

School Autonomy in France According to Talis 2013: The Importance of Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, school autonomy in France has become a central issue for the improvement of students' outcomes. French principals, who have a significant responsibility for learning tasks, play an active role in decision-making. The purpose of this study is to explore the correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately-managed) and the significant responsibilities of French principals which participated in TALIS 2013. The sample consisted of 174 participants. Descriptive data were generated for all variables (percentages and means). Pearson's chi-square test was used to determine if there is an association between the type of school and principals' responsibilities for some tasks. All analyses were carried out using SPSS, version 22. Findings suggest a significant correlation between the type of school and principals' responsibilities for dismissing teachers and establishing teachers' salaries. This study adds to a growing body of research that school-based management has an influence on principals' responsibilities for deciding which courses are offered and choosing learning materials.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, principals, professional autonomy, school autonomy, school-based management.

INTRODUCTION

In France, not all schools assume the same responsibilities legal or administrative. Hence the fact that people who administer schools receive different names. Principal is the name of Lower Secondary Education directors and Proviseur, in the Lycée, of Higher Secondary Education. French principals of Secondary Education can make decisions to authorize expenses, modernize the equipment and make some items of the budget more flexible (Oria, 2009). A qualitative study by Tulowitzki (2013) described how five Parisian principals had spent their work time. Most of them put a low emphasis on school improvement. They had to face many tasks and responsibilities with a demanding level of complexity. Their activities were related to administration and relationship.

In France, the transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education is particular: families are involved in a process of dialogue with the school. In the first step, families make a request. In the second step, the staff meeting formulates a proposal. Barg (2013) found that school staff's decision-making depended on families' requests and, therefore, had reproduced the differences between social classes. Parental involvement had a great influence on school staff's decision-making. From a legal point of view, French principals can make decisions related to the organization of teaching in their school, but not with their methods and contents. This task is carried out through a division of responsibilities between the administration, the year head and its team and the pedagogical area (teachers) (Normand, 2015). French public schools are managed through a centralized system in which all teachers and principals are government employees. Elementary schools have principals who teach in and manage their schools, whereas principals work full time in middle and high schools (Supovitz, 2013).

The administrative accountability has influenced schools in the long term, although it has not had important consequences on teaching responsibilities. There is a limited autonomy for schools, a framework for school choice of limited dimensions and an unsatisfactory decentralization (Derouet, Normand & Pacheco, 2015).

School principals have the right to be both leaders and spokespersons for their schools. An effective management of human resources requires the recognition of directors as leaders, which does not agree with the pedagogical autonomy and professionalism demanded by teachers (Dutercq, 2015).

In 2005, an accountability policy was implemented in the French educational system, but it remains bureaucratic, centralized and descending, without taking school improvement into account. French principals have limited autonomy because their tasks are limited by the national standards in the curricula, teaching and schedules in schools (Normand, 2016).

French students' scores in PISA tests are close to the average of the OECD countries in all subjects. The government created two action plans. One plan is intended to provide personalized assistance to students with learning difficulties. Another plan aims to give schools more autonomy to manage its budget (Baird et al., 2016). After the publication of PISA results in France, the French government implemented national standards, an evaluation based on the PISA methodology for eighth grade students (Hugonnier, 2017).

The growing inequality of student performance in the last 15 years, confirmed by PISA results and the fact that this inequality is the highest in Europe, has been the reason why school autonomy remains limited. Many teachers and parents believe in traditional teaching and question political measures that advocate the learning diversity (Michel, 2017). In a study investigating principals' workload in France, Leithwood & Azah (2014) reported that school improvement is related to highly motivated principals who perfect their leadership over time, take advantage of their abilities in different contexts and work with other principals.

OBJECTIVE

This paper investigates the factors that influence French principals' decision-making. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the type of school (publicly or privately-managed) and the significant responsibilities of French principals for some tasks to improve school management.

THE STUDY

Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is an international survey that offers the opportunity for principals to provide information about their professional development, practices, beliefs and school leadership. The questionnaire, which asks for information about policy matters and education, was completed by French principals (OECD, 2013).

Data were collected from TALIS 2013 results in France.

A variable is a construct or concept which is assigned to numerical values (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011).

A qualitative or nominal variable, which involves non-numerical observations, describes an individual by putting it into a group or category such as man or woman (Brase & Brase, 2016).

