

# How principals identify low-performing teachers in public schools? Evidence from Chile

*Felipe Aravena*

**Abstract:** This research aims to explore how school principals determine whether they have low-performing teachers among their staff. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 principals in Chilean public schools. The qualitative research entailed an inductive approach, along with an interview methodology and content analysis to investigate the research questions. Principals rely on three main sources of information to identify low performing teachers: classroom observations carried out by principals and senior leaders, parents' complaints and students' comments. However, there is no single common approach for identifying low-performing teachers, even within the same school district. This study is the first to report on low-performing teachers in Chile from the perspective of school principals.

**Keywords:** leadership, principals, low-performing teachers, Chile

## Introduction

Research suggests that teachers are the most important factor in determining student success (Futernick, 2010; Owings et al., 2006; Stronge, 2002; Whitehead, Boschee, Decker, 2013). Other variables such as class size, student demographics, curriculum, infrastructure, and resources are relevant but the quality of the instruction is critical to student outcomes (Range, Duncan, Day, Haines, 2012). The quality of the teaching directly affects student learning achievement (Darling-Hammond, Rothman, 2015; Nye, Konstantopoulos, Hedges, 2004; Yariv, Kass, 2019).

Besides the role of the teacher, school leadership influences student learning outcomes (Bush, 2008; Hallinger, Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Harris, Hopkins, 2019; Robinson, Hohepa, Lloyd, 2008; Witziers, 2004). School leaders who focus on instructional practices have a greater impact on student learning outcomes and teaching, especially those who focus on teachers who need to improve their performance (Day et al., 2011; Hallinger, Lee, 2015; Hallinger, Wang, 2015; Hattie, 2015). Based on this evidence, Chile has expanded the pedagogic responsibilities and duties of school principals (Aravena, Madrid, 2020; Marfan, Pascual, 2017; OECD, 2016) in line with the explicit guidelines set out in the National Framework for Good School Leadership and Management of 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015). Specifically, the framework details two leadership dimensions of the role of principals in enhancing teacher professionalism. One is the development of professional capacities and the other is leading teaching and learning processes. However, in practice most principals in Chile feel that the external demands associated with the accountability market system (Fallabella, 2020) are inconsistent with the expectations of instructional leaders in the framework (Montecinos, Bush, Aravena, 2018; Weinstein, Marfan, Horn, 2016). Consequently, principals are left with the complex task of having to balance administrative with pedagogical tasks (Weinstein, Muñoz, 2014).

Supporting and evaluating teaching performance is a key part of instructional leadership practices (Ing, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2019; Rhodes, Benicke, 2003; Shaked, Gross, Glanz, 2019; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, Geijsel, 2011). For principals, developing instructional practices is complex, especially when the support and evaluation is directed at teachers who are not achieving expected results (Yariv, 2004). Having ineffective staff is an urgent issue that diminishes a school's reputation if not dealt with promptly (Fuhr, 1993; Yariv, 2004). Low-performing teachers place disproportionate demands on the principal's energy and time, which could otherwise be focused on other instructional matters (Hanushek, 2009; Yariv, Coleman, 2005). Dealing with low-performing teachers adds to the emotional stress experienced by school principals because it may lead to conflict and threats (Yariv, Kass, 2019). Unfortunately having to deal with ineffective teaching staff is a universal school challenge faced by school principles (Yariv, 2004; Yariv, Coleman, 2005; Zhang, 2007). Range et al (2012) found that 8.44% of incompetent teachers were recognized by American school principals. This percentage is higher than the results presented by Yariv (2004) in Israel which was 7%. Additionally, Zhang (2007) concluded that incompetency is the most frequent teacher misbehavior in the U.S., China, Germany and Japan. Teaching incompetence that is a systemic issue relating to educational

policy is a cross-cultural problem. In Chile this issue has not yet been investigated from the principal's perspective (Aravena, Hallinger, 2018).

The present research aims to explore how school principals in Chile identify whether there are low-performing teachers on their staff. This study contributes empirical data on the types of information sources principals use to identify low performing teachers among their staff. An important research endeavor within the context of school improvement and effectiveness is to understand how principals approach one of the more difficult instructional challenges: improving teaching practices.

To achieve this, two research questions were defined:

RQ1: What source of information do school principals use to identify low performing teachers?

RQ2: How do principals view these sources of information?

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review explaining the traits of low-performing teachers is presented, followed by descriptions of how school principals identify such teachers among their teaching staff. Next, the educational context within which school principals and teachers operate is explained. The third section describes the methodology used to present the results and includes a discussion and conclusions stemming from the research.

