

Construction of Professional Knowledge and Identity by Female Principals of Chilean Educational Establishments

La construcción de conocimiento profesional e identidad de directoras de establecimientos educacionales chilenos

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Abstract

The reflections of this article are the result of an investigation based on the discourses of a group of female principals of educational basic education institutions in Chile on the process of construction of professional knowledge and managerial identities. The research is qualitative and is approached from a narrative biographical point of view. Ten female principals of municipal and private subsidized schools participated in it. The results indicate that the construction of professional knowledge and identity is a situated process, of social interaction, which combines theoretical, practical and reflexive knowledge, all based on the personal and professional experience of these directors and with their daily environment.

Keywords: professional knowledge, identity, social interaction, directors.

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Resumen

Las reflexiones de este artículo son resultado de una investigación realizada a partir de los discursos de un grupo de directoras de establecimientos educacionales de enseñanza básica de Chile sobre el proceso de construcción de conocimiento profesional e identidades directivas. Esta investigación fue de carácter cualitativo, y se posicionó desde un enfoque biográfico narrativo. En ella, participaron diez directoras de escuelas municipales y particulares subvencionadas. Los resultados señalan que la construcción de conocimiento profesional e identidad es un proceso situado, de interacción social, en el que se conjugan saberes teóricos, prácticos y reflexivos, todos a la base de la experiencia personal y profesional de las directoras y con su entorno cotidiano.

Palabras claves: conocimiento profesional, identidad, interacción social, directoras.

Introduction

Various national and international studies have demonstrated that the performance and leadership of the principal has great influence and importance as a strategic factor for the improvement and efficacy of an educational institution (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2012; Bolívar, 2019; Maureira & Garay, 2019). Studies have shown that knowledge, strong managerial identities (Bolívar & Ritacco, 2019), and the leadership of principals directly influence the improvement of student learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), as well as the learning of the educational community as a whole (Barber & Mourshed, 2008; Leithwood, 2009), which helps to promote school autonomy (Bolívar, 2019). It is therefore important to research and analyze how principals in the country learn, how they construct professional knowledge, and the characteristics of their identities, in order to strengthen their professional development of and how they are selected and assessed.

As a consequence of this, in recent years, public education policy has focused on promoting a set of actions that have made it possible to define the roles, responsibilities, and scope of action of school principals in the country, in addition to promoting their selection for the position and their continuous training. Specifically, there has been a focus on

Improving the leadership capabilities available in the system, either by ensuring that the most suitable candidates enter managerial positions (for example, by making principals' careers more attractive or by strengthening selection processes), or by developing effective leadership skills (and practices) in principals in service, mainly through training programs (Mineduc, 2016, p .21).

Within this context, a series of laws and reforms have been implemented that have changed principals' roles and responsibilities, defining new duties for the position. These include the General Education Law (N° 20,370, 2009), the School Inclusion Law (N° 20,845, 2015), the Law on the Teacher Professional Development System (N° 20,903, 2016), as well as the Law on Quality and Equity in Education (N° 20,501, 2011) and Law N° 20,006 (2005), which define the selection and assessment mechanisms for managerial positions in municipal-run education establishments in the country.

In terms of gender distribution among principals, according to information from the Study Center of the Ministry of Education (Mineduc, 2019), 64% of principals are currently women and 36% are men, a high percentage that demonstrates the importance of the female role in managerial positions. In addition to the above, it is important to point out that, in terms of the learning or knowledge of principals, research in the

country has focused mainly on studying the development of principals' competencies (Muñoz & Marfán, 2011; Uribe & Celis, 2012), but not their knowledge, the former being the basis for the construction of principals' professional knowledge. Considering this, it is important to investigate both the professional knowledge and identity of female principals in Chile.

Given this, the aim this paper is to understand how the professional knowledge and identity of female principals of municipal and subsidized private schools in Chile are constructed, with the intention of contributing to reflection on the construction of professional knowledge and the configuration of identities in school management.

Conceptual framework

Professional knowledge of the principal

The professional knowledge of principals and how it is generated is a complex process that is intrinsic to the human experience, as multiple areas of knowledge are involved in its construction (Pech & Morejón, 2018). For knowledge to be generated, it is necessary to have the possibility of constituting an experience, and if this does not happen there will be information, but not authentic knowledge (Dubet, 2011; Contreras & Pérez de Lara, 2010). Because of this, when thinking about the construction of knowledge, it is impossible to separate the subject from the object, as this is produced as part of our being, from our meaningful experiences in everyday life, from the actions of the human being (Tadeu da Silva, 2001; Heller, 1977). This implies moving past the traditional separation between disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge and practical knowledge (Vaillant, 2019).

In this sense, knowledge is never an isolated element, but interaction and signification with the subject's environment are required in order for it to exist and for the process of its construction. In this respect, Tardif (2013) argues that knowledge is always marked by the context in which the profession operates, so in this case it tends to be affected by social and political controversies that are typical of the socio-educational context. Therefore, female principals bring the ideological world and common sense into play in the construction of knowledge (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2014).

