

School Principals in Latin America and the Caribbean:
Leaders for Change or Subjects of Change?

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Introduction

Even as governments across the Latin American and Caribbean region focus on the central role education plays in the economic, civic, and political well being of the nation, awareness of the weaknesses in education systems continues to spread to all levels of society. And policy makers, in an effort to meet the demands for improved quality and equity of education that have echoed across the hemisphere for at least a decade, have responded with a series of education reforms, some successful and some much less so.

One of the greatest challenges in undertaking education reform is the transformation of education administration, particularly at local levels and especially in individual schools. Each LAC country is experiencing its own unique set of demands and limitations, but there are three problems that countries seem to have in common. The first is a need to implement strategies that will permit innovation and improvement in the administration of schools and the education system as a whole to produce quality learning for children, adolescents, and young adults. Secondly, given each country's political, social, historical, and even geographical realities, there is a pressing need to develop an understanding of the new meanings of "autonomy" and "participation". Finally, as new professional competencies for education administrators are identified, simultaneous changes in preparation, training, and professional development strategies must occur (Schettini & Pozner, 2001).

A promising response to the challenge of how to transform education administration is to allow for changes in the school principal's role.² There is a growing sense across the region that the principal, in many cases while acting in concert with others, can and must provide leadership to meet the demands of education reform efforts in the twenty-first century. Principals are in the schools. They are critical actors who are likely to have a positive impact on improving quality in school processes. But at the

¹ The author thanks Claudia Uribe for her insightful comments on the first draft of this paper.

² A school leader in the English-speaking nations of the LAC region may be referred to as the head, the headmaster, headmistress or head teacher. Principal is the term used in the United States.

same time, in order to foster the necessary conditions to support and strengthen their role, a clearer understanding of principals and their work in schools across the LAC region is needed. The purpose of this paper is to analyze three broad themes related to principals: (1) the role of the school principal, (2) the preparation of principals to assume new roles, and (3) directions for future research on principals and their work. See Appendix A for a description of the data collection process.

The role of the school principal: Why it must change

For many years, all across the LAC region, schools have been dismissed as little more than a collection of classrooms, one school interchangeable with another, the smallest units in a powerful, centralized education system. School principals, traditionally mid-level managers, acted strictly as transmitters of orders and rules. With minimal authority, low prestige, and inconsistent support from the school community and the education system at large, they were overlooked as potential leaders and facilitators of change (Moura, 2000, p. 18).

Now this situation must change. Over the past decade, there has been a shift in how schools are viewed by education policy makers and researchers; but perhaps more importantly teachers, parents, principals, and indeed the general public are reconsidering the purpose and goals of schools. National and international conversations about education reform suggest a need for schools to be more autonomous, more responsive to the demands and concerns of multiple stakeholders, especially at the local level (Alvariño, Arzola, Brunner, Recart, & Vizcarra, 2000; Pozner, 2000; Sallán, 1998).

But if schools do indeed continue to move towards greater independence, and in the process seek to improve their performance, the principal will have to take on new roles if schools are to be successful. Numerous reforms call for the decentralization of decision making to the school and the community, creating the potential for the principal to take action to lead efforts to improve teaching and learning at his school. But the possibility also exists that reforms may in fact do very little to change the principal's traditional roles long supported and maintained by centralized education systems.

A commitment to redefine the principals' role and utilize them as leaders for change is not explicitly stated in more idealized, less specific language of general goals of education reform such as improving equity and quality or increasing access to education. This is not so unexpected. What is surprising is that when we look at the details in education reform documents, strategy papers, project descriptions or research reports, there appears to be little consideration of how the reforms will be implemented at the school level and who will lead the process.

In many of the Spanish speaking countries, for example, as part of efforts to decentralize education systems, schools are permitted to adapt national education goals,

programs, and curriculum to the demands and needs of the local education community. Whether we are talking about the Institutional Education Project (Proyecto Educativo Institucional -Colombia), School Autonomy (Autonomía Escolar-Nicaragua), Education Projects (Proyectos Educativos-México) or other similar initiatives, these reforms will not be successful without leadership at the school level. The documents that mandate and describe these reforms create an expectation that there will be a space for the participation of parents, teachers, students, and others in the decision-making processes of the school. They also raise expectations that teachers and academic programs will be more responsive to students' needs and that consequently student academic performance will improve. They may even include limited transfer of funds to the school to be allocated according to local needs. What they often do not do is establish a clear role for the school principal as a leader for the successful implementation of the reform.

