

# School Management Competencies: Perceptions and Self-Efficacy Beliefs of School Principals

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Received 19 March 2014; revised 19 April 2014; accepted 26 April 2014

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## Abstract

In several contexts, reform in the training and nomination of future school principals was based on competency profiles. In Québec, it was not until 2008 that its Ministry of Education established a profile of competencies specifically for school principals. This study proposed a questionnaire on the perceptions and self-efficacy beliefs of school principals with regard to these competencies and their associated factors. Respondents gave greater weight to the management of education services, followed by human resources, educational environment, and finally, administration. A significant difference was observed between administrative management and the teaching level and school size. The principals whose professional development activities consisted of conventions and seminars also felt a greater sense of personal efficacy on this factor compared to the principals whose professional development was done through mentoring.

## Keywords

School Management Competencies, School Management Competencies, Self-Efficacy Beliefs, School Principals

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## 1. The Context of Reform

Until 1980, no nation possessed a clearly defined national policy on the training standards for school principals. It was only in the early 21st century that several countries became aware of the importance of specific training for school leaders (Bush, Kiggundu, & Moorosi, 2011; Bush, 2008). Indeed, the many societal transformations have generated significant changes in the education system and ultimately, complex challenges for school prin-

cipals (Bush, 2008; Warfield, 2009; Levine, 2005). The building superintendent of yore must now possess multiple forms of expertise, such as academic content, data analysis, public relations, and change management (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Huber, 2008; Levine, 2005; Perez et al., 2011).

Research has shown that school principals do in fact play a pivotal role in improving school and classroom conditions and in teacher supervision, not to mention student learning (Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). This effect, which is second only to in-class teaching (Leithwood et al., 2004), occurs through the influence they have on their teachers' level of commitment and motivation, work conditions, and distribution of power (Leithwood et al., 2006), or through their organisation of the school's culture (Wahlstrom & Seashore, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). Effective principals also enrich teacher performance (Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991; Lee, Buck, & Midgley, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989) as well as the latter's sense of efficacy in their practices (Smylie, 1988; Hipp, 1996; Hipp & Bredeson, 1995). This observation has led to an acknowledgement of their profession as one requiring specialised capabilities that warrant specific training and preparation beyond innate qualities (Bush, 2008, 2010; Avolio, 2005; Lumby et al., 2008). Thus training programs for young principals and professional development for in-service school leaders must expand their expertise so as to better respond to the growing demands (Ravitch, 2010).

It goes without saying that the training requirements for the position of school principal vary depending on the context. In the United States, for example, a teacher becomes eligible for promotion to the position of principal when they have completed a Masters in educational administration (Tucker & Coddling, 2002), while in the United Kingdom, teachers must climb the ranks to become senior faculty, or "deputy head", and must assist the principal during a minimum of five years before being allowed to apply for the position of headmaster (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

In Québec, having a degree in school management only became a job requirement for the position of principal in 2001. In the wake of this reform, Québec's Ministère de l'éducation, du loisirs et des sports (MELS) enacted new policy with its profile of professional competencies for school principals. This study centered on the perceptions of school principals and their self-efficacy beliefs with regard to these required qualifications, and asked the following research questions: How did school principals view the competencies expressed in the MELS profile on training in the administration of educational institutions (MELS, 2008)? What were their self-efficacy beliefs regarding these competencies and which factors were associated with these perceptions?

## 2. Literature Review

Several arguments support the idea of specific training for school leaders and the importance of investing in their formal development so as to improve the quality of school leadership. To meet the demands of a constantly evolving society, schools must have well-qualified principals, as the latter have a definite impact on student performance (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006). In this sense, "professionalising" the principal's role and recognising the differences between their role and that of their teachers calls for separate and specialised training and preparation (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007; Bouchamma, 2013).

Many authors have noted a serious lack of knowledge in the field as regards the professional development of school principals (Nicholson et al., 2005; Salazar, 2007; Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005), the evaluation of these professional growth activities (Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005), the type of professional upgrading principals engage in (Nicholson et al., 2005), and the effect professional development may have on student achievement (Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005; Salazar, 2007).

### 2.1. Training for Principals and Continuing Professional Development

Two main options exist in the training of school principals, namely, the initial identification and training of potential candidates prior to their nomination and the continuing professional development of in-service principals (Daresh & Male, 2000). Regardless of the choice, the development of school principals—not to mention the recruitment and retention—must be a priority in each and every education system (Chapman, 2005).

