Effective Leadership Practices for the Improvement of Learning in Public Schools in Chile

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Abstract

This study analyzes and compares the perceptions of Chilean public-school principals with varying levels of effectiveness regarding leadership practices aimed at improving learning. The research is structured around four key dimensions of educational leadership: setting direction, redesigning the organization, developing people, and managing the teaching and learning process. The sample consisted of 48 educational establishments belonging to three Local Public Education Services (SLEP). The results show that leaders of highly effective establishments perceive their leadership capabilities more highly, especially in the dimensions of establishing direction and developing people. The findings suggest that collaborative leadership, support for teacher development, and a focus on learning outcomes are valued as key to strengthening educational management.

Keywords: leadership for learning, school management, management effectiveness, public schools

INTRODUCTION

The current educational context faces complex challenges, where leadership for learning has become increasingly relevant and is key to improving school systems and achieving quality learning outcomes. The landscape is diverse and ever-changing; evidence shows that successfully leading and guiding an organization requires leadership that adapts to the needs of the educational community. Research has shown that effective leaders possess the resources and capacities within the institution to advance equity. According to Olmos-Gómez et al. (2024), they have the ability to influence and impact not only student learning and development but also the professional growth of teachers and the effective and efficient functioning of the institution as a whole. Various studies have demonstrated that effective school leadership has a positive influence on academic performance and other relevant indicators such as school climate and teachers' professional development (Huamanttica, 2024). In Chile, the interest in strengthening principals' leadership and improving the quality of management gained momentum with the enactment of Law No. 21,040 in 2017, which established the new Public Education System. This law assigned the State the responsibility of guaranteeing public, free, and high-quality education, which is secular, pluralistic, and promotes social and cultural inclusion, equity, tolerance, and respect for diversity (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2024). One of the pillars of this reform is the creation of the Local Public Education Services (hereinafter SLEP), decentralized public entities in charge of managing educational institutions. Their mission is to manage resources and administrative processes, provide technical-pedagogical support to principals and their teams, and create conditions for continuous improvement.

SLEPs are responsible for administering and managing groups of schools, promoting improvement through intra- and inter-school collaboration, and building identity and a sense

of belonging within these schools (Uribe et al., 2020; Reyes & Orellana, 2024). They play a strategic role by shaping the institutional context in which school leadership is exercised. At a foundational level, they redefine the relationship between the central level and individual schools.

School principals in Chile play a crucial role in educational quality (Weinstein & Muñoz, 2012), as their effective leadership impacts school improvement processes. Studies have found that leadership can have a positive influence on learning outcomes, provided it is shared among members of the school community (Leithwood, 2020; Chaucono, 2024). This influence is explained by their ability to guide, mobilize, and support teachers around a shared vision of learning. Some processes promote improvement, while others hinder it (Vásquez-Espinoza, 2023). Additionally, Weinstein and Muñoz (2012) indicate that principals' leadership impacts student learning through the development of their teaching staff, which requires the right institutional conditions. This is why SLEPs are key—they allow for the redistribution of responsibilities, clarification of roles, and provision of necessary technical support, preventing leadership from becoming diluted due to task overload and helping maintain a pedagogical focus (Bellei & Valenzuela, 2015).

This study aims to analyze and compare the effectiveness of principals' leadership across a sample of 48 primary and secondary schools, selected from a total of 131 public schools within this new governance system in Chile, located in the Metropolitan and Valparaiso regions. The study seeks to understand how leadership practices are interpreted and adapted in public schools, considering dominant conceptual frameworks and the concrete institutional conditions that shape them. It also aims to analyze how principals in these schools—categorized by performance levels—perceive and assess their leadership practices in relation to pedagogical and organizational challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Specialized literature connects, to some extent, the instructional leadership and leadership for learning approaches. The former focuses on supervision over the curriculum, teaching, and academic achievement, assigning a central role to school leaders, who are considered models with a direct effect on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2014). The latter represents a conceptual evolution that goes beyond an emphasis on pedagogical control, promoting a shared professional culture, teacher collaboration, and organizational development oriented toward learning (Moral, 2018). This perspective broadens the horizon toward creating learning communities committed to improvement processes. According to Bolívar (2014), what matters are the meaningful effects that emerge when a strategic vision, ethical action, and professional teacher development are articulated around a common goal: improving teaching and learning. A learning-centered dimension implies that educational priorities and forms of support for teachers must be integrated within their daily practice (Bellei et al., 2015).

