Mexican successful school principals profile. An empirical study

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1.   Abstract

Principals' role is important because is a key player for good performance school excellence and influence the teaching-learning process. This paper addresses eight Mexican school principals' cases that are recognized as successful. An analysis of multiple cases was conducted in order to define a common profile. Findings are presented base on three categories: 1. *Individual characteristics*, 2. *Skills* and 3. *Knowledge*. These categories are described base on cases evidence and literature support.

Keywords: school management, school leadership, successful school management, school principal.

2.   Introduction

Education is a lifelong process that contributes to the development of the individual and the society transformation, and is a fundamental factor in the pursuit of knowledge and to educate women and men (LGE, 2013), just as the society is formed in schools (Mulford, 2005) and these have an important role to create the conditions where it affects the student's abilities (Alvariño, Arzola, Brunner, Recart & Vizcarra, 2000). The 30% of student learning is attributed to the conditions of the school (Fernández & Blanco, 2004) where the school principal is a key factor for ensure quality education (Murillo & Román, 2011). Thereby generating knowledge about principals helps to generate knowledge about how they influence in the learning process.

In this sense, the principal activities have a significant level of responsibility, as it relates to the school performance. Since the principal is the decision-maker for the performance, organization, operation and administration of the school and its annexes (SEC, 2011). He is responsible for everything that happens in the institution (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2009), set the tone and agenda for achieving the educational development (Møller, Vedøy, Presthus & Skedsmo, 2009), and their

role is crucial in educational quality (Cantón & Arias, 2008). These features demonstrate the importance the principal role, and also the high level of responsibility.

Some studies have defined this type of head teacher as a successful school principals: are head teacher who achieve remarkable results by addressing effectively the moral, social and ethical issues as well as the implementation of the school agenda set for the institution (for example, MacBeath, 1998; Leithwood, Jantzi y Steinbach, 1999; Southworth, 2002; Day, Parsons, Welsh y Harris, 2002). These school principals achieve balance between objectives, educational tasks and group needs (Torres, 2010) course all his actions toward the purpose of improving student learning (Rosenholtz, 1985), thenceforth reach a goal or a shared vision, where the head teacher creates structures and procedures to enable and guide teachers and school administrative achieve the goals set (González, 2007), as well get the commitment of the school community (Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011) including participation of students in the teaching process, in addition to partnerships with parents to establish learning organizations (Schmelkes, 2002). Méndez-Salcido and Torres-Arcadia (2013) placed the school principal as an change agent important for change social practices that prevail within an educational community and thus modify the structure of the school, it means, that school principal remakes social structure way, defined as social restructuring (Giddens, 2009). Therefore successful school principals are change agents that establish a share vision that seeks to improve student learning, in the same way their action improve school practices.

Among the investigations that have emerged to the successful school principal study is the International Successful School Principalship Proyect (ISSPP), which was founded in 2001 by Professor Christopher Day in the University of Nottingham, England. The ISSPP objective is documented successful school principal cases, as it seeks to generate understanding about what makes successful a school in a country can contribute and if this can contribute to improve to another school in another country.

This research takes up the cases of successful school principals documented by the ISSPP México, in order to analyze the successful school principal similarities. Then the method is described.

3.   Method
Participants

For the analysis of multiple case study was conducted the review of eight cases of successful principal of secondary level, k-12, in public schools in Mexico. Data come from three interviews with the head teacher of the eight schools, around three interviews with teachers, three parents and three students focus group was analyzed. Four school principal are female and four male, with an average age of 54 years, an average of 15 years' experience as principal and an average of six years as head teacher of the school in the time that cases were documented. All of them have work experience in teaching, four of them before being school principals worked on as principal's assistants and two collaborated in the teachers' union. As for instruction, four head teachers are graduates of Teacher Education, one has a degree, one has a master and two have PhD. The cases were documented in different cities in Mexico, three from the North: Hermosillo, Chihuahua and

Monterrey; three from the South: Xalapa, Tuxtla Gutierrez and Merida; and two located in the center of the country: San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato.

3.1.   Materials and procedures

This research was based in the study case method, which according to Creswell (2007) is a qualitative approach where the researcher explores a limited case or multiple cases in time using multiple sources of information, to generate a report of a subject as the basis for the case or case description. Multiple case analyses was made with the purpose to understand, find the profile of successful school principal in eight cases.