Despite the relevance, specific training remains inaccessible in many contexts. In some countries, school principals often begin their professional careers as teachers, progressing toward the directorial position through experience (Bush et al., 2011; Mestry & Singh, 2007), while in others, the training of principals is increasingly accepted as a means to improve student achievement. Such is the case in some South African urban area schools

that have succeeded in implementing professional development programmes for school principals who seek to enrich their skills and practices (Mestry & Schmidt, 2010).

In the context of Africa, school principals are often promoted based on their success as teachers, although many point out that success in teaching does not automatically mean success as a principal (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Van der Westhuizen et al., 2004) and that principals with no basic management skills are unable to survive the many changes (Kitavi & Van der Westhuizen, 1997).

## 2.2. The Benefits of Training

Some studies have qualified leadership development as a “strategic necessity” (Brundrett, Fitzgerald, & Sommefeldt, 2006). Effective training programmes generate numerous positive benefits on the leadership qualities of school principals in the sense that they reduce the shock of the passage from the role of teacher to that of principal (Daresh & Male, 2000). Moreover, when these initiatives are not successful, the principals tend not only to lose interest in future professional development training but also become reticent in welcoming change (Knight, 2007).

In a study conducted in four American states on the professional development of school principals, professional development activities were viewed as being essential for them to respond to the demands of student achievement and their professional practice (Nicholson et al., 2005).

Many education systems emphasise the need to focus on the principals’ professional development in order to introduce effective management and elevate the level of leadership of school principals (Mathibe, 2007; Salazar, 2007). Because of the many challenges facing principals in many low-performing urban schools in America, this situation is even more critical (Houle, 2006). Studies have shown the importance of addressing the practice in the training programmes for future principals, making these development activities more easily applicable to the real-life day-to-day situations, connecting theory and practice, and giving school principals enough time to reflect and to exercise their practice (Dinham, Anderson, Caldwell, & Weldon, 2011).

In Québec, the massive exodus of retired principals in the early 2000s raised a serious concern regarding accelerated replacement and resulted in research related to the difficulties caused by this precipitated action. As a result, the movement toward administrative decentralisation and the resulting increased responsibilities for the schools have led to a complexification of the principal’s responsibilities. Thus the law governing the working conditions of school commission leaders called for a Masters degree in management, thereby emphasising the importance of continuing education for school principals.

In response, two studies were conducted which led to the elaboration of government policy entitled *La formation à la gestion d’un établissement d’enseignement orientations et les compétences professionnelles* in which Québec’s Ministry of Education (2008) profiled a list of required professional qualifications for school principals: the first study centered on the support and supervision practices of new principals (MELS, 2006), while the second focused on professional integration (Fortin, 2006). With the help of these two works, the coordination committee was able to construct a common reference list of competencies. In the subsequent document, the MELS elaborated the orientations and professional capabilities expected of future principals of training centres and schools of all levels, from pre-school to secondary.

This official document thus presented a reference guide to the ten competencies defining the school management training programme. These interdependent skills were divided into four skills management groups: education services, educational environment, human resources, and administration.

## 3. Conceptual Framework

Two key concepts defined our conceptual framework: professional development and self-efficacy beliefs.

### 3.1. Professional Development

The concept of professional development is defined as an intensive, comprehensive and supported initiative centered on improving the effectiveness of both teachers and principals to ultimately have a positive impact on student outcomes (Hirsh, 2009). It involves processes and activities through which educators acquire professional knowledge, skills (National Staff Development Council, 2000), and attitudes to enrich student learning (Guskey, 2000).

### 3.2. Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Formerly referred to as the sociocognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), the theory of self-efficacy is a social learning theory. It is the subjective belief an individual has in their capacity to successfully perform a given action. This theory not only represents one of the most determinant psychological mechanisms of human behaviour (Bandura, 1989) but is also one of the most important concepts in the family of motivational theories (Landy, 1991; Locke, 1991; Gorrell, 1990; Schunk, 1995). Based on objective and subjective elements, the self-efficacy belief represents the conviction an individual develops in terms of their capacity to deal with what is required in a given situation. As a situational variable (Bandura, 1986, 1996), its strength and scope vary depending on the context and various spheres of life of the individual.