An effective principal is a mediator, capable of delegating responsibilities and sharing authority to collectively build an active school, energize the team, act as an agent of change, and proactively inspire, motivate, and influence in order to improve educational quality (Ibarra-Carrasco, 2022). They must be able to go beyond a normative perspective and address their situated dimension—that is, how they construct meaning around their role in challenging contexts—where adaptive capacity is a key attribute of successful leadership. Villa (2019) and Pascual et al. (2024) agree that effective leaders are those who can combine well-established

practices with innovative responses in highly complex situations. This type of leadership—reflective, ethical, and contextualized—makes it possible to sustain long-term improvement processes and to build resilient educational communities committed to equity.

Differences in the Degree of Effectiveness

For the purposes of this study, it is essential to clarify the use of the term effectiveness, understood as the capacity of certain leadership practices to generate sustained improvements in school processes, promote professional teacher development, and build inclusive and culturally relevant learning environments—valued by school actors themselves according to their needs and experiences (Murillo, 2006; Bolívar, 2010; Bellei & Valenzuela, 2015). This broader and more interpretive notion allows us to grasp the complexity of the contexts in which public-school principals operate and avoids a simplistic interpretation based solely on quantitative indicators.

Several studies have shown that schools regarded as successful tend to have leaders who articulate vision, support, and the development of collective capacities (Day et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 2019). From this perspective, González, and Gómez-Millán (2023) emphasize the role of inclusive leaders who engage the entire educational community in learning processes, promoting spaces for participation, collaboration, and pedagogical adaptability. These practices align with what Moral (2018) has termed leadership for learning. On the other hand, Loya and Delgado (2017) and Plata et al. (2019) warn that in schools where bureaucratic or authoritarian approaches prevail, teachers often experience isolation, limited support, and low motivation, which negatively affect pedagogical processes.

From another perspective, authors such as Ibarra (2022); Murillo (2020), and Fullan (2016), argue that effective school leaders are those who, beyond setting high standards, provide concrete tools and institutional conditions to facilitate the achievement of those goals. Likewise, Bolívar (2010) and Leithwood et al. (2019) agree that leadership for learning requires a strong capacity to articulate strategic vision, professional ethics, and pedagogical purpose.

The specialized literature links leadership effectiveness to the practices implemented in schools. Some models have even systematized these practices, highlighting dimensions such as building a shared vision, supporting professional teacher development, promoting collaboration, and using evidence for pedagogical purposes (Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Murillo, 2020). These allow for theoretical approaches to be translated into situated actions that impact institutional improvement and student learning. According to Cevallos (2024), these practices show enhanced outcomes and demonstrate a school's capacity to positively transform its educational environment in the pursuit of excellence and equity.

In this study, the practices considered successful include: (a) building a shared vision focused on inclusion and equity; (b) providing ongoing support for teaching through professional development strategies; (c) institutional reorganization to encourage participation from various stakeholders; and (d) adapting pedagogical processes to the needs of students, especially in contexts of sociocultural diversity. Understanding leadership effectiveness requires both contextual analysis and interpretation of the meanings that school actors construct based on their everyday experience.