## Traits of Low-Performing Teachers

In the research literature, various different terms are used to describe low-performing teachers. These include “poorly performing teachers” (Rhodes, Beneicke, 2003), “incompetent teachers” (Bridges, 1992; Range et al., 2012), “challenging teachers” (Yariv, 2004), “mediocre teachers” (Fuhr, 1993), “failing teachers” (Wragg et al., 2000), “ineffective teachers” (Torff, Sessions, 2009) and “struggling teachers” (Tucker, 2001; Yariv, Kass, 2019). Most of these categorizations focus on the teaching traits of individual teachers. However, the evidence shows that there is no single factor that explains poor-performing teachers; typically, such teachers exhibit a cluster of difficulties (Yariv, 2009). For example, Wragg (2000) stated that low-performing teachers have poor classroom discipline, do not plan or prepare sufficiently, have difficulty gauging student progress, have poor personal relationships with students, low expectations of students and lack the ability to respond to change. In the same vein, Torff and Sessions (2009) note that teachers

have ineffective lesson planning skills, poor lesson implementation skills, are unable to establish rapport with students, find classroom management difficult and lack pedagogical and knowledge content. According to Bridges and Gumpert (1984) low-performing teachers are unable to perform satisfactorily. Five categories make up unsatisfactory performance: (1) technical failure (e.g. teaching methods, lesson planning, subject knowledge); (2) bureaucratic failure (e.g. compliance with district rules, performing the relevant administrative tasks); (3) ethical failure (e.g. negative attitudes toward students, indifferent performance of teaching duties); (4) productive failure (e.g. low academic progress of students, classroom climate); and (5) personal failure (e.g. emotional instability, lack of self-control). Similar traits are consistently identified in the literature among low-performing teachers that profoundly impact students' learning (Bridges, 1992; Menuey, 2007; Range et al., 2012; Rivers, Sanders, 2002; Yariv, 2004; Yariv, Coleman, 2005; Yariv, Kass, 2019).

## **School Principals Identifying Low-Performing Teachers**

According to Rhodes and Beneicke (2003), it is important to understand that there is no single source of evidence that can be used to categorize a teacher as ineffective. Usually, school principals rely on a combination of evidence, such as school performance criteria, complaints from parents, students and other colleagues, disruptive student behavior, informal monitoring by the school principal, monitoring of middle leaders, feedback from school inspectors and/or poor student results. Principals typically possess information about teacher performance (Bridges, 1992) obtained through classroom observations, revising materials, test scores, interaction with colleagues and parents, informal and formal meetings, and so on. However, some researchers conclude that school principals are not best placed to identify ineffective teachers owing to the subjective nature of their views (Kerrins, Cushing, 2000; Machell, 1995).

According to Stronge (2002), principals use multiple data relating to teacher effectiveness, taking into account utility, feasibility, reliability and accuracy. This enables them to consider formal and informal information about teachers, combining subjective judgements and data obtained from standardized instruments (Painter, 2000). While school principals have considerable resources for identifying high- and low-performing teachers (Beerens, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Torff, Sessions, 2009; Yariv, 2004), they also obtain information about teacher performance from multiple stakeholders such as students, parents, department heads and colleagues, who have

some idea of the quality of teachers' performance (Torff, Sessions, 2009; Range et al., 2012). Yariv (2009) found in an Israeli context that principals use and combine various formal and informal methods to keep up-to-date on teacher incompetence (p.296). There is no clear school system in place for identifying low-performing teachers (Cheng, 2014). As Yariv (2009) stated, "each principal had a unique yardstick" (p.289). Principals are creating their own mechanisms for identifying teaching staff incompetence, and most of the time this is not an easy task (Tucker, 1997; Yariv, 2009). Furthermore, principals do not receive formal training on how to create a competence evaluation system or how to improve teacher performance (Hollinger, 2016).

Identifying low-performing teachers present school principals with different dilemmas. First, it is a time-consuming exercise (Hanushek, 2009) and one challenge is deciding whether to invest time in a particular teacher or in the collective teaching capacity. Sometimes, principals are aware that they need to 'learn by doing' and so there are no immediate results (Yariv, 2009). Additionally, they frequently ask themselves if they have selected the appropriate strategies, efforts and tools for improving teaching performance (May, Supovitz, 2011). The second dilemma is an ethical one. When a principal becomes aware a teacher is underperforming, they have to undertake specific instructional action to improve teacher practices or dismiss the teacher (Hollinger, 2016). In many educational systems, dismissing teachers is a complicated multi-step process (Bridges, 1992; Dandoy, 2012; Tucker, 1997; Wragg et al., 2000). Bureaucratic barriers and restrictive administrative procedures complicate the possibility for principals to dismiss teachers (Dandoy, 2012). However, there is evidence showing that dismissal is the last resort for many principals (Yariv, Coleman, 2005). In fact, identifying low-performing teachers brings the principal face-to-face with the inevitable question of whether to renew their contract or face extensive legal processes, including the risk of conflict with the teacher's union (Dandoy, 2012). Principals tend to avoid dismissal because it is ethically complex and has organizational and interpersonal effects (Yariv, 2009). According to Fuhr (1993), principals are averse to admitting they have low-performing teachers in their schools because it reveals an inability to improve teaching performance. In sum, identifying low-performing teachers is a complex task that presents potential ethical, legal and personal dilemmas for school principals.