The values of a categorical or nominal variable are expressed as some categories, stated in words. If a categorical variable has two values is called a dichotomous variable. If it has more than two values, it's called a polytomous variable (Quader, 2016).

Pearson's chi-square test was used to determine if there is an association between the type of school and the significant responsibilities of French principals. The chi-square test of independence is conducted to determine whether the frequencies' distribution for one categorical variable is independent of another variable (Tokunaga, 2015). It's used to test the null hypothesis that the outcomes' proportions are the same all compared groups. The alternative hypothesis states that the proportions of outcomes are different (Hanneman, Kposowa & Riddle, 2013). The null hypothesis claims that there is no difference between compared groups or no relationship between variables. In contrast, the alternative hypothesis claims that there is a difference between compared groups or relationship between variables (Allen, 2017). If the P-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is true. Then the result is statistically significant. If the P-value is equal to or greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted and the result is not statistically significant (Defusco et. al, 2015; Epstein & Martin, 2014).

In general terms, the alpha level or the level of significance is a probability level set before beginning hypothesis testing and determines the standard to reject the null hypothesis (Smith, Gratz & Bousquet, 2009). The alpha level sets the boundaries that separate high-probability samples (those that are likely to be obtained) from low-probability samples (those that are unlikely to be obtained) if the null hypothesis is true (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). In social sciences, it's commonly used an alpha level = 0.05. The normal curve of the sampling distribution, which represents 95% of its area, is included within 1.96 standard deviation units. Any score farther away from the mean falls within the 5% region (2.5% on either extreme of the sampling distribution) (Meyers, Gamst & Guarino, 2006).

All analyses were carried out using SPSS, version 22.

FINDINGS

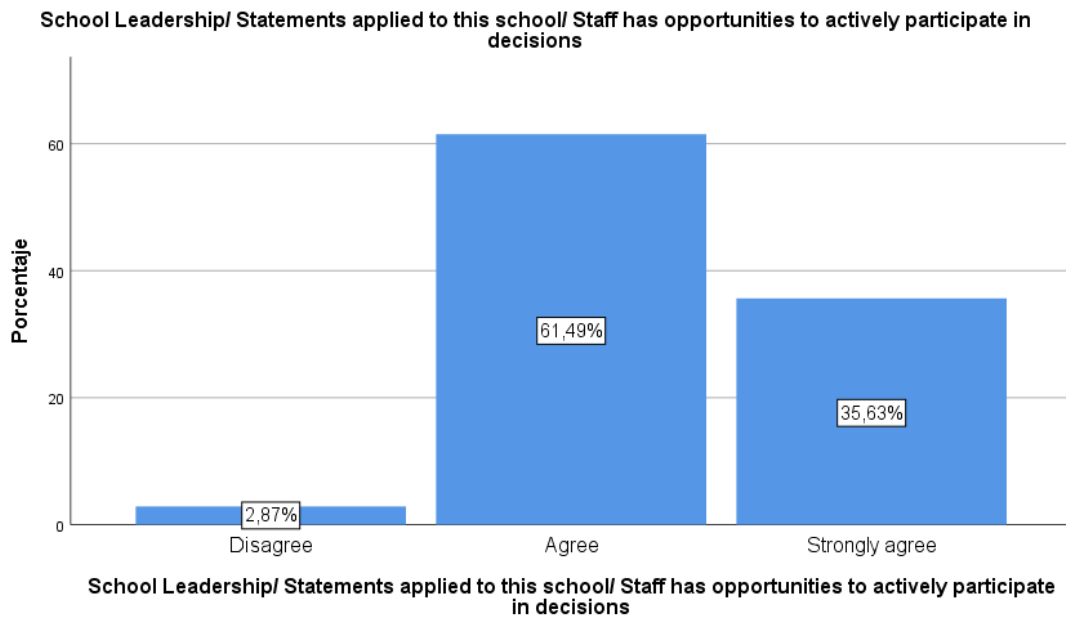


Chart 1. Percentage of French principals who answered the question “How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: This school provides staff with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions”.

Of two hundred and four French principals, one hundred and seventy four completed the questionnaire. 61.49% of French principals provide staff with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions, 35.63% of the respondent strongly agreed with the statement. A minority of participants (2.87%) disagree with the statement.

