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Leadership and school improvement in France

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to show how school principals in France spend their work time and when and under what circumstances they deal with school improvement-related matters.
Design/methodology/approach – For the study presented in this paper, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used. Five French collèges (secondary schools) from one school district were visited for a week each. Each principal was shadowed, his/her actions and the context were recorded and categorized. The shadowing was conducted using a structured observation approach derived from Mintzberg. In addition semi-structured interviews were conducted with all principals. The data were analyzed following a grounded theory approach.
Findings – The results show how principals spend their work time and as well as possible areas of improvement. Among other things, they reveal very fragmented workdays. Most principals put a low emphasis on school improvement and struggle with conflicting expectations (preservation vs innovation). Shared leadership was only observed in one case.
Research limitations – The specificity of the sample limits the possible ranges of interpretation and generalization. Also, it remains unclear whether one week of observation per school is enough to get a reliable estimate of a principal's daily work. There is a need for further empirical studies of the matter.
Originality/value – This paper offers rare insights into the day-to-day work of French school principals. It contributes to the understanding of school leadership practice as well as to the transcultural understanding of school leadership.

Keywords Leadership, School change, Improvement, Principals, France
Paper type Case study

Introduction

During the last decade in particular schools in many countries have faced increased pressures to change and adapt. National and international evaluations such as PISA and TIMSS have acted as two of many catalysts for these developments. One clear consequence of such is that schools can no longer simply react to changes in society; they need to be developed in an active, conscious way. Not surprisingly, this has had an impact on the duties of school principals. In the western hemisphere the duties and profiles of school principals have been changing (for a detailed presentation and analysis, see OECD, 2008). In many cases, their responsibilities have expanded and their work profiles have become more complex. This is due in part to the fact that school leaders are considered a key factor for successful innovation in schools (Brookover *et al.*, 1979; Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993). How these expanded responsibilities have affected principals in their everyday work practice is a question that needs to be addressed.

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This study therefore aims to assess how school principals in France spend their work time and – on a more specific note – aims to capture and analyze their actions with regard to developing their schools. The goal is to gauge what French principals do and – by extension – show when they deal with school improvement-related issues during their daily work. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- How do principals spend their work time?
- How much of their time do principals spend on school improvement?

French schools were chosen primarily because of the lack of coverage in the Anglophone literature with regard to the French educational system in general, but even more so when it comes to school leadership in that country. The decision to select all schools from one school district was made so as to minimize external influences[1] and to ensure a basic coherence in the data gathered.

In the following sections of this paper a brief summary and analysis of relevant literature is first provided before laying out the theoretical perspective developed as well as a description and critique of the methods employed, the sources of data and a presentation of the relevant categories of measurement. This is followed by a presentation of the results of the data analysis. In the final section, implications from the findings, limitations and possible areas of interest for future research are discussed and a critical reflection of the study is undertaken.

Literature review

When compared with that of the USA and UK, for example, there has not been a great amount of research on the principalship and school leadership in France. There are several possible explanations for this. The most obvious is that the field of educational research, certainly at university level, is still relatively undeveloped. There also appears to be a "language barrier" as many publications are published exclusively in French (although this is slowly changing). What seems certain is that to date no major study of the principalship and school leadership in France has been published in an English-language journal. No papers regarding this topic have appeared, for example, in the *Journal of Educational Administration* or other high-impact journals. Papers about any branch of the French educational context published in English are in fact quite sparse.

Until the 1980s the French educational system was highly centralized (and it is still considered to be one of the most centralized systems in Europe). In addition, principals were legally considered teachers with extended responsibilities and were thus regarded by many simply as teachers with additional administrative duties. Consequently, very little attention was paid to school principals by the scientific community at that time. However, over recent decades, there have been various decentralization efforts that have envisaged more autonomy for individual schools and for their principals in particular. In 1988 the principalship became its own profession (Décret No. 88-343, 1988); in 2001, it was reformed with more authority and responsibilities delegated to principals (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 2002). As responsibilities were transferred to principals and as expectations of localized school improvement efforts rose, scientific interest in school leadership increased.

Around 2003 a debate arose whether school leaders in France needed a stronger support structure in order to significantly improve their schools. In a study commissioned by the French Ministry of Education, Ghislaine Matringe and her team

surveyed several schools working with experimental "advisory boards" (conseil pédagogiques) seeking to identify possible advantages for school improvement (Matringe, 2005). These advisory boards worked alongside principals, usually presided by them, on projects intended to benefit their schools. Based on Matringe's findings, these advisory boards were implemented on a national scale. It was the hope that the task of school improvement could be distributed among several people and that principals would thus feel less overwhelmed by school development tasks. While the implementation was considered a step in the right direction by many, yearly large-scale evaluations of the work of school principals conducted by the French Ministry of Education indicate that many principals still cling to outdated work routines and are reluctant to fulfill their expanded duties (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, 2008, 2010).

Details of the most important of the few studies of principals and their possible effects on school development are referenced forthwith.

In 1998, Yves Grellier tried to provide a detailed portrait of the principalship in French schools (Grellier, 1998). He analyzed various reports and statistical data on the role and interviewed principals as well as inspectors and teachers. He concluded that the changes in the role of principals have not been translated into changes in their training. He was critical that many principals lack the degree of professionalization necessary to cope with their expanded responsibilities. Further, he argued that principals are not autonomous in many regards and that their responsibilities, as well as those of their vice principals, are in need of documentation as they have been expanded beyond the point of clarity. A decade later, Grellier presented an updated version of his study (Grellier, 2011), maintaining that many points of criticism were still applicable.

In 2003, Agnès Pélage published an analysis of the evolving roles of principals in France between 1980 and 2003 (Pélage, 2003). She made the case that today's conception of school principals in France is characterized by principles of management, evaluation and mobilization. Principals are seen as the "engines" of their schools. They are expected to establish a culture of evaluation and to mobilize staff to make use of the existing autonomy. Nevertheless, Pélage cautioned that this new culture of school leadership has so far not been implemented successfully. She estimated that, in fact, many schools have not changed at all. She argued that many artifacts of the "old way of doing things" still remained, be it in the minds of teachers and principals or in legislation (e.g. the responsibilities of teaching and supervising staff were not reformed along with those of the principals).

In 2005, Yves Dutercq examined the state of school principals in France and found them to be a mutating profession, navigating between a model of traditional bureaucracy and a more modern organizational form (Dutercq, 2005, p. 132). In a subsequent meta study encompassing studies and evaluations from the 1980s up to 2004, Dutercq (2006) came to the conclusion that school principals in France have been continuously gaining new areas of authority and that they are on a path of transition from administrators to leaders.