Self-efficacy is developed through various mechanisms: cognitive (notably by determining the objectives), motivational (i.e. by adopting self-regulatory practices), and affective (by controlling anxiety and promoting avoidance behaviours). Many studies have shown possible connections between self-efficacy, favoured behaviours, and persistence when dealing with challenges (Schunk, 1996). According to some authors, the Self-efficacy may be developed through adequate practices and appropriate interventions (Bandura, 1997; Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Maddux & Lewis, 1995), and concrete actions to improve the Self-efficacy may be introduced to enrich an individual's performance.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Sample

In total, 49 school principals and vice-principals responded to our questionnaire: 53.1% were women, 89.8% were tenured, 85.7% were principals; 69.4% were employed in primary schools, 26.5% in secondary schools, and 4.1% in adult education. Among them, 54% possessed a degree in school administration, while 45.5% were studying to obtain this certification. On average, the respondents possessed 12.95 years of teaching experience, with 7.8 years as principal. Average age was 43.3 years old. They were responsible for an average of 24.4 teachers and 397.6 students in schools with a socioeconomic status index (SES) of 5.9 on a scale of 10 (10 being the most disadvantaged).

### 4.2. Data Collection

The *Questionnaire School Management Competencies: Perceptions and Self-Efficacy of School Principals* was devised to present our research questions to the participating principals and was divided into three sections: 1) their personal characteristics as well as the sociodemographic and socioprofessional characteristics of the school; 2) the importance they gave to the 10 competencies of school principals (MELS, 2008); and 3) their self-efficacy belief with regard to these competencies. The principals were asked to respond to the last two sections by means of a Likert-type scale consisting of 6 items ranging respectively from *Not at all important* to *Extremely important* and from *Totally disagree* to *Totally agree*.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Degree of Importance Given to the 10 Competencies

Bouchamma et al. based on the four school management skills (education services, educational environment, human resources, and administrative resources), our analysis (see **Table 1**) shows that the principals felt the strongest regarding the management of Education Services ( $M = 5.66$ ), followed by Human Resources ( $M = 5.39$ ), Educational Environment ( $M = 5.15$ ), and Administration ( $M = 5.03$ ).

### 5.2. Self-Efficacy Beliefs Regarding the 10 Competencies

Concerning their self-efficacy (see **Table 2**) beliefs toward the 10 school management competencies, these perceptions were stronger with regard to Education Services ( $M = 5.60$ ), followed by Educational Environment ( $M = 4.84$ ), Human Resources ( $M = 4.69$ ), and finally, Administration ( $M = 4.55$ ).

### 5.3. Importance Given to Administration by Teaching Level and School Size

Our analysis of the degree of importance given to each of the four management competencies (see **Table 3**)

**Table 1.** Degree of importance given to the 10 competencies.

Management competency	<i>M</i>	<i>ET</i>
Education services	5.66	0.98
1) Organise the school to focus on the students' academic needs.	5.65	1.03
2) Support the development of instructional practices adapted to the students' needs.	5.67	0.99
Educational environment	5.15	0.95
3) Assist the school council as mandated by law.	5.02	1.15
4) Head the development of a school initiative and the implementation of a results-oriented academic achievement plan.	5.29	1.04
5) Foster the development of collaborations and partnerships centered on student achievement.	5.14	1.02
Human resources	5.39	0.78
6) Ensure effective action in my practice and in that of my staff members.	5.49	0.77
7) Ensure effective action by each work group.	5.33	0.88
8) Continue to develop my skills and those of my staff members.	5.37	0.95
Administration	5.03	0.97
9) Effectively and efficiently manage the school's financial resources.	5.12	1.09
10) Effectively and efficiently manage the school's material resources.	4.94	1.03

N = 49.

**Table 2.** Self-efficacy belief regarding the 10 competencies.

Management competency	<i>M</i>	<i>ET</i>
Education services	5.9	0.95
1) Organise the school to focus on the students' academic needs.	5.14	0.88
2) Support the development of instructional practices adapted to the students' needs.	5.04	1.14
Educational environment	4.84	0.86
3) Assist the school council as mandated by law.	4.94	0.99
4) Head the development of a school initiative and the implementation of a results-oriented academic achievement plan.	4.96	1.11
5) Foster the development of collaborations and partnerships centered on student achievement.	4.61	0.93
Human resources	4.69	0.89
6) Ensure effective action in my practice and in that of my staff members.	4.82	0.95
7) Ensure effective action by each work group.	4.63	1.05
8) Continue to develop my skills and those of my staff members.	4.63	1.35
Administration	4.55	1.14
9) Effectively and efficiently manage the school's financial resources.	4.53	1.08
10) Effectively and efficiently manage the school's material resources.	4.57	0.95

N = 49.

