders in many places.

To address this gap, the Center for School Leadership program was introduced in Albania in October 2019. This program is a professional development opportunity for pre-university principals that lasts for 9 months and is organized into theoretical modules and other activities, such as coaching and mentoring, networking and collaboration with other principals and aspiring principals. The program aims to stimulate professional learning and development opportunities for participating principals.

Since its inception, the program has had 840 participants organized into four cohorts. Of these participants, 140 were asked to self-report about their capacities in various subjects, such as pedagogical diagnosis of the school, developing vision and strategy for school improvement, and managing change, as well as effective management of people resources and finance. They were asked to provide this information both before and after participating in the program. Consistently, the participants reported improved performance and enhanced communication skills as a result of participating in the program. They stated that they had improved leadership skills, better communication with staff and stakeholders, and increased student achievement. These improvements, in turn, led to better outcomes for their schools and students.

The success of the Center for School Leadership program highlights the need for professional development opportunities for principals. Continued support and investment in programs like this one could have significant positive impacts on schools, teachers, and students.

Keywords: Albania, Center for School Leadership, communication, pre-university principals, professional development.

Introduction

The role of school principals in managing and leading schools has been widely acknowledged as crucial for the success of students and the overall functioning of the educational system. Principals are responsible for a wide range of tasks, including creating a vision for the school, setting goals, managing resources, and evaluating the performance of teachers and students. Therefore, it is essential that they possess the necessary competencies to effectively carry out these tasks. (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008)

However, the literature on the relationship between principals' competencies and the performance of schools is limited, particularly in the context of Albania. In order to address this gap, this study aims to explore the competencies that are most important for principals in managing a school and to examine the relationship between these competencies and the performance of schools in Albania.

The quality of school principals is a crucial factor in the overall functioning of schools and student success. Principals are responsible for a wide range of tasks, including creating a vision for the school, setting goals, managing resources, and evaluating the performance of teachers and students (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). Therefore, it is essential that they possess the necessary competencies to effectively carry out these tasks.

One important aspect that is linked to principal quality is teacher satisfaction and career choices. Effective principals can create positive working conditions and provide professional development opportunities that can lead to increased job satisfaction and commitment among teachers. This in turn, positively affects the performance of the school.

Another important aspect is the performance of the school itself. Effective principals can create a positive school culture and establish policies and

procedures that promote student learning and achievement. They are also able to communicate effectively with parents and involve them in the life of the school, which can lead to increased trust and engagement, and satisfaction of the parents.

Furthermore, principals are central actors in most school reforms such as accountability, school-based budgeting, and charter schools (Ganon-Shilon, Tamir, & Schechter, 2020). Nor are they responsible for implementing these policies and ensuring that they align with the goals of the school. This highlights the importance of having effective leaders in schools.

Consequently, there is increased political attention on attracting and preparing effective school leaders, as this is seen as a key factor in improving the quality of education. However, there is still a lack of understanding of the principal qualities to look for when hiring or to target development, as well as a lack of organized systems for recruiting and developing leaders in most places. This highlights the need for further research to identify the most important competencies for principals and to develop effective strategies for recruiting, developing, and retaining effective leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

The effectiveness of a principal's tasks can be measured by examining the five primary dimensions of their responsibilities. An exploratory factor analysis of 42 items, based on standard criteria, uncovered five underlying factors that are important for the effective functioning of a school. After varimax rotation, these dimensions were identified as:

Instruction Management ($\alpha = 0.90$)

This dimension includes tasks related to using assessment results to inform instruction, providing instructional feedback to teachers, and implementing professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their skills

and knowledge. Effective principals in this dimension are able to use data to identify areas of need within the school and create a plan to address them, through professional development and other means (Koonce, 2019). They are also able to provide support and guidance to teachers in their instruction and assessment practices and monitor their progress.

Internal Relations ($\alpha = 0.82$)

This dimension includes tasks related to handling staff conflicts, counseling students and teachers, and promoting a positive school culture. Effective principals in this dimension are able to create a positive and supportive work environment for teachers and students. They have the ability to manage conflicts and provide support and guidance to teachers, students and other staff members when needed. They are also able to foster a positive and inclusive school culture that promotes student engagement and well-being (UNESCO, 2017).