When discussing professional knowledge, we can refer to it as practical knowledge or knowledge of practice (Pérez Gómez, 1988), as perception (Heller, 1977), as knowledge, experiences (Tardif, 2004, 2013), and as personal knowledge. However, as we look more closely at these definitions, we observe that at the basis of all of these is a relationship between different levels of knowledge (rational and experiential) that interact with one another, leading to the emergence of professional managerial knowledge (Marcelo, 2009).

Along these lines, Porlán-Ariza, Rivero, and Martín del Pozo (1997) contend that professional knowledge is the result of the juxtaposition of knowledge expressed in two dimensions: one epistemological (rational-experiential) and one psychological (explicit-tacit). Similarly, Tamir (2005) argues that, in the case of the former, the difference and relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge is of great importance. In this context, he states that professional knowledge should be understood as the body of skills necessary to operate successfully in a specific profession. Furthermore, professional knowledge is heterogeneous and eclectic, that is to say, its construction requires different components (Shulman, 2005).

It is understood that professional knowledge, rather than simply theoretical knowledge, always requires knowledge that comes from the experiences and reflections of the actors, providing value to the context in which the principals perform their role (Tardif, 2013).

The process through which professional knowledge is constructed is social. Therefore, the female principal will not define her own professional knowledge, but she will instead do this through interaction with other educational subjects (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

However, this interaction requires a reflective capacity to allow one to recreate and rationally incorporate social practices. In this respect, reflective practice remains a great help, because subjects take note of actions and incorporate them into their tools through this process of reflection (Giddens, 1992). In this framework, reflective practice is understood as an intentional and systematic process by means of which the subject seeks to learn about themselves and the relationship with others, enabling them to generate new professional knowledge to address different scenarios (Giddens, 1992). Thus, on the one hand, the principals interact with other actors in the framework of this construction, but various kinds of knowledge also converge in that process. In this respect, Schön (1992) points out that the actors develop reflective professional practice by resolving problems they encounter in their daily lives, relating it with actions to take decisions and use methodologies for innovation.

Reflective processes involve action. Therefore, they are not independent; they complement each other and result in action becoming progressively more tacit, mechanical, and unconscious when it has an associated trajectory and routine (Poggi, 2001). Reflective processes are important because they allow the production and mobilization of professional knowledge (Campos, 2016).

The process through which principals' professional knowledge is built is usually marked by different types of promotion in educational spaces. That is, vertical promotion refers to the possibility for teachers to take courses and build their skills by moving up the hierarchical ranking of positions in school institutions; while another type of promotion is horizontal, in which what is relevant is the satisfactory completion of continuous training courses in the same role, with no aspirations to new roles as a driving force (UNESCO, 2007).

Finally, it can be pointed out that each experience represents a particular structuring of knowledge: from practice, for practice, and in practice (Simkins, 2005), which responds to a trajectory of principals' experiences grounded in life stories, daily reflections, interaction with their peers, and, of course, their own actions as principals in the school space. Principals thus construct their knowledge by continuously relating three components: theoretical, practical, and the reflective experience of their actions.

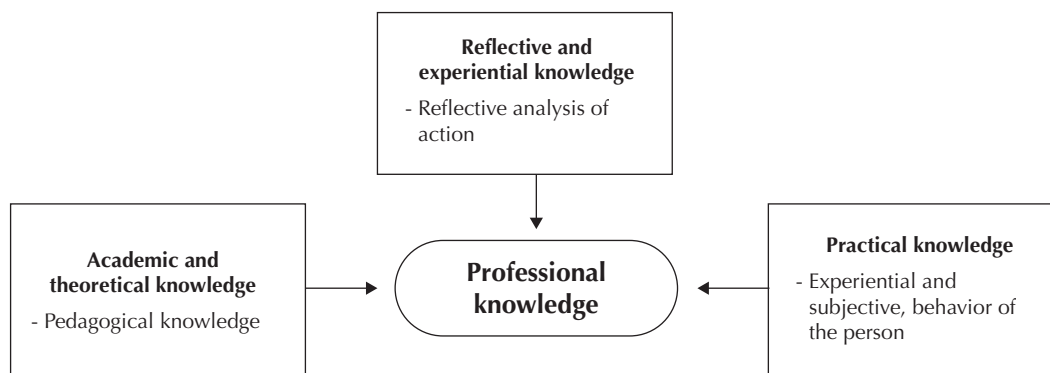


Figure 1. *Summary of female principals' construction of professional knowledge*
 Source: Prepared by the authors based on Porlán-Ariza et al., (1997), Poggi (2001), Shulman (2005), Tamir (2005), and Demuth (2011).

Identity and trajectory of female principals

Talking about identity implies a collective process of self-recognition, complemented by the recognition of others and permeated by the different social changes that directly affect the configuration of identity (Vaillant, 2008).

In this context, to understand one's own identity, it is always necessary to think in relation to the community of belonging (Ricoeur, 1996; Ritacco & Bolívar, 2018). In no case does identity neglect the individual component, but it is understood that one is always relating to and interacting with others (Wenger, 2001). Identity is not something that is possessed; it is developed throughout life in a trajectory, so it is not an attribute of an individual but is a relational phenomenon (Marcelo, 2010).