Leadership for learning is that which gives a common purpose to the school organization and influences the behavior of its members, with the ultimate goal of improving quality, as expressed tangibly in student learning outcomes (Bolívar, 2014). From this perspective, a principal's managerial role cannot be understood merely as a prescriptive function, but rather

as a contextualized practice full of meaning—redefined in complex and vulnerable settings that face a range of structural transformations. This vision allows for an expansion of traditional frameworks, recognizing the potential of leadership to transform school culture and create more equitable conditions for learning.

Dimensions and Practices of Leadership for Learning

The model developed by Leithwood et al. (2019) proposes four fundamental dimensions that characterize school leadership oriented towards learning: (1) the establishment of a clear vision shared by the educational community; (2) the professional and personal development of the teaching staff and leadership team; (3) an organizational redesign to promote collaborative structures; and (4) the strategic and effective management of the curriculum and pedagogical practices. These dimensions have shown a positive association with sustained improvement processes in the school setting and with the development of an institutional culture focused on learning (Rivero et al., 2015; Hernández-Castilla et al., 2020).

In the Chilean context, a 2009 study conducted by Fundación Chile found that, while some principals recognize the importance of these practices, their effective implementation is hindered by factors such as administrative overload, lack of pedagogical autonomy, and the pressure stemming from standardized educational policies (Weinstein & Muñoz, 2012; Carrasco-Aguilar et al., 2023). This diagnosis aligns with Leithwood's (2019) findings, which indicate that excessive administrative tasks reduce the time available for instructional leadership and limit pedagogical support for teachers.

Educational leadership has a significant influence on education quality when teachers are trained and demonstrate commitment to implementing innovations in their classrooms, and when they have the support of institutional administrators (Vega et al., 2023). This perspective aligns with the notion of leadership for learning as a practice aimed at building educational communities that reflect, learn, and transform based on their own experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a mixed-methods approach, which consists of the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This method integrates or combines both types of data and, as a result of this integration, draws inferences that provide a broader perspective than either type of data could offer on its own (Creswell et al., 2018). This approach allowed for the analysis of Chilean public-school principals' perceptions regarding their leadership practices oriented towards learning.

Instruments

Two instruments were used: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, both based on the four dimensions proposed by Leithwood (2008), as seen in Table 1.

Table 1   *Dimensions and Practices of Leadership for Learning*

Leadership Dimension	Practices	Cronbach's Alpha
Setting Direction	- Shared vision understood by the community - Encouraging dialogue to establish institutional goals	0.919

	- Trust in teamwork to achieve goals	
	- Promotion of achievement-oriented attitudes	
Redesigning the Organization	- Work culture that respects rights and responsibilities - Collaborative climate within the school - Community involvement in institutional development - Promotion of networking for institutional and community development	0.919
Developing People	- Management of opportunities for reflection and professional development - Individualized support for teacher well-being - Recognition of individual and collective achievements - Diagnosis and prioritization of professional development needs	0.918
Managing Teaching and Learning	- Observation and feedback on teaching practices - Monitoring curricular articulation and learning assessment - Support for students with learning difficulties - Monitoring of teaching practices and learning outcomes - Resource management and effective pedagogical implementation	0.926

Source: Adapted from Leithwood et al. (2008).

Table 1 shows the reliability of the questionnaire, which was estimated using the split-half method, yielding a correlation coefficient of 0.808. The use of this instrument is supported by empirical evidence of its adaptation and validation within the Chilean context. In this case, the instrument by Leithwood et al. (2008), in its Chilean-adapted version by Leithwood (2009), has shown high reliability levels for the good practices scale. Its reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is widely used to measure the internal consistency of psychometric scales (Cronbach, 1951).

These values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 established by Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza (2018), indicating that the items are strongly interrelated and consistently measure each construct. Additionally, the same questionnaire was applied for the first time in

Spain in 2009 (Villa, 2019), and high reliability indices were obtained using both Cronbach's alpha (0.939) and McDonald's omega (0.940), reinforcing its psychometric robustness.

