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The Local Administrator as a Change Agent: The Role of Technical Coordinators in Supporting Chilean Municipal Schools

El sostenedor como agente de cambio: el rol de los coordinadores técnicos en el apoyo a establecimientos municipales chilenos

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Abstract

International research on educational reform and change has stressed the relevance of the intermediate level of the educational system as a source of support for the improvement of teaching and learning in schools. However, this emphasis has not been replicated in the context of the Chilean school system, although current legislation require that *sostenedores*, or local administrators, must play an important role in school improvement policy. Considering the above, this article reports a study that aimed to learn about the practices of a team of professionals, called technical coordinators, working for a Municipal Corporation of an urban district in central Chile. Through field observations and a questionnaire, six dimensions of practice developed by technical coordinators were identified. From these results, the key elements of technical coordinators' work, which is frequent, focused and personalized, are discussed. Finally, it is proposed that future research be considered to assess the impact of the six dimensions of practice identified in the improvement of teaching and learning, and other lines of research are suggested for further study of the intermediate level in the Chilean school system.

Keywords: local administrator, educational change, school support, school improvement

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Resumen

La investigación internacional sobre reforma y cambio educativo ha puesto de manifiesto la importancia del nivel intermedio como una fuente de apoyo para el mejoramiento de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en los centros escolares. Sin embargo, este énfasis no se ha replicado en el contexto del sistema escolar chileno, a pesar de que la normativa vigente establece que el sostenedor educacional debe ejercer un rol importante en la política de mejoramiento escolar. Considerando lo anterior, este artículo un estudio que buscó conocer las prácticas de un equipo de profesionales, los coordinadores técnicos, pertenecientes a una corporación municipal de una comuna urbana de la zona central de Chile. A través de observaciones en terreno y un cuestionario, se identifican seis dimensiones de prácticas desarrolladas por los coordinadores técnicos en el trabajo con los establecimientos educativos. A partir de los resultados, se discuten las claves del trabajo de los coordinadores técnicos, que es frecuente, focalizado y personalizado. Finalmente, se propone considerar en futuras investigaciones la evaluación del impacto de las seis dimensiones de prácticas identificadas en el mejoramiento de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, y se sugieren otras líneas de investigación para profundizar en el estudio del nivel intermedio en el sistema escolar chileno.

Palabras clave: sostenedores, cambio educativo, apoyo a escuelas, mejoramiento escolar

From the early 1980s, an extensive process of decentralization of public services was set in motion. This included school education, and Chile's public elementary and high schools started to be managed by local administrators, municipal or private, who received financing from the State via a subsidy, or *voucher*, for each student that attended the institution (Gauri, 1998; Núñez, 1984; Raczynski & Muñoz, 2007). Despite this administrative and financial decentralization, technical and pedagogical guidance for educational institutions remained in the hands of the Ministry of Education (Mineduc) through their Provincial Education Departments (DEPROV, according to its Spanish acronym). Research has found that this double dependence —on the one hand on the local administrator with regard to administrative and financial aspects and, on the other hand, on Mineduc with regard to technical and pedagogical aspects— has led to tensions in the operation of schools, mainly because it complicates the decision making process and the efficient use of resources. At the same time, the school is expected to respond to the usually contradictory requirements of both agents (OECD, 2004).

The reforms of the 1990s tended to overlook the possible role that the local administrator could play in the efforts to improve the quality of education. Nevertheless, since the year 2000 they have been progressively positioned as a relevant actor in Chilean educational policy with regard to their technical role in supporting the improvement of the institutions under their responsibility (Espínola & Silva, 2009). In the opinion of some authors, the local administrator's role was consolidated by the General Law on Education No. 20,370 (LGE, according to its Spanish acronym) and the Preferential School Subsidy Law No. 20,248 (SEP, according to its Spanish acronym). These legal frameworks guarantee their importance in improving the students' learning experience (Raczynski, Muñoz, Weinstein, & Pascual, 2013). Likewise, progress has been made recently in defining their area of co-responsibility for the learning experience of students in Law No. 20,529 on the National Quality Assurance System (SAC, according to its Spanish acronym). In particular, the creation of *indicative performance standards* by Mineduc, to be used in future evaluative visits by the Quality of Education Agency. It is worth mentioning that, although these standards were not designed exclusively to evaluate the local administrator's role, this new scenario has put pressure on the role of the local administrators, particularly municipal ones, by holding them responsible, along with their institutions, for the improvement of teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom.

International research concerning the role, responsibilities and practices of intermediate levels of school systems (districts, local authorities, municipalities) regarding the successful implementation of reforms and the improvement of teaching and learning in schools, has so far concentrated on countries such as Canada, United States and the United Kingdom (Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010; Honig, 2003; Lee, Seashore Louis, & Anderson, 2012; Leithwood, 2010; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Spillane, 1996; Supovitz, 2008; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Trujillo, 2013; Umekubo, Chrispeels, & Daly, 2013; Woods & Cribb, 2001). In Chile, evidence that analyzes the role or records experiences of local

administrators involved in achieving changes and improvements in their institutions is still scarce. The available research, rather, has focused on the development of regulatory frameworks and standards for local administrators (Espínola & Silva, 2009; Valenzuela, Montecinos, Abufhele, Fernández, & Gálvez, 2010), or on characterizing the operation of these frameworks with respect to the different tasks established by existing regulations (Raczynski & Salinas, 2006, 2008; Román & Carrasco, 2007).

