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Effective Principals Serving in High Poverty Schools in Chile: Managing Competing Realities

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Abstract

This article focuses on three elementary public schools principals in Chile who are serving socially and economically disadvantaged communities. It explores how these principals manage competing pressures and respond to the harsh realities of the lives of many young people in their schools. Using the lenses of place and belonging, these issues are located within the growing corpus of research in the field of leading high-poverty schools. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the principals, the authors identify factors in the lives of young people, which have significant implications for the competing realities of school leadership.

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1. ***Keywords:*** **High-poverty schools; school leadership; sense of belonging; place; social justice**

1. Introduction

How to lead schools that serve the most disadvantaged communities is one key to redress inequities in the distribution of educational outcomes. A number of studies in different parts of the world that have examined highly successful schools in challenging contexts – as judged on a range of criteria – suggest leadership approaches which reach out to communities, with leaders who seek to understand the lives and experiences of young people and their families (Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke, & Wildy, 2014; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Medina et al., 2014; Naicker, Chikoko, & Mthiyane, 2014; Riley, 2011; Sharvashidze & Bryant, 2014). Understanding of context needs to be translated into leadership practice that enable students and their families experience schooling with agency to pursue realm of possibilities (Sallee & Boske, 2013; Montecinos, Sisto & Ahumada, 2010).

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In the current paper we draw on the emerging concept of *leadership of place* developed by Riley (2013b) to understand ways in which school leaders view the complex challenges they face. Their view will shape their approach to leadership, and their expectations about the young people in their charge. Riley argues that schools operate in a web of physical, sociopolitical, emotional and spiritual realities and school leaders efforts need to take these realities into account. As families struggle with inadequate housing, healthcare services, or concerns about safety, it's important that schools build reciprocal relationships with them and develop networks with local community organizations (Anderson, 2009).

Leadership of place is linked to issues about equity and social justice education (Anderson, 2009). Barad writes that a "yearning for justice . . . is necessarily about our connections and responsibilities to one another— that is, entanglements" (Barad, 2007, p. xi, cited in Bright, Manchester & Allendyke 2013, p. 747). In the current paper we examine the connections and responsibilities that three principals in Chile working in a high-poverty school describe for themselves and for their school staff as they create a school that embraces policies and practices that anchor young people and enable them to find their sense of self and place in the world.

2. Chile's Schooling Context

Chile's quasi-market educational system, dependent on choice and competition as the key leverage for improving educational quality, has largely failed. Although advances can be observed in an expansion of coverage, Chile has achieved some international notoriety as having one of the most socially segregated educational systems in the world (OECD, 2013). Parents today are offered a choice of three types of schools: municipal (public) state-subsidized (serving 38% of all students), privately owned or administered state-subsidized (54%), private non-subsidized (8%) (Muñoz & Muñoz, 2013).

The distribution of students by type of school reflects a high concentration of low-income students in public schools. In 2009, 80% of students in municipal schools were from low or middle low income families, 20% in private subsidized and 0% in schools fully funded by parents (García-Huidobro, 2010). Performance, as measured in national standardized tests (SIMCE), is unequal and is associated with social segmentation in the school system. The challenges facing leaders of public schools in Chile are complex and framed, in part, by the financial as well as prestige crisis of public education (Bellei, González & Valenzuela, 2010).

3. The Study

3.1 Research question

Our overarching question was: What are the realities of leadership for principals leading schools in socially and economically disadvantaged communities in Chile?

We used *Taking the Leadership Pulse* as an analytical tool that provides a way of unpacking four key realities shaping school leaders' assumptions and practices (Riley, 2009, 2013; Elemski, 2013):

- *Physical reality:* the built environment and what routinely happens within it and in students' home lives; the availability and quality of the school's and the community's infrastructure.
- *Social and political reality*: social relations among school members as well as the political forces operating in the community that can become resources for the school;
- *Emotional reality:* leaders' self- awareness, self-management, relational awareness and resilience (Elemski, 2013)
- *Spiritual and ethical reality:* which is the beliefs that drive leaders, the rock that holds them together in stormy times; their moral compass.

3.2 Participants

In undertaking this exploratory study we used a multiple case study design involving three principals working in public primary schools. Their selection was based on our professional judgments about: (a) *social and economic disadvantage:* the schools serve communities which are highly disadvantaged, socially and economically; (b) *school principal commitments:* the principals are established leaders who appear to embrace the challenges; and (c) s*tudent attainment:* on standardized tests students are achieving at or above the average for comparable schools

3.3 Data sources and analysis

Principals were individually interviewed about the realities of leadership for them; the tensions and contradictions in their role; their knowledge about young people's lives and their responses to this; and their commitments. Interviews were audiotaped and conducted in Spanish, with simultaneous translation into English. After reading and signing a letter of informed consent, audiotaped interviews were conducted; lasting about 60 minutes. Using as analytical categories to code segments associated the four realities proposed by Riley (2009; Elemski, 2013), two researchers independently read interview transcripts. These coded segments were then compared, refining coding on which there were disagreements.