The interview was submitted to expert review (Canales, 2006), confirming its coherence through a structured review process that included: a) The design of a pilot document with 28 questions, evaluated for formulation and relevance. b) Application of the instrument to the experts. c) Analysis of observations and revision of the items. d) Reevaluation of the document for theoretical and contextual confirmation of the instrument. Three education experts participated in this process: Andrea Carrasco Sáez, Ph.D. in Educational Sciences, University of Granada (Spain); Leonardo Vera Monroy, Ph.D. in Education Policy and Management, University of Playa Ancha of Educational Sciences (Chile); and Sergio Garay Oñate, Ph.D. in Educational Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid (Spain).

Sample

Out of a universe of 131 principals, 48 (36.64%) agreed to participate in the study. They signed informed consent forms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in the administration of both instruments. Participants were selected based on territorial proximity, accessibility of information, and direct contact.

Table 2   *Sample Characteristics*

SLEP	Total schools selected	Percentage of total sample
Valparaiso	20	41.66%
Barrancas	20	41.66%
Gabriela Mistral	8	16.66%

Source: Own elaboration.

Quantitative Phase

The instrument was sent by e-mail. Detailed instructions were provided to ensure the proper completion of the questionnaire, which consisted of 30 statements. Participants identified relevant good practices using a five-level Likert scale: *strongly agree* (5); *agree* (4); *disagree* (3); *strongly disagree* (2); or *not applicable / no opinion* (1). Data was collected through Google Forms. Descriptive analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, calculating frequencies, percentages, and gaps by dimension according to the level of effectiveness.

Qualitative Phase

Eight principals were selected and interviewed based on homogeneous group criteria, SLEP affiliation, and effectiveness trajectories (upward or downward). Responses were recorded, transcribed, and inductively coded using Atlas.ti 9 software. Each individual interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. The objective was to explore the meanings, tensions, and interpretations emerging from their leadership practices. Inductive coding allowed researchers to construct emerging categories and establish the relationship between key practices in their leadership roles.

The mixed-methods integration strategy allowed for the identification of differentiated patterns, reinforcing the internal validity of the findings and enriching the understanding of how leadership is constructed in various institutional contexts and conditions. It also allowed for a contrast between the reported valuation of "high" and "low" effectiveness practices and the identification of gaps between intended and actual implementation.

Classification and Analysis by Level of Effectiveness

Principals' leadership was categorized into two groups: "high effectiveness" vs. "low effectiveness," based on a longitudinal review from 2017 to 2021, using six indicators defined by Chile's National Education Performance Evaluation System: (a) enrollment (student numbers and stability), (b) promotion (student pass rates), (c) achievement (improvement in outcomes), (d) equity (inclusion and retention), (e) improvement (documented management progress), and (f) comparable conditions (homogeneous groups by context). Schools with a sustained upward trend were classified as having high effectiveness, while those with stagnant or negative evolution were classified as having low effectiveness.

This classification made it possible to organize the data and conduct a comparative analysis of principals' perceptions of their leadership, identifying differentiated patterns, trends, and gaps—recognizing that the schools, although similar in characteristics, are situated in educational contexts with divergent improvement trajectories.

RESULTS

The results are presented according to the four dimensions of the leadership for learning model proposed by Leithwood et al. (2008): setting direction, redesigning the organization, developing people, and managing the teaching and learning process. This structure allows for the integration of findings from both the quantitative analysis (questionnaire) and qualitative analysis (interviews), comparing principals' perceptions, based on the institutional level of effectiveness they achieve.

Table 3 presents the results according to their leadership effectiveness category. The results show that 54.2% of principals demonstrate "high effectiveness" in their leadership, while 45.8% exhibit "low effectiveness."

Table 3 *Distribution by Level of Effectiveness*

Effectiveness	Frequency	Percentage
High	26	54.2
Low	22	45.8
Total	48	100

Source: Own elaboration.