The same holds true for other programs or projects to improve education. It is clear that it is the nature of these initiatives that shape the principal's participation and responsibilities and not necessarily some wider effort to reform the education system (See Table 1 for examples). But there is no guarantee that once the project is either completed, runs out of money or is cancelled by a change in government that there will be support for this new role for principals to continue. In Nicaragua for example, the Autonomous Schools program is still a pilot program that is not yet operating in all schools across the country. The principals in the program act as the general administrators of their schools in accordance with the instructions they receive from the local School Advisory Board (Ministerio de Educación, 1999). Under the supervision and with the support of the Board, they are responsible for the efficient management and academic development of the school. This is clearly not the traditional role that principals have held in Nicaragua, but what is not clear is if this program will be sustained or even expanded. If for some reason it is eliminated, what will the principal's role be in these pilot schools? Will it remain the same or revert to the more traditional one?

Table 1: Examples of initiatives to improve education

Project/Program	Country	Strategy	Principal's role
Riojano Forum Project ³	Argentina	Offer third cycle of basic education in rural areas	Responsible for the sustainability of the project
P-900 Program ⁴	Chile	Compensatory education program for poorest schools	Serve on the Common Management Teams ⁵ with multiple stakeholders
Institutional Project for Rural Education ⁶	Colombia	Serve rural and marginalized urban youth, ages 12-17	Deal with multiple stakeholders to guide integrated processes for the development of the whole student
Education Quality Improvement System ⁷	Costa Rica	School is nucleus for education innovation with Lead Schools as centers of innovative experiences	The principal is “the engine of change” and is perceived to be the institutional, administrative, and academic leader
School Administration Councils ⁸	El Salvador	Councils promote democratic processes, collegial decision-making, and school administration	Serve on the councils
Primary School Administration Project	México	Each school develops a project to solve, evaluate and correct student learning problems	Take part in academic discussions with teachers to improve student learning
Autonomous Schools Program: School Councils ⁹	Nicaragua	Councils plan, manage, supervise, and control the quality of services as well as financial, material, and human resources	Serve on the councils
Pilot Centers ¹⁰	Panamá	Program to increase school autonomy and involvement of multiple stakeholders in education	Assume increased responsibility for the educational process

³ Foro Riojano: Experiencia Provincial de Gestión del Tercer Ciclo Rural

⁴ Programa de Mejoramiento de Escuelas Básicas (P-900)

⁵ Equipos Comunales de Gestión

⁶ Proyecto Institucional de Educación Campesina y Rural (PIERC)

⁷ Sistema de Mejoramiento de la Calidad de la Educación (SIMED)

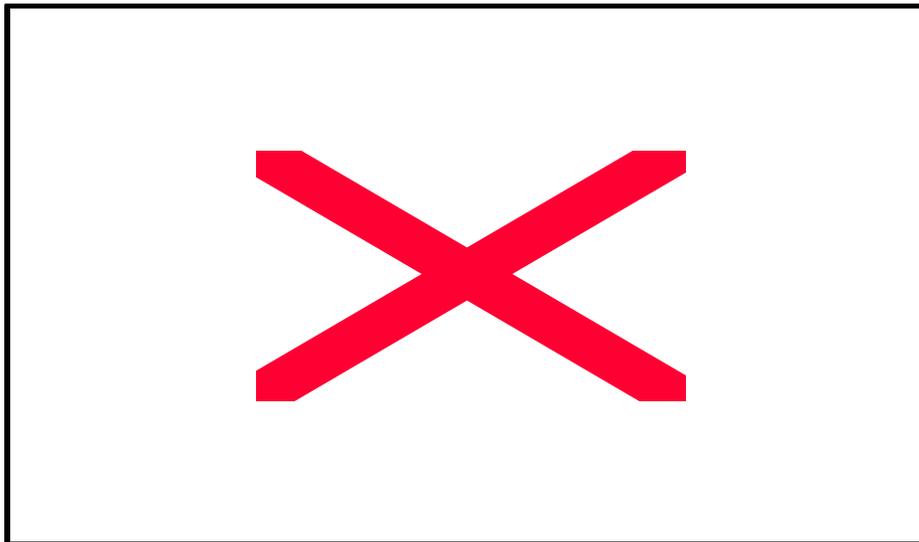
⁸ Consejos Directivos Escolares (CDE)

⁹ Escuelas Autónomas: Consejos Escolares

¹⁰ Centros Pilotos

It is safe to say that for the most part, even with reforms to decentralize education to the school level, principals in Latin American and Caribbean schools are still functioning primarily along one dimension of school administration, namely management. The fact that they continue to do so is of urgent concern because there is now considerable evidence that two dimensions of school administration, leadership and management, are essential to making positive changes in schools (Achilles, Keedy, & High, 1999; Jamentz, 1998; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). The principal's job is to administer the school morally and ethically, acting as leader and manager (not leader or manager). Notice in Figure 1 that the principal who exercises school administration has leadership and management functions, each of which lead to two sets of goals, one set for the school itself and one for the broader context in which the school functions.