The sociologist Anne Barrère offered a similar point of view. For her study she interviewed 43 principals about their duties and routines. Additionally, she observed a principal and a vice principal from one collège (junior high school) for a year in order to record their work. She identified administrative work, relationship work and decision making as the three main work domains of principals in France. According to her findings, the principalship in France is going through an evolutionary phase,

requiring incumbents to become more flexible, less bureaucratic and more present (Barrère, 2006, p. 162ff). However, Barrère found principals existed in a world of "conflicting temporalities," meaning that they are exposed to conflicting short-term and long-term expectations.

Based on an evaluation of the change capacity of the French educational system and its actors from a historian's point of view, Antoine Prost (2006) arrived at the conclusion that school leaders in France are facing a culture that is averse to innovation in schools and thus they have to surpass two important obstacles: resistance from individuals at the school level (mainly teaching staff) and resistance from the system that is geared heavily towards large scale, top-down reforms as means of school improvements in spite of decentralization efforts.

It is important to note that unlike certain other countries such as Germany where terms like "school improvement," "school effectiveness," "leadership" and related concepts and models have been adopted (meaning the concepts and the original English terms are known), the French educational research community has so far largely adhered to its own terminology. The term "leadership" is seldom used; the same is true for "school improvement" and "school effectiveness." In 2005, Jean-Michel Leclercq published an analysis of the "leadership vogue" (Leclercq, 2005, p. 133). He concluded that leadership and its many sub-notions were mostly inappropriate for the French educational context due to different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

There are subtle indicators, however, that this point of view is no longer dominant as the number of French publications from the educational field dealing with "leadership" (and employing the English terminology) has in fact increased over the last years (see e.g. Endrizzi and Thibert, 2012; Lillistone, 2010)[2]. Nevertheless, at this stage it remains unclear whether the French research community will adopt the terminology and concepts related to school leadership and school improvement or continue to cultivate its own terminology (for a comprehensive analysis on these developments, see Normand, 2012).

On a more general note, it has been established that leadership is embedded in a local cultural context (Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Wulf, 1995). A greater, cross-cultural understanding of leadership therefore depends on first gaining an insight into the current, actual work practice of school principals in their local context. The majority of the literature at hand addressing this subject is either dated (e.g. Davies, 1987; Martin and Willower, 1981; Willis, 1980) and/or stemming from American research (e.g. Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; Horng *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell and Castle, 2002; Spillane and Hunt, 2010). This makes its validity nowadays outside the American context a matter of interpretation and debate while, at the same time, providing an excellent point of comparison and analysis for cultural peculiarities in both the principalship and leadership.

Common criticisms of studies of school principals often center around the shortcomings of the research usually related to the methods employed, or around the failure to "see the whole picture," in other words overlooking key aspects of school leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 1996a, b, 1999). In-depth analyses of how school leaders work are vital to a deeper understanding on how to sustain conditions that favor innovation, professionalism and learning. Although the importance of the principal and his/her position is recognized, there seems to be insufficient tangible information about the principals' current day-to-day work practices and the nature of the impact of school leaders on school improvement (Huber, 2008; Rayfield and

Diamantes, 2004) This insufficiency appears to be even more poignant when it comes to French schools.

Conceptual anchors

In this paper leadership is understood as practice that entails "influencing and serving others, taking the initiative and making decisions for the greater good, modeling learning and being sensitive to context" (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2008, p. 1). It is recognized that leadership is not inevitably tied to formal positional authority (MacBeath *et al.*, 2004), something Spillane refers to as the "leader-plus aspect" (see e.g. Spillane and Zuberi, 2009, p. 378f; Spillane *et al.*, 2008, p. 191f). However, as this paper revolves around the leadership activities of formally appointed school leaders, leadership activities of other school members are not featured herein. Furthermore (again), taking a distributed perspective as a frame of investigation, it is understood that "interactions are paramount in efforts to understand the practice from a distributed perspective" (Spillane *et al.*, 2008, p. 191). Therefore, this study tries to take into account leadership practice (by school principals) and its context like involved parties, previous activities, whether actions were planned or not, and so on.

In this paper, the school leader is seen as working within boundaries stemming from the rules, laws, expectations, resources and so on that could also be referred to as structure. However, the school leader is neither viewed as being completely unhindered by structure nor are his/her actions viewed as being completely determined by structure. Following Giddens, structure is seen as the mediums as well as the outcome of practices (Giddens, 1985, p. 25). Agency and structure do not oppose, but presuppose each other (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). The agents act according to their knowledge of society and actively produce or reproduce structure. Structure can be defined as rules and resources involving human action and therefore both constrains and enables action. Agency refers to human actions or rather people's capability for action (Giddens, 1985, p. 9).

Methods and sources of data

Common research designs

Broadly speaking, research on principals and their actions can be divided into two main categories: studies that rely on observations and self-report studies. Both approaches present advantages as well as limitations. Observational studies usually result in more detailed data and can allow for more depth of understanding, especially when combined with other methods like interviews. However, they typically do not scale well; their complexity and cost rise almost exponentially which is why they are generally restricted to a relatively small sample size. Therefore, observational studies usually are by no means representative by design but have to rely on generalization to produce results that are of hypothetical validity for larger sizes.

Self-report studies on the other hand are predominantly performed through the use of surveys. These surveys are generally read and completed by the respondents at a specific time, e.g. at the end of their workday, and then turned over to the researcher. This makes it possible to scale up to much higher sampling sizes. However, there are many pitfalls and design limitations such as a certain "operational inflexibility" that stems from the need to keep things quantifiable. An example would be "yes or no" questions in a survey or questions that have to be answered through the use of a scale. Also, there is the risk of skewed data through social desirability, self-reporting biases and memory biases. Finally, another limitation of self-report

studies is that large sample sizes can make it difficult to identify and take into account details that can make such approaches lacking in depth and, possibly, precision.

Over recent decades the experience sampling method (ESM) has become more popular. In this method, subjects are outfitted with electronic devices which signal at certain intervals after which the subject is usually required to answer a few short questions, for example what he/she is currently doing, where and with whom. While this method does largely eliminate problems related to memory bias, it can be less precise than observational studies and also introduces new difficulties such as incomplete data due to unresponsiveness of the subjects (for two more elaborate critiques, see Hormuth, 1986; Mann *et al.*, 2008). Admittedly, some of the risks mentioned previously are also present during observational studies but, generally speaking, they are easier to identify and compensate for than during self-report studies. Another method is to assess principals' actions through the use of a daily log (Camburn *et al.*, 2010; Spillane and Zuberi, 2009). So far, the accuracy of this approach has been found to be higher than ESM and on par with direct observation. However, the daily log has as of yet been seldom used as a method to research school principals and seems prone to the many of the pitfalls associated with ESM; its validity needs further investigation. Also, remembering and then logging various short-term activities (e.g. those taking just a minute) can be very difficult for a respondent.