Moreover, when we talk about female principals, one of the relevant individual and personal components is associated with gender characteristics, which influence how they construct their own identity, from the personal to the professional collective, and how they address the identity tensions that lead them to identify themselves as teachers-principals (Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019). In this regard, it is impossible to ignore that the role of female principals is established in a space that tends to be masculinized, insofar as they have power, and this is typically associated with male figures and patriarchal practices (Barberá, Ramos, & Candela, 2011; Bustos, Oros, Álvarez, & Rebolledo, 2015; Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017), a space from which women have historically been excluded. Therefore, it is not surprising that the identity of female principals is established in conflict with a view that constantly subjects them to tension when considering their identities, often leading to the development of new figures that allow them to validate themselves compared with others, such as the figure of the *ideal manager* (Moorosi, 2007). Assuming additional responsibilities to those of men, related to caring for offspring and the home, long working hours, and extra work, among other factors (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Cabrera, 2005; Coronel, Llamas, Macías, & Moreno, 2012; Gómez & Jiménez, 2019), creates complexities that involve making a highly demanding job compatible with raising children (Coleman, 2007). In some cases, this leads to *doing macho maternity* (Smithson & Stockoe, 2005), a scenario in which women take less maternity leave than is granted by the law. All of these actions are evidence of the forms of domination into which female principals' construction of identity has been inserted, a space that has been subjected to the generation of knowledge based on a heteronormative logic that is unequal and discriminatory towards women, so it is essential to transform these spaces, as well as to promote the development of practices situated within a feminine pedagogy (Troncoso, Follegati, & Stutzin, 2019). Therefore, the challenge remains to overcome the conceptions that administrative roles in education are a male enterprise and that bureaucratic rationality is a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, which reduce it to male action and impede the development of female practice in leadership roles (Blackmore, 2017).

In any case, it is essential to understand that identities are social and that they always develop in relation to other people—or social groups—and are influenced by the context. That is, they are not immovable, but instead respond to a continuous movement in which historical and cultural contexts play a fundamental role (Dubar, 2002; Crow & Møller, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that identity and leadership characteristics in women principals are considered in relation to male characteristics (Jones, 2017).

Therefore, in order to look more deeply into the identities of female principals, it is necessary to study their constitutive elements framed within a trajectory that includes the personal and professional dimensions, reconsidering the beliefs, feelings, and motivations of the principal's work (Bolívar, 2007), taking into account the context or social space in which they develop.

In this regard, various studies suggest that professional identities should be recognized for themselves and for others, in such a way that acceptance of the environment becomes a fundamental element in their construction. According to this interpretation, the role of the principal depends on this professional identity recognized by others, being detached from the imposed figure of authority, because they are shaped by integrating the perspectives of others about personal actions, an issue that provides legitimacy to their work (Ritacco & Bolívar, 2018).

In this vein, and with a focus on educational practice, Sammons et al. (2007) suggested that three dimensions interact when analyzing professional identities: an identity related to the tradition of teaching and educational policies, one situated locally and related to the school and the institution or institutions through which the professional has passed, and a personal one, related to life outside the school. For its part, initial and continuous training influences the construction and reconstruction of identity as a transformative process (Carver, 2016). Thus, the trajectory plays a fundamental role, since that is where the principal's identity is configured, together with his/her teaching stories, personal events, and professional experiences, factors that influence the construction of professional knowledge. In this respect, Morgade (2005) argues that the development of a teacher or principal is a process of subjectivation and a process that lasts a lifetime, from the first school experiences of teachers-principals to the construction of professional knowledge that takes place through work in schools.

In this respect, when analyzing the construction of professional knowledge by female principals, it is essential to situate them within their own trajectories and contexts, in order to develop a dialogue with the heterogeneity of knowledge, where this should inspire action, social commitment, and questioning of the processes of normalization of existing power relations (Cariño et al., 2017), particularly within educational establishments.

Methodological Framework

This research, carried out in 2018-2019, was exploratory and longitudinal, and based on generation of knowledge from primary sources. The approach to the object of study followed a qualitative methodology, more specifically based on the association of two particular approaches: comprehensive-interpretative (Berger & Luckmann, 1995) and biographical-narrative (Bolívar & Domingo, 2019). This was done in order to capture the meanings constructed by the actors themselves in their daily lives (Creswell, 2013). From this perspective, the views of the principals and the contextual analysis that they carry out in their discourses are of prime importance (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

On the other hand, this research was based on an instrumental case study to address educational changes in their specific contexts (Stake, 1999). The case study implies an approach focusing on the singular and distinctive (Simons, 2011), which enabled us to look more deeply at specific facts of interest for the research and gave us the opportunity to capture and reflect on the elements that provide meaning to the object of study.

We used the biographical method to approach the object of study (Bolívar & Domingo, 2019), more specifically the research technique called the life story approach (Bertaux, 2005; Bolívar, 2014), understood as an expression of a part of the life of the female principals under study, which requires a defined time, sequence, and space, as well as a storyline, a sequence, a protagonist, and a situation to be shaped as a biographical narrative (Bolívar & Domingo, 2019). Using this technique, we recorded the language used by the principals, either oral or written, in order to gain an insight into their thinking and their life meanings.