Figure 1: The dimensions and contexts of school administration



(Source: Achilles et al., 1999)

It is theoretically possible (and maybe even desirable) for one person, or a group of people, to assume the leadership functions and another person or group the management functions, but this may be difficult in most LAC schools in the near future. Therefore, the principal is the most likely candidate to simultaneously play these two, quite different roles; and the successful principal will be the one who learns to balance

them to “improve curriculum, instruction, and other pertinent elements of the school” (Achilles et al., 1999, p. 29). After all, as Kotter points out, “strong leadership with weak management is as bad as the opposite” (in Drake & Roe, 1999, p. 114). Table 2 presents examples of the types of activities that fall under the leadership and management dimensions.

Table 2. Examples of leadership and management activities of principals that lead to positive changes in schools

Leadership	Management
Articulates a vision for the school’s improvement	Makes plans to turn visions into concrete actions to be taken
Inspires others to think about the vision	Takes care of budgets, schedules, and other administrative details; delegates routine administrative tasks to others
Listens to others’ ideas, incorporate them into the vision	Provides access to materials, knowledge, training of other resources
Gains acceptance for the vision	Works with teachers to determine their needs and responds to those needs
Teaches others about change and helps them work through the change process	Gets involved in the formal assessment of the change process and the outcomes of change
Maintains a sense of direction over time	Works on issues of accountability at the classroom level
Actively participates in change	Supports and engages in team-building
Accepts responsibilities for outcomes	Recognizes teachers efforts towards change

Based on: (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000, pp. 40-42)

We can acquire some understanding of the potential for principals to be school leaders for change or barriers to reform by examining the language of education rules and regulations, descriptions of programs, etc. Such language is often prescriptive in terms of duties, responsibilities, and authority; leaving it open to interpretation in terms of the potential for the principal to act as a leader for change at the school level. Compare, for

example, the descriptions of the principal's role in two different countries, Barbados and Costa Rica (Table 3). Taking into consideration the definitions of leadership and management in Table 2, it appears that principals in Costa Rica have greater potential to act as leaders for change at the school level than do principals in Barbados.

Table 3. A comparison of descriptions of the principal's role

Barbados	Costa Rica
<p>Part III, Education Regulations Selected examples from the duties of the principal, articles 15-18</p> <p>(Approved 1982, amended 1992)</p>	<p>Ministry of Public Education, Basic General Education Quality Improvement Program</p> <p>Definition of the principalship and the principal's responsibilities</p>
<p>17. Subject to the policy of the Minister and the general directions of the Board, every principal:</p> <p>(a) Has control of the building, premises, apparatus, equipment and furniture of the school,</p> <p>(b) Must allocate duties to staff, and</p> <p>(c) Is responsible for the discipline of the school.</p> <p>18. Every principal in public schools shall subject to the Act and these regulations:</p> <p>(a) Supervise the teachers of his school,</p> <p>(b) Prepare in consultation with the teachers, a scheme of work, based on the official curriculum, suited to the needs of the pupils,</p> <p>(e) Provide leadership in the improvement of the educational programme and render guidance and advice to teachers,</p> <p>(o) Take all necessary steps to ensure co-operation with parents, parent-teacher associations and other related bodies.</p>	<p><u>School Principal</u></p> <p>A democratic leader, responsible for the permanent job of continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process at the school</p> <p><u>The principal must:</u></p> <p>a) Identify problems in the school related to teaching and learning</p> <p>b) Guide study and analysis of the curriculum guides, textbooks, teaching materials</p> <p>c) Coordinate the school's curriculum committee and the grade-level or departmental meetings around curriculum</p> <p>d) Create, together with grade-level and/or departmental committees, mechanisms that permit a follow-up process once curriculum changes are implemented</p> <p>e) Provide democratic and participative emphasis on improving the processes of teaching and learning</p> <p>f) Organize and coordinate permanent activities that value the processes of teaching and learning</p>

I would argue that for the most part principals in LAC countries do not complete most of the activities that fall under a management role much less those that fall under a leadership role. It may be because they are not yet expected to be managers and leaders. Perhaps they have had little or no training and so do not recognize nor understand the importance of their role. Or it may be that they have been unsupported in their efforts to act as leaders for change in their schools. Nevertheless, this is not an argument for a model of school administration where non-educators become school principals. The principal as instructional leader requires a person who has had experience as a teacher, a person who understands how children learn and how teachers teach. In the United States, for example, “nearly 90 percent of principals ranked experience as a teacher as ‘highly valuable’ to their success as a principal” (Doud & Keller, 1999 in Fenwick, 2000).

As we move from descriptions of particular programs to the regulations governing the education system to the policy objectives of national education reform, it is easy to lose sight of how to maximize the principal’s potential as a change agent and school leader. This is particularly true in the case of secondary school principals. Because the secondary education sector is only recently receiving attention in LAC countries, most of the changes in the principal’s role have been tied to reform in primary schools¹¹. There is little in the way of information on initiatives to change the principal’s role in public secondary schools. Ministries of education will find it necessary to explore what is working (and what is not) in both the public and private sectors, within their borders, and across the region and the globe.