## **School Leadership Context in Chile**

In the last decade, following international recommendations from the OECD (2016), there have been attempts to aims to improve the quality of

school leadership in the Chilean education system. A wide range of policies have been implemented to ensure diverse accountability, orientations and regulations, under which school principals have primary responsibility for instructional practices (Aravena, 2016; Montecinos, Bush, Aravena, 2018; Weinstein, Muñoz, 2014). For example, the School Leadership Framework states that Chilean principals have to assess, guide and support teachers in order to improve performance. If school principals can provide school districts with evidence showing they have done everything in their power to improve teacher performance, but have nonetheless failed, law 20.501 stipulates that principals can make suggestion of put a disposition of only 5% of teachers to remove from their school. In this case, the teacher is not dismissed but relocated to another school in the same district.

Principals can create their own mechanisms to support and assess teacher performance. However, in 2003, Chile implemented a national evaluation system for teachers working in public schools. Under this national system, related to law 20.903, The New Teaching Career was established in 2017. This has created a new situation for Chilean teachers regarding improving working conditions, financial remuneration based on years of teaching experience and national evaluation system scores, as well as opportunities for professional development. Teachers working in public schools now have a mandatory assessment every four years. The assessment consists of a portfolio (60%), self-assessment (10%), a one-pair interview (20%) and the school principal's report (10%). Teachers are subsequently categorized according to four performance levels: incompetent, basic, competent and outstanding. Quiroga and Aravena (2018) have pointed out that school principals play a limited role in the teacher evaluation process, as they are considered marginal actors with little impact as a source of evidence for teacher performance. School principals in Chile have criticized this evaluation system, as the results of the teacher evaluations frequently contradict their own views and student outcomes (Quiroga, Aravena, 2018). According to the Ministry of Education, in 2018, only 172 teachers of the 20,529 teachers evaluated in Chile that year were categorized as incompetent (0.85%). When a teacher is deemed incompetent, the school district has to send them on a professional development course to improve their performance, and the teacher then has to be re-evaluated the following year. If the results are again unsatisfactory, the teacher is dismissed from the public sector. In Chile, as in many other parts of the world, improving teaching quality is a key challenge, and teacher appraisal is the last and least attractive option (Yariv, 2009).

## Methodology

Assessing a teacher's performance requires us to identify and understand diverse sources of information about the teacher and their schools. This complexity creates the need for a qualitative research approach (Paton, 2002). Qualitative studies are profoundly interpretative, focusing on understanding the why and how (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). They offer the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of a wide range of aspects of the social world (e.g. personal beliefs, theory of actions, feelings) from the participant's point of view (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). This study is a qualitative one that uses an inductive approach to investigate the research questions, by creating the interview methodology and performing a content analysis. Empirical data is used to explain the interactions between participants (Corbin, Strauss, 1998). The following sections describe the participants, data collection and data procedure.

## Participants

The principals (N=24) were all attending a professional development course created by a Leadership Centre in Chile. Eleven male and 13 female principals participated in the study (See table I). The average age was 49 (ranging from 35 to 62). Only nine principals reported being in their current position for two years or less. We classified these nine principals as novices. Post-holder experience ranged from 10 months to 15 years (average = 5 years), and only six principals indicated that they had previously worked as a principal in another school. In terms of the school characteristics, all the participants were working in the municipal sector, in four different school districts in the same region. Most were principals of small elementary schools (n=18) in urban areas (n=17) with fewer than 261 students<sup>1</sup>. Regarding the level of performance, according to the QAE<sup>2</sup>, seven schools were categorized as low performing and the majority were categorized as mid-performing (n=13). Three schools were not categorized because they had a small school roll. There were no high performing schools in this group.

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<sup>1</sup> For school size, we adopted the categories proposed by (Weinstein and Muñoz, 2014). Small schools (261 students or less), medium (262-470 students) and large schools (more than 471).

