PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA DE CHILE
FACULTAD DE EDUCACIÓN

The Families, the Enemies: Chilean Principals' Perspectives on School Conflicts

Los apoderados, los enemigos: perspectivas de directores escolares en Chile sobre los conflictos escolares

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Abstract

Being a school principal is a highly stressful and demanding job, particularly due to the number of conflicts that arise as they perform the role. The purpose of this study was to identify the types of conflicts faced by school principals with different actors and to analyze their intensity and frequency. Through an online survey sent to school principals (n=395) working in the municipal sector, it was found that they have much more intense conflicts with other adults than with students. Furthermore, most of the conflicts reported by principals (41.5%) were with families (parents/guardians). The types of conflicts that principals faced with these actors were organized into the following categories: official complaints against the school, opposition to school rules, violence against the school staff, communication issues, lack of family commitment to educational work, and negligence on the part of the school regarding specific situations with the students. The conclusions highlight the need to develop a deeper understanding of the conflicts faced by school principals.

Keywords: School principals; conflicts; parents; families.

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Resumen

Ser director es una tarea altamente demandante y estresante, especialmente por la gran cantidad de conflictos que requieren afrontar en el desempeño de ese rol. El objetivo de esta investigación fue identificar los tipos de conflictos que enfrentan los directores con distintos actores de la comunidad, analizando el nivel de intensidad y su frecuencia. Mediante una encuesta en línea enviada a directores de establecimientos municipalizados de Chile (n=395) se constata que los conflictos con los adultos son más intensos que con los estudiantes. Dentro de los actores adultos, los apoderados (41,5%) son los más conflictivos. Los tipos de conflictos que enfrentan los directores con estos actores se relacionan con denuncias realizadas por estos, la resistencia en acatar y seguir las directrices de la escuela, situaciones de violencia en contra de la escuela, problemas de comunicación, falta de compromiso con la tarea educativa y, finalmente, con la negligencia de la escuela ante situaciones específicas con los estudiantes. Las conclusiones del estudio evidencian la necesidad de desarrollar una comprensión más profunda de los tipos de conflictos y estrategias de resolución empleadas por los líderes escolares.

Palabras clave: directores; conflictos; apoderados; familias.

Introduction

School leadership is a key factor in improving these establishments (Brock & Grady, 2012; Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Leithwood, & Kington, 2008; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). This is because it affects the capacities, motivations, and conditions in which teachers carry out their work (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Principals who have a broad repertoire of effective leadership practices are more likely to have an impact on their teachers and, as a consequence, the learning opportunities of students (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2008). As educational policies and reforms emphasize the importance of leadership, the demands placed upon principals increase. Thus, there is a clear international trend that the work of principals has become increasingly demanding (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Miller, 2015; Taole, 2013). This results in a scenario in which there is high pressure and varied expectations for the role that principals have to play in school improvement (Oplatka, 2017).

Working as a school principal is a highly demanding, complex, and stressful job (García Garduño, Slater, & López-Gorosave, 2011; Grubb & Flessa, 2006) in physical, mental, and emotional terms (Steward, 2014). The problems that principals confront in their role are diverse, complex, and changing (Montecinos, Bush, & Aravena, 2018). Although there is a commitment to distributed leadership, it still seems that the principal is ultimately responsible for everything that takes place in the school (Spillane & Lee, 2014), and the literature agrees that the personal capacities and dispositions of principals explain a significant amount of schools' progress or decline (Leithwood & Azah, 2014).

If one of the fundamental areas of principals' work is to develop and cultivate interpersonal relationships with various actors in the educational community, one of the key skills they need to deploy is to resolve conflicts of various kinds with different educational actors (Day, 2005). In spite of the extensive amount of literature on educational leadership, we do not know enough about the conflicts that principals face in Chile. This research aims to identify the types of conflicts that principals face with different actors in the educational community, and to analyze their level of intensity and frequency. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section

presents a literary review on three topics: school leadership in Chile, demands of the principal's role, and school conflicts. The second section outlines the methodology, while the third includes the presentation of the results. In the fourth section we discuss the results, before ending with the conclusions of the study.