Governments have been pressing forward with education reforms designed to decentralize education systems and shift the responsibility for changing schools and improving student achievement to the level of the school and classroom. Policy makers have been slow to recognize that their most important ally in this effort is the school principal, but the situation is changing for the better.¹²

¹¹ One exception is Nicaragua where 157 secondary schools have been incorporated under the “School Autonomy” model (Ministerio de Educación, 1998, p. 22).

Recommendations

1. Develop and operationalize a profile of a school leader.

Regardless of the expectations for the principal's role laid out in legislation, regulations, program descriptions, and education reform documents, the conditions in which principals are expected to exercise leadership have not been fully described nor explored.

One way to address this is to develop a profile of a school leader and then operationalize it. The analysis needed to produce the profile requires the participation of specialists at the ministry of education, representatives of institutions that provide pre-service and in-service training, the principals themselves, and others interested in expanding or changing the principal's role. Simultaneously, the process of producing the profile requires educators to examine their assumptions about school leadership, their expectations for school improvement, and the mechanisms for implementation of education reform. The 23-point profile of the general, primary education school principal in Panamá is an example of such an approach (See Box 1 on the next page).

The profile describes the principal as the “organizer of the education enterprise” who provides “leadership to resolve problems prudently and convincingly” and “obtains the participation of others”. A 16-page analysis of some 45 functions and responsibilities of the principal supplements the profile. The functions and responsibilities are grouped under four major areas of principal's activities: pedagogy, administration, socio-cultural, and political-economic. There are also suggestions for training and examples of how the profile can be operationalized.

2. Treat the profiles of school leaders as broad, flexible frameworks, subject to continuous evaluation and revision.

Operationalized profiles of the school principal are a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, care must be taken that the profiles do not become long lists of skills and activities that no principal could ever hope to meet or achieve. These profiles should permit principals to respond to the needs and demands of an individual school. They should also be used to develop professional development programs and pre-service

¹² This is somewhat ironic given that even in heavily centralized education systems, there has always been at least tacit recognition that schools are not the same in either appearance or performance and that some of

training curriculum. They may also be used to establish criteria for the selection and dismissal of principals.

It is not unrealistic to expect principals to assume new roles under education reform. What is unrealistic and even unjust is to expect principals to meet the challenges of education reform without the necessary skills, knowledge, and support. In the next section of this paper, I will discuss what is being done and what still needs to be done in terms of preparing principals for their role as a leader of change.

Box 1. Examples of the operationalization of the activities of primary school principals in Panamá

Area of activity:	Administration
Responsibility:	Facilitate the School Board's work; support the implementation of its resolutions and promote interactions among the distinct sectors of the education community
Skill:	Demonstrates competency to interpret and carry out the regulations related to community participation in school administration
Training:	Learn about legislation on community participation
Indicator:	Number of School Board meetings with stakeholders
Area of activity:	Pedagogy
Responsibility:	Motivate and orient effective teacher participation in the design and implementation of the school's educational plan
Skill:	Possess the abilities needed to foster participatory processes among the teachers that lead to excellent, democratic, and efficient education development
Training:	Participation in the development of school education plans drawing on community collaboration
Indicator:	School has an education plan, designed in collaboration with the education community; it utilizes basic education statistics and qualitative information; includes strategies for monitoring and evaluating its implementation.

that variation can be attributed to differences in the actions of the principals.

Principals and education reform: Prepared to lead the change process?

Attempts to implement the education reforms of the 1990s have forced ministries of education to recognize that the training offered through targeted programs is insufficient. Relatively small numbers of principals benefit from such experiences. Furthermore, such training may be narrow in scope and may not lend itself to developing the skills needed to meet the demands of broader national reforms such as those designed to improve learning and teaching in more autonomous, local schools.

Ministries of education cannot wait for the next generation of school leaders to emerge from training programs at national universities, normal schools or other post-secondary institutions (if such programs even exist). And even if they could wait, at the present time these programs cannot produce anything close to the number of graduates needed by the public schools. Such programs are relatively expensive (in time and money) and almost always offered only in cities. They may be out of reach for many teachers and principals who seek an advanced education in school administration.

This is not to suggest, however, there are no efforts being made to meet the demand for better-prepared school principals. Countries have developed training modules and courses to be delivered at schools, regional education centers, and through distance learning technologies. The duration of the training ranges from one to two day workshops to degree, certificate or diploma programs that are offered during school vacation periods across several years (See Table 4). While these programs represent an important *first* step in the process of developing skills and acquiring knowledge principals will need to assume a new role as leaders for change, they also suffer from a common set of problems:

1. The amount of time spent in the training program is often too short. Very little of what is presented is understood, remembered or implemented.
2. The curriculum and/or instructional materials are too theoretical. Participants do not see the connection between what is being presented and the reality in which they work.
3. There is no opportunity for supervised application of the concepts presented. Participants do not receive feedback on their efforts to implement what is learned.