The gap in national research is evident with regard to the intermediate level of our school system. There is also a breach in evidence that would allow to influence in an effective way the decisions taken on the subject of public policies about the role of local school administrators. Taking into account the previous statement, this research aimed to record and analyze a concrete support strategy from a local administrator to their elementary and high schools. This was implemented during the year 2013 by a team of professionals, called *technical coordinators*, who belong to a Municipal Corporation in an urban municipality in the central zone of the country. The role of the technical coordinators is not defined by the Chilean school system's institutional or regulatory framework, but rather corresponds to a specific initiative by this Municipal Corporation in which these professionals accomplish their work. That is to say, the technical coordinators are a strategy defined by this particular local administrator in order to fulfill its task of providing support to its schools.

Given the prior statement, in the framework of this research, we proposed the objective of identifying and characterizing the practices of the members of this team in the different schools to which they provide support. For this purpose, we developed a mixed methods study —qualitative and quantitative— that would permit, in the first instance, to identify the practices of the technical coordinators through field observation. Subsequently, a questionnaire was prepared which allows to establish the frequency with which the practices were deployed in the institutions, from the perspective of the directors and teachers with leadership responsibilities that form the managerial team of each institution.

As a result of this research, we identified six dimensions of practice that emerged from the field observation, and which gather a long list of tasks and activities performed by these professionals. Likewise, the questionnaire provided with information about, in the opinion of the school management teams surveyed, which dimensions of practice are most commonly deployed in their schools. These results, although they reflect the individual case of the local administrator being studied, are nevertheless informative when considering other local administrators with similar characteristics. It is for that reason that in this article we will discuss some key ideas to move closer to understanding the role of the local administrator as a change agent that promotes school improvement. At the same time, we will propose other lines of research that allow an in-depth knowledge of this issue, given the limitations of our study.

Literature review

The study of the role of the intermediate level in school systems has grown in importance at an international level since the 1990s. Initially, the intermediate level was rejected as a possible agent in the implementation of reforms that led schools to improve the students' learning achievements. Nevertheless, the need to extend these achievements to the entire system and to ensure their sustainability in time, led to a reconsideration of the contribution of intermediate levels to the national reform efforts, seeking to improve teaching and learning at a local level, thus reviving the interest in studying it (Trujillo, 2013), with the intermediate level being understood as an articulating agent between the macro-political level, which includes the State and the Ministry of Education, and the micro-political level, which includes educational institutions (Raczynski & Salinas, 2006; Valdivia & Díaz, 2008). In recent years, it has become commonplace to find studies that seek to establish the characteristics of effective intermediate levels, that is to say, those that have an influence on the improvement of schools' effectiveness to achieve learning among all students (Leithwood, 2010). The improvement of school effectiveness is, thus, closely related to the interest in investigating the contribution of intermediate levels to reform initiatives in school systems.

School effectiveness and improvement framework, and education reform initiatives

The improvement of effectiveness at a school level has been a permanent challenge for more than four decades, both in terms of research and educational policy. Starting with the premise that schools are

important and that they make a difference in students' learning (Brookover, 1977; Edmonds, 1979), this field of study focused on two lines of research in parallel. The first one involves the study of school effectiveness that sought to identify key characteristics associated with schools demonstrating high performance in terms of students' learning results (Reynolds et al., 2014; Sammons et al., 1995). The second one is related to studies of school improvement, focused on researching the key internal processes that led schools to achieve good performance and to sustain it in time (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994; Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2014). Subsequently, researchers of both lines linked them, given the complementarity of their research methods and objectives (Reynolds & Stoll, 1996; Stoll, 1994; Stoll & Fink, 1996), and to work together on the development of an exhaustive research framework under the heading of effective school improvement (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). It is worth mentioning that this framework has been particularly relevant for research in Latin America, where concrete efforts have been carried out to adapt it to the local context of our school systems (Arancibia, 1992; Hernández-Castilla, Murillo, & Martínez-Garrido, 2014; Murillo, 2003, 2011).

This research framework has been and continues to be relevant in driving educational policy initiatives that seek to improve the quality of education, both in developed countries (Chapman et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2012) and in developing countries (Anderson, 2010; Thomas, Salim, Muñoz-Chereau, & Peng, 2012), with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged or vulnerable contexts (Belleï, Muñoz, Pérez, & Raczynski, 2003; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Raczynski, & Muñoz, 2005). This link between research and policy is framed within a global reform movement in education based on the evidence from the effectiveness and improvement frameworks and the principles of new public management. This transfers the logic of private management to the work of professionals in the public sector in order to increase their effectiveness, risking negative consequences if this is not achieved (Louis, 2013; Ranson, 2008; Sisto & Fardella, 2011).

According to Pasi Sahlberg (2006), the global reform movement in education has, among its objectives, to increase the economic competitiveness of a country by improving education with the application of standard-based accountability measures. This is particularly the case with regard to the performance of students, teachers, schools, and more recently, the intermediate levels of school systems. These standards-based accountability measures have been inspired by evidence generated by the school effectiveness and improvement framework, which has guaranteed the adoption of these measures by government officials in charge of educational policy (see, for example, the report by Barber & Mourshed, 2007 and criticism of this by Coffield, 2011).