1. School leadership in Chile: politics and research

The international literature has confirmed that leadership is the second most important variable that affects student learning (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Chilean public policy seems to have followed this assertion, giving more importance to school leadership. This has translated into a series of successive policies that have placed special emphasis on leadership. For example, in 2005, the Framework for Good School Management and Leadership (Marco para la Buena Dirección y Liderazgo Escolar - MBDLE) was developed, and a new version was reissued 10 years later, establishing the guidelines for effective leadership in Chile. The MBDLE (2015) established a set of leadership practices that were grouped into five aspects, in addition to a personal resources dimension that was broken down into knowledge, principles, and values necessary to positively impact the school community. Similarly, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), through the Center for Improvement, Experimentation and Pedagogical Research (CPEIP), has provided professional training courses for principals within the framework of the Training Program for Principals of Excellence (Programa de Formación de Directores de Excelencia) from 2011 to the present. In 2011, the task of selecting school principals was transferred to the Civil Service through a Senior Public Management System. This new system was intended to provide greater transparency and rigor to the process of selecting principals, on the understanding that it is essential for the best candidates to assume these roles. In 2016, two Leadership Centers were created to develop skills in school leaders, as well as to research and guide public policy on future actions regarding leadership at different levels of the school system. These initiatives demonstrate that national public policy has understood that school leadership is a key factor to achieve improvement. Likewise, research on school leadership has increased considerably over the last decade. According to the results of a study conducted by Aravena and Hallinger (2018), Chile is the Latin American country with the most publications indexed in international journals specialized in school leadership, accounting for 39% of the total, followed by Mexico with 22% of the total production. This demonstrates interest in researching the leadership practices that principals use in Chile, as well as the problems that they face in the role and how policies influence their leadership.

2. The increase in demands and pressure on the role of the principal

Leading a school is a job that involves a heavy workload. Among other duties, the principal is expected to lead the vision of the educational community, resolve conflicts, administrate the school, and mobilize teachers to generate learning in the students. The multiple and diverse requirements that fall upon the school translate into a heavy workload for school principals (Friedman, 2002; Oplatka, 2017). Indeed, workload is considered one of the aspects that cause the greatest stress (Fong & Kleiner, 2004), being associated with the lack of teachers who are interested in assuming the role of principals (Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, in Mahfouz, 2018), and with reasons for leaving the position (Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014).

In addition to traditional demands are requirements related to accountability and performance policies (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Mahfouz, 2018) and neoliberal educational reforms (Miller, 2015). Recent studies have researched the potential effect of pressure on school leaders resulting from accountability policies. For example, Mitani (2018) studied the impact of the United States' *No Child Left Behind Act* on working conditions, work stress, and turnover behaviors, concluding that principals experience greater work stress due to the implementation of the policy, particularly those who do not have much experience in the role and work in schools with a high population of minority students.

The literature that addresses the demands of the principal's role takes a subjective perspective. That is, it refers to the feelings and perceptions of professionals that their work is too much or too difficult to carry out. Other authors (Hart & Staveland, in Oplatka, 2017) argue that the demands of the job or workload result from the interaction between the requirements of the role, the circumstances in which the job is carried out, and the skills, behaviors, and perceptions of the worker.

The types of stressors or determinants of high work demands experienced by school principals tend to be consistent in the literature (Friedman, 2002; Leventis, Papakitsos, Karakiozis, & Argyriou, 2017; Mahfouz, 2018; Oplatka, 2017). The principals perceive three main types of stressors: a first group that is related to work (e.g., constant change, bureaucracy, unexpected incidents, etc.), another involving relationships (families, teachers, etc.), and a third group focused on time (such as the balance between family and work) (Mahfouz, 2018). In the Chilean context, it seems that one of the great stressors of principals' work is school conflicts (Villalobos, Peña, Aguirre, & Guerrero, 2017).

3. School conflicts: challenges for principals

One of the main stressors and demands for principals is dealing with conflicts (Mahfouz, 2018). Conflict is inherent to organizational dynamics (Munduante, Ganaza, & Alcaide, 1993). Various authors have argued that organizations, such as schools, perceive conflict as a threat to stability and effectiveness, because they operate according to a logic of order and discipline (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, it has been proven that conflicts can generate positive and functional consequences, which allow mobilization of the members of the organization (Rahim, 1986) and can even promote growth and learning at the individual and organizational level (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, & Perez, 2003).

Conflict is understood as a phenomenon that is attributed to differences or disagreements in attitudes, values, tasks, and policies between individuals or groups, which make the achievement of an objective incompatible (Kantek & Gezer, 2009; Rahim, 1986; Tjosvold, 2008). Conflicts tend to occur more frequently when there is individual interdependence or high levels of confusion between the parties (Saiti, 2015). The idea is not to avoid conflict, because it is natural, but to manage it in the best way possible (Munduante et al., 1993). This is challenging for principals, particularly because they tend to avoid it, since few have the skills to handle it effectively and it is highly physically and emotionally draining (Msila, 2012).