Table 4: Training programs to meet education reform objectives

Program/Project	Duration	Major Topics Covered
Competencies for the Professionalization of Education Administration ¹³ (Argentina)	10 module program	Challenges to Education; Strategic Administration; Leadership; Communication; Delegation; Negotiation; Problem Resolution; Planning; Working in Teams; Participation and Education Demand
Education Sector Enhancement Programme of Educational Reform (Barbados)	total of 370 hours	Attitudinal Change; Basic Technology; Educational Leadership; School Advising; EMIS; Subject Matter Advising; Teaching Technologies
National Program for Education Development for School Administrators ¹⁴ (Costa Rica)	four modules; each has 20 hours of in-class work and 20 hours through distance education	Leadership, Power Relationships, and Conflict Resolution in Schools; Evaluation and Supervision of Education Programs; Education Legislation; Quality Management of Human Resources
Education Management Pilot (Guyana)	distance education with one meeting/month	Educational Leadership; Management of Personnel, Curriculum, Finances, Gender Issues; Measuring the Effectiveness of Schools
School Administration from a New Perspective of Leadership and Innovation (Nicaragua)	two sessions of two weeks each for a total of 180 hours	Education in Global and National Contexts; Role of School Principal in Pedagogy and Innovations in Teaching; School Principal as Leader/Promoter of Educational and Pedagogical Innovation
School Administration Professional Development Project for Education Cluster Leader Principals ¹⁵ (Paraguay)	10 modules offered through 1,000 hours of in-service training	Administration for a Quality Education; Development of Leadership, Education Change and the Role of Teachers; Technical-Pedagogical Functions; School Organization; Efficient School Administration; Strategic Planning; Communication; Organization and Evaluation of Human Resources; Education Evaluation

¹³ Competencias para la Profesionalización de la Gestión Educativa

¹⁴ Programa Nacional de Desarrollo Educativo para Administradores de la Educación (PRONADE)

¹⁵ Proyecto: “Formación en Gestión y Administración Educativa para Directores de Areas Educativas”

Efforts are underway to prepare principals to assume greater responsibility as school leaders. What remains to be seen is how these initiatives will be sustained, revised, expanded or evaluated. The preparation of principals must be an integral, long-term commitment of education reform, not an “add-on”, designed to help a particular project meet its objectives and then destined for neglect when the funding runs out.

Strengthening the principal’s leadership of the learning and teaching process is clearly essential. It will go a long way towards addressing the “failure to achieve curriculum goals because of inadequate teaching, too little time on task, lack of teaching materials, and inadequate management and incentives” (Moura, 2000, p. 10). Principals who are prepared to assume increased responsibility for the teaching and learning processes are aware of strategies to address inadequate teaching. They have the potential to change the environment for teachers and students by acquiring additional resources, organizing existing resources, and coordinating efforts by the community to improve education.

Recommendations

1. Principals should be included in the planning, design, and production of pre-service training and professional development programs.

In Costa Rica, for example, 25 principals in one district in San José were surveyed (Aguilar, Jiménez, & Sanchez, 1999). The principals were asked to identify the challenges facing school administration in the 21st century and a series of questions about their training and future training needs. Their responses were incorporated into the planning and development process for a program that has already trained more than 800 principals.

In Paraguay, 30 principals representing all regions of the country met in a one day conference (Borden, 1995). They discussed their views on the demands and difficulties of their work, the training they need to meet the challenges of education reform, the professional competencies needed to do their job, and what actions could be taken to further their professional development. The information they provided played an important role in decisions regarding the curriculum for a training program that has already trained more than 500 principals. Perhaps as important, the principals who participated in the conference expressed satisfaction and even gratitude that their views

and opinions were taken into account. Accustomed to being involved after the fact, they were favorably impressed with the opportunity to provide input. Although it is very difficult to measure, the goodwill that results from such actions by those at the center cannot be underestimated.

2. Theories of adult learning should provide the foundation for any professional development program.¹⁶

Participants experience greater success when activities are problem centered and appropriate for their stage of social and professional development. Learning should be increasingly self-directed and there should be an obvious, immediate application of the content to be learned. The participants' experience is valued as a rich resource for new learning.

Reflective practice is essential for professional development. Programs for principals should be accompanied and supported by multiple opportunities to engage in coaching, mentorships, peer observation, and other similar, follow-up activities.