Setting Direction

In Table 4, the indicators "Shared vision understood by the community" (58%) and "Trust in teamwork to achieve goals" (59%) show similar results, differing by only 1%, and "Encouraging dialogue to establish goals" differs by 3%. The most significant gap appears in "Promotion of achievement-oriented attitudes" (10%), which is a key aspect for achieving better results.

Table 4 *Setting Direction*

Item	High effectiveness	Low effectiveness
Shared vision understood by the community	58%	59%
Encouraging dialogue to establish institutional goals	62%	59%

Trust in teamwork to achieve goals	65%	64%
Promotion of achievement-oriented attitudes	69%	59%

Source: Own elaboration.

The qualitative analysis indicates that principals with "high effectiveness" possess a shared strategic vision that guides teamwork and strengthens institutional culture. This dimension is expressed through practices that integrate trust, planning, and shared commitment. One principal stated: "The greatest impact that my leadership will have on the school is related to trust and bringing order to move forward with a clear vision" (Principal 2). This finding aligns with what Leithwood et al. (2008) argue: that the formulation of a shared and mobilizing vision is one of the pillars of effective leadership.

On the other hand, principals with "low effectiveness" present the institutional vision as a formal component of the Educational Project, one that is not widely embraced by the school community and fails to mobilize them As one principal noted: "The vision is written, but the community doesn't really feel like it's theirs. It's hard to get them involved in the PEI's goals" (Principal 5). This difficulty echoes Morales (2022), who warned of the risks of having a vision that is not collectively owned, which prevents the alignment of efforts and hinders the projection of sustained improvement.

Redesigning the Organization

Table 5 shows that both "high" and "low effectiveness" leadership are similarly rated in the areas of "Work culture that respects rights and responsibilities" and "Collaborative climate…," with a difference of 5%. However, for "Community participation…," there is a significant decline, with an 8% difference. In "Promotion of networks…," there is a notable gap of 17%, being more emphasized by principals with "low effectiveness" (59%) than by those with "high effectiveness" (42%). This suggests that the latter tend to focus more on internal efforts than on external networking.

Table 5   *Redesigning the Organization*

Item	High effectiveness	Low effectiveness
Work culture that respects rights and responsibilities	77%	73%
Collaborative climate within the school	73%	68%
Community involvement in institutional development	58%	50%
Promotion of networking for institutional and community development	42%	59%

Source: Own elaboration.

The qualitative analysis indicates that effective principals place emphasis on strengthening collaborative work environments and proactive conflict resolution. One principal stated: "The most important thing is how much you need to trust your team" (Principal 3). This highlights

how the most effective leaders are able to structure institutional relationships to foster collaboration, enabling participation and dialogue—all elements consistent with the relational leadership promoted by Bolívar (2010).

In contrast, the testimonies of less effective principals reveal that efforts to build a shared organizational culture are still underway. One such principal mentioned: "Here, support staff and teachers were headed in different directions" (Principal 1). This clearly shows that, while they acknowledge the need for these structures, they have not yet been able to consolidate them. There is a disconnect between the formal governance structures and their actual organizational appropriation, revealing a fragmentation that hinders the development of inclusive and cohesive cultures. This is because collaborative school cultures must be implemented in order to see educational improvement (Ahumada et al., 2023).

Developing People

Table 6 shows the lowest percentages across both groups: Principals with "high effectiveness" (65%) score 10% higher than those with "low effectiveness" (55%) for the indicator "Management of opportunities for reflection and professional development." This is a key factor for improvement. According to Duk et al. (2021), it is a top priority task for building teacher capacity and addressing the challenges in increasingly complex and diverse educational settings.

For the indicator "Individualized support for teacher well-being," the scores are low across the board: 42% for high effectiveness and 45% for low effectiveness. This suggests a general lack of attention to teachers' personal well-being, which is also reflected in the "Recognition of achievements" indicator, which shows 50% in both cases.