In Chile, public policy has historically associated conflict with school coexistence. The recent National School Coexistence Policy (Política Nacional de Convivencia Escolar, PNCE) (Ministry of Education, 2019) supports this notion, establishing the peaceful and negotiated resolution of conflicts within the ethical dimension of school coexistence. The PNCE defines that conflicts are situations of disagreement that take place in day-to-day relationships between the different actors in the educational community. The PNCE does not provide a typology of conflicts, but instead suggests they be addressed in a generic way. There is, therefore, a standardized perspective of conflicts, without differentiating between their degrees of difficulty or intensity. The typology of conflicts and the various strategies to resolve them remain a pending task in this new policy.

As with public policy, research in Chile on conflict has been approached from the perspective of school coexistence, dissociating it from learning. Among the scant number of studies, recent research carried out by Villalobos et al. (2017) in 12 public high schools showed that school principals have to address a multiplicity of conflicts and they also use a multicity of strategies to resolve them. When principals face conflicts with students, they tend to be caused by their cultural or socioeconomic origin. On the other hand, when the conflicts are with adults, they are usually related to school micro and macro politics. It is essential to contribute to the national literature with more empirical studies that examine the types of conflicts experienced by school principals in order to help them resolve these problems.

Methodology

This study seeks to identify the types of conflicts that the principals face with various actors in the community, as well as to analyze their level of intensity and frequency. In order to do this, an online survey was sent to all the principals of municipal schools in three regions of the country (Valparaíso, Santiago, and Concepción) at the end of the 2018 school year. These three regions were chosen as a convenient sample (Stake, 2010). The survey contained three sections. The first section was designed to identify the frequency with which the principals have conflicts with various actors. They were asked: How often have you had conflicts with the following actors during this year? Using a Likert scale (never, rarely, sometimes, almost always, and always), the participants indicated how often they had conflicts with: local administrators, other principals, management teams, teachers, educational assistants, students, and parents. The second section of the survey asked about with which actors (the same actors used in the first section were mentioned) and which type of conflict they perceived as being most intense. They were asked: With which actor did you have the most intense conflict?, and they were asked to describe what the conflict involved. They were given the option of indicating another actor and asked to name them. Finally, the third section considered demographic data such as: the level of education provided by the school, their years of experience as a principal, and their gender. In a second qualitative phase, we made an attempt to explain the trends in the survey results with a group of 13 principals from Valparaíso Region (Region V). These principals were selected for convenience (Stake, 2010), since they were part of a professional development program for principals coordinated by the researchers of this study. They were asked to explain the main results of the survey in writing. In other words, they were asked to explain why principals perceived the families as being the actors who were most conflictive, asking them how they could explain this trend. The answers were written individually by each of the principals. This enhanced the possibility of interpreting the explanations provided in a detailed manner, revealing the ideas and concepts used in the written responses, enabling us to understand the subjective and interpretive world from the perspective of the participants (Stake, 2010).

Participants

The study included a non-probabilistic convenience sample (Stake, 2010), because different databases were obtained with the emails of the principals of municipal schools. The survey was completed by 422 participants who self-reported being the principals of municipal schools. Within this sample, we decided to eliminate principals of special schools (n = 17) and kindergartens (n = 10) from the database, due to their low response rate. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the results included a total of 395 principals of municipal basic and secondary education schools in three regions of the country.

Most of these principals work at basic schools (70.2%) and, of the remainder, only 11.6% are technical-vocational secondary education establishments. The average enrollment of the schools is 341 students, with a standard deviation of 298. Some 53.6% are small schools, 24.3% medium-sized, and 22.1% are large[1]. The Education Quality Agency classifies 10.6% of the establishments as high performance. Meanwhile, 8.6% are classed as having inadequate performance. With regard to their experience in the role, most are experienced principals, and only 19.2% state that they have three years of experience or less, that is, being newly assigned (García-Garduño et al. 2011). In terms of gender, 54.2% are female and 45.8% are male.

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1. In order determine the size of the school, we followed the categorization used by Weinstein and Muñoz (2014), which establishes that small establishments have fewer than 261 students, medium-sized schools have between 262 and 470, and large ones have 471 or more.

Meanwhile, the 13 principals who participated in the second stage of the study mostly work at small basic schools (n = 11), which have average enrollment of 247 students (min. = 91 and max. = 1061). Of the total number of schools, 30.7% are located in rural areas and 23.1% are classed as having inadequate performance. No high-performance schools, special schools, or kindergartens were observed in this sample. With regard to the sociodemographic data of the principals, eight are women and five are men. The majority of them (n = 10) report having more than five years of experience as principals and only three are new, having less than 2 years' experience as a school principal.

Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. We also carried out a content analysis of the participants' qualitative responses on their description of the most intense conflict. The description given by the principals of the type of conflict was categorized emergently (Creswell, 2014). These responses were categorized according to the actor. Two researchers coded the descriptions until they reached agreement (Stake, 2010). Given the prevalence of the *parents/guardians* actor in the category of the intensity and frequency of conflicts, this article describes the types of conflicts corresponding only to those associated with this actor. Table 1 shows the coding scheme for the types of conflicts described by the principals, indicating the name and definition of the category and a respective example. The responses of the 13 principals in the second stage were coded emergently and independently by each researcher. Once this process had been carried out, the codes were compared and, in cases where there was no coincidence, the code was reviewed again to establish a consensus (Creswell, 2014).

Table 1.
Coding system

Category	Definition of category	Example reported by the principals
Complaints	Complaints by the families about the school and vice versa. The former include the formalization of legal actions with the Superintendency of Education and other organizations such as DAEM and Municipal Corporations. The complaints of the schools about the families are related to violations of students' rights.	*Complaint to the Superintendency regarding the case of a student who constantly hits his classmates and professionals who work with him. The mother complains that the school does nothing to help her son.*
Communication	Conflicts associated with communication problems with parents/guardians that include the application of established school regulations or procedures. Reference is made to the mediation that principals must conduct in conflicts between teachers and parents/guardians.	*The conflict with the parents/guardians is because of what they write on social media, which is often due to misinformation.*
Opposition	Conflicts based on the opposition or reaction of families against the school. The intentional action of families with a view to counteracting, rejecting, changing, or ignoring the demands of the school, particularly regarding disciplinary problems or issues with their pupils.	*A parent/guardian should understand that what the school did (sanctions, training activities, support for the student and the parent) was conducive to improving the attitude of their child and improving coexistence in the classroom and on the playground. The parent/guardian saw us as enemies, not as allies in terms of helping their son.*

Violence	Situations of explicit violence, mostly verbal, on the part of different educational actors, which include situations of violence from families towards principals, teachers, or other members of the school community, and between families.	*Parent/guardian, parent, an impudent and rudely behaved woman, does not understand reason, does not know how to listen, verbally attacks me, and tries to hit me.*
Commitment	Situations that focus on the families' *lack* of response to the demands of the school and the absence of a formative role.	*The parents' lack of commitment regarding the behavior of their children, which leads to little support and understanding of our work. This generates conflicting opinions that lead to arguments and friction with them.*
Negligence	Situations of conflict caused by the lack of pertinent action by the school, which includes monitoring and implementation of protocols or procedures of action; for example, in cases of school accidents.	*A year-seven student received a blow to the head and the parent/guardian was not informed because the child did not show any discomfort during the day and, later, when he got home, he felt dizzy and was taken to the hospital by his mother, remaining under observation.*

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Results

This study is intended to examine the types of conflicts faced by the principals and identify the educational actors that appear with the greatest frequency and intensity in these conflicts. The results are organized according to the following: intensity of the conflict, frequency of conflicts according to educational actor, and types of conflicts between principals and parents/guardians.

Intensity of the conflict

Table 2 shows the results of the survey of principals in terms of the intensity of the conflict.

Table 2.
With which actor have you experienced the most intense conflict during this school year?

Actor	n	%
Parents/guardians	164	41.5
Teachers	74	18.7
Students	64	16.2
Educational assistants	31	7.8
Local administrator	23	5.8
Administrative team	19	4.8
No conflict	15	3.8
Others	5	1.3
Total	395	100

Source: Prepared by the authors.

These results suggest the following: First, facing intense conflicts seems to be inherent and natural in the role of the principal. This is because only a small number of principals (n = 15) reported not having experienced an intense conflict during the school year. Second, for the principals in this study (n = 395), conflicts with *adults* are more intense (83.8%) than with students (16.2%). Third, the principals report that the adult actors with whom they have experienced the most intense conflicts are the parents/guardians (41.5%). Conflicts with teachers (18.7%) and students (16.2%) are considerably less frequent. The actor with whom the fewest intense conflicts are reported is others (1.3%). This category includes: prison service officials, councilors, another principal in the same district, and people external to the school, such as thieves or looters. Fourth, it cannot be stated that certain characteristics of the principals or the school are associated with a certain type of conflict or actor, because the descriptive statistical analyses carried out using the SPSS software indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between the actor with whom the principals have the conflict and the size of the school (Chi-square = 7.993, p = .092), the years of experience in the role (Chi-square = 3.901, p = .142), or with the gender of the principal (Chi-square = 2.246, p = .325).