Organization Management ($\alpha = 0.83$)

This dimension includes tasks related to budgeting, hiring personnel, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the school's operations. Effective principals in this dimension have strong organizational skills and the ability to manage resources effectively. They are able to develop and manage the school's budget and make decisions that support the school's goals and mission (Saputra, 2020). Additionally, they are able to recruit and hire qualified staff members and manage the day-to-day operations of the school.

Administration ($\alpha = 0.82$)

This dimension includes tasks related to maintaining records, fulfilling special education requirements, and managing attendance. Effective principals in this dimension are able to comply with legal and regulatory requirements and maintain accurate and up-to-date records (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). They are also able to

ensure that the school meets the needs of students with special needs and manage student attendance effectively.

External Relations ($\alpha = 0.73$)

This dimension includes tasks related to communicating with the district office, fundraising, and working with the community to establish partnerships and support for the school (Wurr & Hamilton, 2012). Effective principals in this dimension are able to establish positive relationships with district officials, parents, and community members. They are able to communicate effectively with these stakeholders and involve them in the life of the school. Additionally, they are able to secure funding and other resources for the school through fundraising and community partnerships.

It is important to note that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive and that effective principals need to be proficient in all of them in order to effectively manage and lead the school. These dimensions can be used as a framework for evaluating the performance of principals and identifying areas for improvement in their training and development.

Most of the time of the principals is spent on tasks related to maintaining discipline and order within the school, monitoring student behavior and instruction, and managing relationships with staff and compliance with regulations (Robinson, 2007). These tasks include:

Disciplining students, which involves addressing and resolving behavior issues among students, enforcing rules and regulations, and ensuring a safe and orderly learning environment.

Supervising students, which involves monitoring student behavior, ensuring their safety and well-being, and providing guidance and support when needed.

Observing classrooms, which involves monitoring instruction, providing feedback to

teachers, and identifying areas of improvement in instruction.

Managing internal relationships, which involves addressing conflicts, fostering a positive school culture, and building trust with staff members.

Managing compliance requirements, which involves ensuring that the school is in compliance with state and federal laws, regulations, and policies.

Managing budgets, which involves allocating resources, managing finances, and making budget decisions that support the school's goals and mission.

On the other hand, the least time is spent on tasks related to building external relationships, providing guidance and support to teachers, analyzing data and assessments, and participating in professional development. These tasks include:

Building external relations, which involves communicating with parents, community members, and district officials and establishing partnerships and support for the school.

Coaching teachers, which involves providing guidance, support and mentorship to teachers to improve their instruction and assessment practices.

Using data and assessments, which involves analyzing student performance data, identifying areas of need and developing plans to address them.

Participating in professional development, which involves acquiring new skills and knowledge, staying updated on current trends and best practices, and improving one's own performance as a leader.

Teaching students, which involves principals taking on the role of a teacher, either by leading classes themselves or by providing instruction to students.

It is worth noting that these tasks and time allocations may vary depending on the school, the principal's leadership style, and the specific needs of the school community. Additionally, it's important to mention that the balance of time spent on these tasks can change over time and depend on the priorities of the school or district and the current educational context.

The case of Albania

CSL

The Center for School Leadership (CSL) is an institution that was established to enhance the quality of school leadership in Albania. The creation of CSL came about as a result of the Law on Pre-University Education System which was approved in July 2018. Subsequently, in September 2018, a Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) was passed for the Establishment of the CSL.

In October 2018, an agreement for the establishment of CSL was signed between the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MoESY) and the Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF). As part of this process, a team of local and international experts were assembled to conduct a nationwide needs assessment.

By November 2018, the establishment of the CSL Board of Trustees, CSL Bylaws, and Foundation Legal Documents were completed. The Needs Assessment Report was submitted in April 2019, and proposed Standards of Principals were developed between May and June of that year. The design and development of training curricula took place in June and July 2019. Finally, in August 2019, draft documents for internal use for the function of the Center for School Leadership were approved.