Methods employed in this study

The research presented in this paper is based on a mostly qualitative approach, relying mainly on a structured observation (in this paper also referred to as "shadowing") and semi-structured interviews. Structured observation refers to a technique for procuring data and is commonly attributed to Henry Mintzberg, who developed it to overcome shortcomings he saw in diary-based techniques that were a prevalent tool to record a subject's activities in the 1950s and 1960s (Mintzberg, 1970). Instead of relying on a subject writing what he or she had done, Mintzberg observed the subject, recording details like time and place, the type of interaction and people involved. His method was at first very well received and was quickly employed in many fields, not just that of managerial studies. Over time, its usage declined and the term "structured observation" was seemingly forgotten. Over the last ten years, however, shadowing has become an increasingly popular method to study persons of interest. The terms "shadowing" and "structured observation" share so many similarities that they are frequently used synonymously (Arman *et al.*, 2012, p. 301f). Additionally, structured observation still enjoys a great deal of popularity in the medical sciences, especially in the field of psychology (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 297f). It can therefore be argued that any reports of the "death" of structured observation are greatly exaggerated.

Regarding the study of educational leadership and administration, structured observation never was as popular a method as it was in the field of managerial studies or in psychology. The 1970s and 1980s can be considered to be the time where this method was most popular, especially in the Australian realm. In one of the more prominent studies of that time, A. Ross Thomas and John Ayres investigated interruptions in the workflow of principals using structured observation. They arrived at the conclusion that interruptions were frequent but that they were often not seen as a hindrance but an investment by the principals (Thomas and Ayres, 1998, p. 248). Another noteworthy study was conducted by Thornton, Thomas and Vine in 1996. Using structured observation in combination with questionnaires and a blood pressure monitor, they described and analyzed the physiological and psychological work stress

of school principals. Their findings contradicted the then-common notion that specific incidents (such as an angry parent demanding to speak to the principal) would generally provoke stress, no matter the circumstances. Instead, they found school principals' stress levels to be dependent on several factors (Thornton *et al.*, 1996, p. 51). Finally, a recent study of school principals in the USA by James P. Spillane and Bijou Hunt relied on questionnaires, ESM logs, interviews and shadowing. One of their main findings was that principals spent at least a fifth of their work time on instruction and curriculum and that the practice of leading and managing curriculum and instruction differs greatly from principal to principal (Spillane and Hunt, 2010, p. 24f).

Structured observation seems to have been employed less frequently nowadays with survey-based studies dominating the field of educational leadership. However, studies employing this method are still conducted and publicized (see e.g. Parkes and Thomas, 2007; Horng *et al.*, 2010)[3].

It should be noted that structured observation in education was not without controversy. In 1982, Peter Gronn fiercely criticized structured observation in a paper entitled "Neo-Taylorism in Educational Administration?" Gronn deemed structured observation to be inadequate for collecting meaningful data and found it to be "infected with […] crude Tayloristic thinking" (Gronn, 1982, p. 17). This sparked an intense debate with the comprehensive piece "Seeing isn't believing? Neither is hearing! In defense of observational studies" by Thomas in reply (Thomas, 1986). In this paper, Thomas attempted to refute Gronn's criticisms, arguing among other things that structured observation consisted of more than Tayloristic motion and time studies and pointing out that Mintzberg's work was not blindly duplicated by researchers of the educational field but used as a starting point for their empirical endeavors[4].

Whether structured observation should be considered a qualitative or a quantitative method is not without dispute. While certain researchers identify it squarely as a qualitative method (e.g. Thomas, 1998), others argue that structured observation may be considered a quantitative tool since it allows for the development of "categorization schemes that allow behavior to be classified, counted, and quantitatively manipulated" (Martinko and Gardner, 1985, p. 689). It is the author's contention that shadowing as used in this study encompasses qualitative as well as quantitative gathering of data; the gathering of (what Thomas calls) "basic" data (e.g. activities, time and duration of such, frequency) being considered rather quantitative, the usage of said data and the gathering of additional data (whether activities were planned or unplanned, the search for patterns, the context) tending towards the qualitative.

The study presented herein took place between November 2010 and January 2011 during which five schools were visited, each for a week. Each principal was shadowed every school day. Shadowing began the moment the principal entered the school building and concluded the moment he/she went home. The shadowing consisted of an open, passive, structured observation of each principal (Mintzberg, 1973). At the beginning of each visit, the principal was instructed to ignore the researcher as best he/she could and to interact with him as little as possible during the shadowing period. During the shadowing, each observed activity was recorded (including a brief description of the activity, the duration, involved parties and the location) and classified. In an effort to compensate for perceived shortcomings in Mintzberg's original method of structured observation, several changes were made. Contrary to Mintzberg's (1970, p. 89ff) original design, the categories used in this study were not solely informed by the observed actions themselves, but also by previous research. They were also more inclusive than Mintzberg's original categories that tended to be

rather clinical (two examples being "desk work" and "phone call" Mintzberg, 1970, p. 92). These observations could therefore also be considered semi-structured instead of structured. Additionally, in order to gather more data regarding the context of what was observed, a semi-structured interview was held with the principal towards the end of each school visit. The interviews were usually held in the afternoon, after school had ended and typically lasted about an hour. They revolved around retracing past and ongoing improvement projects in school, the involvement of the principal, the principal's opinions of such and educational policy regarding school improvement. Projects and procedures that had been observed during the school visits were referenced during the interviews and used as prompts for discussion. The interviews were conceived as expert interviews or key informant interviews (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Marshall, 1996). The material gathered during these interviews was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (see Strauss and Glaser, 2008).

The period of one-week per school was chosen so as to achieve a more valid and reliable data collection process. Visiting schools for only one day could have been misleading with regard to proper data collection. For example, if the said day had been exceptional, the resulting analysis and conclusions would have inevitably been flawed. This risk was reduced by choosing a longer period of observation. While visiting schools for more than a week would have been even more desirable, such was not feasible due to logistical constraints.

The collected data were converted into time stamped logs for each principal's workday using a Gantt-diagram (for a brief description, see Jones, 1988, p. 893f). This resulted in five logs per principal (Monday through Friday). The principal's five logs were superimposed and a hypothetical average day was calculated based on the average number, duration and time of activities observed. In this paper, the specific day observed that most closely resembled the hypothetical average day is used as a reference for discussion of each principal and labeled a "typical day." Due to the majority of the principals having rather erratic schedules in the afternoon, this paper focusses more specifically on the information collected up until noon.