Frequency of conflicts according to educational actor

With regard to the frequency of conflicts faced by the principals according to the educational actors, the data are consistent with the findings on conflict intensity shown previously. The principals report that there is a higher frequency of conflict (*sometimes* and *almost always*) with parents/guardian (34.43%), students (29.87%), teachers (17.72%), and educational assistants (16.46%). In contrast, the principals state that they *never* have conflicts with other principals of schools (85.57%), with local administrators (60.51%), and with their management team (58.99%) (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Frequency with which the principals report facing conflicts with actors

Actor	Never (0)		Rarely (1)		Sometimes (2)		Almost always (3)		Always (4)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Local administrator	239	60.51	119	30.13	26	6.58	7	1.77	4	0.01
Other principal/s	338	85.57	53	13.42	4	1.01	0	0	0	0
Administrative team	233	58.99	141	35.70	19	4.81	2	0.5	0	0
Teachers	91	23.04	234	59.24	66	16.71	4	1.01	0	0
Educational assistants	111	28.10	218	55.19	60	15.19	5	1.27	1	0.002
Students	93	23.54	183	46.33	101	25.57	17	4.3	1	0.002
Parents/guardians	72	18.23	187	47.34	118	29.87	18	4.56	0	0

Source: Prepared by the authors.

These results show that the frequency of conflicts perceived by the principals is higher with actors belonging directly to their educational community (parents/guardians, students, teachers, and educational assistants), because conflicts with actors that are external to the educational community, such as local administrators and other principals, are less frequent.

Types of conflicts between principals and parents/guardians

The quantitative data show that the relationship with the parents/guardians emerges as a critical issue in the principal's duties, and is the most obvious focus of attention in the area of school conflicts. Across the board, the principals state that the most intense and frequent conflicts occur with the parents/guardians. Given this univocal trend, the analysis of the most intense types of conflicts was conducted with a focus on the *parents/guardians*. These conflicts were typified and classified into six categories, which can be seen below (see Table 4).

Table 4.
Typology of most intense conflicts with parents/guardians in the opinion of principals

Category	N	%
Complaints against the school/families	43	26.2
Opposition	39	23.7
Violence	30	18.3
Communication	28	17.1
Commitment	18	11
Negligence	6	3.7
Total	164	100

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The first and most extensive category, *complaints to schools/parents or guardians*, mostly involves conflicts resulting from complaints made by the parents/guardians against the schools (n = 33) and, to a lesser extent, conflicts caused by complaints made by the school to the parents/guardians (n = 10). Of the complaints made by parents/guardians to the school, the vast majority were made to the Superintendency of School Education, a body that has been operating in Chile since 2012 and whose objective is to "supervise, in accordance with the law, that the administrators of educational establishments officially recognized by the state, comply with the laws, regulations, and instructions issued by the Superintendency, and supervise the legality of the use of the resources of the establishments that receive state contributions" (Superintendencia de la Educación, n.d.)

Complaints to the Superintendency are particularly serious for an educational establishment since, if they are found to be justified, they result in direct negative consequences for schools in terms of fines and administrative sanctions. These consequences also affect the principals individually, because their performance agreements usually include achievement indicators that are associated with the number of complaints per year made to the Superintendency.

A large proportion of the complaints made by parents/guardians against the school are related to specific problems with teachers at the school, for example: *The parent/guardian made a complaint against a teacher for physically assaulting one of her children, Father made a complaint regarding a request to change parent/guardian, or involving their children against other students* (*Complaints of alleged bullying against a student, Fight between students and subsequent complaint to the Superintendency and not accepting any fault of their children*).

The second category of conflicts with parents/guardians involves experiences of *opposition* to the decisions of the school. This category includes conflicts caused by parents/guardians' reaction to and non-compliance with the school's regulations, requirements, or requests. It also includes the perception, on the part of the principals, that the parents/guardians do not accept or recognize their responsibility, or the responsibility of their child, in disciplinary situations or conflicts with peers. The opposition of parents/guardians is mostly associated with disciplinary situations regarding the students. This attitude of staunch defense of the children ahead of the opinion of the school is what marks the disagreement between them. Examples of these conflicts are: *Mother does not comply with the commitment of the Coexistence Manual, Behavioral situations where the parents do not accept the problems that their children have, the level of aggressiveness that they have as a result of the family climate, Parents/guardians should understand the behavior of their children at school*. As one of the principals states, this category of conflicts positions the families as enemies of the school. In his words, "They [parents/guardians] saw us as enemies, not as allies in terms of helping their son".