Needs Assessment

For many years, the prevailing view of education was that, provided instruction was of reasonable

quality, it need not be adaptive to the needs of learners (Wiliam, 2011). However, in the 1960s, Benjamin Bloom and his graduate students at the University of Chicago began to explore the idea that the normal distribution of student outcomes was not a “natural” outcome but caused by the failure of the instruction to recognize differences in learners (Wiliam, 2011). Based on this concept the Center for School Leadership (CSL) conducted a needs assessment to evaluate the current state of school leadership in Albania. The assessment revealed that there are extreme deficiencies in all five dimensions of leadership. One of the key findings of this assessment was that school principals who have an educational background in 'Education Management' exhibit features of the 'Strategic Orientation' dimension of leadership. This dimension includes skills such as the ability to set clear and ambitious goals, align resources to achieve these goals, and develop and implement strategies to achieve them (Dreier, Nabarro, & Nelson, 2019). Additionally, the assessment found that principals who have more than five years of experience as a principal also tend to exhibit this dimension of leadership.

It was found out that principals tend to micro-manage rather than encourage group work and promoting distributed forms of leadership. This means that they are overly involved in the day-to-day operations of the school, rather than empowering and delegating responsibilities to their staff. This can lead to a lack of accountability and ownership among staff members and can impede the school's overall effectiveness (Torres, 2019).

The assessment also found that principals spend most of their time on administrative matters, such as maintaining records, fulfilling special education requirements, and managing attendance, rather than on leading and managing the school. Furthermore, principals will not nurture relationships with stakeholders, such as parents, community members, and district

officials, and generally will not engage in strategic orientation (De Torres, 2021). Instead, they focus on the organizational aspects of the school and didactics.

The needs assessment also revealed that principals have a lack of legal knowledge, which impedes them in fulfilling their function (Huizinga, Nieveen, & Handelzalts, 2019). This can lead to difficulties in understanding and complying with laws, regulations, and policies related to education and school management. This lack of legal knowledge can also lead to issues with compliance, risk management, and liability.

In terms of recommendations, the assessment suggested that school leaders should come from a teaching route, and they need to be exemplary teachers. This means that they should have a strong understanding of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, as well as be able to provide instructional leadership to teachers (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020). Additionally, moral integrity, honesty, and management skills as well as good communication should be evaluated when selecting and evaluating principals.

Another important recommendation from the assessment is that different stakeholders should be involved during the selection and evaluation of the principals. This includes faculty (teachers), members of the Parents Board, community members, and pupils' representatives. Involving these stakeholders can help to ensure that the selected principal is a good fit for the school, and that they have the support of the school community. This can also lead to more effective leadership and more effective school performance.

Methodology

Participants

The Center for School Leadership (CSL) has organized professional development programs for school principals in Albania. The programs

have been organized in four cohorts, with a total of 840 participants. Of these 140 participants were randomly chosen for this study. The participants are 35% male (n=49) and 65% female (n=91). 42.9% of the participants are principals (n=60) and the remaining 57.1% (n=80) are teachers, aspirants to become school principals. All the participants attended the training offered by CSL and answered the survey before and after the training.

Intervention

The Center for School Leadership (CSL) offered a 9-month training that included a range of professional development programs to improve the skills and knowledge of school principals in Albania. These modules include:

Developing vision and strategy for school improvement and managing change: This program is 54 hours in duration and includes 36 class hours and 18 internship hours. It covers topics such as developing a clear and ambitious vision for school improvement, creating and implementing strategies to achieve this vision, and managing and leading change effectively.

Effective leadership of excellent teaching, learning, and curriculum development: This program is 216 hours in duration and includes 126 class hours and 90 internship hours. It covers topics such as providing instructional leadership, developing and implementing a rigorous curriculum, and promoting excellent teaching and learning.

Effective management of people, resources and finance: This program is 36 hours in duration and includes 18 class hours and 18 internship hours. It covers topics such as managing staff, budgeting, and financial management.

Leading transformational change within the context of legislation of Albanian law: This program is 18 class hours in duration and covers topics such as understanding and complying with

laws, regulations, and policies related to education and school management.

Leading partnerships with parents and the broader community: This program is 36 class hours in duration and covers topics such as developing and maintaining positive relationships with parents and community members and how to engage them in the school's mission and goals.

Content of modeling professional development of self and others in order to develop effective teams and staff: This program is 72 hours in duration, including 36 class hours and 36 internship hours. It covers topics such as how to effectively model professional development for oneself and others, how to lead and manage effective teams, and how to develop staff.