<sup>2</sup> Education Quality Agency (in Spanish: Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación). Schools in Chile are categorized in terms of performance on the SIMCE (national standardized test) with the exception of multigrade rural schools, which affect the statistical validity owing to the small number of students. This category may change from year to year, depending on the SIMCE results. If a school remains in the low-performing category for more than 3 consecutive years, the Ministry of Education closes the school.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Participants and Their Schools

| <b>Principal</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Years as principal</b> | <b>Number of teachers</b> | <b>Student roll</b> | <b>School performance category</b> | <b>School Location</b> | <b>Primary/Secondary</b> |
|------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1</b>         | 47         | Male          | 3                         | 17                        | 174                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>2</b>         | 35         | Female        | 6                         | 32                        | 195                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Secondary                |
| <b>3</b>         | 42         | Male          | 2                         | 12                        | 76                  | Medium-low                         | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>4</b>         | 55         | Male          | 15                        | 53                        | 429                 | Medium-low                         | Urban                  | Secondary                |
| <b>5</b>         | 55         | Male          | 5                         | 23                        | 199                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>6</b>         | 46         | Male          | 15                        | 16                        | 108                 | Medium-low                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>7</b>         | 44         | Female        | 6                         | 24                        | 248                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>8</b>         | 48         | Female        | 5                         | 85                        | 1154                | Medium-low                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>9</b>         | 61         | Female        | 5                         | 52                        | 273                 | Medium-low                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>10</b>        | 45         | Female        | 7                         | 60                        | 648                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Secondary                |
| <b>11</b>        | 56         | Female        | 3                         | 32                        | 454                 | Medium                             | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>12</b>        | 51         | Male          | 1                         | 35                        | 220                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>13</b>        | 59         | Male          | 4                         | 39                        | 302                 | Medium-low                         | Urban                  | Secondary                |
| <b>14</b>        | 60         | Female        | 17                        | 36                        | 250                 | Medium                             | Urban                  | Secondary                |
| <b>15</b>        | 46         | Male          | 8                         | 20                        | 200                 | Inadequate                         | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>16</b>        | 55         | Female        | 7                         | 24                        | 248                 | Medium                             | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>17</b>        | 38         | Female        | 1                         | 14                        | 96                  | Medium                             | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>18</b>        | 46         | Female        | 1                         | 15                        | 101                 | Medium                             | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>19</b>        | 37         | Female        | 1                         | 12                        | 143                 | Medium                             | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>20</b>        | 62         | Male          | 1                         | 8                         | 99                  | Medium                             | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>21</b>        | 50         | Female        | 7                         | 30                        | 160                 | Medium                             | Urban                  | Primary                  |
| <b>22</b>        | 51         | Male          | 1                         | 8                         | 67                  | -                                  | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>23</b>        | 46         | Male          | 1                         | 7                         | 53                  | -                                  | Rural                  | Primary                  |
| <b>24</b>        | 41         | Female        | 1                         | 7                         | 51                  | -                                  | Rural                  | Primary                  |

Source: Compiled by author (2021)

## Data Collection and Data Procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). First, we created the interview protocol and then piloted it with two school principals. The protocol contained four main sections: (1) an overview of the principal's job, motivations and challenges, (2) general performance

of teaching staff, (3) traits and strategies for dealing with low-performing teachers, and (4) sources of information used to categorize teachers as low-performing. This study presents the data relating to the last section. As part of the study an in-depth interview was conducted on site at the end of the academic year (2019). All the school principals were invited to participate in the study and were assured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The average duration of the interviews was 51 minutes. The data gathered was first coded manually and individually, and then compared with three researchers to identify common themes and codes (Stake, 2010). An inductive analysis of the narrative was used to identify themes and patterns to answer the research questions based on the subjective view of the interviewees (Paton, 2002).

## Findings

Traits of low-performing teachers were grouped into four main categories, based on the principal's views: low motivation, commitment and self-esteem, inability to raise student achievement levels, lack of pedagogical skills and poor social skills. The school principals involved in this study reported having at least one low-performing teacher on their teaching staff. On average, the school principals reported that 10.5% (SD=7.7%) of their staff were low-performing. For this study, that means that there were 1 to 10 low-performing teachers in the selected schools with a staff ranging from 8 to 61 teachers.

## Information Sources Used by Principals to Identify Low-Performing Teachers

The school principals indicated that they used more than one source of information to identify low-performing teachers. They reported using a total of 16 types of sources of information (See figure 1). On average, principals used approximately five different sources of information (min= 2; max= 8). As one of the principals in the study explained: "It is much better to capture the teaching reality using different eyes, otherwise you cannot obtain a complex picture of what is going on in the classroom" (Principal 4). The figure below presents the sources of information used by principals to identify low-performing teachers. based on internal and external, and formal and informal categories.