This study involved the participation of 10 principals of elementary schools in the Metropolitan Region of Chile. The selection of the cases was done on an equitable basis, considering the type of schools (five municipal-run and five subsidized private).

Table 1
Characteristics of the participating principals

Participating principals	Type of school	Years of experience as teacher	Years of experience in managerial roles	Years of experience as principal
Principal N°1	Subsidized private	16 years	3 years	2 years
Principal N°2	Subsidized private	5 years	25 years	2 years
Principal N°3	Municipal-run	21 years	4 years	6 years
Principal N°4	Municipal-run	10 years	8 years	7 years
Principal N°5	Subsidized private	15 years	8 years	2 years
Principal N°6	Municipal-run	25 years	3 years	4 years
Principal N°7	Municipal-run	18 years	24 years	10 years
Principal N°8	Municipal-run	14 years	4 years	10 years
Principal N°9	Subsidized private	15 years	10 years	7 years
Principal N°10	Subsidized private	12 years	4 years	2 years

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Due to the nature of this research, we used two instruments to investigate the object of study: an autobiographical questionnaire and semi-structured biographical interviews—three for each principal under study. Both instruments were validated by a group of experts.

Table 2
Group of experts

Profession – role	Gender	Range of experience in years	Expertise
Teacher – principal of educational establishment	Male	20 – 30 years	Experience in the role of school management.
Teacher – principal of educational establishment	Female	10 – 20 years	Experience in the role of school management.
Academic – researcher Universidad Metropolitana	Male	10 – 20 years	Expertise in teacher training – university management.
Senior researcher	Male	20 – 30 years	Expertise in teacher training – university management and in public policy.
Academic – researcher Universidad de Chile	Female	10 – 20 years	Expertise in university research in biographical-narrative methodology.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The objective of the validation was to safeguard and ensure the internal and external consistency of the instruments based on the criteria of pertinence, clarity, and relevance. This process involved two stages; the first involved structural, terminological, and semantic changes that were applied to the instruments, which were then sent back to the group of experts for validation. In the second stage, certain modifications were made, which were mainly related to the appearance, leading to the definitive instruments.

The analysis we conducted was related to the biographical-narrative approach used in this research, which aimed to find common themes in a set of narratives, subsequently analyzed by means of two types of analysis; one that emerges from the previous conceptual framework and another that is constructed inductively from the narratives themselves (Bolívar, 2002).

We therefore decided to work on this using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), due to the possibilities that this method offers to facilitate the processes to interpret experiences over time or transformations via stages.

Once the life stories were transcribed, we used the software program Atlas ti. 7 to improve the consistency and rigor of the analytical procedures (Bolívar, 2012). For the analysis we designed a matrix of dimensions and categories that contained both the theoretical elements and those resulting from open coding.

Table 3
Dimensions and categories for analysis

Theoretical knowledge or knowledge for practice	Practical knowledge or knowledge in practice	Reflective experiential knowledge or knowledge of practice	*Managerial identity and trajectories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial teacher training • Continuous teacher training • Continuous training as principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching practice (first teaching experiences) • Teaching consolidation experiences • Managerial practice • Managerial consolidation experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical incidents of principal management • Characterization of principal management • Evaluation of experience: obstructing/facilitating factors • Evaluation of role: obstructing/facilitating factors of management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managerial identity (self-perception of role) • Teaching and management consolidation experiences • Standout elements of teaching and management experience • Valuation of teaching and management experiences

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Results

Construction of professional knowledge

With reference to the construction of professional knowledge, the principals make continuous mention of three specific dimensions—three different types of knowledge—that are connected, enabling the emergence of the necessary knowledge for the continuous performance of their profession. These dimensions are: theoretical (formal) knowledge for practice, practical knowledge (experience) in practice, and reflective experiential knowledge of practice (Porlán-Ariza et al., 1997; Shulman, 2005; Demuth, 2011; Simkins, 2005).

Theoretical knowledge or knowledge for practice

The first element that stands out when considering the construction of knowledge is theoretical knowledge (Porlán-Ariza, 1997). In this respect, the interviewees have great appreciation of theoretical knowledge when thinking about their managerial practices, mainly because they consider it part of their responsibility to keep their knowledge up to date, which they believe is essential to perform their role.

Continuous training is what gives you more and more tools, the updates that you need to have (Principal N° 7).

According to the interviewees, theoretical knowledge plays an important role that is expressed in relation to the implementation of managerial actions (Marcelo, 2009). They consider that theoretical knowledge allows them to build of a set of professional tools that facilitate the approach to and performance of managerial duties. In this vein, a link is observed with the social interaction component that lies at the basis of knowledge construction, because, according to the interviewees, theoretical knowledge allows them to provide responses to questions that arise from the connection that exists with pedagogical communities, in the practice itself (Tardif, 2004).

So, what happens is, I think I relied a lot on the theory in the master's degree, but since I was in service ... I think it became easier for me because of that, I was experiencing it (Principal N° 10).