A professional development program should have clearly defined goals. It is important to take into consideration the source of the goals when defining them. Training program goals should be developed in response to legislated reform, national or state standards, locally defined needs, peer-group defined needs, and/or individual objectives.

Program materials should be well written and interesting. They should include sufficient activities for practice and contextualization of the concepts. There should be a balance between theory and practice. They should be based on the reality of the principals' work and the schools in which they work. Supplementary materials may be necessary when principals do not have access to professional materials. The tone should be positive, recognizing that the principal has knowledge that has been acquired through experience.

3. Follow-up support should be provided once training is completed.

When principals return to their schools, they resume their work in relative professional isolation. Technical, financial, and/or human resource support is needed to assist principals in applying what they have learned in these workshops and courses. One

¹⁶ The ideas in this section come from the work of Barth, 1980; Duke, 1990; Kline, 1987; Richardson & Prickett, 1994; Smylie, 1995.

strategy that has been successful is to have a “coach” or mentor who works with the newly trained principal as he goes about the process of implementing new ideas. Supervisors, other specialists from the Ministry of Education, principals from other schools or districts, or professors from post-secondary institutions can serve in this capacity.

4. Short term and long term participant evaluation of the program should be used to make changes in the program.

The types of programs shown in Table 4 are *infrequently* the subjects of follow-up evaluations. At best, participants complete an evaluation form at the end of the final session. Participants should be asked to do follow-up evaluations of their training. This will give program designers and developers a better idea of how to make future offerings of the same or similar workshops or courses more responsive to the individual objectives of the participants.

Research on principals in LAC countries: What do we know?

The challenges to education systems across Latin America and the Caribbean are significant and have been well-documented (Moura, 2000; Navarro, Carnoy, & Castro, 1999; Reimers, 2000). Primary school repetition rates remain high. Access to secondary education is still limited or non-existent for many underserved groups. Teachers are poorly prepared, lack content area knowledge, and are underpaid. Principals have no formal training beyond that of teachers. Student achievement as measured by national and international standards is low. The school day and the academic year are shorter than those of more industrialized countries. Young adults enter the workforce with fewer years of education than their peers in other regions.

Education reforms designed to meet these challenges are as diverse as the countries that are implementing them yet they all have one important element in common. To varying degrees, they are intended to decentralize the administration of education systems and individual schools. The implication seems to be that schools will act autonomously within a support structure provided by the ministry of education. The reality is that, for the most part, there is still much to be done to achieve this.

In theory at least, there is increased recognition across the LAC region of the centrality of the principal's leadership role to school improvement (Alvariño et al., 2000; Sallán, 1998; Schettini & Pozner, 2001). Guided in part by the school effectiveness and improvement research from European countries and the United States, investigators in LAC countries have begun to turn their attention to the work and impact of school principals.

Research on principals in most cases tends to be primarily qualitative in nature. This is not surprising given the complex nature of the dynamic processes in schools. Researchers interested in designing quantitative studies find it difficult to define leadership, develop reliable and valid data collection instruments, and quantify the processes that take place around teaching and learning. In spite of the limited research agenda on principals, we have learned something about their work in LAC countries over the past ten or fifteen years. Table 5 presents selected examples of recent research.

Table 5. Selected examples of recent research on school administration in LAC countries

Author(s)	Method/sample	Findings related to principals' behaviors
Loera Varela, 2001	Qualitative evaluation study of 128 Mexican primary schools	At 25 of the 65 schools where student achievement improved, school administration was based on principal leadership to improve instruction where the principal meets with technical teams, discusses student learning, and holds high expectations for student achievement.
Espínola, 2000	Case study analysis of two types of decentralization: administrative autonomy (AA) in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua; and pedagogic autonomy (PA) in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay	AA is the decentralization of the administration of human, financial, and material resources from the ministry of education to the school. PA is the transfer of control over the curriculum to the school so that it can meet local needs. The school has authority over collective planning, implementation, and evaluation of the academic program Under AA, community selection of the principal did not by itself have an effect on school outcomes. Under PA, the principal was more concerned about poor teacher performance but did not have the skills to address the problem.
Hernández, Lázaro, & Flores, 2000	Qualitative study of 28 primary schools in El Salvador, 14 "successful" and 14 "unsuccessful" where success/lack of success is consistent over/under achievement on standardized examinations of language arts and mathematics	Principals in successful schools exhibit strong leadership, participate in planning with teachers, visit classrooms, and promote creativity and innovation in the teaching and learning process. They work well with parents to improve the school. There is a positive effect between the length of time the principal has held the position and the strength of his leadership. Principals with teaching responsibilities, predominantly in rural schools, exhibit weak leadership with teachers and somewhat stronger leadership with parents.