This situation has been strongly criticized by a sector of academia because of its epistemological (Wrigley, 2008), methodological (Gorard, 2010), theoretical (Morley & Rasool, 2000) and political (Thrupp, 2001) implications. However, policies based on accountability and standardization have remained in force in educational reform initiatives (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The effects of these policies are extensively documented by national and international research (Ball, 2003; Carrasco, 2013; Contreras, Corbalán, & Assael, 2012; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Elacqua, Martínez, Santos, & Urbina, 2013; Finnigan et al., 2013; O'Day, 2002; Shirley et al., 2013), with a main focus on macro-levels (state, ministries or departments of education) and micro-levels (educational institutions) of the school system. Nonetheless, some analysts have also started to consider the intermediate level (districts and local authorities) in their studies.

The intermediate level and its role in school-level improvements

As indicated above, international research on the effect of the global reform movement in educational systems has been increasingly taking into account the role of intermediate levels in its analysis (Daly, Finnigan, Jordan, Moolenaar, & Che, 2014; Honig, 2003, 2004, 2008; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Supovitz, 2008). As such, Louis (2013) indicates that is possible to appreciate two trends regarding how districts or local authorities respond in contexts such as the previously described reform. On one hand, there is a position of starting from zero, or fresh start, with regard to schools that do not comply with the standards imposed, with such schools facing severe sanctions (from closure or dismissal of school leaders). On the other hand, a position of turnaround management is imposed, seeking to combine accountability measures with focused support for improvement (definition of goals or improvement plans and professional support).

In this way, and following the rationality of research on schools, the study of intermediate levels of the school system has investigated the effective factors or characteristics of districts or local authorities that drive improvement in teaching and learning, as well as the transfer and implementation of national or state policies (Trujillo, 2013). These studies have placed emphasis on technical-rational factors associated with the school effectiveness improvement framework in order to assert that intermediate levels, as well as schools, also matter (Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009; Spillane, 1996). Their impact on school improvement, however, is not independent of the singular conditions of the educational system in which they are inserted, which Louis and van Velzen (2012) have called *political cultures*, regarding how the system is organized and educational policy is implemented in a specific context. As such, the decentralized structure of the Chilean educational system would imply specific challenges in deploying the potential of the intermediate level, in this case the local administrator as an educational change agent.

The intermediate level in Chile: local administrators

In this study, we empirically research how local administrators carry out their role of technical support to their institutions and what this entails, observing the specific case of technical coordinators from a Municipal Corporation. However, the specific nature of the local administrator figure in the Chilean school system makes it necessary to do a brief review of the functions linked to administrating and supporting an institution in the public education system.

It is worth mentioning that the rationality behind the process of decentralizing public education in Chile sought, in principle, to generate greater economic efficiency in the State by introducing market elements, subsidiarity and privatization, and deepening the democratization of the decision-making process through territorial decentralization (Larrañaga, 1995). Once the administrative and financial decentralization process of the Chilean school system was completed in 1986, institutions in Chile became dependent on one of the following four types of local administrator (OECD, 2004):

1. Municipal. These function through two possible structures: Municipal Education Departments (DAEM, according to the Spanish acronym), that form part of the internal structure of the municipality. Or Municipal Corporations, that function outside of the municipal structure, but are chaired by the mayor of the municipality.
2. Private subsidized. Institutions or individuals, profit or nonprofit, that receive the state subsidy just like municipal authorities, but are authorized to charge an additional fee to parents.
3. Private non-subsidized. Institutions or individuals, profit or nonprofit, that receive financing from the payment of school fees by parents.
4. Delegated management schools. Private sector institutions specifically appointed to manage technical-vocational schools, and that receive state financing different to that of subsidies for average attendance.

Regarding the principles behind the process of decentralization of education in Chile, diverse studies have offered contradictory viewpoints. At first, its results were questioned in terms of improving economic efficiency or advancing towards greater democratization (Espinoza & González, 1993; Latorre, Núñez, González, & Hevia, 1991). Subsequently, its impact on financial efficiency levels and educational quality was also questioned (Rounds, 1997; Winkler & Rounds, 1996). Nevertheless, the Chilean school system has maintained its decentralized structure, in which municipalities and private subsidized administrators provide public education to the large majority of families in the country. Given that this research deals with the municipal administrator's role, we will give some details about the functions that they should fulfill in order to contextualize the role of the technical coordinators on whom this study is focused.

Since the 1990s and until the mid-2000s, regulations on municipal administrators indicated that they must perform administrative functions (principally management of financial and human resources) for their institutions. Technical and pedagogical aspects, which were the responsibility of the DEPROV, and therefore the implementation of support programs for their institutions, were largely kept in the margins (Espínola & Silva, 2009). Diverse policy initiatives, however, increasingly brought local administrators closer to the technical and pedagogical field, and to providing support for their institutions. These initiatives were consolidated with the enactment of the Preferential School Subsidy Law (SEP, 20,248) in 2008, which explicitly establishes the responsibility of local administrators for improving learning results. Meanwhile, the Law of Quality and Equity in Education (20,501) passed in 2011, reinforces the local

administrator's role in providing technical and pedagogical support, with more demanding requirements for those who carry out this function (Raczynski et al., 2013; Weinstein, Fuenzalida, & Muñoz, 2010).