On the other hand, the interviewees place particular emphasis on the contribution to their work from opportunities for continuous training—associated with learning theoretical knowledge. In addition to providing them with academic knowledge, they consider that these are spaces for socialization among their peer principals, which enable them to receive feedback based on personal and group experiences.

One of the positive occasions where one could solve and find solutions to certain problems was when I took the courses, the training plan for principals So, this opportunity for dialogue and participation is very enlightening, I think that one should have these opportunities (Principal N° 8).

In this respect, in addition to theoretical training, these opportunities for continuous training allow construction of collective reflective knowledge (Schön, 1992; Cerecedo, 2018) that emerges from the link between peers. Along these lines, and in the opinion of the interviewees, one of the main advantages of these continuous training courses is specifically to encourage reflective-critical exercises among those who participate in them, promoting interaction and the generation of professional knowledge (Campos, 2016).

Practical knowledge, or knowledge in practice

The directors give great prominence to practical knowledge, since they believe that it allows them to situate their leadership, putting what they have learned into action, constantly stressing their guidelines for action (Porlán-Ariza et al., 1997), which necessarily implies a process of revision and continuous updating of knowledge, thus positioning themselves as a catalyst for knowledge construction, relating it to knowhow, in continuous movement and in continuous practice (Pérez Gómez, 1998).

The classroom has been very formative for me. This doesn't mean that the university has been less so in the different courses I've been on, but the role is still more abstract in terms of professional training; I think that the realization of this, and the specific training, I've achieved it by practicing what I've done, and specifically the practice I've had at this school (Principal N° 10).

For the principals, it is the continuous link between experience and theory that allows them to build their knowledge and their guidelines for action within the framework of daily practices. Furthermore, it would seem to be impossible to separate the components of either in the process of knowledge construction (Marcelo, 2009).

Experience and practice on their own are useless, they need theory (Principal N° 4).

The interviewees consider that the main function of practical knowledge is to enable a space for the development of lived knowledge, putting the acquired learning into action (Tamir, 2005). In other words, it stresses the role of the principals, motivating them to perform work that seeks to address and solve the problems that arise on a daily basis in learning communities and, at the same time, lends substance to the theory, which is often considered in an abstract way.

I think that experience, having been able to spend time with a lot of the previous principals, because in theory you can learn many things, but practice is what enables you to know and make sense of what you're doing (Principal N° 2).

In this context, it is unsurprising that the interviewees constantly link theory and practice when reflecting on their knowledge and experiences, because, as Tadeu da Silva (2001) points out, subject and object, being and knowledge, cannot be separated.

I think that experience [is important], but accompanied by a proportion of knowledge (Principal N° 1).

On the other hand, in the discourse of the principals we can identify a clear emphasis on experience and the role it plays in visualizing the knowledge that each of them has regarding her role and the way in which it is linked to various actors in the learning communities (Bolívar, 2008; Fullan, 1999). In this respect, practice allows them to experience educational institutions as dialectical and dialogical spaces, which establishes challenges that have to be addressed in their process of knowledge construction.

You need to have had the experience of being a teacher in order to then be able to lead a teacher, guide them or ... or help them, support them. If you haven't been a teacher, how are you going to feel what they're feeling as a teacher in the classroom? (Principal N° 6).

Reflective experiential knowledge or knowledge of the practice

In the discourse of the principals, we can also identify various processes of reflection on their experiences, which are present in their trajectories, having arisen during the daily routine of their work. These processes of reflection are positioned as a relevant element of learning to understand not only their role in the schools, but also the guidelines of action with which they face their daily work (Poggi, 2001; Campos, 2016).

When I have difficult work situations, I don't get stressed, I mean, I don't think I get stressed. I try to be as rational and objective as possible; to put all the elements together and say, this is how it's resolved (Principal N° 1).

In this respect, we identify a reflective and critical space in the process of building professional knowledge, resulting from the continuous relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge and the reflection on both in action (Giddens, 1992; Campos, 2016). This knowledge contributes to the development of the situated image of their roles in specific contexts, as stated by the following principal.

But the experience, that is, the more theoretical part, as long as you have a lot of experience, you can begin to make the connections [reflections] between the two (Principal N° 9).

This reflective process occurs in a different order to the two types of knowledge analyzed previously, because it emerges from the juxtaposition of both within the framework of situated practice. It is the stressing and interaction of knowledge that promotes the emergence of a reflective component (Schön, 1992).

Regarding this aspect, it is suggested that this reflective knowledge always requires a link with experience, because it requires action to be able to develop (Marcelo, 2009).

Construction of professional knowledge by type of school

There is a factor that stands out as the main difference between the principals of the two types of schools, which is associated with the value of theoretical and practical knowledge and the importance of experiential knowledge in constructing the professional trajectory, with the two groups of principals displaying different strategies in the construction of professional knowledge.

a. Strategy of principals at municipal-run schools

These principals state that their process of constructing professional knowledge is part of a strategy built and focused on responding to the skills and qualifications required to reach a managerial position.