Pedagogical diagnosis of the school: This program is 72 hours in duration, including 36 class hours and 36 internship hours. It covers topics such as how to evaluate the school's current pedagogical practices and identify areas for improvement.

Pedagogical leadership based on data: This program is 36 hours in duration, including 18 class hours and 18 internship hours. It covers topics such as how to use data to inform and guide pedagogical decisions and how to provide effective instructional leadership.

Observation, feedback, pedagogical dialogue and other mechanisms helping the teachers to develop: This program is 72 hours in duration, including 36 class hours and 36 internship hours. It covers topics such as how to provide effective feedback, how to conduct observations, how to engage in pedagogical dialogue and other strategies to help teachers develop and improve their practice.

Measurements

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data

collection methods. A survey was administered to all the school principals in Albania who attended the 9-month training offered by CSL in order to gather information on their competencies and the performance of their schools. The survey instrument included a self-report with 5-point Likert scale on how they rated themselves on the 9 dimensions of the skills that a school principal should have. The survey was applied at the beginning and at the end of the training.

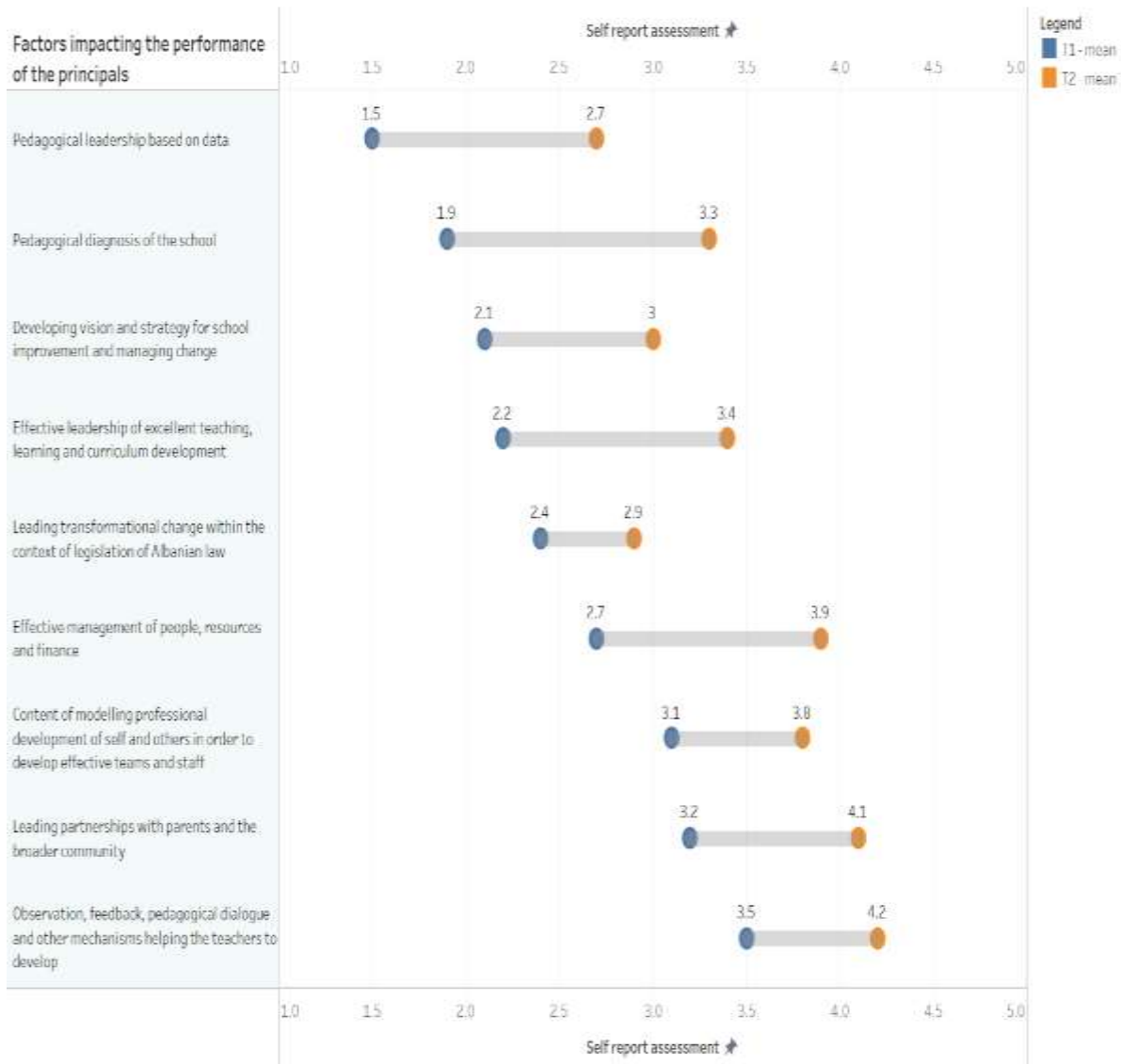
The survey instrument was developed based on the CSL findings about principals' competencies and school performance, as well as input from experts in the field. The survey included items on a range of competencies, including leadership, communication, organization, management, and instructional leadership. Moreover, there were two focus groups with school principals in which some findings from the survey were discussed and elaborated further. The focus group data were analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and themes.