Basic background information such as the size of a school, the age and gender of the interviewed persons, etc., was obtained using a standardized questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent out in advance to the schools and in all but one instance completed and returned before the shadowing stage began. The one exception was delivered on the day shadowing began.

Sources of data

The sources of data for the study reported in this paper consisted of five French collèges (for more information on this type of secondary school, see Toulemonde, 2006, p. 94ff) located in Paris, France. The five principals all agreed to allow full access to their schools and their staff for a week. All personal data were rendered anonymous; hereafter the five principals are simply called Principal 1 through Principal 5. They work in rather similar schools (see Table I). Principal 1's school is located in an economically challenged area and is attended by approximately 400 students. Principal 3's school is very similar. Principal 4's school is also located in a low-income area but is attended by about 600 students. The schools managed by Principals 2 and 5 are located in suburban areas considered to be middle-class and are each attended by about 640 students from diverse backgrounds. Principals 1, 2 and 5 are female, Principals 3 and 4 are male. Principal 1 is 54 years old, Principal 2 is 58, Principal 3 is 61, Principal 4 is 49 and Principal 5 is 51.

Categories employed in this study

Prior to the conduct of this study a literature review of categories employed in recent studies with similar aims and methods was completed. The aim of such was to identify essential categories used with regard to assessing the day-to-day work of school principals. The review revealed important common denominators. "Administration" was oftentimes a central task category, as were "relationships," "relationship building," "fostering relationships" or "relations," respectively (see e.g. Brauckmann and Pashiardis, 2012, p. 25ff; Horng *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell and Castle, 2002; Skedsmo *et al.*, 2011; Spillane *et al.*, 2007). The two categories "administration" and "relationships" were therefore established as preliminary categories of study for the structured observation. Additionally, "school improvement" was established as a category due to the orientation of the second research question of the study. A literature analysis of the French educational system with a strong focus on the duties of French secondary school principals led to the hypothesis that the categories mentioned above would also be appropriate for the French context. This hypothesis was upheld after a pretest during which approximately 60 distinct actions were recorded, hinting at the broad spectrum of different activities for which school principals are deemed responsible. These were subsequently classified into the three aggregate categories based on the literature review. This was necessary in order to reduce the number of activities so that meaningful deductions could be made. The developed categories correspond to the management functions[5] of school leaders as defined by Dalin (1998, p. 81ff). According to him, a school needs three management functions: the administrative function, consisting of organizing and making decisions, but also delegating and representing; the educational improvement function consisting mainly of development, guidance and evaluation; and the social function consisting mainly of communication, conflict mediation and caring for individual problems. Additionally, as a result of the pretest, a fourth category was developed to take into account the (very limited) time principals spent doing non-work-related activities. The resulting categories used in this study are thus:

Activity 1 School administration and organizational management such as routine work centered on maintaining the status quo, e.g. managing budgets, schedules, report duties towards school inspection, making rounds, ordinary communication with parents.

Activity 2 Human relations such as internal and external social interaction unrelated to administrative tasks, e.g. settling disputes and fostering relationships, mediating and counseling.

Activity 3 School improvement-related activities such as systematic, sustained efforts aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in a school, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively (adapted from Velzen *et al.*, 1985, p. 48).

Activity 4 Non-work-related activities, for example, private phone call to spouse.

Name	Gender	Age	Size of school	Surroundings of school
Principal 1	Female	54	~450 students	Low-income area
Principal 2	Female	58	~600 students	Suburban area
Principal 3	Male	61	~400 students	Low-income area
Principal 4	Female	49	~650 students	Low-income area
Principal 5	Male	51	~490 students	Suburban area

Table I.
Principals presented in this study

It should be noted that observed school improvement efforts often occurred in the form of project work; there was rarely explicit talk of practicing "school improvement." Also, since this study focusses on individual schools, the original definition of school improvement by Velzen *et al.* was restricted accordingly, thus omitting certain areas of school improvement such as efforts made beyond the school level.

Results

After analyzing the observational and interview data, it can be said that while there are differences with regard to organizational and leadership activities, common features could be seen in all schools. Several generalized observations were noted:

- principals performed a magnitude of different tasks every day;
- they performed a lot of unplanned activities every day;
- most activities did not last long;
- principals were frequently interrupted thus fragmenting workflow; and
- three of the five observed principals placed a strong focus on day-to-day management.

With regard to school improvement, the following observations were made:

- all but one principal did not prioritize school improvement;
- all but one principal tried to personally supervise most school improvement-related activities;
- with one exception, all principals viewed themselves as having too little power to ignite significant change;
- all principals characterized themselves as being agents of stability as well as agents of change; and
- three of the five principals expressed frustration in trying to find the right balance between preservation and innovation.

Administrative work made up the bulk of all principals' workdays. All principals spent at least half of their time on administrative tasks. On average, the administrative activities on which principals spent the most time were overseeing student services, coordinating matters associated with the short-term management of the teaching staff and managing budgets. Regarding activities related to human relations, settling disputes between students and teachers, usually about disciplinary issues, took up a significant amount of time – as did motivating staff. In four out of the five schools visited, the amount of time spent on school improvement-related activities seemed of low significance. In all schools time spent on personal activities was of least significance.

Principal 1

Looking more closely at the individual schools, certain common characteristics as well as individual differences became evident. For example, the workdays of Principals 1, 2, 4 and 5 consisted of lots of short, frequently interrupted bursts of activities. In the case of Principal 1, 61 distinct actions were recorded between the time she arrived at work

and the time she left for lunch. Most of those actions were of administrative nature. She spent by far the most time, over three hours, on day-to-day and administrative tasks, for example asking teachers to submit grades for their students and managing day-to-day operational problems (making calls to find out who is sick, writing memos to remind teachers to turn in grades etc., see Figures 1 and 2 and Table II for an outline

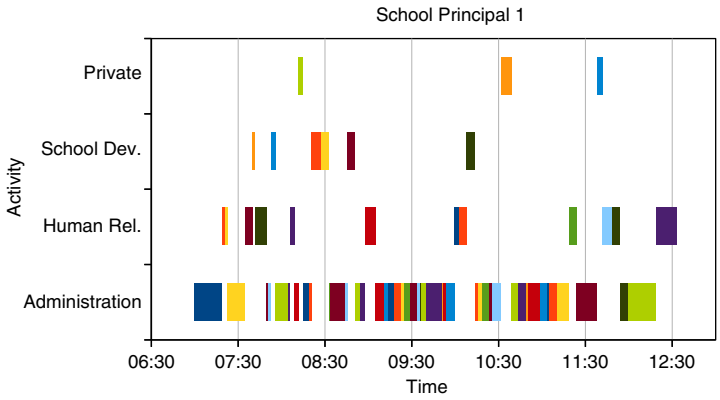

Figure 1.
Time-log of School Principal 1

Notes: Each "slice" represents one activity. The longer the "slice," the longer the activity lasted. Each time an activity changes, another color is used. Besides this, the various colors have no special meaning. Repeating colors do not indicate repeating activities