I was always very interested—in being a principal—and my aim was to validate myself ... not success for the sake of it, because it wasn't to show off, but for myself. It was like my life project, let's say (Principal N° 7).

In this context, great value is placed on academic training processes and exogenous experience, insofar as they understand that these allow them to have in-depth knowledge of the Chilean school system, an issue that is important for competitive public processes to hire principals.

Having a master's degree somehow allows you to apply for a position. As I didn't have one, that was what I thought at the time and that wasn't the case, because I could have applied for the position of principal previously, and I didn't have a master's degree, so I have no options (Principal N° 8).

Another element that the interviewees highlight is the quest to move up the hierarchical ranking in the schools. In their opinion, it is of great importance to be able to access managerial positions before applying for the position of principal, because they understand that these roles prepare them for the challenge of being a principal. This element, present in the way in which the interviewees construct their knowledge, is related to vertical promotion (UNESCO, 2007) in the educational system.

The principal must have managerial experience prior to assuming the position. She has to have the experience of having been either UTP head or inspector general, or assistant principal. I think she should have been one of those (Principal N° 7).

Therefore, what is relevant in this promotion is advancing to roles that imply new and greater responsibilities. This is related to the selection processes for the role of principal in the public system, since one of the assessment criteria for consideration during selection is previous experience and performance (Law N° 19,070, 1997). In this respect, we are able to observe a strategy in their trajectories that is adapted to the requirements of the educational system, to the demands of current public policies—mainly competitiveness and the assessment for the position: Law of Equity and Quality of Education (Law N° 20,501, 2011) or the law that establishes competitive hiring processes for the positions of principals at municipal-run educational establishments (Law N° 20,006, 2005)—which allows the selection criteria to be standardized. As a consequence of this, we can identify a strategy throughout their trajectory where they aim to meet all of the requirements necessary to attain the position of principal.

b. Strategy of principals at subsidized private schools

Meanwhile, the path that leads the principals of subsidized private schools to attain management positions is characterized by them attributing great importance to the trajectory and relationships of trust within the schools.

In the case of subsidized private schools, the selection process for principals is based on relationships of trust that are built in the daily work at the school. Thus, rather than specific requirements, what is important is how their profiles fit into the framework of the vision and mission of the schools. This factor is so important that it sometimes outweighs technical or resumé requirements (postgraduate degrees).

They say to me ‘you know, the religious community thinks you should participate’, so I say ‘I hadn’t considered it, I don’t even have my resumé updated’, ‘but I’m going to participate’, ‘but you have to ignore those two requirements and I’ll participate’. They said to me ‘yes, look, we’ve already interviewed seven of the 12 people, and the truth is that I don’t think any of them represents what you could do in the role’ (Principal N° 10).

In this respect, we see that the strategy used by this group of principals has more flexible characteristics; their process of constructing professional knowledge, mainly referring to the academic aspect, is something that arises more spontaneously and with great support, which allows them to build their resumé with greater freedom.

No, the school is very concerned about that [training]. Some went via the school, which are, at the end of the year, you apply, they say ‘sister, look, there’s the possibility, there are resources, its 50-50’; some of them were organized by the school, and others were organized by me (Principal N° 1).

This way of approaching the construction of professional knowledge in the case of the principals of subsidized private schools, together with their specific contexts, is related to horizontal promotion (UNESCO, 2007).

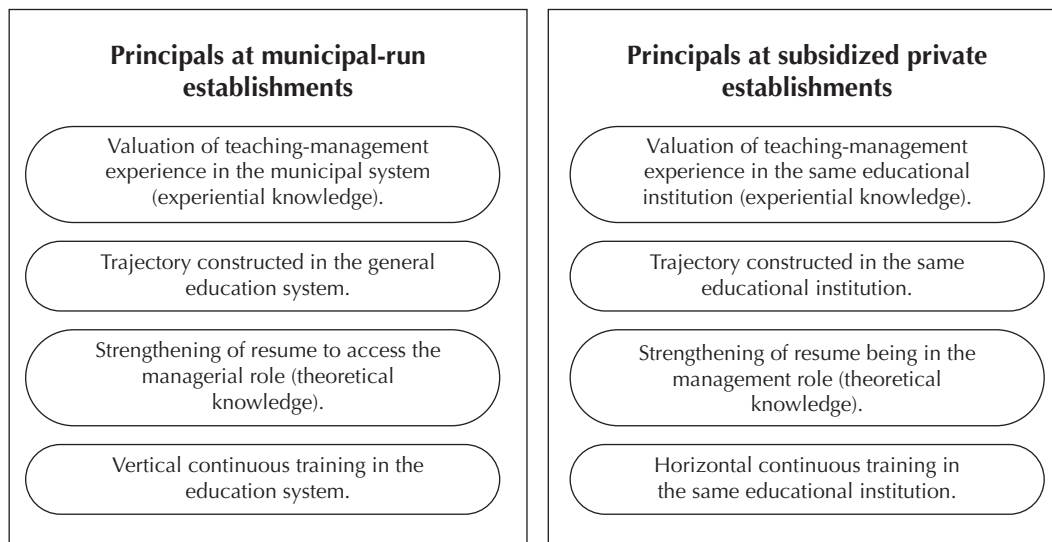


Figure 2. Summary of principals’ construction of professional knowledge by school type
 Source: Prepared by the authors.