Under "Diagnosis and prioritization of professional development needs," low effectiveness principals outperform their high effectiveness counterparts by 9%, although this does not translate into better outcomes. This indicator is crucial for achieving better learning results, as teacher preparation and clarity in instruction are among the core features of effective teaching. These are essential to spark student interest and maintain a positive classroom environment (Rengel et al., 2021).

Table 6   *Developing People*

Item	High effectiveness	Low effectiveness
Management of opportunities for reflection and professional development	65%	55%
Individualized support for teacher well-being	42%	45%
Recognition of individual and collective achievements	50%	50%
Diagnosis and prioritization of professional development needs	46%	55%

Source: Own elaboration.

The qualitative analysis reveals key findings: effective leaders emphasize that creating internal conditions for professional development is essential, through reflective processes aligned with pedagogical challenges. One principal stated: "We have technical support and training based on the challenges we are identifying" (Principal 2). This suggests that professional

development is strategically integrated as part of their organizational culture, consistent with the principles of leadership for learning. On the other hand, less effective principals perceive professional development as an external process, showing lower levels of ownership of this role. One principal commented: "Training comes from the Local Education Service" (Principal 4). This implies that the training does not reflect internal needs or is dependent on external forces. In turn, this weakens its impact and sustainability—an issue also noted by Bellei and Valenzuela (2015) regarding the risks of bureaucratic support models. In this sense, key tensions arise as identified by Hallinger (2011) and Leithwood et al. (2019), who argue that effective leadership not only offers training but promotes a culture of continuous professional learning.

Managing Teaching and Learning
In Table 7, data for the indicator "Observation and feedback on teaching practices" shows an insignificant difference of 1% between the two groups. However, in "Monitoring of curricular articulation and learning assessment," there is a 9% difference, with higher scores among low effectiveness schools. In both cases, scores are below expectations, despite the fact that these elements are considered to be critical for improvement.
For the indicator "Support for students with learning difficulties," the 42% gap is highly relevant. Data show that high effectiveness schools provide greater support (65%), while low effectiveness schools offer only 23%—a discrepancy that warrants attention if leaders wish to improve outcomes.
Regarding the indicator "Resource management and effective implementation," high effectiveness schools scored 17% lower (38%) compared to low effectiveness schools (55%). This suggests that other factors may be influencing better outcomes, as those low effectiveness schools that manage more resources are still not achieving the desired efficiency.

Table 7 *Managing Teaching and Learning*

Item	High effectiveness	Low effectiveness
Observation and feedback on teaching practices	54%	55%
Monitoring curricular articulation and learning assessment	50%	59%
Support for students with learning difficulties	65%	23%
Resource management and effective pedagogical implementation	38%	55%

Source: Own elaboration.

In the interviews, principals with "high effectiveness" expressed a commitment to continuous improvement based on evaluation processes, as reflected in the statement: "Learning continues to be our main focus. We evaluate, we provide feedback..." (Principal 6). Effective principals develop consistent practices of monitoring, formative assessment, and differentiated support. This validates the strong link between leadership and learning outcomes proposed by Robinson et al. (2014), who argue that the most effective leadership practices are those that exert a direct influence on teaching.

Less effective principals acknowledge initial progress but show inconsistency in pedagogical analysis processes and weak student support, as shown in the statement: "We are starting to look more at the data, but we still lack systematization" (Principal 8). This suggests that they face structural limitations that hinder the implementation of such practices, revealing a gap between intent and execution. This situation aligns with the concept of leadership without enabling conditions proposed by Murillo (2020), which suggests that the lack of resources and adequate support restricts principals' ability to implement significant changes.

Relationship among Leadership Practices

"High-effectiveness" leadership integrates practices such as "pedagogical reflection," "support and feedback," and "climate of trust," reflecting a structured system of improvement where the use of evidence and a collaborative professional culture are central to the educational process (Pascual et al., 2023; Ahumada et al., 2023).