As such, in the current regulatory and institution framework of the Chilean school system, defined by the laws SEP, LGE and SAC, local administrators occupy an intermediate position between the macro and micro levels of the school system (Espínola & Silva, 2009; Valenzuela, et al., 2010). The macro-level is taken by various actors (Mineduc, the National Council of Education, the Superintendence of Education and the Quality of Education Agency), which define, sanction and supervise the policies and regulations that govern the school system. Meanwhile, the micro-level is occupied by educational centers, which implement the policies defined by the macro-level and are evaluated on their performance. Local administrators are located between these two levels, on the one hand responding to the administrative requirements of the macro-level (regulations), and on the other hand, aiming to ensure good performance of their institutions in accordance with national standards (policy).

In this way, local administrators have administrative and financial responsibilities, as well as technical and pedagogical ones before their schools, the Superintendence, the Quality of Education Agency and Mineduc. Among these responsibilities we can mention: signing performance agreements with Mineduc (the Equality of Opportunity and Educational Excellence Agreement); managing, assigning and employing SEP resources; supporting the process of designing and implementing improvement plans in their institutions; making decisions about hiring Technical Education Assistance (ATE, according to its Spanish acronym) or requesting technical support from Mineduc; establishing monitoring and evaluation systems; collaborating with inspection visits from the Superintendence and guidance from the Quality of Education Agency; and generating and using information to provide feedback on institutions' performance.

It is interesting to note that this regulatory and institutional framework, despite the fact that it identifies tasks or actions such as those listed above, does not explicitly establish a set of specific practices for local administrators in Chile. Furthermore, at the time of writing this article, Chile had recently implemented a set of indicative performance standards, which are non-obligatory in nature, created by Mineduc so that the Quality of Education Agency is able to evaluate the performance of local administrators and educational institutions when it initiates its guidance visit regime. However, the SAC law determines that the objective of this performance evaluation is to strengthen the institutional and self-evaluation capacities of educational institutions (Law 20,529, art. 12), without specifying how these standards are linked with the role of the local administrator.

On the other hand, there have been attempts to address this issue and proposals have been raised regarding the components or dimensions that should be considered to define the role of local administrators. Unfortunately, these proposals have not had widespread circulation or continuity. One of the most recent proposals was made by Valenzuela and his team (2010) from the Center for Advanced Research in Education (CIAE, according to its Spanish acronym) at the request of Mineduc. It collected proposals by government organizations, or those commissioned to research centers by government bodies, in order to propose five specific areas of responsibility for public administrators, each with a variable number of components. These areas are: *educational results*, with seven components that consider learning achievements, internal effectiveness and community satisfaction, among others. Another one is *pedagogical and institutional leadership*, with three components including mission and vision, strategic planning and internal leadership support. Then, there is *teaching management and learning evaluation*, with two components including technical support and curriculum and teaching management, followed by *resource management*, with three components including finances, equipment and people. Finally, there is *network and relationship management for community participation*, with three components including participation, inclusion and coexistence, and network management. The authors indicate that this proposal of standards is an initial effort, and that it must be complemented by an instance of validation that collects technical and social elements of local administrators' daily work. Nevertheless, this work did not have the continuity expected by the authors in the years following its development.

Finally, another relevant aspect is that the available research on the intermediate level in Chile indicates that many local administrators do not have sufficient professional, technical and resource capacities to address the tasks indicated in the regulatory and institutional framework. Especially those associated with their responsibilities in the technical and pedagogical field (Espínola & Silva, 2009; Raczynski,

2012). For that reason, even if a more explicit regulatory and institutional framework regarding the exclusive areas of responsibility of local administrators were to exist, it is likely that many would find it difficult to fulfill it. Nevertheless, local administrators must deploy some type of action to respond to the expectations of the current regulatory and institutional framework. We believe that it is possible that in these actions some keys will be found to raise a proposal for the dimensions of practice to guide the work of the local administrators.

Methodology

This study was focused on monitoring the strategy that a municipal administrator deployed to comply with its technical and pedagogical role of monitoring and supporting its institutions. This was done in a case study format (Bassey, 1999; Yin, 2003), which is informative for other similar cases, within the previously described context of the Chilean school system. For this reason, we aim to identify and describe the practices that these professionals deployed in their work with school management teams, as well as the perception of these teams regarding the frequency with which practices were deployed.

The monitoring was carried out in the context of a training program on educational advising that the authors conducted during 2013 in the V Region, in which twelve technical coordinators and the Head on the Education Area in a Municipal Corporation of the same region participated. The training program sought to contribute knowledge and skills on school management to the technical coordinators, in order to help them with their task of supporting the schools under their responsibility. These were, specifically: monitoring SEP improvement plans and providing support in administrative tasks requested by the Municipal Corporation. In order to fulfill these tasks, the technical coordinators visited the schools with variable frequencies according to their needs.

During the research we used an exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006), consisting in two consecutive stages: first qualitative and then quantitative, with the two conceived as complementary studies. We chose this design due to the fact that we were unaware of the characteristics of the coordinators' work, and for this reason we required detailed information of their daily on-site responsibilities. We also aimed to collect information from an extensive spectrum, considering that each coordinator worked in different schools.