**Figure 1.** Sources of information used by principals to identify low-performing teachers

|                 | <b>Internal</b>   | <b>External</b>  |
|-----------------|---|--|
| <b>Formal</b>   | Principal classroom observations (21)<br>Leadership team classroom observations (16)<br>Lesson plans (10)<br>Teacher formal interview (7)<br>Students' notes in copybook (3)<br>Teaching meetings (3)<br>Administrative work (3)<br>Teacher Self-evaluation (2) | National Teacher Evaluation system (8)<br>Student performance on standardized tests (8)<br>Education Quality Agency reports (7)<br>Feedback from ETA (5) |
| <b>Informal</b> | Students' comments (12)<br>Colleagues' comments (3)   | Parents' complaints (13)<br>Principal's comments (3)   |

Source: Compiled by author (2021)

## Formal and Internal Sources of Information

Both the formal and internal information sources come from well-structured, pre-existing instruments or processes in the schools. In this case, the information was collected by the same principals using protocols and instruments in the school. The most frequent source of information used to identify teacher performance is formal classroom observations conducted personally by the principal. This method was mentioned by 21 school principals. The reasons for observing teachers directly in action was:

*(...) "I know if my teachers are doing their job well or not when I go and directly observe the classroom... At that moment you can clearly see if students relate to them or not... if the lesson is well-organized or not... if the teacher explains the content well or not... those kinds of things". (Principal 13)*

*(...) "The most powerful information that I have are classroom observations. When you go into the classroom with a rubric and see what the teacher is doing with the students you can immediately confirm whether the teacher is high or low-performing (...). (Principal 1)*

Most principals stated that their own observations were key to identifying low-performing teachers. The second biggest internal source of information was the members of the leadership team, mainly the curriculum coordinator, who supplied the principal with information. Curriculum coordinators oversee the monitoring of teaching practices. The principals also used information on classroom observations conducted by others. *"I would say that around 80% of the classroom observations are done by the curriculum coordi-*

nator and the 20% are done by me, this is because I don't have enough time. So, I trust her judgments.” (Principal 8). Therefore, principals also considered classroom observations to be a key source of information for identifying low-performing teachers, primarily from their own experiences and secondly from the perspectives of the leadership team.

Ten principals relied on the quality of lesson plans to identify low-performing teachers. In most Chilean schools, teachers produce daily, weekly or monthly lesson plans. The principals stated that the lesson plans can provide interesting information about learning goals and activities. “(...) *Low performing teachers usually also produce bad lesson plans that do not sufficiently challenge students, but give a vague description of what they are doing in the classroom. For me, looking at the lesson plan is important for understanding the level of performance.*” (Principal 5). Interestingly, these ten principals all worked in the same school district. The district level has an online platform for teachers to upload their materials, and principals have free access to it so they can check it. The fact that all the principals in this particular district used the lesson plans as an information source, but those in other districts did not, indicates that different factors in each district affecting the principal's practices, in this case the online platform.

Seven principals reported that formal interviews with teachers were a source of information for identifying performance level. “*I usually meet with teachers so we can reflect on their practices and during the conversation, you may get the feeling that they don't care about students and are not interested in providing good lessons.*” (Principal 17). One principal said, “*We support low-performing teachers, so we have a discussion with them at least once a week to find out how they are improving, the areas we could provide more support for them. For example, before you [the interviewer] got here, I was with a teacher, and I was providing literature to improve a specific area in math*” (Principal 20).

Less mentioned sources of information identified at the formal and internal level included the following: students' notes in copybooks (n=3), teachers' meetings (=3), administrative work (n=3) and teacher self-evaluation (n=2). Three principals considered the information available in students' copybooks. They looked at activities, learning tasks, and compared the plan with the implementation. This source of information was used in combination with and compared with other sources. For example, (...) “*I check the lesson plan and the copybook of a student to see if the teacher is doing what he said he was doing.*” (Principal 7). In Chile, most schools have teachers meetings

every week. The principals stated that these meeting provided a means of identifying low-performing teachers: “(...) During a teaching meeting you can observe how the teacher participates... gets involved, how committed they are, how effectively they think about their practices.” (Principal 2).

Three principals characterized low-performing teachers as being weak on administrative work. For those principals, the administrative part of being a teacher was also important. “For me, a teacher who does not respond properly to administrative tasks is also low-performing. They may be really good teachers, but if they don’t do the administrative work, it is complicated.” (Principal 8). Only two principals used self-evaluation instruments to evaluate teaching performance. These school principals created their own instruments, which gave teachers an opportunity to state their strengths and weaknesses. “We developed a self-evaluation report because we think it is important to consider the teacher’s voice; how they feel about their job, not just what we see. The idea is that teachers have to be aware of what they need to improve for the next year.” (Principal 4).