"Low-effectiveness" principals need to strengthen "shared vision," "prioritization of professional development," and "support for students with learning difficulties." Bernal (2020) notes that the lack of integration and the absence of a unified vision across leadership dimensions limit the ability to drive significant improvements in learning, with the understanding that effectiveness requires the capacity to interconnect multiple practices towards a common goal.

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data confirms that leadership for learning practices are recognized as essential by principals, though their effective implementation varies significantly by level of effectiveness (Valdés, 2020; Molina & Sallán, 2017). Effective principals achieve a systematic integration of strategic vision, organizational culture, teacher professional development, and pedagogical focus. This contrasts with the perceptions of "low-effectiveness" principals, who, while recognizing these practices as desirable, face structural limitations and a strong dependence on external support (Botía, 2010; Barragán-Quiñonez, 2024).

The tensions identified suggest the need to adopt a more reflective and less bureaucratic approach, fostering trust and commitment among teachers (Cabrera et al., 2023). From a strategic perspective, these findings reveal differences not only in individual leadership capacities but also in the institutional conditions that directly impact the achievement of effective leadership (Vega et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm that leadership is a decisive factor in improvement processes within Chilean public education. Effectively leading in these settings requires a complex and multifaceted task that combines technical capabilities, interpersonal skills, and a strong commitment to improvement. According to Leithwood (2009) leadership is understood as the ability to mobilize and influence others to achieve common goals, which frames leadership as a shared and ethically-grounded process.

The findings show that the most effective principals tend to focus on participation, pedagogical reflection, and professional development; their leadership is perceived as learning-centered, showing greater coherence between discourse and action. On the other hand, less effective principals tend to emphasize network-building, often at the expense of providing support to students and engaging in other key practices needed to achieve results.

The evidence also shows that the "Developing People" dimension is not a strong focus for either group. The absence of practices aimed at learning and professional growth limits institutional effectiveness, reduces the school's ability to respond to complex contexts, and diminishes the potential for sustained improvement. This translates to the need for a form of leadership focused on support, ongoing training, and the creation of structures that promote professional autonomy. Such practices require strategic decision-making grounded upon care ethics and a commitment to learning for all.

The gaps identified in fundamental pedagogical practices are a central contribution of this study. The contrasting-case approach reveals tensions and differing capacities in principals' leadership, particularly in pedagogical reflection and fostering achievement—confirming the need to strengthen the pedagogical role of the principal, including professional support, mentoring, and context-specific reflection based on each school's trajectory and institutional setting. The practices currently in place highlight the need for support from the Local Public Education Services (SLEP). According to Bellei and Valenzuela (2014) and Pont et al. (2008), SLEPs should focus on reducing bureaucratic burdens, expanding the scope of school autonomy, and promoting ongoing professional development.

Leadership for learning requires robust systems of monitoring, continuous teacher training, and organizational structures that support pedagogical decision-making focused on student learning. It demands a collective work dynamic that involves a genuine transformation of attitudes, motivations, and behaviors (Bolívar, 2014). Therefore, it is advisable to review current policies and enable conditions for the sustainable development of this leadership, especially in vulnerable educational contexts. This includes strengthening the pedagogical role of SLEPs, which are responsible for training leaders and providing contextually appropriate pedagogical support. As Bolívar (2014) notes, there is international consensus that effective leadership must have a measurable impact on student learning.

In this context, it is essential to clearly define the tasks and responsibilities that principals must assume and, based on this definition, promote the necessary changes to strengthen leadership and advance a culture of learning. The principal's primary role should be centered on improving teaching and learning processes, engaging all dimensions that support this improvement (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2024). Fullan (2016) highlights the need for purposeful leadership, one that is capable of connecting institutional strategy with pedagogical action.

Finally, future research could explore, from a longitudinal perspective, how these leadership configurations are consolidated or transformed, using mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative and qualitative data. These approaches have proven effective in highlighting the leadership dimensions proposed by Leithwood et al. (2008) in the management practices of school principals.

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