A data matrix collection is used in order to classify interviews references associated. With the information collected, data is analyzed by categories and subcategories through matrix log adapted from Stake (2006).

Profile is defined by the successful school principal complies with the retrieved list of subcategories, which includes the subcategories that are present in at least seven of the eight cases in the study. Also retrieved profile undergoes validity by reviewing by peers, involving three researchers in educational administration.

4.   Results

As result of the analysis of the cases, three categories were identified: 1. *Individual characteristics*: includes traits of the individual exercising the role of school principal, which includes thoughts, feelings, attitudes, habits and values, 2. *Skills*: lists aptitudes that the school principal has to carry out the activities derived from his function and 3. *Knowledge*: refers to the antecedent that school principal possesses about any field, which has acquired by experience or learning, and is linked to his school function. These three categories are endorsed by 1.496 references identified in the cases. The *skills* category has greater presence within the cases since it has 51% of references; followed by the category *individual characteristics* with 41% of references and finally the category *knowledge* with 8% of the references. In table 1, there are the three categories listed with its corresponding subcategories, of which the subcategory with most references in the cases is *commitment generation*.

Table 1

Number of cases and references by case

Category	Subcategories	References		Cases	
		#	%	#	%
Individual Characteristics 611 References 41%	Accessible	29	**5%**	8	**100%**
	Inclusive	79	**13%**	8	**100%**
	Responsible	47	**8%**	8	**100%**
	Celebrate achievement	28	**5%**	7	**88%**
	Aimed at improving	28	**5%**	7	**88%**
	Respectful	38	**6%**	7	**88%**
	Strict	10	**2%**	7	**88%**
Skills 769 References 51%	Effective Communication	36	**5%**	8	**100%**
	Commitment Generation	552	**72%**	8	**100%**
	Social interaction	22	**3%**	8	**100%**
Knowledge 116 References 8%	School principal's functions	12	**10%**	8	**100%**
	School colleagues	11	**9%**	7	**88%**

The school principal common profile is developed with 12 subcategories, of which the following are most relevant subcategories: *Accessible, Inclusive, Responsible, Effective Communication, Commitment Generation, Social interaction* and *School principal's functions*, since evidence of these were found in eight cases analyzed. The school principal common profile structure can be seen in detail in figure 1. Below explains each of the categories.
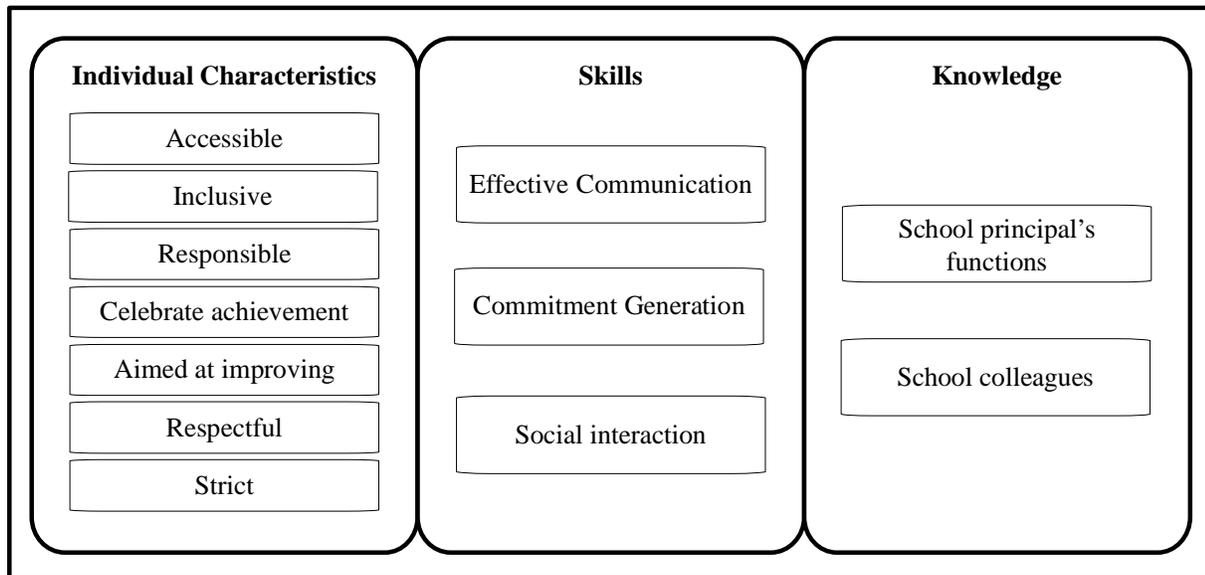
Individual Characteristics	Skills	Knowledge
Accessible	Effective Communication	School principal's functions
Inclusive	Commitment Generation	School colleagues
Responsible	Social interaction	
Celebrate achievement		
Aimed at improving		
Respectful		
Strict		