## Formal and External Source of Information

All principals use a combination of formal internal sources of information and formal external information. External informants are stakeholders who are not involved in daily school activities such as parents, the Ministry of Education, supervisors, external technical assistants (ETAs), and so forth. Most of the principals thought these stakeholders were a valid source of information on teaching performance. Principals mentioned using four external sources of formal information: National Teacher Evaluation results (n=8), student performance on the standardized tests (SIMCE) (n=8), Education Quality Agency reports (n=7) and feedback from ETAs (n=5).

Some principals disputed the reliability of teachers’ results in the national teacher evaluation system. Eight principals indicated that they took this data into consideration. However, during the interview, the remainder (n=16) specifically mentioned that they did not trust this information.

*The interviewer asked, “Do you consider the results of the national teacher evaluation system?”, to which Principal 9 responded, “No, I use other kinds of information... I don’t trust it”.*

Most principals said that the teacher evaluations in the national system did not reflect their true performance throughout the year. For example,

principal 19 stated, (...) *“In this school, I don’t have any incompetent teachers according to the national evaluation... but that evaluation is really inaccurate. Teachers prepare their portfolio – you can even pay to have it done – when they are video-recorded for the ministry that class is perfect, but if you go to see the same teacher the day after in the same class, at the same time, in the same room, it’s nothing like that (laugh). In that evaluation all teachers prepare ideal lessons, but in an unrealistic situation. For example, if they are to be video-recorded for 45 minutes, the teachers prepare for at least 3 weeks before the lesson. That does not happen in reality... some of them don’t even do lesson planning.”* Considering the emphasis the interviewees placed on the untrustworthy results of the national teacher evaluations, a wide selection of principals do not consider the formal information provided by the Ministry of Education to be a valid external source. In Chile, every year student performance is measured by the SIMCE tests. Eight principals considered student performance on this standardized test to be relevant for identifying low-performing teachers. However, it is limited as a source of information, because it is only possible to obtain information on teachers of some subjects, for example math or Spanish teachers. One principal reported, *“The SIMCE results show if a teacher has been working badly or not with the students. For example, I know that this year’s math results will be terrible because the 4th grade teacher is bad,”* (Principal 9) while another added, *“We can choose to agree or disagree with the standardized tests, but those instruments tell us something about teacher performance regardless.... you can take some information from the results”* (Principal 23).

Another informational source used by principals is the feedback provided by External Technical Assistance (ETA). In Chile, principals can choose whether to hire an ETA paid for out of their school budget and with the approval of the district. Depending on the needs of the school, the principal or the teachers’ interests, principals can decide to hire an ETA as external support. Principal 1 relied on feedback provided by the ETA because it was consistent with their own opinion on their teaching performance:

*(...) The ETA has a similar opinion about the teacher as well. They provided well-supported information structured with a theoretical framework behind it. For example, ETA indicated that a weakness of our teachers is how they plan the lessons. The pedagogical activities that they give to the students is very poor, nor do they diversify or consider differentiated learning styles of students. The activities or actions that they design to students are too basic, too elementary, and they don’t*

*lead the the development of higher critical thinking... this is the same as we have detected here (...).* (Principal 2).

Similarly, seven principals used the Education Quality Agency reports, especially in schools categorized as inadequate. *“When we receive the EQA reports, those kinds of teachers are not doing their job well. In the report you can see the type of activities, tasks and strategies used by teachers who are not achieving the expected level.”* (Principal 5). In sum, it seems that principals check external information to affirm the data already collected, rather than as an initial information sources. External stakeholders can add to the information already collected by principals. More research is needed to understand how principals use external information to validate their own views about teacher performance.

## **Informal and Internal Sources of Information**

In contrast to the formal data, informal sources of information are not obtained from standardized processes or sophisticated instruments. Informal data is not sought out, but encountered by principals. In other words, when a teacher is having issues in the classroom and not performing as expected, complaints are reported to the principal’s office. One interviewee explained, *“I also use informal comments about teacher performance from different actors. Sometimes this is more telling and meaningful than formal information obtained from school instruments.”* (Principal 21). In this category, principals reported only two informal and internal sources of information: student complaints and teaching staff comments. Twelve principals reported using informal comments from students. They preferred the informal student comments because they related to feelings, and emotions about the teaching performance. Low-performing teachers seem to attract a higher volume of informal comments. One interviewee explained, *“(...) you know if a teacher is bad because you receive a lot of complaints. This is a red alert, especially when students come to my office and says ‘Principal, what about Miss Maria?... She is not doing the lessons.’* (Principal 14). Another principal explained, *“For me the main source of information is students’ opinions... because you can go and see... observe the teacher, but it could be a performance. The ones who know what happens every day are the students, because they spend their entire time with the teachers.”* (Principal 12). However, not all the principals relied on student voices to identify low-performing teachers, and it was not mentioned as a formal instrument for collecting information to evaluate teacher performance.