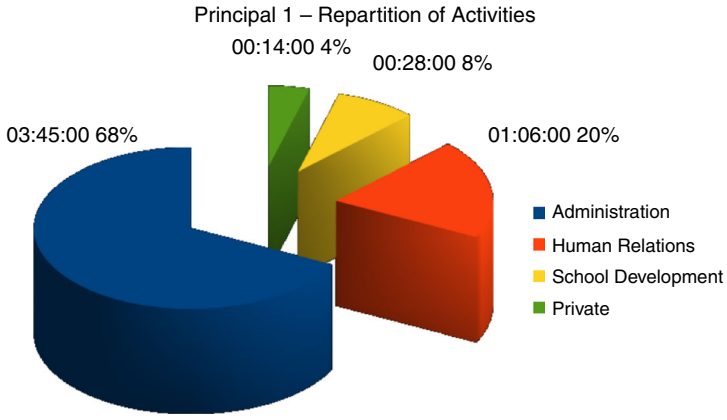

Figure 2.
Distribution of activities of Principal 1 during a typical morning

Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
03:45 h (67.57%)	01:06 h (19.82%)	00:28 h (8.41%)	00:14 h (4.20%)	05:33 h (100%)

Table II.
Distribution of activities of Principal 1 during a typical morning

of activities). Frequently she was interrupted by the telephone or by a knock at her door resulting in a request, often to help solve a problem.

Principal 1 also spent a significant amount of time reading and responding to official notices. Social interaction unrelated to administrative tasks was infrequent, any activity related to school improvement even more so. When her workload – as she perceived it – permitted it, or in case of serious conflict, Principal 1 tried to foster human relations, listening to people's concerns and ideas and offering comfort and advice. The time spent on human relations amounted to just over an hour between the beginning of work and lunch. During the interview, Principal 1 explained that she was open for school improvement initiatives, but that the day-to-day operations left her no spare time for these activities. She felt that her job was already very stressful, stating that it "drains my batteries pretty quickly." She also stated that she felt she did not have a good enough rapport with her teaching staff to implement changes and expressed a desire for more executive powers over her staff in this context. When asked about her vice principal, she referred to her as her "right arm" and "deputy." Principal 1 explained that she had a good relationship with her vice principal but that, in her opinion, it was clear that there was a hierarchy that had to be observed. She noted that her vice principal was also a member of her executive.

Principal 2

A typical day at work for Principal 2 resembled that of Principal 1. Her workflow was less fragmented than that of Principal 1, but like Principal 1, Principal 2 spent the majority of her time – over three hours – doing administrative work, followed by time spent on human relations and on school improvement-related activities (see Figures 3 and 4 and Table III). As is the case with Principal 1, Principal 2 did not spend much time on school improvement-related activities, less than half an hour. According to Principal 2, school improvement, although important, took up too much of her time. She stated that she perceived her day-to-day work as very demanding, at times excessively so. She did not feel that her vice principal was adequate to handle important school improvement projects on her own. Principal 2 explained that in general she viewed her vice principal as an aid, but not one she deemed capable of handling "the important matters." She further stated she wished teachers would be more supportive of school improvement efforts, but that her teaching staff tried to block most school improvement projects out of fear it would entail significant additional work. She declared that for the time being she had resigned herself to the current state of affairs.

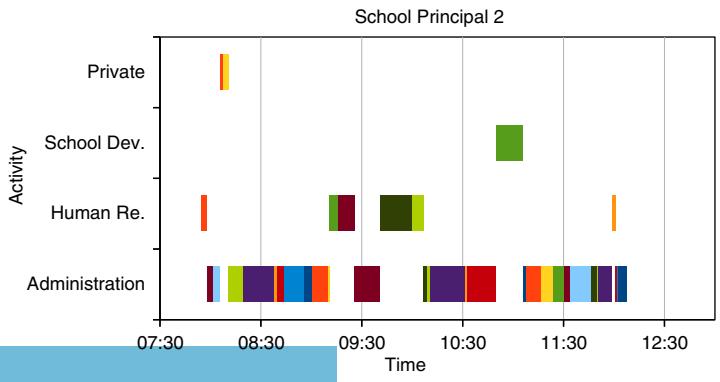

Figure 3.
Time-log of school Principal 2

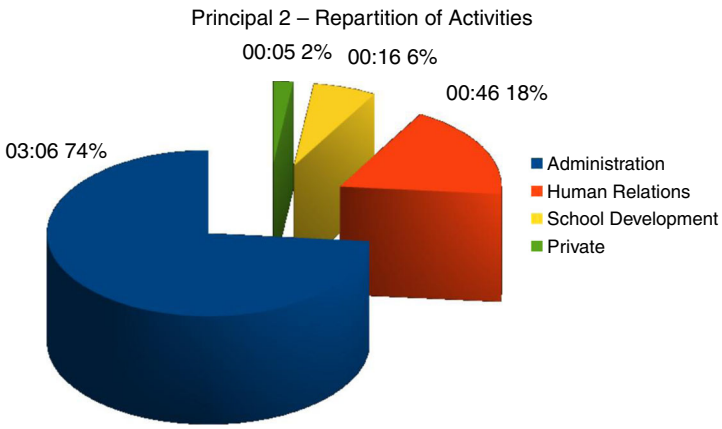

Figure 4.
Distribution of activities of Principal 2 during a typical morning

Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
03:06 h (73.52%)	00:46 h (18.18%)	00:16 h (6.32%)	00:05 h (1.98%)	04:13 h (100%)

Table III.
Distribution of activities of Principal 2 during a typical morning

Principal 3

While a typical day in the life of Principal 3 still showed several short bursts of activity, administrative work was not quite as dominant as with the other principals (see Figures 5 and 6 and Table IV). In total, 24 activities were recorded during a typical workday, noticeably less than for the other principals. Principal 3 devoted significantly more time to school improvement-related issues than his colleagues on a day-to-day basis. During his interview, he explained that he had tried "getting through the day" when he was younger, referring to it as the "firefighter approach." He found a strong focus on improvement and effectiveness actually to be more helpful to the school and

