

# Chapter 61

## Principals and Student Achievement: A Comparative Study of Eight Countries

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Connections between principal leadership activities, school context, and student achievement are examined within this paper. Data for this quantitative study are from the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) and the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The eight countries of examination participated in both the TALIS and PISA and the researchers merged datasets, yielding a study sample of 1,301 schools. This paper supports a context-specific view of instructional leadership. When looking across countries, the researchers found different practices were more strongly associated with the academic achievement of students, and suggest that school leaders have a meaningful overall relationship with academic achievement, both directly and indirectly. This study therefore supports prior research about the direct and indirect effects of instructional leadership. Further study, which accounts for differences in family academic resources and school-level opportunities to learn, will better illuminate the connection between instructional leadership practices and academic achievement.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Gaining a better understanding of the specific school leadership practices that best predict student achievement is of international importance, even though the existence of a connection is widely presumed. As Robinson (2010) noted:

*There is no doubt that this body of evidence about the links between instructional leadership and student outcomes has been noticed by policymakers. For example, it has informed the development of educational leadership standards in the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008), the work of the National College of School Leadership in England (Leithwood, Day, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006), and the development of a leadership framework for New Zealand principals (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008).*

As school leaders, principals are often considered central to student success, in terms of enacting organizational practices and translating external policies into terms and conditions that have strong presence in daily interactions between teachers and learners. How specifically might school leadership practices be connected to teachers and students? A (2012) meta-analysis of research studies on principal effectiveness entitled *Ripple Effect: A Syntheses of Research on Principal Influence to Inform Performance Evaluation Design* was conducted by the American Institute for Research. The framework that emerged from the meta-analysis of more than 20 studies provided a framework for understanding principal effectiveness that included direct and indirect effects of principal practices on student achievement.

The foundation of the ripple effect theory is principal practice. This is informed by principal knowledge and dispositions and can take different forms including traditional manager, supervisor of standards, adaptive leader, instructional leader, and leader of leaders. This behavior has direct effects upon teacher quality, instructional quality, and student achievement, and can be mediated by school conditions and community contexts. There can also be indirect effects of principal practice, which can include providing feedback to teachers to signal preferred methods of instruction, allocating resources in concert with priorities, or having a role in teacher evaluation based upon student learning.

While ripple effect theory includes school conditions and community contexts that can mediate principal practice quality, it does not identify relevant principal constructs such as the principal's life experiences. Nor does ripple effect theory identify the barriers to principal efficacy in supporting high student achievement.

Although effective school leadership is a common subject of inquiry, researchers have not uncovered the context-specific leadership practices that become available using the most recent international datasets from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The objectives of the chapter are to address this concern through the following research questions:

- What are the relationships among principal leadership practices activities, school culture and climate, perceived hindrances, professional background, and student achievement in the countries of Australia, Finland, Latvia, Mexico, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, and Spain?
- How does the nature of these relationships differ by country?

To answer these questions, the researchers merged variables from two datasets, the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) principal questionnaire and the 2012 Programme for Interna-

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