The first, qualitative study consisted in accompanying the technical coordinators from the Municipal Corporation on-site. In this instance, we collected information about their practices in the institutions. One accompaniment visit (McDonald, 2005) was carried out with each coordinator, and adjusted to each one's work agenda in their respective schools. The duration was between two and three hours; approximately thirty hours of fieldwork. The second, quantitative, study consisted in the application of a questionnaire (Ponce, 2012) that sought to measure the frequency with which the practices collected in the first study were expressed. Principals, school leaders and classroom teachers with leadership roles, who form the management teams of the schools in which the technical coordinators work, answered this questionnaire. The details of participants, data production methods and the analysis strategy used in each study are shown below.

Study 1: Accompaniment of technical coordinators

We used a non-participant observation technique for the accompaniment, with extended field recording (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), that enabled us to identify the technical coordinators' practices in the context of the fieldwork carried out in the educational institutions. We considered certain criteria to guide the observation that aimed to record the actions executed by the coordinator, more than those performed by the team from the institutions. Furthermore, we collected contextual data (frequency of the visits, objectives, methodologies, etc.), that were subsequently validated and explored in greater depth with the technical coordinators.

To analyze the information collected in this phase, we used the categorical analysis technique (Cáceres, 2003). Through this technique, based on what was observed in the accompaniments, the main practices carried out by the technical coordinators in their direct work with the institutions were systematized. From this stage, six dimensions of practice emerged.

Study 2: Questionnaire on the practices of technical coordinators

We constructed a questionnaire based on the six dimensions that we identified in the first study. Each one of these dimensions had four associated practices that the technical coordinators perform. Furthermore, we included a question referring to the relevance of the coordinator's work in their institution.

Each coordinator requested that the people with whom they work in schools (leaders and teachers on the management team) answer the questionnaire anonymously via an online platform, indicating the frequency with which the coordinator carries out the action within a range of 1 to 10, where 1 is never and 10 is always. We collected a total of 90 answers that were analyzed with the software SPSS 16.0. A descriptive analysis to identify frequencies, mean and standard deviations was undertaken. Furthermore, we carried out an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to identify possible differences between groups, taking into account the characteristics of the institutions (elementary/high school) and characteristics of the technical coordinators (teaching qualification/non-teaching qualification).

Results

In this section we present a summary of the results of the research. First, we describe the six dimensions of practice that emerged from the qualitative component (study 1). These were subsequently used to construct the questionnaire that was used in the quantitative component (study 2). Then, we report the main results of the questionnaire in terms of the technical coordinators' practice frequency.

Study 1: What are the practices deployed by the technical coordinators in the institutions?

Based on the on-site accompaniment of the technical coordinators, six dimensions of practice emerged as described in Table 1. These dimensions give account of what was observed during accompaniments to visits that the coordinators made to the institutions that they were advising.

Table 1
Description of the six dimensions of technical coordinators' practices

Dimension	Description
Environmental	This refers to the attention and protection implemented by the coordinator to generate a work climate that facilitates learning in the team. Special attention is given to the development of confidence and participation.
Articulatory	Refers to the role of the coordinator as an agent in promoting the municipal and national strategic plan. This dimension integrates all those actions or strategies implemented by the coordinator that promote the development and alignment with the municipality.
Focused	This refers to the practices carried out by the coordinators that promote the definition and achievement of specific objectives. This dimension is related to the coordinator's capacity to manage emerging situations and not abandon the proposed goals.
Organizational	This contemplates practices associated with the planning and scheduling of activities, as well as strategies that facilitate efficient work dynamics. This dimension refers mainly to external elements at work in the institution.
Personalized	This refers to actions taken by the coordinators that show a deep knowledge of the educational community being advised. Comprehension of institutional challenges, staff, management teams and student profiles is emphasized.
Reflexive	This refers to the strategies implemented by the coordinator that promote discussion and learning in the team. In this dimension, actions that question institutional practices, theoretical and empirical discussion and reviewing institutional viability are highlighted.

We observed a wide variety of activities, strategies and tools that these professionals use in their work with the schools' management teams. For example, during the on-site accompaniment we were able to observe that the technical coordinators, beyond the Municipal Corporation's formal mandate to visit the institutions and monitor their work, deploy actions that are linked with the setting in motion of internal improvement strategies, as well as the institution's SEP improvement plan and external improvement initiatives such as ministerial or municipal programs.

The technical coordinators carry out actions that, on one hand, aim to establish guidelines so that the schools being advised can develop their daily tasks in an effective way, considering aspects such as internal planning and articulation with external initiatives. At the same time, there is concern to maintain precision with respect to the objectives that the institution should pursue over emerging situations (*organizational*, *focused* and *articulatory* dimensions). Likewise, we highlight the development of actions that aim to generate a climate of trust and security to promote the development of reflexive capacities and learning in the management team. This implies that the technical coordinators need to have thorough knowledge of the challenges faced by the institutions and the people with whom they work (*environmental*, *personalized* and *reflexive* dimensions).

Study 2: Which of the technical coordinators' practices are most frequent according to the schools?