Identities of female principals

With regard to this dimension, we find elements of the identity of the principals that are common to all of them, particularly those associated with the more personal aspect (Sammons, 2007), as well as others that differ. Considering the former, the principals point out that the fact that they are women—and everything this entails—is a relevant factor when thinking about their identity.

The principals forge their identity in a continuous relationship between their self-image and the image others have of them (Dubar, 2002). In this sense, it is not surprising that this difficulty in validating themselves in the opinion of others gradually undermines their confidence (Dubar, 2002).

The man arrived validated because he's a man in this macho culture, and the woman has to earn that validation. And that's true, it's sad, but it's true. I remember, at a place where I used to work, a principal arrived and said 'the principal has arrived, it's a good thing he's a man'. A female principal had left a short time beforehand. They hadn't liked her much, she had to leave ... 'and how good he's arrived, now things are going to be different, because it's different to be with ...' I said: 'My God, what exaggerated machismo!' (Principal N° 4).

Accordingly, there are evident conflicts created within this principal, where feminism stands as a means of transforming patriarchal, heteronormative, and male-dominated spaces (Barberá et al., 2011; Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017).

On the other hand, the role of the principal is typically characterized by masculinization (Barberá et al., 2011), due to the position of power in this space where work comes first, an issue that is difficult to reconcile with aspects of taking care of one's home and children (Cabrera, 2005; Coronel et al., 2012; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Gómez & Jiménez, 2019).

In light of this, the principals point to the need to build an image that reinforces their capacity to perform in all the areas in which they participate, even by putting up with acts that involve infringing their own rights and engaging in macho maternity (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005).

Before I had my last child, that day I came to work. I came to a meeting because I had to prepare for my degree and my sister called me. I came and that same day I had my baby (Principal N° 2).

Once again, this highlights the forms of patriarchal domination that are deployed in the school space, which reveal the need to promote practices focused on feminist pedagogies (Troncoso et al., 2019). The discourse of the interviewees also shows the tendency to build their personal and professional trajectory in line with the image of an ideal manager (Moorosi, 2007) that can respond to all of the impositions that have historically and socially been constructed in this masculinized space (Coleman, 2007).

I got married at the time I was at Pehuén, of course, and Fernanda, my daughter ... my second daughter, was born, but then something happened, as I was in charge of everything I couldn't stop working, and the local administrators asked me, the owner, they said they would pay me double salary, but that I shouldn't leave. So, my daughter was born on the Thursday and I worked on the Wednesday until 6:00 in the afternoon, and I went back to work on Tuesday the following week with the girl (Principal N° 6).

In this sense, this role of the ideal manager is a figure that seeks to comply with an excessive commitment to the tasks assigned to the role, since she must perform to the maximum in both the professional and personal spheres, resulting in female identities that compromise their role as mothers in order to accept the recognition of others. This is mainly due to the fact that the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in the performance of school management hinder the development of feminine practice in positions of leadership (Blackmore, 2017).

Identities of principals in contexts (by type of school)

With regard to this, we can state that distinctions can be observed in the identities constructed by the principals, which are mainly related to the type of their schools. These processes are related to the way in which these institutions understand the role of the principal, which is an issue that, as we have seen, also has a strong influence on the process of knowledge construction previously discussed.

In the case of municipal-run institutions, we observe the existence of a process to construct a standard identity that is linked to the homogeneity required by the public school system with regard to the position of the principal. In this sense, and following Sammons (2007), in these constructed identities it is possible to see greater relevance of the aspect involving the tradition of teaching and educational policies, while at the same time we observe the importance given to certain formalized and standardized criteria within the framework of their own identities, a more exogenous trajectory.

I applied to the competitive process for the rural school, because when I did my master's degree I said 'ok, I have to have a different educational experience', so I started looking for competitive hiring processes in rural schools. And I applied to the district of María Pinto. And then I went to work in the rural school of Santa Emilia, which, at that time, was among the 10 worst in Chile. So, for me it was very practical (Principal N° 4).

In the case of subsidized private schools, we can observe a process of identity construction in which the greatest value is attributed to the aspect involving referring to local criteria and related to the school and the institution or institutions through which the principals have passed (Sammons, 2007). In this respect, we see an identity that constantly relates to the endogenous trajectory of the interviewees in each school, which allows them to orient their identities to the framework of the particular mission/vision of the learning community, rather than the standard in the educational system.

I visualize you, I know what your work experience has been like, and I need you to be that She told me, in these years she had observed me, that I had the character of the founding mother foremost, so I said 'what's that', so she told me 'you work a lot for the benefit of the children, because of your role as an educational psychologist, you're always helping, you're always there, and that's what I want', and I was very grateful (Principal N° 1).

It is therefore possible to see that the type of schools in which the principals work has a strong influence on the process of constructing managerial identities.