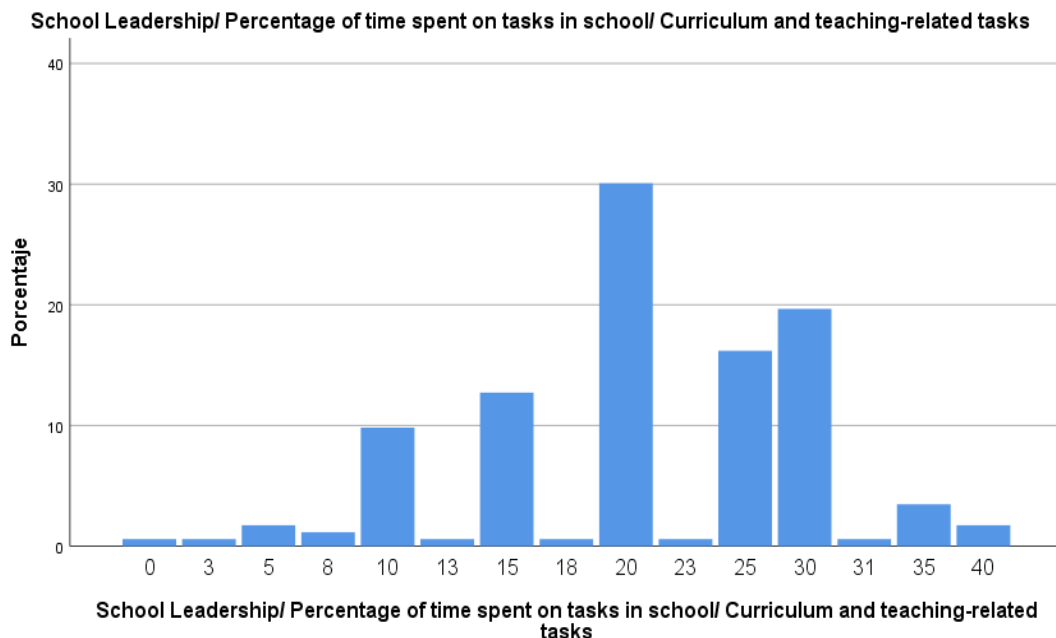


Chart 2. On average throughout the school year, percentage of time in the role as a principal that he/she spends on Curriculum and teaching-related tasks in school (Including developing curriculum, teaching, classroom observations, student evaluation, mentoring teachers, teacher professional development).

From the Chart 2 it can be seen that 30% of French principals have spent 20% of their time on Curriculum and teaching related tasks in school, 19.6% of them have spent 30% on their time, 16.9 of them have spent 25% of

their time. 12.8% of French Principals have spent 15% of their time and 9.8% spent 10% of their time on Curriculum and teaching-related tasks. A minority of participants (less than 3%) have spent different percentages of their time on these tasks; for instance, 3%, 5%, 8%, 13%, 18%, 31%, 35% and 40%