In Figure 1, we present a graph with the average score of each dimension of practice according to that reported in the questionnaire. Upon observing the results, we can appreciate that the dimensions of practice that are reported with lesser frequency are organizational (8.20) and articulatory (8.22). In turn, upon reviewing the items associated with these dimensions, we can say that there is a high variation with regard to the dimensions of practice that the respondents report with lesser frequency. Nevertheless, we can appreciate that the less-frequent practices refer to the establishment of long-term work plans, and forging links with external organizations, such as other schools.

Meanwhile, those that are reported with higher frequency are the personalized (9.11) and focused (9.02) dimensions. In this case, there is greater consensus (lower variability) in the responses to the questionnaire regarding the more frequent practices of the technical coordinators. These are related primarily with the capacity to demonstrate proximity and knowledge of the school that they are advising, and the commitment to a specific focus during the work sessions with the management teams.

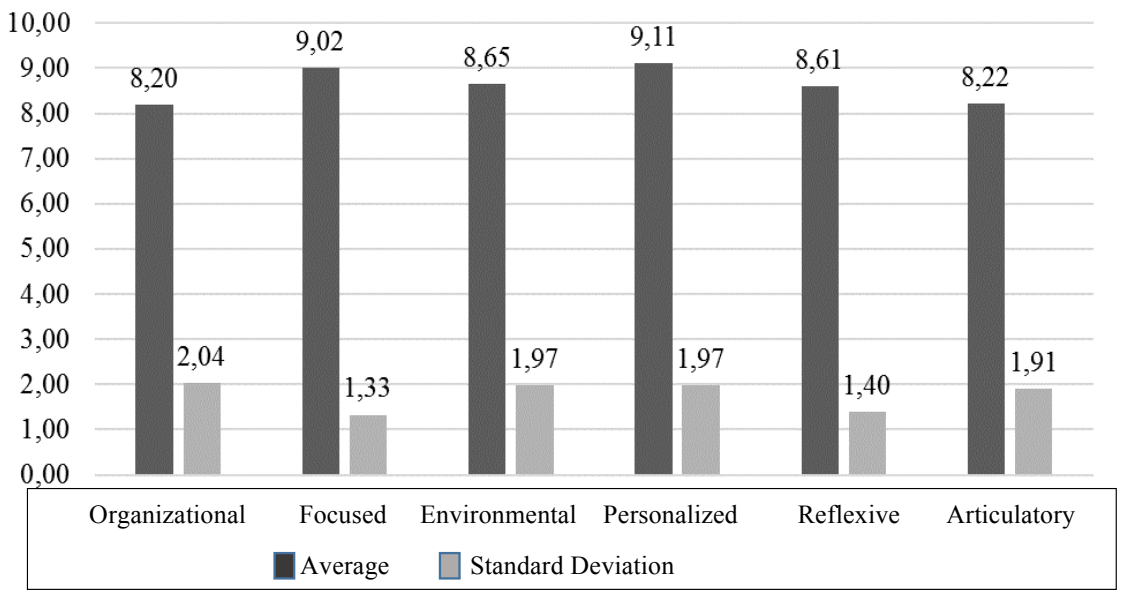

Figure 1. Average score and standard deviation of the technical coordinators' practice frequency, by dimension (1 = never; 10 = always).

Table 2 details the average scores and standard deviation of the responses to each of the items (practices) included in the questionnaire that was designed based on the qualitative information collected in study 1. In the table we can observe that, according to the responses to the questionnaire, the practices that have the lowest frequency are: «establishes a long-term work plan», «finishes each visit by scheduling the date of the next one», «promotes the exchange of successful experiences between institutions» and «promotes communication between the school and other institutions». The answers are relatively varied between participants (standard deviations of 2.68; 2.76; 2.56 and 2.37, respectively), which leads us to assume that this opinion is not necessarily representative of the majority of respondents.

With regard to the practices implemented with higher frequency by the technical coordinators, according to the answers to the questionnaire, we find that these refer to: «Demonstrates knowledge of the institution's characteristics», «takes an active role during work», «demonstrates knowledge of the institution's challenges» and «maintains the session focused on a specific objective». In these cases, the answers are more homogeneous between the participants (standard deviation: 1.37; 1.40; 1.42 and 1.33, respectively). This can be interpreted as greater consensus with regard to these being the actions implemented by the majority of coordinators in their work with the institutions.

Table 2
Average score and standard deviation of the technical coordinators' practices frequency, by item (1 = never; 10 = always)