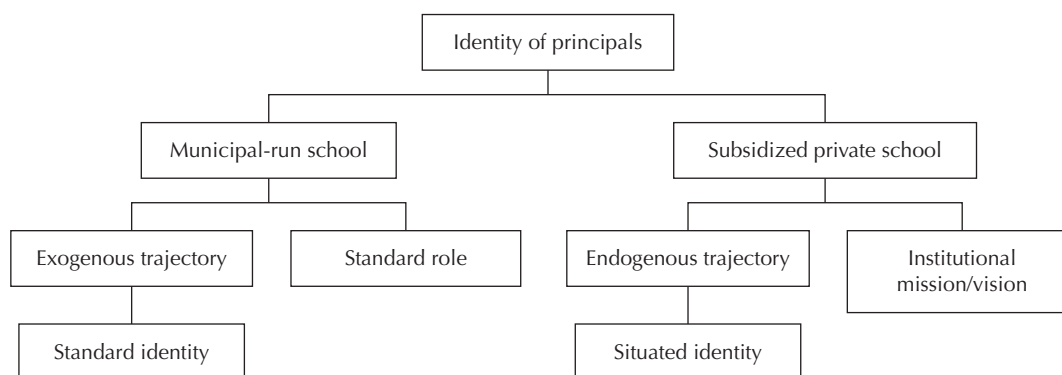


Figure 3. *Comparison of identities in context (type of school).*
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Conclusions

The construction of professional knowledge and identity by principals in Chilean elementary schools is a situated process of social interaction, through which theoretical, practical, and reflective knowledge is combined, all based on the subject's experience, either individual or collective. This is a construction that cannot be separated from personal life experience, which, in this case, conditions the type of principals: capable of compromising their personal or family life to achieve their professional goals. Being women in a highly masculinized and patriarchal school space (Barberá et al., 2011; Coleman, 2007, Blackmore, 2017) places conditions on their professional trajectories and identities, converting them into women with a high level of commitment to meet historically imposed demands, as well as principals with a range of professional knowledge, which is the product of experiences of practice and learning in continuous training.

Although the elements discussed here are the result of systematic analysis based on the discourse of 10 Chilean female principals, this is a case study that is not intended to provide generalizations, but rather to produce reflections and guidelines to contribute to the discussion of public policies, and to be a starting point for further study of this topic in the future.

Firstly, for the principals who took part in this study, theoretical knowledge alone has no value: it must be linked to practical knowledge and, in turn, contextualized in the practices of managerial work. Based on this situated relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge, according to the principals, a third important component emerges for knowledge construction: experiential reflective knowledge. This is of a different order to the types of knowledge mentioned previously, since it arises from the juxtaposition of theoretical and practical knowledge in situated practice. Thus, in the interviewees' discourse, there are continuous references to this knowledge, which emerges from daily educational practice: it is situations that can be improved in which the principals put into action/review their ways of acting, thus building new guidelines for action.

Because of this, it is important to bear in mind that, when thinking about competitive hiring processes and assessing the role of principals, experiential knowledge should be considered a key component; however, it should not be understood as knowledge of experience that only involves the number or type of courses studied, but should also include experience as the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge that allows the principal to generate reflection and seek solutions to daily situations or incidents of management practice through a case.

Similarly, for these female principals, experiences of teaching and management prior to assuming the role of principal (in different management positions) are a determining factor and, therefore, are highly valued when applying for the position, since teaching and management practices allow them to have professional knowledge that is better prepared when assuming the job.

Secondly, we can conclude that, regarding the feminine identity of these principals, it is clear that the fact that they are women has conditioned their professional careers, so we cannot ignore that the identity of these 10 principals is shaped by prejudices historically constructed about the role of women, which limit them and, at the same time, hinder the development of feminine leadership.

On the other hand, we also point out that developing professional trajectories in the same educational space allows the construction of managerial identities that are shaped with the characteristics and culture of the school, which creates better interaction with the actors in the educational community, which is clear in the interviews conducted for this study. This type of endogenous identity enables better commitment to the institution, a greater sense of belonging, and more connection with the mission and vision of the educational establishment, thus achieving a comprehensive performance that is more efficient and profound, unlike what happens with principals of municipal-run schools, who build an exogenous identity.

For this reason, it is suggested that competitive hiring processes for the position of principal should be much more closely linked to the principal's experience at the school for which he/she is competing, since the experiential and practical knowledge acquired in that educational space is valued as an important factor for a better managerial performance.

With regard to female identity and trajectories, it is certainly necessary to reflect on gender policies in the school space and, above all, in management positions, because the number of women in these roles is constantly increasing; therefore, rethinking management and leadership from a female perspective is an issue that must be resolved, since the current framework of action of principals continues to be linked to a masculinized structure. There is an urgent need to overcome the heteronormative, unequal, and discriminatory patriarchal logic, and move towards feminine pedagogical practices based on social justice, the collective, and the correspondence of roles and duties.

Finally, considering the career of a school principal for the country should take into account the aforementioned elements, since efficient performance of management that allows the implementation of leadership to improve the school requires consideration of the context and characteristics of the educational institution, as well as those of the principal who assumes the role.

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