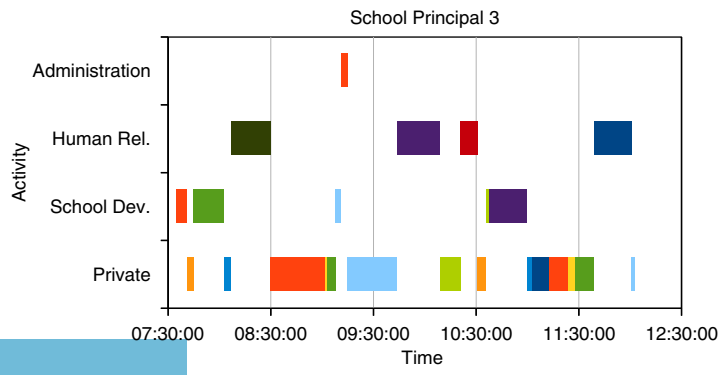

Figure 5.
Time-log of Principal 3

less stressful to him as it forced him to delegate matters such as the many emergencies occurring during the day. According to him, this shift ultimately led to fewer interruptions and a better workflow. To Principal 3, an integral point of this shift and an even greater key to success was strongly relying on his vice principal, delegating in a very consistent manner and empowering him. During the interview, he stated that he had "absolute" faith in his vice principal and that the vice principal regularly made vital executive decisions if Principal 3 was unable to make them himself due to other obligations, especially when it came to handling day-to-day affairs. That way, there was no waiting around for him to be available, again resulting in a more efficient workflow for everybody. Principal 3 further explained that he viewed his vice principal "for all intents and purposes as equal," but stressed that this was, to his knowledge, very uncommon. He believed that this approach had resulted in the vice principal feeling more empowered and, as a result, he was "probably doing more than a lot of vice principals." Principal 3 emphasized that this was only possible because he and his vice principal regularly discussed their goals for the school, ensuring that they were in agreement and because they had a great personal rapport. They had short, regular meetings every morning to which they referred as "briefing sessions."

Principal 4

A typical day of Principal 4 revealed certain similarities with that of Principals 1, 2 and 5. Like theirs, a day for Principal 4 consisted mainly of frequent short activities (see Figure 7). However, while he spent a significant amount of his time on administrative task, it was considerably less than the time spent by Principal 1 or 2. He also spent a little more than one hour on human relations (see Figure 8 and Table V). The typical day of Principal 4 (further) differed from that of Principals 1, 2 and 5 when it came to school improvement; Principal 4 spent almost one hour on school improvement-related

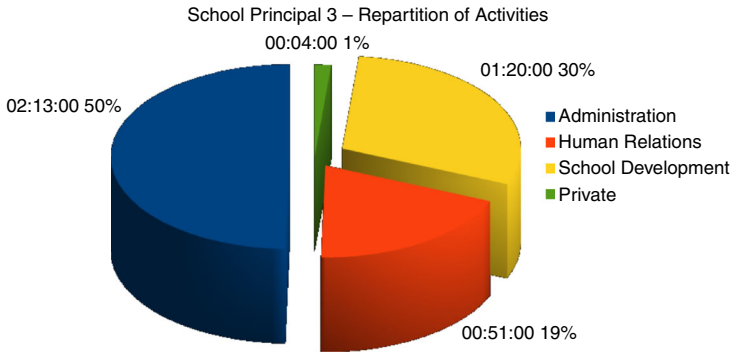

Figure 6.
Distribution of activities of Principal 3 during a typical morning

Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
02:13 h (49.63%)	00:51 h (19.03%)	01:20 h (29.85%)	00:04 h (1.49%)	04:28 h (100%)

Table IV.
Distribution of activities of Principal 3 during a typical morning

activities, considerably more than Principals 1, 2 and 5. Finally, Principal 4 spent a negligible amount of time on personal and non-work-related activities. During the interview, he stated that improving his school was his highest priority and that he felt that his staff was supporting this endeavor and prepared to focus on long-term development strategies. When asked about his vice principal, Principal 4 stated that he had a great rapport with her and that he relied on her immensely for "all the administrative stuff," explaining that he viewed her as autonomous in that domain. He added that he preferred to let her handle these matters freely so that he could focus on projects to develop the school. Regarding teacher participation in school improvement, Principal 4 felt that this was an area that could still be improved and regretted not being able to motivate and compensate his teaching staff through the use of bonuses. He explained that he had hardly any legal way to motivate his staff to

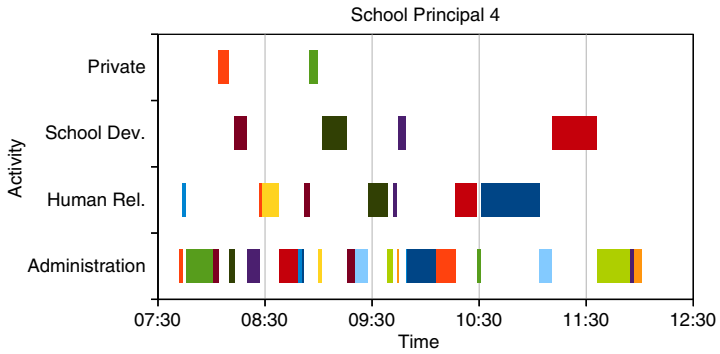

Figure 7.
Time-log of Principal 4

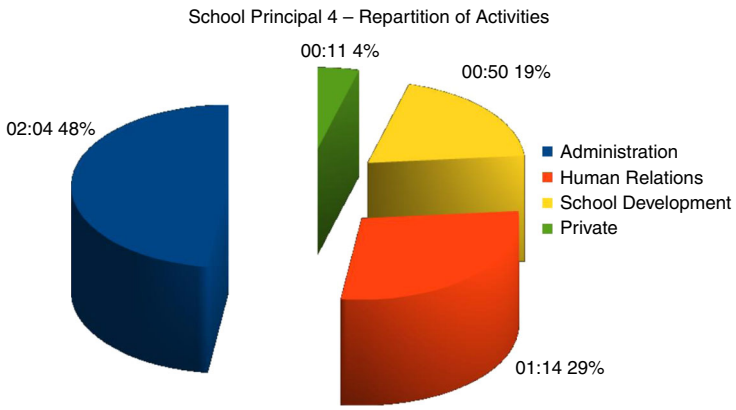

Figure 8.
Distribution of activities of Principal 4 during a typical morning

Table V.
Distribution of activities of Principal 4 during a typical morning

Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
02:04 h (47.88%)	01:14 h (28.57%)	00:50 h (19.31%)	00:11 h (4.24%)	04:19 h (100%)

participate, be it in the form of bonuses or sanctions, and therefore relied on their continuing good will for participation.