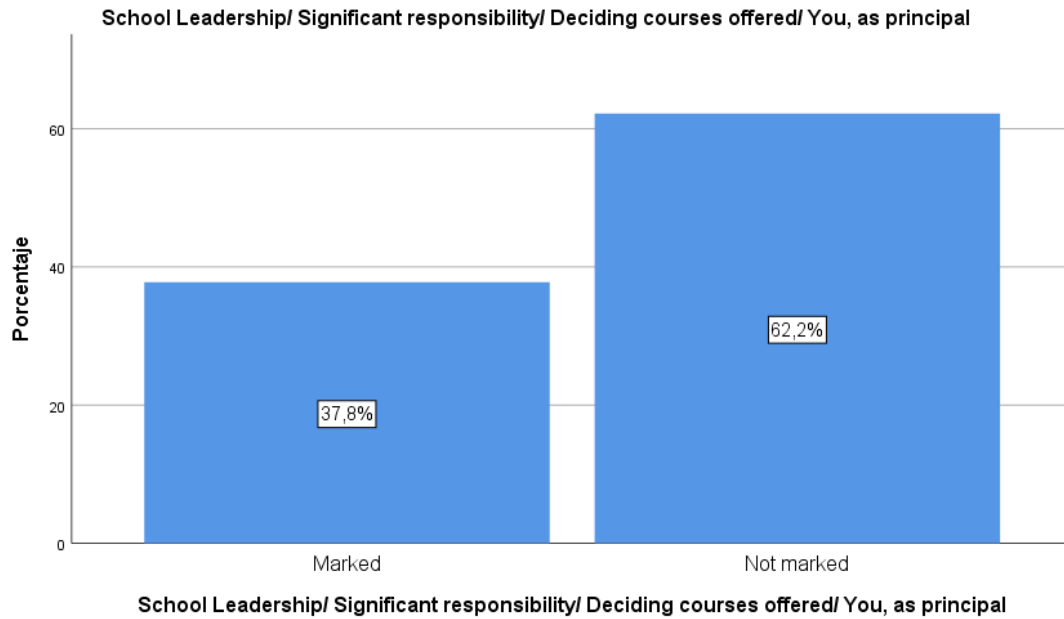


Chart 3. Percentage of French principals who had a significant responsibility for deciding which courses were offered.

From the Chart 3 it can be seen that 37.8% of French principals had a significant responsibility for deciding which courses are offered, whereas 62.2% of them hadn't this responsibility.

Chi-Square distribution

The null hypothesis is accepted if the P-value is equal to or greater than 0.05 (the two variables are independent) The alternative hypothesis is true if the P-value is less than 0.05 (the two variables are related)

Table 1. P-Value of the correlation between the type of school and principals' responsibilities for dismissing teachers.

	Value	df	P-value
Chi-square Distribution: Is there a correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and principals' responsibilities for dismissing teachers?	10,272 ^a	1	0.001

As Table 1 shows, there is a statistically significant correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and French principal's responsibility for dismissing teachers. The alternative hypothesis is true, so there is a difference between compared groups (public/private school principals) in relation to that task.

Table 2. P-Value of the correlation between the type of school and principals’ responsibilities for deciding which courses are offered.

	Value	Df	P-value
Chi-square Distribution: Is there a correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and principals’ responsibilities for deciding which courses are offered?	23,023 ^a	1	0.00

Table 2 shows a P-value = 0. There is a statistically significant correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and French principals’ responsibilities for deciding which courses are offered. The alternative hypothesis is accepted, so there is a difference between compared groups (public/private school principals) in relation to that task.

Table 3. P-Value of the correlation between the type of school and principals’ responsibilities for deciding on budget allocations within their school.

	Value	Df	P-value
Chi-square Distribution: Is there a correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and principals’ responsibilities for deciding on budget allocations within their school?	4,647 ^a	1	0.031

Table 3 presents a P-Value = 0.031. There is a statistically significant correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and French principals’ responsibilities for deciding on budget allocations within their school. The alternative hypothesis is true, so there is a difference between compared groups (public/private school principals) in relation to that task.

Table 4. P-Value of the correlation between the type of school and principals’ responsibilities for choosing learning materials.

	Value	Df	P-value
Chi-square Distribution: Is there a correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and principals’ responsibilities for choosing learning materials?	4,548 ^a	1	0.033

As Table 4 shows, the P-value is less than 0.05. There is a statistically significant correlation between the type of school (publicly or privately managed) and French principal’s responsibility for choosing learning materials. The alternative hypothesis is true, so there is a difference between compared groups (public/private school principals) in relation to that task.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that nearly 62% of French principals provide staff with opportunities to actively participate in decisions, but they can’t decide which courses are offered in their schools. It has confirmed the findings of Iftene (2014) which found that French principals do not have any autonomy for raising private funds through donations, sponsorships and revenue from space rental.

The results indicate that 30% of French principals spend 20% of their time on curriculum and teaching-related tasks, whereas nearly 20% of them spend 30% of their time.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that principals’ responsibilities for dismissing teachers or establishing teachers’ salaries is related to the type of school (public or private). It has complemented the findings of an earlier study conducted by Maroy, Pons & Dupuy (2017), which reported that in France there was a

"globalization by discursive internalization", in which transnational imperatives are integrated in official discourses on the regulation of the education system.

The results suggest that the type of school (publicly or privately-managed) plays a vital role in principals' responsibilities for deciding which courses are offered and choosing learning materials. It has provided a deeper insight into the school autonomy. Pons, Zanten & Da Costa (2015) reported that the introduction of New Public Management approaches and instruments in the field of education had not exerted a significant influence either on the public management of State-controlled private schools or on the coupling between the public and the private sector. The management of Catholic schools is still mainly based, on the one hand, on regulation through inputs and limited intervention by public authorities and, on the other hand, on a complex system of internal moral controls by the private authorities themselves.

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