Dimension	Item (practice)	Average	Standard deviation
Environmental	Avoids distracting elements during meetings.	8.47	2.26
Environmental	Carries out actions that facilitate the work not being interrupted by external events.	8.51	2.28
Environmental	Carries out actions that encourage the participation of all attendees.	8.79	1.99
Environmental	Implements strategies that promote a favorable work climate.	8.84	2.10
Articulatory	Promotes the exchange of successful experiences between institutions.	7.79	2.56
Articulatory	Promotes communication between the school and other institutions.	7.92	2.37
Articulatory	Uses the experiences of other schools from the same municipality to improve the institution.	8.15	2.03
Articulatory	Promotes the implementation of municipal lines of action in the institution.	9.03	1.63
Focused	Implements strategies that mobilize work toward the achievement of objectives.	8.82	1.60
Focused	Achieves an equilibrium between the proposed objective and emerging needs.	8.89	1.53
Focused	Maintains the session focused on a specific objective.	9.16	1.37
Focused	Assumes an active role during the work.	9.22	1.42
Organizational	Establishes a long-term work plan.	7.63	2.68
Organizational	Finishes each visit by scheduling the date of the next one.	7.72	2.76
Organizational	Presents the objective of the visit.	8.73	2.14
Organizational	Finishes each visit by summarizing the general ideas and the agreements.	8.73	2.10
Personalized	Demonstrates that he/she knows the people of the institution.	8.87	1.75
Personalized	Demonstrates knowledge of the improvement focus of the institution.	9.14	1.48
Personalized	Demonstrates knowledge of the institution's challenges.	9.18	1.40
Personalized	Demonstrates knowledge of the institution characteristics.	9.23	1.33
Reflexive	Makes comments based on relevant theoretical references.	8.38	2.31
Reflexive	Discusses the teams' ideas with data from the institution.	8.56	2.09
Reflexive	Makes comments based on relevant practical experience.	8.64	1.98
Reflexive	Asks interesting questions that promote reflection.	8.87	1.92

Table 3 shows the distribution of results according to the institutions' characteristics; in this case, we differentiate the answers of professionals from high schools and those from elementary schools. Although differences are observed in all categories, these are statistically significant only in the organizational (F: 3.938; Sig: 0.23), personalized (F: 3.326; Sig: 0.41) and articulatory dimensions (F: 3.488; Sig: 0.35). Nonetheless, it is important to indicate the differences in the number of cases analyzed (responses from elementary schools, n = 76; high schools = 14), which could affect the results.

Table 3
Type of institution advised and average frequency score of practice dimensions

	Organizational	Focused	Environmental	Reflexive	Personalized	Articulatory
School (n=76)	8.1	8.9	8.6	9	8.5	8
High school (n=14)	6.9	8.3	7.4	8.8	7.3	7.7
F	3.938	2.732	2.842	1.763	3.326	3.488
Sig.	.023*	.071	.064	.178	.041*	.035*

* $p < 0.05$

On the other hand, Table 4 shows the answers grouped by the profile of the technical coordinators. In this case we considered whether their initial qualification was in teaching (general elementary education, physical education, history and geography, etc.) or in another discipline (psychology, special education, social work, etc.). The answers indicate very similar averages in both groups, and no statistically significant differences.

Table 4
Type of vocational training of the technical coordinators and average frequency score of practice dimensions

	Organizational	Focused	Environmental	Reflexive	Personalized	Articulatory
Teacher (n = 42)	8.1	9	8.8	9.2	8.8	8.3
Not teacher (n = 48)	8.2	9	8.4	9	8.4	8
F	.028	.002	1.113	.369	.742	.468
Sig.	.867	.960	.294	.545	.391	.496

* $p < 0.05$

With regard to other factors, Table 5 presents the results by dimension of practice in accordance with the frequency of visits per month, grouped by low frequency (less than or equal to 2) and high frequency (more than or equal to 3). Here the greater the frequency of visits to the institutions observed, the greater the perception about all of the dimensions, especially the organizational (low: 7.7; high: 8.9) and articulatory dimensions (low: 7.7; high: 8.9).

Table 5
Average score and standard deviation by practice dimension and technical coordinators 'frequency of visits to the institutions.

Dimensions	Low (less than 2 per month)		High (more than 4 per month)	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Organizational	7.7	2.2	8.9	1.6
Focused	8.8	1.5	9.3	0.9
Environmental	8.2	2.3	9.1	1.3
Reflexive	8.8	1.7	9.4	0.8
Personalized	8.3	2.2	9.1	1.6
Articulatory	7.7	2.1	8.9	1.2

Finally, in Table 6, the results are presented by practice dimension, according to the years of experience that the technical coordinator has in this role (ordered in three groups). In this sense, a trend is observed in all dimensions that more experience the coordinators have, the greater the perception of the management teams regarding the frequency with which they deploy the practices of these six dimensions. Likewise, this tendency is appreciated with greater clarity in the environmental (beginner: 8.1; intermediate: 8.6; experienced: 9.5) and personalized dimensions (beginner: 7.9; intermediate: 8.6; experienced: 9.4).

Table 6
Average score and standard deviation by practice dimension and years of experience of the technical coordinators in the role

Dimensions	Beginner (0-2 years)		Intermediate (2-4 years)		Experienced (more than 4 years)	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Organizational	7.8	2.4	8.3	1.9	8.5	1.8
Focused	8.6	1.6	9.0	1.25	9.4	0.9
Environmental	8.1	2.5	8.6	1.8	9.5	0.9
Reflexive	8.9	1.6	9.0	1.4	9.4	1.2
Personalized	7.9	2.5	8.6	1.8	9.4	1.2
Articulatory	7.9	1.9	8.2	1.9	8.6	1.8

Discussion and conclusions

From the two studies that compose our research and based on the on-site data that emerged, we propose some ideas that enable to reflect on the key elements of the technical coordinators' work with regard to their task of monitoring and supporting the schools in their municipality. As indicated in the methodology section, it seems necessary to emphasize that the information and results presented here represent a specific case of how a local administrator is addressing its responsibility in the technical and pedagogical area. One limitation of our research is precisely the generalization of these results. Nevertheless, we believe that the discussion from the results obtained can be relevant for other cases of similar municipal administrators. It invites to reflect about the practices that the administrators' professional teams deploy in the field with the schools in their municipality.