Another source of internal information, mentioned by only three principals, was the informal comments provided by teacher colleagues. *“One teacher came to my office to say ‘Principal, I don’t know if you realize it, but the new teacher is not keeping up with our work. I think you should keep your eye on it.’”* (Principal 24). Principals do not collect this information, but they pay attention to it and open their door to teachers who have something to say about the teaching performance of their colleagues.

## Informal and External Source of Information

In this category, the principles reported two sources: parent complaints and comments from other principals. Thirteen principals stated that they identified low-performing teachers based on what parents had to say. Usually, this information was provided in the form of a complaint. *“(…) Most of the time when teachers are not doing their job well, I usually get a lot of parents in my office complaining,”* said Principal 19. Another principal notes, *“A parent came to the office looking for answers about low-performing teachers, saying, ‘How is this possible... or do you know that my student is not learning anything?’”* (Principal 4). Principals who make use of informal comments from different actors tend to show openness and flexibility: one interviewee stressed *“(…) I take the complaints into consideration... but this is because my leadership style is not hierarchical. I always maintain a policy of listening to everyone, even if they want to say something bad about my teaching staff (...)”* (Principal 2).

In addition to the parents’ complaints, the principals also took informal comments made by other principals who worked with the teacher in question into account. This source of information was regularly sought by two of the three principals. *“I knew that the teacher was removed from another school in the same district, so I asked the other principal, who is my friend... (laugh) if he was having the same experience with this teacher... and he said yes... no comments about [the teacher’s] performance was an answer in itself.”* (Principal 3). These findings illustrate that principals use this type of external information as evidence to reaffirm their own impressions of low-performing teachers.

## Discussion

Research has emphasized the effect of instructional leadership practices of principals on school effectiveness and school improvement (OECD, 2016; Robinson, Lloyd, Rowe 2008; Shaked, Gross, Glanz, 2019). This feeds into

the idea that principals have to develop specific leadership practices to improve teaching performance such as evaluating and supporting teachers at the individual and collective level (Hallinger, Wang, 2015; May, Supovitz, 2011). On average the school principals in this study reported that 10.5% of their teachers were low-performing. However, as Yariv (2009) and Fuhr (1993) show, principals do not like to admit that they have low-performing teachers in their schools, as feelings of frustration and shame may create inaccurate descriptions of their teacher's competence. The data should therefore be carefully interpreted and compared with further research. Nevertheless, this study confirms that principals as instructional leaders have to deal with low-performing teachers. Clearly, a more in-depth understanding of how principals conceptualize low-performing teachers and how they collect different sources of information related to teaching performance is necessary.

As in various regions of the world, Chile has no specific professional development programs on how to identify and provide support for low-performing teachers (Hollinger, 2016). Unsurprisingly, then, there are multiple approaches to improving teaching performance. As we can see in this study, the principals used different approaches and sources of information to identify low-performing teachers. Nonetheless several commonalities can be highlighted.

Firstly, principals use more than one source of information to identify teacher incompetence. The use of multiple information sources reduces principal subjectivity (Painter, 2000; Stronge, 2002). This situation encourages principals to triangulate different sources of information. Secondly, principals use and combine formal and informal sources of information to identify low-performing teachers. This was also found by Yariv (2009) in the Israeli context. In practice, principals who use formal sources of information have to be active observers of teacher performance in daily activities. Developing observation skills should be considered an essential instructional leadership task for school principals focusing on the quality of teaching practice. In contrast, informal sources of information emerge depending on the openness and willingness of the principal to listen to diverse actors who report issues with the quality of teaching instruction. This highlights the complexity of analyzing how principals collect data about teacher performance, especially regarding reliability. Another commonality among principals was that the most frequent information source for identifying teacher performance was formal classroom observations conducted by primarily by the principal themselves but also the curriculum coordinators. Compared to