Figure 1. Successful principal profile in México

4.1. Individual characteristics.

The *individual characteristics* category is identified in 611 references and established 7 subcategories valid after applying the selection rule. After the analysis of subcategories the cases of Guanajuato, Hermosillo, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Xalapa and Monterrey are more similarity with the subcategories, because these have a 100% similarity. The definition and literature evidence of these subcategories is shown below.

- *Accessible*. The school principal is available to receive whoever seeks him, as parents, students and staff. In the Moos, Krejsler, Kofod and Jensen (2005) study the successful school principal said that "the door only is closed when very personal things are going on" (p. 569). *Accessible* subcategory is found in Chihuahua case where a teacher said that he sees that the principal is available for everyone and most of the time meets with all who seeks him.

- *Inclusive*. The school principal is open to listen to others and include its contribution. In this regard Manes (2005) indicates that a leader must take into account the participation of its staff in the vision of change processes and Day and Sammons (2013) denote that successful principals ensure that all school stakeholders participate. The subcategory is in found Monterrey case, where a teacher points out that the school principal consults with others before making decisions, she does surveys and sometimes asks some key elements involved with the area in which she has to decide.

- *Responsible*. The school principal meets the commitments acquired. It is related to that in the literature described within shared leadership, since it includes the collaboration of others in decision making and changes; in this respect Aguilera (2011) emphasizes that the shared leadership rests with contributions of improvement and school management and that is identified as a characteristic of successful managers. This subcategory is found in Xalapa case, in which a student indicates that the school principal is very committed to her work, if

she has three things on a day she gives her time to each and it will counted out, she is very responsible.

- *Celebrate achievement*. The school principal enjoys their achievements and those of the school. It is related to what Leigh, Sherman and Clayton, (2011) found about successful school principals in their study: "Principals spoke with a sense of pride at how they had improved the academic atmosphere in the school" (38). A *celebrate achievement* example is observed in the Hermosillo case where the principal says that it is a personal satisfaction overcome the challenges set.

- *Aimed at improving*. The school principal is oriented towards the improvement of the school. Similar the OCDE (2010) define that principals should promote excellence. An aimed at improving example is observed in the Guanjuato case where the principal said "It is that part where we [school staff] should not settle".

- *Respectful*. The school principal recognizes and respects the other forms of thinking and acting, although he could not be in agreement. Leithwood & Riehl (2003) indicates that successful educational leaders show respect to their staff and MINED (2008) notes that among the values that the school principal should show is respect. An example is in the case of Mérida, where a parent described the principal as a respectful person

- *Strict*. The school principal is firm to establish the discipline of the school. Similar to what was found by Pastrana (2002) about the principals care that discipline is respected and teachers respect the established requirements, also OCDE (2010) states that school principals should take care and control that teachers comply with the regulations of their work. An example of this subcategory is observed in Monterrey case where a parent indicates that the school principal is very strict.

4.2. Skills.

In this category are identified 769 references and stablish three valid subcategories. There is evidence of the three subcategories in the eight cases, which is 100% similarity with the cases analyzed. The definition of each subcategory and its literature description is shown below.

- *Effective communication*. Is the ability of the school principal to communicate effectively to convey a clear and understandable way their ideas well to listen carefully. Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, (2005) found that successful school principals are excellent communicators. This subcategory can be observed in the Hermosillo case where the school principal notes that effective communication is to talk honestly and address the problems in its real dimension in conjunction with the different styles of parents, and that it has been a long time learning to be a good listener and create conditions to be heard.

- *Commitment generation*. It is the ability of the school principal to achieve the commitment of the school community. Schmelkes (2002) indicates that in a good school, principals encourage the participation of the entire school community. An example of this is in the Chihuahua case where a teacher indicates that in his school teachers are committed to comply with the student learning, even if the school principal is not present, the principal

has already shown them that he is committed, delivered to their work and has a positive attitude and openness.