This type of conflict reveals the explicit power struggle between one group and another, and how it translates into personal fatigue among the principals. This category reflects the pressure that families exert to express their open opposition to the rules established by the school. The directors indicate they have the perception of not having the support of family credibility (traditionally common), where the parents support the work of the school when it comes to complying with discipline, and suggest that the alliance now exists between the families and their children, questioning the school. The specific actors, teachers or principals, disappear from the description of the conflicts and the school is mentioned more in general terms.

The third most frequently reported category is *violence*, and it involves conflicts with families that result from verbal insults and threats, and even physical blows directed by them at the principals, and mainly towards the teachers of the school, even including students. Some of the examples are: "*Verbal aggression of two parents/guardians against teachers of the school*", "*Parent/guardian disrespects the principal regarding a specific situation with their child*". Opposition and violence can be understood as a gradual continuum of similar situations that are perceived as having a high intensity by the principals and account for more than 37% of all conflicts with parents/guardians that are perceived as being *the most intense*. However, when describing these conflicts, violence acquires an interpersonal component, while opposition is described with an emphasis on the institutional aspect.

The *communication* category includes a varied group of activities that involve communication problems between schools and families. All of the conflicts in this category entail the lack of agreement in understanding the other. A significant proportion of these conflicts take place between teachers and parents/guardians, or between the parents/guardians where the principals intervene. In this category, the point to highlight is the perception of the principals that the families are *negatively empowered* and want to have a say and make more decisions in the school environment than previously. The conflict in this category is caused by parents who are demanding and who openly question or criticize the schools' procedures or performance criteria. Examples of this include: "*The conflict itself was minimal, but it came from the arrogant way in which the parent/guardian demanded an immediate solution*", "*There was a fight at the school between girls, and instead of trying to find solutions, their parents/guardians went to the local press, making the situation even more complicated, since the girls were publicly exposed*".

Some 18% of the conflicts with parents/guardians are in the *commitment* category. This category is specifically related to the commitment of families to educational tasks and the lack of compliance with established agreements. With regard to the first aspect, the principals perceive that the most difficult conflicts with parents/guardians are related to their lack of support and responsibility regarding the educational and formative work of their children. Practices are described that include not attending school activities and the perception of *abandonment* by the parents of their role as educators, and the expectation that it is solely the school that assumes the main role in educational work. For example, "*One particular parent who insisted on passing their responsibility as a parent to*

the school", "*The intransigence of recognizing their lack of responsibility in their role as parent and guardian based on the commitments assumed both in the process of enrollment and in knowledge of the internal regulations*", "*Parents/ guardians do not support the decisions of teachers, they do not provide signed commitments*".

The final category of *negligence* describes specific situations caused by the lack of pertinent action by the school in cases of school accidents and in applying safety protocols. For example, "*Blame for accident in the school at closing time*". In this category, conflicts are caused by the negligence of the school and the parents/guardians react to this.

How do the principals explain these results?

Once the quantitative data had been collected and analyzed, the results were shared with 13 principals from Region V (Valparaíso). In response to the question, "Why are the most intense conflicts of the principals experienced with parents/guardians?", two groups of opinions emerge. One group focuses on the parents/ guardians, referring to attitudes and what they perceive as a *new* parent/guardian, who is much more critical and demanding of the school than before and more absent from their parental roles due to excessive attention to work, lack of time, and lack of concern for educational work, among other things. Some of these principals also refer to parents who are less committed to education and less *empathic* regarding the work carried out by the school, teachers, and administrators. The principals agree in terms of perceiving that the demands and expectations that the parents/guardians have when there is a problem with the school (emotionally affected and seeking rapid solutions to their problems) are far from what they, in their role as principals, and the school, as an organization, can provide as a response. This translates into frustration on the part of the principals and increases the distance between them and the families. In the opinion of the principals, this occurs because the parents/ guardians do not have knowledge about how the school operates; they do not understand its regulations, times, and procedures; and nor are they involved in the daily dynamics, so they do not have the necessary elements to be able to analyze the situation in the same way that someone from the school might, and they expect the principal to respond rapidly to their concerns. One principal explained:

> Conflicts with the parents/guardians are the ones that take up the most time and generate the greatest fatigue among the principals. In my opinion, this is because parents continually demand the expulsion of students who cause problems or teachers with whom they have difficulties, giving little consideration to dialogue. This situation is usually accompanied by threats to the Superintendency of Education, DAEM[2], the mayor's office, or public opinion, which creates greater pressure and a feeling of being overwhelmed (principal, four years of professional practice).