indirect measures of instructional practice such as student test scores, observing instructional practice is one of the most direct ways of understanding what happens in classrooms and allows principals to engage with teachers around instruction (Ing, 2010, p.339). This explains the preference for internal sources of information over external ones, and specifically in relation to the data collected in direct classroom observations. School principals regard their own information produced by their own systems to have greater validity. Internal information about teacher incompetence tends to be more reliable because it is more frequently collected than external sources of information that can be compared to a snapshot of teaching practices. Principals know first-hand how teachers perform, whereas external stakeholders tend to observe episodes of teaching practice within a particular timespan. It may therefore be beneficial for the principal to have professional development opportunities to share the ways they collect and use internal information about teaching practices. Principals would then be expected to have clear indicators of what effective and ineffective teaching practices look like. Fourthly, it is interesting to note that most of the principals do not have confidence in the information provided by the national teacher evaluation system. They do not trust the mechanism for collecting information about teacher performance. This is likely because the national teacher evaluation system is heavily weighted towards the quality portfolio that is submitted, rather than daily teaching practices. As Quiroga and Aravena (2018) have stressed, the portfolio score does not ensure quality learning. Only 38% of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the results of the national teacher evaluation system reflected their own views of a teacher's performance (Quiroga and Aravena, 2018). Interestingly, the fifth commonality among principals in this study is that they rarely considered student evidence of learning. Adults' views of teacher ineffectiveness seem to be more relevant because evaluating teaching practices is a professional task. However, if principals only focus on adult perceptions of teacher incompetence, they will miss critical pieces of information from student voices (Bridges, 1992). The emphasis should be on fostering principals' ability to determine what students are learning rather than what teachers are teaching. This is supported by the fact that the principals did not make use of information on student learning outcomes, including from standardized tests. It is possible that student test scores are not a primary source of information about teacher performance for principals in Chile because there are many factors affecting the results, such as socio-economic background and parental involvement (Torff, Sessions, 2009). The findings of this study contradict those of Torff and Sessions (2009), specifically the finding that "teacher performance can be assessed (...) using measures of student achievement, typically test

scores” (p.128). Most of the principals in this study did not use test scores to identify low-performing teachers.

## Conclusions and Limitations

The aim of this research was to explore how school principals become aware that they have low-performing teachers on their staff. This study highlights three major findings ascertained in previous international studies. School principals in Chile, similarly to in other regions of the world, have to deal with low-performing teachers among their staff. The percentage of teachers identified by principals in this study as low performing was 10.5%. These principals are therefore presented with the challenge of improving the performance of teachers who are not achieving the expected outcomes (Yariv, 2004; Yariv, Kass, 2019; Yariv, Coleman, 2005; Zhang, 2007). Secondly, principals use different sources of information to identify low-performing teachers. For instance, the principals who participated in this study made use of informal complaints from parents or students as well as more sophisticated information obtained via evaluation systems or student learning as reflected in the results of standardized tests (Cheng, 2014). The findings indicate that principals rely on three major sources of information to identify low-performing teachers: classroom observations carried out by principals and senior leaders, parents’ complaints and student comments. Thirdly, there is no single approach to identifying low-performing teachers (Tucker, 1997; Stronge, 2012), even within the same school district. It was found that each principal collects, uses and combines different types of information about teacher performance. This situation stems from the fact that the guidelines are too general to develop and support teaching performance (Aravena, 2018). As school leaders, principals are told to improve teaching and develop teachers’ abilities, but there are no specific guidelines or training on how to do this. The logical consequence is that principals create diverse systems, using and combining different types of information to identify and evaluate low-performing teachers (Yariv, 2009). There is a clear need in Chilean policy and practice to support principals using and combining data from different sources to improve teacher performance. This is an aspect that should be considered as part of professional leadership programs for principals given the expectation that they will improve teacher performance and address the issue of tackling low-performing teachers. Therefore, it would be beneficial to prepare and support principals to develop diverse strategies for improving teacher performance both collectively and individually, especially among those who need to improve quickly.

This exploratory study has several limitations. First, it is important to recognize that the principals used their own subjective criteria to identify low-performing teachers. Therefore, the data needs to be carefully analyzed. Further studies could focus on obtaining greater understanding from a leadership career stage perspective, given the notable differences between novice and experienced principals in approaches to low-performing teachers. Another limitation is that none of the principals in the sample was from a high-performing school. Further research into how principals of high-performing schools collect and use data to evaluate teacher performance would be useful to obtain a full description of this issue. Secondly, this study relied on small scale qualitative data. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the Chilean reality. Thirdly, the findings of this research could be bolstered by a further study integrating other voices such as school district leaders and the under-performing teachers being evaluated.

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**Author:**

Felipe Aravena, Ph.D. student  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso  
Center for leadership Lideres Educativos  
Brasil avenue  
Valparaiso  
2950  
Chile  
Email: felipe.aravena@pucv.cl