4. Findings

4.1 Principals and their schools

Blue Ravine. Maria Sánchez became the school's principal two years prior to our interview, having had a strong past association as an interim curriculum coordinator. Blue Ravine is perched at the end of a newly built road, which winds its way up through the hills. During the academic year in which data were produced the school enrolled close to 200 children grades K-8 (98%, living below the poverty line). On national standardized tests (SIMCE), the school consistently performs above the average for schools serving a similar population. When we visited the school, a hand written sign on the door informed visitors that the school had placed third, within the municipality's schools, on the SIMCE test.

Hill Top. Alberto Fernández has held the principal post at this school for over two decades. Hill Top is located towards the top of one of the city's hills and is surrounded by low-income housing developments With 413 pupils, 90% of them are growing up in conditions of social vulnerability. Under Alberto's stewardship enrolment has remained steady; this in contrast with a steady decline experienced by most schools in this municipality. Moreover, its one of only a handful of schools in this municipality recognized as meeting all criteria considered by the "National System for Assessment of the Performance" (SNED).

Ocean View. Ana Rodríguez has been the principal at this school for almost eight years. At the time of the study, the school enrollment was over 250 children grades PK to 8, with 64% living in conditions of social vulnerability. Ocean View is located in an old, affluent neighborhood of elegantly built houses on the city´s coast. Ocean View is in this neighbourhood but not of it. The majority of the local children attend private schools. Children of the maids working in the upper middle-class homes go to Ocean View, as do the children of recent immigrants who live in the old mansions, which have been subdivided into tenement houses.

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4.2 The four leadership realities

4.2.1 The physical reality. Maria Sánchez tells us that many children from Blue Ravine live with adults who are overwhelmed by their daily struggles. Children's lives are tough:

> *They go back to their homes under the care of an adult who is experiencing issues of alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment and domestic violence. We have statics that show this reality.*

Alberto Fernández works to build trust and reciprocity with the community and tells us that as trust has grown over the years, the community has put its own shield round the school, protecting it from the street violence that characterises part of the neighbourhood. He went on to say,

> *Here there is a drug problem outside of the school; we have never had it inside the school, never, ever. I believe it is because the community loves the school. For example, the day of the Street Fighters, September 11, the streets are always on fire, but the school is not touched. No one throws a stone at the school, absolutely nothing, nothing.*

At Ocean View, awareness of the differences in children's home circumstances and the distances some students travel, led Ana Rodriguez to encourage staff to avoid setting homework. Homework, she argues, can lead to conflicts between children and overburdened parents. Her stance is contested by teachers, worried about national test scores, and by some parents who judge the quality of the school based on the amount of homework being sent. Ana comments:

> *I see our young teachers, with school age children, who are juggling house chores and work. They leave as soon as they can, they get home and start cooking, they must get up early to cook again, must grade papers. So I ask them, 'Do you feel like getting home to deal with your kid's homework?' I try to have them confront their lives as workingwomen so they can understand the other woman.*

4.2.2 **The social and political reality.** There is little work to be found in the shantytowns around Blue Ravine. Parents travel long distances by public transportation, returning late at night or at weekends. Maria Sánchez sees parents who are overwhelmed by work and daily pressures, unsure about their own capacities and 'scared' to participate in learning-oriented activities.

Wages are low for all public school teachers in Chile and working conditions tough. At Hill Top, the leadership team has responded to these factors by seeking to maximise professional development and create a positive working environment. There are weekly sessions on pedagogical issues, with administrative matters kept to a minimum. The school has won a significant number of government funded scholarships for teachers to study abroad.

As the average daily attendance in schools is 65%, the local municipality in which Ocean View is located is in serious financial difficulties. Ocean View's attendance is over 90% and, according to Ana Rodriguez, this has been achieved through an ongoing focus on people and relationships. Children come to this school, Ana tells us, because they feel secure, contained and they can learn. As they enter Ocean View, students and teachers are welcomed by the leadership team who take stock of the emotional well-being. Ana Rodriguez commented:

> *If we have children who come from environments that expose them to psychological violence, with parents who curse at them, then the school must offer a different space. If teachers feel constantly under pressure to obtain results, the workplaces can become torture. Without turning the workplace into a social club, because we do have to reach goals, I hope teachers are happy to meet with their colleagues each day.*

4.2.3 The emotional reality. The emotional realities of Blue Ravine as a school are influenced by outside factors: children who see fights, yelling and crying at home and who learn a limited repertoire of responses to shape

their own behaviour. The 'spill-over' into school can include poor behaviour, which in its turn makes teachers become angry with children. Maria Sánchez counsels love.