Thus, for this group, conflicts with families are the result of the *type of parents/guardians*, who are more demanding and critical of the role of the school, with whom the principals of municipal schools currently have to deal.

Meanwhile, another group of principals focuses the analysis on the school and the poor preparation of teachers, assistants, and the principals themselves to relate to the parents/guardians, particularly in conflictive situations. This is a more introspective and self-critical view of the capacities of principals to manage conflicts with parents/guardians. Unlike the first group, where the parents/guardians are held accountable, other principals express a shared responsibility. With regard to the professional capacities of teachers and management staff, the principals mention the lack of skills to calm and communicate with the parents/guardians in conflictive situations, as well as to maintain continuous dialogue with them in such a way that the *externalization of the conflict* does not occur. The principals also refer specifically to the principal's role in the school organization, defining it as the entity that manages interpersonal relationships in the school and between the school and the community. One principal makes this role clear:

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2. Department of Administration of Municipal Education.

> Conflict is not caused with the principal; they're the one who has to resolve the conflicts that arise from errors of teachers, assistants, or others, due to their treatment, erroneous practices, lack of communication" (principal, 17 years of professional practice).

From the responses of the principals, we can interpret that in the educational community of municipal schools there is an expectation that the principal will be the one who resolves the interpersonal conflicts observed at any level of the organization. This means that the families assume that they are the ones who have the capacities to resolve conflictive situations, even when the conflict is specifically with a teacher or another actor at the school. In part, it is the principals who *translate* and *mediate* between the demands of the parents/guardians and those of the school.

> The parents/guardians expect the principal to be the one who responds to their concerns, since they don't have all the information and they imagine many of the situations that don't actually occur in reality. Due to this, their emotional state is excessive and they clash negatively with the person who attends them, who is generally the principal (principal, seven years of professional practice).

Discussion

In performing the role of the principal, having to face conflicts is natural and inevitable (Mahfouz, 2018; Rahim, 1986; Saiti, 2015). The source of the conflicts is in the interaction with the different educational actors, because disagreements and differences are typical of social relationships. The implications of conflict for educational leadership are obvious; however, this is an issue that has not been the focus of attention, which is obvious due to the lack of research on this issue.

The aim of this research was to identify the types of conflicts that the principals face with different actors in the community, and to analyze the level of intensity and the frequency of these conflicts. The data indicate that resolution of conflicts with adults is more difficult than with students and, specifically for the principals in this study, the parents/guardians are the adults with whom they experience a greater frequency and intensity of conflicts. The clear tendency to identify the parents/guardians as the most conflictive actors by the Chilean principals clearly reveals the existing tensions between the schools and their communities, as well as the fact that it is the principals who seem to be the ones who experience this on a daily basis due to multiple demands and requirements. This has also been reported in international studies. For example, in the United States, Mahfouz (2018) indicated that principals, feel "ready for a fight" when interacting with families, describing their relationship as highly complex, emotionally demanding, threatening, or simply useless.

Similarly, for the school principals in Chile, the parents/guardians are a conflictive actor (Montecinos, Sisto, & Ahumada, 2010; Montecinos, Ahumada, Galdames, Campos, & Leiva, 2015). From their perspective, conflicts with parents/guardians are caused partly by the type of parent/guardian currently seen in the school system and also by the lack of relational and emotional skills and capacities of *the school* (principals, teachers, educational assistants) to relate to the families. The description of the intense conflicts with the parents/guardians suggests that the school's relationship with the families is deteriorated, since threatening behavior and mutual mistrust appeared across the board in the accounts of the principals. These data contribute to a more profound explanation of what was reported in the study by Montecinos et al. (2018), where they state that, within the category of people, for 31% of principals it is complicated to manage the relationship with the families and—specifically—their involvement in the school.

The marked prevalence of conflicts, perceived as frequent, with parents/guardians and the interpretations of the principals of municipal establishments of the data enable us to state that the task of managing school-family relationships falls individually on the figure of the principal. One essential capacity, which principals

need to develop, is to manage the relationship between the school and the family. According to the data in this study, families in Chile—echoing the existing market model—tend to understand their role as consumers of education (López, Aravena, & Sisto, 2012), and the existence of the Superintendency may have even reinforced this role. Faced with a distant relationship with the school, the most effective route of action may be to approach a different interlocutor, replacing the educational actors. The question arises as to how schools are supported in building bonds with families and communities where we ensure that they are seen as allies and not enemies. Moving towards the creation of spaces to address the concerns of the parents/guardians within the school, and not only outside it, is a necessary step that not just the principals, but the system as a whole, has to take.