**Table 3.** Degree of importance given to administration by teaching level and school size.

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Df</i>
Teaching level	4.74 (0.96)		
Primary	5.73 (0.60)		
Secondary		6.349**	2.46
Adult education	5.50 (0.71)		
School size			
Small	4.53 (1.04)		
Medium	5.22 (1.05)	3.537*	2.46
Large	5.33 (0.56)		

Note. \* =  $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* =  $p \leq 0.01$ .

revealed a significant difference between Administration management, the teaching level, and the size of the school.

Teaching level (primary, secondary, adult) sparked a notable difference between the schools. The secondary school principals ( $M = 5.73$ ;  $ET = 0.60$ ) placed greater importance on this competency compared to their peers in primary schools ( $M = 4.74$ ;  $ET = 0.96$ ), [ $F(2,46) = 6.349$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ]. Our results also indicate that the respondents from large schools felt stronger with regard to Administration ( $M = 5.33$ ;  $ET = 0.56$ ) than did the respondents from small schools ( $M = 4.53$ ;  $ET = 1.04$ ), [ $F(2,46) = 3.537$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ].

### Self-Efficacy Beliefs Regarding Professional Development

Only one relationship was found to be significant between self-efficacy belief and type of professional development (in the form of conventions/seminars or mentoring) (see [Table 4](#)). In The respondents whose professional development activities were conventions and seminars ( $M = 5.41$ ;  $ET = 0.71$ ) experienced a greater feeling of self-efficacy with regard to Competency no. 4, Head the development of a school initiative and the implementation of a results-oriented academic achievement plan, compared to the respondents whose professional development was gained through mentoring ( $M = 4.33$ ;  $ET = 1.23$ ), [ $F(2,39) = 5.100$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ].

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the perceptions and self-efficacy beliefs of school principals with regard to the competencies of principals and the associated factors.

Our results show that the participating principals placed greater importance on the management of Education Services, followed by Human Resources, Educational Environment, and Administration. This finding supports the changing role of the school principal depending on the context. This role takes precedence over that related to administrative functions by privileging pedagogy and student achievement and thus reflects the preoccupation of education systems to improve student outcomes. School principals in Québec who are increasingly concerned with improving perseverance and achievement in school must develop a results-oriented management model (MELS, 2004, 2009). Based on measurable results, this management approach is defined by taking into account the services that are required. To reach the proposed objectives, three principles are evoked, namely, transparency, accountability, and flexibility (Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor du Québec, 2002). Our results varied, however, on certain school characteristics. A significant difference was noted between the primary and secondary characteristics in terms of the importance the respondents gave to Competency no. 9 effectively and efficiently manage the financial resources, and Competency no. 10 effectively and efficiently manage the material resources, as the secondary school principals showed greater interest in administrative management than did their peers from the primary sector. Because secondary schools are generally larger and are responsible for larger budgets, it is suggested that the principals of these establishments devote a greater portion of their time to administrating.

**Table 4.** Self-efficacy belief regarding the type of professional development.

Competency 4. Head the development of a school initiative and the implementation of a results-oriented academic achievement plan			
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Df</i>
Conventions and seminars	5.41 (0.71)	5.100*	2.46
Mentoring	4.33 (1.23)		

Note. \* =  $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* =  $p \leq 0.01$ .

Overall, the respondents' self-efficacy beliefs did not differ because of the type of professional development process employed, although differences were found for two competencies related to the management of the educational environment. For Competency no. 4 head the development of a school initiative and the implementation of a results-oriented academic achievement plan, the respondents who took part in conventions or seminars for their professional development felt more competent on this aspect compared to the respondents whose professional development involved only mentoring. The principals' responses were also similar for Competency no. 5 Foster the development of collaborations and partnerships centered on student achievement, as principals who participated in conventions and seminars gave greater weight to this competency, compared to their colleagues whose professional development consisted of mentoring.

Only a few studies explore the type of professional development activities chosen by school principals (Nicholson et al., 2005; Salazar, 2007; Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005) and there is even less research on how this professional development is assessed (Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005). However, other research orientations continue to develop, such as the nature and goals of educational leadership, mentoring, and professional development coaching programmes (Huber, 2008), to name a few. What must be retained from our study is the positive impact of training seminars, as it is through this type of training activity that new ideas in school management are introduced, that interactions between participants are encouraged, and that points of view are put into perspective through discussion.

While this study was conducted with a relatively small sample, future research should target a larger sample and should not only be limited to generalization but also allow further analyzes that take into account the contextual characteristics of schools where these school leaders work (Schools in disadvantaged areas, rural/urban schools).

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of lines of action may be pursued as a result of this study. Future research should ideally include, among others, qualitative studies by means of interviews and direct observation to learn more regarding the day-to-day work involved and the competencies required for effective school management.

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