> *Yesterday I spoke with a student who told me his life was always bad. 'But how can your life be always bad?' 'Yes auntie* [in elementary schools in Chile children call their teachers aunt and uncle*] my life is always bad. In my home there are constant fights, my father fights, my mom yells, my brother cries and the only place where I have a good time is here, in my school.' Thus, we generate a space for containment. We also scold them, we form them, … what prevails here are our efforts to give them the greatest amount of love possible.*

At Hill Top, Alberto Fernández works to cultivate the emotional well-being of staff, as well as that of students. In Alberto's view, once children feel safe, then they can develop a shared identity, embrace learning and have fun. When staff are encouraged to collaborate and experience more open and distributed forms of leadership, they feel they belong. The rewards are for everyone:

> *I am not alone. I am with the leadership team, which includes selected teachers who are leaders among their peers. These teachers can communicate to their peers what we have agreed. But they also provide me with grounding into the realities of the classroom. Sometimes, with the hustle and bustle of work, one forgets what one used to be.*

Ana Rodriguez promotes staff well-being by acting as a buffer, working to reduce the 'anguish over the tests'. Many of Ocean View's may look happy at school but live 'sad lives', according to Ana. The role of teachers is critical for all these young people and Ana's major concern is children's growing sense of isolation.

> *These children are alone, are growing up alone. Parents, due to work or lack of skills, do not communicate with their children. They will provide for the material needs… but I see a lack of love in many of our students … Thus, it is important that teachers establish an affective relationship with them, be concerned with their development, communicate with them. This also relieves pressure from teachers who think all they must do is meet the target test results.*

4.2.4 The spiritual and ethical reality. What inspires and moves Maria Sánchez at Blue Ravine is ensuring that children are safe, protected and happy.

> *When I wake up I am sleepy and cold, I say to myself 'Nooo, I do not want to step into the cold'. I think about the kids, for me they are first. It is another day you can save one…. These are silly things, maybe, but sometime you 'high five' with them and say 'here we are warm'. The child looks back at you with happiness in his face and looks for you. They are my motivation*

Alberto Fernández at Hill Top has a deep-rooted belief in the talents of the young people in his charge. When recruiting new teachers, he is looking for indications of their interest and commitment to children:

> *I love the school, love the children. I am committed to doing all that it takes to break the knots, the difficulties for children…. What I always emphasize, and talk about it repeatedly, is that we have to give children lots of love. That is, I think, what makes possible for children to stay away from drugs that are outside.*

Ocean View's mission is to be 'among the best, if not the best, of the municipal schools': a high quality, free public school for low-income children. Ana Rodriguez's own personal story of hardship and sacrifices helps create a bond

with parents. It also gives her the confidence to speak out when needed and to project a sense of a world of possibilities.

> *The girl told her mother, 'When I grow up, I want to be like you'. The mother was distraught, 'How can you be a maid? You cannot be a maid like me; you have to be something else'. When the girl left, the mom told me 'I do not want her to be a maid'. I told her, 'No, it's most likely that she will not be a maid. I am the daughter of a maid and I made it to college. If your daughter works hard, your daughter will go to college as I did'.*

5. Discussion

The three principals who participated in this exploratory study informed us that leadership of place involves taking every moment as an opportunity to create a sense of belonging among students, teachers and families. The actions they undertake reflect their strategic intent to create a safe space, to see and know children, and to give them love.

- *Safety - a non-negotiable prerequisite for creating belonging*

In all schools safety is a non-negotiable prerequisite for creating belonging. The community operates a protective shield around the school and the school has become a place of shelter and safety. The spaces within its walls are supportive and creative. The principal's office is a space where children feel listened to and supported. They feel they can knock on her door and say, 'we need to tell you'. Creating safety includes fashioning an environment which is clean, warm, welcoming, a nice place to be.

- *Seeing and knowing - teachers, children and parents*

In this busy and complex world, we all want to be seen for who we are. For the three principals in our study, knowing about each child´s life outside the school and his or her interests inside helped make the children feel visible and valued. 'Seeing and knowing' was about providing spaces in the school for teachers to air their concerns and develop their thinking; for children to talk about what troubles them; and for parents who are overwhelmed by the daily struggles of life, to express their fears and frustrations and not feel stigmatized.

- *Love: - for children to flourish, they need to be loved and to know that they are loved*

In the competitive and market global world of education, the language of love is rarely featured. Few politicians talk about the need to love our children or school's role to nurture them. For our three principals, schools are designed to give the children the greatest amount of love. It is expressed in staff's commitment to children and their responsibility in creating a place where students' feel they belong.

The leadership of place of these principals is about thinking beyond the school gates and making connections to the outside world and the wider archipelago of young people's live. This ties with evidence from other studies in which school leaders are taking a more community orientated approach aimed at building social capital and developing trust (Riley 2009, 2013). The study re-enforces the importance of principal's more nuanced understanding of context, which takes into account the social and economic circumstances that shape the lives and experiences of young people. It is the intermingling of these forces and variables that create distinctive places in which leadership is enacted.

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