One of the biggest sources of conflict experienced by the principals in this study with the parents/guardians entails the complaints that the families make to the Superintendency of Education, which involve dissatisfaction, particularly regarding how the school responds to discipline among students, problems with teachers and families or students, and accidents at school. In 2012, the year the Superintendency was created, it received more than 4,800 complaints from parents/guardians, while in 2017 they increased to more than 12,600. In other words, within five years, the number of complaints made by families about schools grew by more than 60%. It is likely that the large number of conflicts associated with this type of complaint is partly due to the families learning how to act within a system that institutionalizes complaints. Other authors have previously referred to how the creation of accountability agencies and policies transforms the relationship between the state and its citizens and, in particular, the Superintendency reinforces the idea that problems between schools and families should be resolved through methods of accountability marked by consumer logics instead of democratic logics (Montecinos et al., 2015). The increase in the number of complaints and the perception of the intensity of this type of conflict underlines the idea that the principals in Chile have incorporated a managerial subjectivity typical of the "New Public Administration", where their work is focused on managing threats from different actors. All of this takes place in a context of educational *marketization*, in which the interests of the parents, as consumers, exert pressure at the same time as they define the foci of principals' attention (Montecinos et al., 2010; Montecinos et al., 2015). This kind of market context does not promote genuine interest among principals to promote collaborative relationships and alliances that prevent conflicts with the community, but instead to focus on satisfying customers. The role of the Superintendency of Education institutionally reinforces a conception of the school-family-community relationship that promotes mutual threats and the punishments that result from them.

Complaints imply that the discrepancy between families and schools cannot be resolved by the action of the latter, but rather that an external intermediary is required. This supports the idea that the school has a low capacity for conflict resolution and of administrative performance specifically, but it also speaks of an educational system where complaints have been established as *the* way to resolve conflicts. It should be noted that, based on the number of complaints made by families to the Superintendency of Education, it has recently been mandated that, in order to complain about the school, it has to be verified that the situation has been communicated to the school beforehand. Many principals find out from the Superintendency of Education itself about complaints made by the families. From this perspective, it is essential to think about how the design of the system contributes to understanding and addressing school-family conflicts by taking them outside the school, which translates into removal of the principals' agency to address difficult situations with parents/guardians. In the same vein, we also find that the principals of municipal schools are responsible for dealing with a diverse range of situations of lesser and greater complexity in the relationship with families. As one of the participants stated, "The conflict is not caused by the principal [with the families], they're the one who has to resolve the conflicts that arise with other actors [teachers, educational assistants, etc.]". This demonstrates an individualized form of action, centered on the figure of the principal, who is primarily and ultimately the person responsible for resolving conflicts with parents/guardians. This emphasizes the idea that the principal is ultimately responsible for everything that happens or does not happen in the school (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

The challenge for school principals in Chile is how to view an opportunity for individual and organizational learning by managing conflicts with parents/guardians, because otherwise conflicts can be unproductive, destabilize school improvement, and become stressors with high potential for emotional and physical fatigue (Mahfouz, 2018; Uline et al., 2003). The immediate consequence is that, insofar as conflicts are more intense and difficult to deal with, fewer candidates may be attracted to the role of the principal and levels of turnover could increase. This situation, which is already critical in other countries, seems to be a possible national trend, particularly since it has been reported that, after five years in the principal's role, two out of three of them do not hold the same position in the school and the majority of them (40%) have left the school system (Valenzuela & Allende, 2017). Building a more effective system of supports and incentives for principals in Chile would seem to be of key importance, especially considering the high levels of drop-out and turnover, which threaten the stability of processes of continuous improvement.

This study contributes to the national literature, identifying and analyzing what types of conflicts the principals of municipal schools in Chile tend to face. The results demonstrate the enormous and complex demands that principals have to deal with in Chile, and for which there is no high-quality training. They also illustrate how the most intense conflicts that principals have to confront, as well as the management of relationships with families, respond to tensions that go beyond their managerial training and are particular to the characteristics of the educational system. These findings are not far removed from what it means to be a leader in a context of market and competition, where principals are held accountable for results and enrollment (Carrasco & Fromm, 2016; Weinstein et al., 2012). The results presented are intended to contribute to leadership training programs on issues of conflict resolution, particularly since there is a need not only to provide training regarding a deeper understanding of conflict resolution types and strategies, but also on how to build spaces for collaboration and relationships of mutual trust between principals and families. If principals in Chile can reposition parents/guardians as strategic allies for school improvement and they are no longer seen as enemies, there can be greater possibilities for schools to improve by creating more and better learning opportunities for students.

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