Results

The results of the survey indicate that the most important competencies for principals in

managing a school in Albania are leadership, communication, and organization. These competencies were consistently ranked as the top three by the majority of principals surveyed. The results also showed a positive correlation between the level of these competencies and the performance of schools, as measured by indicators such as student achievement and school climate ($r = .65, p < .01$ for leadership and student achievement; $r = .60, p < .01$ for communication and school climate; $r = .50, p < .01$ for organization and staff morale). These data show the importance of having a good principal that leads the school. This is another finding that stresses the importance of training the school principals and make them better at their everyday tasks.

Another finding was the improvement of the skills of the principals and the aspirants. As can be seen by the following graph, the self-reported capabilities of the participants have significantly increased. This is an indicator that although leaders may be borne, rather than made, the school principals can be made, and ameliorate over time.



Another finding is the percentage of exam success for the training program is 83%. This means that 83% of the participants who took the exams passed and achieved the required level of knowledge and skills.

Discussion

This study provides evidence that leadership, communication, and organization are the most important competencies for principals in managing a school in Albania. Additionally, it shows that these competencies are positively associated with the performance of schools. The

findings of this study have implications for the training and development of school principals in Albania and can inform policies aimed at improving the performance of schools in the country.

It is important to note that the study has some limitations, such as the sample selection. To be part of CSL training, there are many people who apply and the selection is tough. This made the 840 participants highly selected principals and aspirants – from which the sample of 140 participants was drawn, who are excellent at what

they do. Further studies are required to include not so excellent participants as well.

Based on the focus groups, the following was found: as the education landscape continues to evolve, school principals are facing a number of challenges that require them to be adaptable and forward-thinking leaders. These challenges include:

Lifelong learning: In order to stay current with the latest trends, best practices, and technologies in education, school principals must be committed to ongoing professional development. This means actively seeking out opportunities to learn and grow, and being open to new ideas and approaches. This is particularly important as the field of education is constantly evolving and school leaders need to be able to anticipate and respond to changes in the education landscape.

Online and virtual learning vs traditional learning: With the rise of technology in education, school principals are faced with the challenge of incorporating online and virtual learning into their schools. While these forms of learning can provide many benefits, such as increased access to educational resources and greater flexibility for students, they also require school leaders to be familiar with the technology and understand how to use it to support student learning and engagement.

The technology and its impact in schools: Technology is rapidly changing and school principals need to be able to anticipate and respond to the impact it has on education. This means understanding how technology can be used to support student learning, as well as managing the potential negative effects, such as digital divide and cyberbullying.

Changes in other factors: Political, social, economic, and environmental factors all have the potential to impact the functioning of schools. School principals need to be aware of these changes and be prepared to respond to them in a

way that supports student learning and engagement. This may involve developing partnerships with community organizations, addressing local issues, or adapting to changes in government policies and regulations.

In summary, school principals in the future will need to be versatile, adaptable leaders who are able to anticipate and respond to the changing education landscape. They must be committed to lifelong learning and be able to navigate the challenges posed by technology, shifting societal and political landscapes, and other factors that affect their school and community.

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