- *Social interaction*. It is the ability of the school principal to interact with other people. Gurr and et al. (2005) found that successful school principals have excellent interpersonal skills. One example is in the Tuxtla Gutiérrez case where a student says his principal is a good person, not very shrewish and he visits the classrooms and talks to them.

4.3.Knowledge.

In this category are identified 116 references, which are classified into two subcategories valid after applying the selection rule. 100% similarity with the category *knowledge* profile was found in seven of the eight cases: Monterrey, Mérida, Chihuahua, Hermosillo, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí y Xalapa. Also in 100% of cases there are references to the *School principal's functions* subcategory. Then the definition of valid subcategories and their description in literature is presented.

- *School principal's functions*. The school principal knows the functions to be performed, mostly set in defining his position and found within educational standards. Silva, Aguirre and Cordero (2009) indicate that experts say that school principal should know the policy underlying the organization and functioning of schools. This subcategory is observed in the Hermosillo case where a parent indicates that the school principal is preparing for her function.
- *School colleagues*. The school principal knows his collaborators and skills that everyone has and can use, and how it relates to its environment. Isaacs (2004) notes that it is important to know the personality of each teacher, and Aguilera (2011) indicates that effective school principal should know the needs and performance of their teachers. An example of this is in Xalapa's school principal interview, where she says that: know well the staff in order to what is going to delegate to each one of them is according to their way of being, according to their preparation, according to their interests, to ensure good results... then a leader should inform staff that is working very well and thus go in the performance that should make.

5. Discussion

Indeed it was possible to identify a common profile among successful school principal of the analyzed cases. A 12 subcategories profile was defined, out of which seven are observed in the eight cases analyzed. Also are supported by 12 subcategories in the literature.

Profile thereon is highlighting subcategories associated with social principal behaviors. S*kills* category and *respectful, inclusive* and *accessible* subcategories, of *individual characteristics* category, are associated with social skills since as point Monjas and González (1998): social skills are abilities that are needed to carry out an interpersonal activity in a competent way. On the other hand social skills have been identified in other studies on successful directors, for example, Day and Sammons (2013), Gurr et al. (2005) and Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra y Angelidou (2011) found evidence in their researches about successful school principal has excellent social skills. These

research results indicate that social aptitudes are relevant and associated with successful school principals.

Moreover leadership is reflected in the profile. Bush (2008) indicates that leadership has three characteristics: 1. Influence on others, 2. Establish vision and 3. Involve values. The influence on others is seen in *commitment generation subcategory* because effective principal seek parent support (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982), staff collaboration (Leigh et al., 2011) and the all school community be involve in achieve school goals (Aguilera, 2011). Likewise influence on others is related to *celebrate achievement subcategory* since it is a positive reinforcement (Schmelkes, 2002) and *school colleagues'* subcategory, due to serves to distinguish how to influence in the staff and also how to interact with them, as it is seen in Xalapa case, where the school principal points that meet partners lets her know what delegates goes with the preparation and way of being of the person. As well, the values leadership characteristic (Bush, 2008), it is shown in the successful school principal profile, since it is identified as: *responsible* and *respectful* subcategories. Similarly, the *aimed at improving* subcategory is linked to that established by Garay y Uribe (2006), who indicate that leadership is reflected in the principal constantly promoting and maintaining improvement initiatives of educational services, creating the conditions so that these can be developed which allows to establish a vision (third Bush (2008) leadership characteristic). It is therefore the profile show leadership, and shows that successful school principals are leaders.

Otherwise, this research provides knowledge about the profile of a school principal who achieved a successful performance, however has several limitations. Namely that the study was conducted with school principals of secondary level in public schools, so it is important to replicate the study in the others educational level, as is also convenient replicate and compare with other countries and to research private schools in order to analyze differences and to distinguish the difference due to contexts.

Furthermore this research leads to future studies. One of them can refer to the study of the effect of training programs based on the profile found. Also since it is based on identified variables, quantitative studies that measure the presence of the subcategories in successful school principals can be performed.

The focus of this investigation is the successful school principal. Literature indicates that school principals are responsible for everything that happens in the institution (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2009), are a key factor to ensure quality education (Murillo & Román, 2011) and are important school change agents (Méndez-Salcido & Torres-Arcadia, 2013). Thereby generating knowledge about successful school principals helps to define how to influence in the school improve, and thus influence in the teaching and learning process.

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