Principal 5

A typical day of Principal 5 resembled that of Principals 1 and 2 in several ways. She spent her time working on many short-lasting activities, oftentimes being interrupted (see Figure 9). She spent the most time on administrative activities (see Figure 10 and Table VI). In her case, these included many matters related to student discipline. A common occurrence consisted of teaching and supervising staff asking her to approve disciplinary actions taken against students. According to Principal 5, parents at her school had a reputation for challenging disciplinary actions taken against their children. Over time this had led to teachers asking the principal to "sign off" on

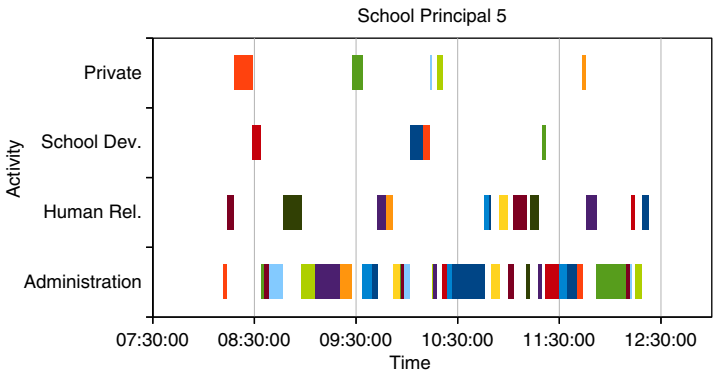

Figure 9.
Time-log of Principal 5

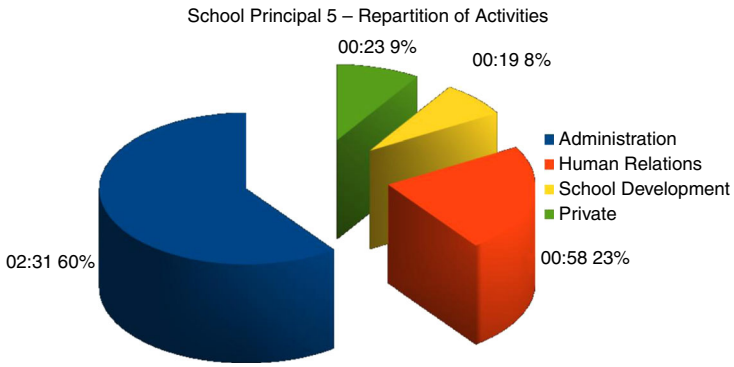

Figure 10.
Distribution of activities of Principal 5 during a typical morning

Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
02:31 h (60.16%)	00:58 h (23.11%)	00:19 h (7.57%)	00:23 h (9.16%)	04:11 h (100%)

Table VI.
Distribution of activities of Principal 5 during a typical morning

any action in order to be in a stronger position in case parents complained or appealed. Principal 5 stated that she could understand the teachers' point of view but that it also frustrated her as it resulted in a lot of time-consuming "meaningless paperwork" for her. She stated that this made her job, which was already stressful enough, even more demanding. The principal also spent a significant amount of time, almost a full hour, on human relations. Most of this was devoted to resolving conflicts between parents and teachers, followed by the motivation of her staff. Comparatively little time was spent on school improvement-related activities. Principal 5 stated she had a desire to spend more time on it, but "more urgent matters keep getting in the way." She described her relationship with her vice principal as "extremely good" and professed that she wanted her vice principal to "one day, be able to do anything I do." However, Principal 5 explained that she felt reluctant to give her vice principal too many or too important tasks because it was her first year in this position.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consists of schools from a school district situated in Paris, France, clearly limiting the possible ranges of interpretation and generalization. Second, this study does not encompass all dimensions of the work of school principals. For example, the work they did from home was not recorded. Third, with studies of observation as extensive as the one presented in this paper, there is always a risk to succumb to cognitive biases like the Pygmalion effect also referred to as the Rosenthal effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). In essence the Rosenthal effect describes a phenomenon where certain expectations are projected on people due to previous knowledge upon which they then perform accordingly. However, since the principals observed and the researcher did not know each other prior to the study and had only had brief contact via e-mail (and a brief talk on the phone), the risk of a Rosenthal-like effect seems rather low. There is also the possibility of the Hawthorne effect, referring to the possibility that people will perform "better" than usual simply because they know they are being observed (for a description and critical review of the Hawthorne effect, see Jones, 1992). Again, this risk has been deemed insignificant as the principals received no feedback whatsoever during the week they were observed and interaction was kept to a minimum. Even if principals had had a conscious or subconscious desire to perform better, they would not have known in what ways to do so (e.g. perform more activities, perform more of a certain activity, emphasize a certain activity, etc.). More importantly, it is (not only) the author's contention that any research, be it quantitative or qualitative in nature, is influenced by the researcher's understanding and views and must therefore be biased in some respects. Consequently, it is imperative that all vital information be made transparent so that other researchers in the field can comprehend, reproduce and critique the work undertaken. Cognitive biases may not be eliminated this way but they can be made visible. While it cannot be guaranteed that the observations made and the conclusions reached in this study are free of bias, every effort has been made to make the theoretical assumptions and methods employed transparent. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether a sampling frame of one week of observation per school is enough to get a reliable estimate of a principal's daily work. Longer observations over the course of an entire school year might be desirable to produce more reliable results. Regarding the method chosen, it is the author's belief that structured observation as it was conducted in this study was an adequate method of procuring data. Criticisms that structured observations yield no meaningful information or that they are a crude Tayloristic method, seem misplaced,

especially since no activity was recorded and analyzed in a vacuum but always with consideration for the context.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the school principals observed (and perhaps others in France) performed a multitude of tasks and responsibilities and had to cope with a demanding level of complexity. Oftentimes they worked in short bursts of activity, frequently being interrupted. This pattern of work is not exclusive to these French principals; in fact it seems to be quite common among principals (see e.g. Willis, 1980, p. 46 who writes "[…] the principal's day will generally be hectic in pace, varied in its composition, discontinuous in any pursuit of tasks, with the unexpected always one of the few certainties of the job"). Their activities were mostly concerned with administration and relationships. Three of the principals shadowed (Principals 1, 2 and 5) perceived the present, meaning the day-to-day operations, as critical. During the interviews they emphasized the importance of dealing with matters in the present or the near future. This "firefighter approach" of school leaders has long been viewed critically as it poses a high risk of focussing almost exclusively on short-term "quick fix" solutions, foregoing the development of long-term strategies (Peterson, 1977; Weick, 1996). This is also consistent with Anne Barrère's findings regarding "conflicting temporalities" of French school principals that were mentioned earlier: all observed principals were unable to comfortably balance short-term and long-term expectations; instead they either focussed on the present or the future. The workdays of Principals 1, 2 and 5 and partly those of Principal 4 were very disparate. Incidentally, Principals 1, 2 and 5 all mentioned the experience of stress in their work routine. This persistent feeling of being overburdened and always under pressure has been reported to be the case for principals in various countries (OECD, 2008, p. 30ff). Principals 1, 2 and 5 indicated that they handled all matters they deemed important themselves, especially when it came to school improvement efforts. This approach of micro-managing might be a key to understanding the high level of fragmentation of their workdays. If a high level of fragmentation is deemed undesirable (which might not be the case, see e.g. Thomas and Ayres, 1998), then a key factor to changing this appears to be the use of shared leadership structures. However, based on both what was observed and on the interviews, it is clear that while the concepts of shared leadership and their advantages are well known among the scientific society and practiced in several countries (mainly Scandinavian, see e.g. MacBeath, 2009), globally speaking, shared leadership practices do not seem to be widespread among school leaders (again, this has been reported to be so for principals in many countries, see OECD, 2008), certainly not in France. All principals except Principal 3, and to a lesser degree Principal 4, could likely free up time by delegating more consistently and building structures of shared leadership. Further research, especially on implementation and possible incentives, appears to be desirable in this context.