Table 5 continued. Selected examples of recent research on school administration in LAC countries

Author(s)	Method/sample	Findings related to principals' behaviors
Administración Nacional de Educación Pública & Educativos, 1999	Qualitative case study of 10 Uruguayan primary schools, six "effective" and four "ineffective" where effective/ineffective was defined by student achievement	Principals at the "effective" schools have a positive attitude, project a professional demeanor, and are active participants in the academic life of the school. Principals at the "ineffective" schools believe they are prevented from being good leaders by circumstances beyond their control.
Fuller & Rivarola, 1998	Qualitative process evaluation study of 12 schools participating in the school autonomy pilot project in Nicaragua	Teachers do not have strong expectations that the principal will provide them with advice on how to improve their classroom practices. Adjusting the principal's role to become more of an instructional leader may be more difficult under decentralization, since many of principals report being preoccupied with administrative matters. "The extent to which decentralization takes hold greatly depends on the strength of the school's <i>a priori</i> leadership, teacher cohesion, and level of parent participation."

Although the findings from only five studies are presented in Table 5, they highlight a fundamental tension that is common in schools across Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, it is clear that principals have an important role to play in assuring school effectiveness and success. Yet at the same time, most principals do not assume the leadership and management functions that are required to contribute to the improvements in learning and teaching that lead to the school's success.

There are three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, broad categories of reasons for this. The first is that principals do not have the skills to meet the challenges presented by reforms that focus on improving learning and teaching at the classroom/school level. In many cases they opt for the administrative tasks that are somewhat easier to address than the challenges of helping teachers improve their performance. The second is that

principals are unable to balance competing or conflicting demands. This is especially true in schools where the principal also has full time teaching responsibilities or schools where decentralization reforms push administrative functions originally reserved for central ministries onto the schools. The third is that principals who are inclined to assume greater autonomy in their roles as school leaders are prevented from doing so by limitations in the national education system's ability to support them in this effort.

Effective leadership at the school level is a key element in the process of improving schools; a critical component in the implementation of any initiative designed to improve the learning and teaching process (Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001; Moura, 2000; Sammons, 1999; Schettini & Pozner, 2001). But there is still much to be learned if principals in LAC schools are to become leaders for change and not barriers to reform. Table 6 presents the types of research that will be useful to policymakers interested in creating the conditions that will shift the principal's role from subject to agent of change.

Table 6. Directions for research on the school principal in LAC countries

What should policymakers know about principals and their work?	Why is it useful to know this?	What are some steps that can be taken to address/answer these questions?
Basic information about principal's professional characteristics (years of service, level of education, etc.) and more detailed information from principals about what they believe they need to know in order to act as leaders for change	<p>The information can be used to develop complex profiles of existing principals; Here are some examples of ways to use the profiles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To design professional development programs based on current principals' needs; 2) To determine areas of the country where principals are less well prepared to do their work; 3) To create indicators related to the principals and their work that can be used in other analyses 	<p>Create and/or merge local, regional, and national databases</p> <p>Use interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires to survey principals about their work and their professional development needs</p>

Table 6 continued. Directions for research on the school principal in LAC countries

What should policymakers know about principals and their work?	Why is it useful to know this?	What are some steps that can be taken to address/answer these questions?
What is the principal's role vis-à-vis school councils, whatever their composition and purposes may be?	School reforms often include a role for local decision-making through such groups as school councils; successful implementation of the reform depend in part on the degree and nature of collaboration between the principal and the school council	An important first step is to examine the language of education regulations and reform to determine the expectations for the principal's role Follow up with research at the school level where investigators attempt to define and describe the relationships between the principal, the school councils, and decision-making processes
What are the principal's responsibilities? What does it mean to be a leader for change in the country's schools? What does it mean to be an instructional leader?	There is considerable evidence that the principal acting as an instructional leader has a positive influence on school improvement; if principals have other responsibilities (such as teaching), it is difficult for them to be involved in classroom observation and supervision	Analyze education reform documents to determine if current descriptions of the principals' roles and responsibilities will contribute to or hinder their work as leaders for change in their schools Use case studies and other qualitative forms of research to uncover and describe the leadership styles of principals in successful schools
What are the criteria for the selection, appointment, evaluation, and dismissal of principals? If there aren't any, what are the steps that are being taken to put them in place?	The principal is a key player in school improvement at the building level, whether the decision-making in the education system has been decentralized or not. This makes it critical that the principal's role should become more professional and much less political. Countries should no longer rely on political processes to appoint principals rather the principal should be selected or appointed through a competitive process that includes a review of their professional credentials.	Obtain information about hiring, evaluation, and firing criteria from other countries that have begun the process of moving from political to professional models of principal selection and retention. Examples include Argentina, Colombia, and Brazil. Work with the professional unions, universities, legislators, the principals themselves, and local stakeholders to develop the criteria. Then pilot the process, evaluate the results, make modifications, and implement the process on a broader scale.