Another key could be the preparation of school principals as well as their further education. As this study demonstrates, there are similarities regarding the work of school leaders that are clearly transcultural. In addition many countries are experiencing policy convergence when it comes to their educational systems. As school leadership preparation programs around the world are showing first signs of moving towards the direction of globally minded leadership (Easley and Tulowitzki, 2012), the need for developing multicultural perspectives on common leadership practices and

challenges becomes greater, eventually possibly arriving at a theory of school leadership that encompasses cultural and intercultural aspects.

Concerning the second research question, it seems evident that to Principals 1, 2 and 5, school improvement appeared to be merely one aspect among many, but of rather low significance in their day-to-day work routine. Much time was spent on administrative tasks, followed by fostering human relations. In most cases, very little time was spent working on developing the school (Table VII). Judging from both observations and interviews, it seemed that the principals were often held back or discouraged because of a real or perceived overburdening workload. Two principals expressed frustration over their lack of executive power over their teaching staff regarding the implementation of school improvement projects. Looking at the legal rules and regulations and taking these frustrations at face value, they seem to be valid: while school improvement is part of the official job profile of a French teacher, no paid working hours are set apart for it. Also, the school principal legally has only full administrative authority over his teaching staff; his authority when it comes to school improvement is limited. Teacher's unions in France have used this as an argument to refute the notion that school principals can task teachers with work on school improvement projects.

A prerequisite for school improvement is having the time to devote to such. The availability of such was not noticeable during the study, an impression strongly reinforced during the interviews with four principals. In conjunction with the establishment of a shared leadership culture, a strong system of knowledge management might alleviate the feeling of not having enough time. The importance of such a system has been underlined in various studies (e.g. OECD, 2000) – especially in the context of school leadership. Further research into how to promote a culture of (efficient) knowledge sharing in schools might lead to tools that make the principals' work more efficient and free up time. The data from Principal 3 suggests that a coherent stringent focus on school improvement and effectiveness might help to reduce the fragmentation and frequent interruptions that most of these principals were experiencing.

While this study has highlighted similarities across national borders, the French context should not be ignored when assessing the results. A comparison with findings from major American or Australian studies like the aforementioned study by Spillane and Hunt is difficult as French principals are not responsible for curriculum and instruction in the way their American counterparts are. Therefore, the image of the school principal as instructional leader that seems to be quite popular in the American

Table VII.
Distribution of activities of all principals during their typical mornings

Principal	Time spent on administrative work	Time spent on human relations	Time spent on school improvement related activities	Time spent on private activities	Total time spent working between arriving at school and going to lunch
Principal 1	03:45 h (67.57%)	01:06 h (19.82%)	00:28 h (8.41%)	00:14 h (4.20%)	05:33 h (100%)
Principal 2	03:06 h (73.52%)	00:46 h (18.18%)	00:16 h (6.32%)	00:05 h (1.98%)	04:13 h (100%)
Principal 3	02:13 h (49.63%)	00:51 h (19.03%)	01:20 (29.85%)	00:04 (1.49%)	04:28 h (100%)
Principal 4	02:04 h (47.88%)	01:14 h (28.57%)	00:50 (19.31%)	00:11 (4.24%)	04:19 h (100%)
Principal 5	02:31 h (60.16%)	00:58 h (23.11%)	00:19 (7.57%)	00:23 (9.16%)	04:11 h (100%)

literature does not seem appropriate for the French context, at least not presently. The task of a school principal in France used to be that of an administrator and overseer while a teacher was regarded to be first and foremost an educator. The strong opposition between principals and teachers regarding school improvement-related work may therefore be attributed to the unique cultural and historical French context. It appears plausible that the transition towards school principals as leaders, which only began in the 1980s in France, must occur at a different pace as the shift in culture that is required is more challenging than in countries such as Germany, the UK or the USA. Findings regarding the ongoing transition of the school principalship made by French researchers and referenced earlier in this paper are only partially supported by this study; without further training and perhaps several changes in law, it is difficult to see how the observed principals could move on from the status quo and advance in their transition from administrators to leaders.

Notes

1. While the French educational system is largely centralized, each school deals primarily with the representatives from its respective school district when it comes to implementing reforms, obtaining authorizations for projects and so on. Thus, selecting schools from different school districts could have posed a risk of skewed data, seeing as how different school districts might have different interpretation of common standards, procedures and expectations.
2. Another indication for the increased awareness and interest for educational leadership in France is that the conference theme for a 2012 educational conference of the École normale supérieure de Lyon was "La question du leadership" (the issue of leadership).
3. Horng *et al.* do not employ the term "structured observation" and instead refer to the method they used as "time-use observations" or "shadowing". Spillane and Hunt also use the term "shadowing" to describe an approach that bears striking similarities to structured observation.
4. Mintzberg himself has repeatedly stated his disappointment that his research had mainly been replicated instead of being expanded upon (Mintzberg, 1990, p. 170).
5. The term management carries a lot of different meanings these days, be it in the daily use or in a scientific use. What is more problematic is that there seems to be some overlap of meaning between management and leadership. In this paper, management is meant to be understood as act or process of taking influence in order to accomplish certain goals with the ultimate goal to maintain the status quo, much like the concept of transactional leadership. Leadership in this paper refers to acts or processes to improve upon the status quo, much like the concept of transformational leadership. This allocation of meaning is certainly debatable. It is also important to bear in mind that Dalin uses the term "management function" differently: he uses it in a way that encompasses leadership as well as management aspects.

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