Table 6 continued. Directions for research on the school principal in LAC countries

What should policymakers know about principals and their work?	Why is it useful to know this?	What are some steps that can be taken to address/answer these questions?
Where is the locus of control in the education system? What is the nature of the principal's authority at the school level?	Principals are set up for frustration and failure when they perceive that they have a great deal of responsibility and little or no authority. It is not enough to prepare principals to act as school leaders, they must also be allowed to act as leaders.	Start by examining existing policies on 1) the hiring and firing of teachers, 2) the process for developing and implementing school budgets, 3) community involvement in school decision-making, and 4) the implications of a national examination system in a country that permits the development and implementation of local education projects

Conclusion

It has only been since the early to mid 1990s that principals in Latin American and Caribbean schools have even been identified as potential leaders for school change. Perhaps this recognition has been late in coming to LAC schools; it is, nevertheless, an important first step in the process of transforming principals into leaders for change. Across the region, principals are needed who “understand school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement” (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001, p. 8). They must also demonstrate that they “know how to work with teachers and others to fashion and implement continuous school improvement, and provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum, and instructional practices” (p. 8).

But there is still much to be done before school principals in LAC countries will truly be able to act as instructional leaders. It will certainly be a significant challenge to develop more effective school leaders through pre-service and in-service training. It will be quite another to expect principals to make meaningful contributions to the improvement of teaching and learning without “structural change and systematic reorganization” of schools and education systems (Hoachlander et al., 2001, p. 10). We need to understand much more about the way in which schools work and determine the “conditions in elementary and secondary schools, that by their very structure and operation, encourage leaders to succeed and help them to do so” (p. 10). This does not in any way diminish the need to improve the knowledge and skills of principals in LAC countries. But such improvement cannot and should not occur without a plan to “create or promote an institutional environment in which principals can really act as leaders and not heroes who work in the face of all kinds of adversity” (Peña, 2000, p. 11).

Appendix A

This paper draws on information provided by ministries of education and is supplemented by materials found in REDUC and other databases as well as reports commissioned or produced by donor agencies such as the IDB and the World Bank. It also relies on articles, reports, books, and other materials obtained by the author.

Information from Regional Policy Dialogue Member Countries

As a first step, the member country representatives of the Regional Policy Dialogue in Education were advised of this study at the meeting held in Washington, D.C. in July of 2001. A few weeks later in August, using the contact information provided by the representatives of the Regional Education Policy Dialogue member countries, each country was initially contacted by electronic correspondence (e-mail)¹⁷. Each member country was asked to provide:

- 1) Copies of qualitative and/or quantitative studies that include the principal as a variable or subject;
- 2) Copies of education regulations and/or education reform documents that describe the role of the principal and the strategies to prepare and support them;
- 3) Copies of instruments, questionnaires or other protocols used by the ministry of education to collect data about principals; and,
- 4) Copies of descriptions of pre-service, in-service, or other professional development programs for principals.

Throughout the months of August, September, October, and November, several facsimiles and e-mails were sent to follow up the initial requests for information¹⁸. In addition, education ministry offices across the LAC region were contacted by frequent telephone calls. Data collection through contacts from the Regional Policy Dialogue member countries was terminated in late November. A summary of the types of data provided by RPD member countries is presented in Table 1A.

¹⁷ If no electronic mail address was provided, then initial contact was made by facsimile.

¹⁸ Appendix A contains copies in English and Spanish of the requests sent by electronic mail and facsimile.

Other Sources of Information

During the same time period, a series of on-line searches in REDUC were undertaken. The key search words and phrases used were “gestión escolar”, “director de escuela”, “gestión educativa”, and “estudio de investigación”. Some information was also downloaded from member country government websites and the websites for UNESCO, the OEA, the IDB, and the World Bank¹⁹.

Table 1A. Summary table of data provided by RPD in Education member countries

	Copies of quantitative and/or qualitative research reports	Copies of education reform documents, laws and/or regulations describing the principal’s role	Copies of questionnaires, protocols or other instruments used to collect data on principals	Copies of descriptions of pre-service, in-service or other professional development programs for principals
RPD member countries that submitted materials	Colombia Costa Rica Nicaragua	Barbados Colombia Costa Rica, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panamá, Trinidad and Tobago	Barbados Colombia Costa Rica Guyana Nicaragua Panamá	Barbados Costa Rica Guyana Nicaragua Panamá
RPD member countries reporting this type of information is not available	Barbados El Salvador Guyana Honduras Panamá Trinidad and Tobago	Honduras	Honduras	El Salvador Honduras
RPD member countries reporting the materials exist but the materials were not sent		El Salvador	El Salvador Trinidad and Tobago	Colombia Trinidad and Tobago

¹⁹ The author also referred to papers and reports provided by colleagues at Harvard Graduate School of Education as well as personal materials previously collected for other research projects.

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