Specifically, we identified an extensive number of practices that the technical coordinators use in their work with the management teams of elementary and high schools, based on the field observation of their work. We grouped such practices according to six dimensions that would allow to analyze how these professionals address the task of providing technical and pedagogical support to the schools with greater ease. These dimensions collect aspects related to the internal organization and external coordination of the actions that these institutions carry out (organizational and articulatory dimensions), the generation of a work environment of trust and reflection with the management teams (environmental and reflexive dimensions), strategic focus on the fundamental tasks of the institutions (focused dimension) and attention to the needs and specific challenges of each school (personalized dimension).

On the other hand, upon gathering the perception of the management teams about the frequency with which the technical coordinators deployed the identified practices, we found that there are some dimensions to which the technical coordinators give greater emphasis. For example, the focused and personalized dimensions are perceived as more frequent by the management teams. This could indicate emphasis of the technical coordinators on recognizing the needs and specific challenges of the schools to which they provide support. At the same time, they aim to concentrate their efforts on establishing and maintaining the teams' attention on specific objectives, over emerging situations. On the other hand, the organizational and articulatory dimensions are perceived as less frequent by the management teams. This could indicate that the technical coordinators somewhat ignore the coordination between institutions' internal activities and external, municipal or national activities. Meanwhile, medium or long-term planning for support work could be scarce or weak.

Other key areas of support delivered by the technical coordinators to schools

Looking a little beyond the objectives of this research, we want to deepen the analysis of the data collected, exploring the relationship between the results of the questionnaire on practices and factors associated with the coordinators and institutions. For example, taking visit frequency as a reference, it was observed that when it is high, the perception regarding the frequency of practices associated with the organizational and articulatory dimensions increases. This could mean that frequent contact with the schools would enable greater articulation of the improvement plans of each school with municipal policies, and improved long-term organization work in each school.

On the other hand, if we consider the length of time that coordinators have been carrying out this work with schools, the frequency with which practices from the environmental and personalized dimensions are reported increases together with the length of time that the coordinators have spent working with schools. This leads to suppose that more experienced coordinators manage to generate a favorable work environment, and have greater knowledge of the school context.

Instead, no variation is observed in the frequency with which practices in the six dimensions are reported upon comparing results by institution type (elementary or high school), or with the initial professional qualification of the technical coordinators (teachers or not teachers). This may indicate that the technical coordinators do not vary the focus of their practices according to these characteristics of the schools, and that their initial qualification is not a decisive factor in executing their task. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider these indications together with the previously mentioned factors of visit frequency and years of experience in the role.

Intermediate levels as agents of change: What do we need to know?

Given that the objective of this research was to identify the work of the technical coordinators in their direct contact with the schools, it was possible to visualize a series of supporting actions that they implement in their interactions with teachers and leaders at the institutions that they advise. As we indicated previously, there has been little research about this area within the national context (Espínola & Silva, 2009; Raczynski & Salinas, 2006; Roman & Carrasco, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2010). For this reason, we aim for our case to provide some clues and trigger a research agenda that concerns itself with collecting evidence with regard to how local administrators assume the role that is assigned to them by the current legal regulations.

One of the findings that stands out the most from the municipality where we developed our study is that the knowledge which the technical coordinators have about the educational context, internal characteristics and challenges of the schools in which they operate, is recognized as a strength at their job. We believe that this is linked with the possibility of clearly establishing a focus for the schools to develop their work. On the other hand, we see that weaknesses are found in the lack of articulation between the work conducted in the schools that they support and municipal or national support initiatives. This leads to believe that a long-term plan, which is maintained despite emerging and administrative issues, is lacking. This plan would help to articulate efforts within the municipality and allow the coordinators to deliver support that is better articulated and planned. In this same vein, the international literature suggests that one way of addressing this challenge within the area that corresponds to intermediate level management is to develop learning networks between schools that are facilitated or moderated by the action of professionals such as technical coordinators (Lee et al., 2012). Evidence also exists indicating that the intermediate level could have a significant impact on the improvement of learning results in its schools upon assuming the role of broker, or facilitator, of resources and knowledge to and from the schools (Daly et al., 2014; Finnigan et al., 2013; Supovitz, 2008). In this way, internal capacities for learning can be generated, best practices disseminated and change processes mobilized (Honig, 2003; Stoll, 2009; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003).

On the other hand, it seems interesting to analyze the emphasis on the coordinators' practice with respect to what Louis (2013) identifies as the two trends of intermediate levels to respond to the current reform context: fresh start and turnaround management. We believe that the case that we have researched is representative of the second tendency (turnaround management), as the coordinators focus their work on guiding the managerial teams towards changing their practices to achieve improvement. However it is not possible for us to declare such successful results, given the limitations of the results of this research. On one hand, the time spent monitoring the technical coordinators did not allow to establish a relationship between the work of these professionals and the achievement of certain objectives or results on the part of the schools supported during the school year. Likewise, the diversity of issues that the technical coordinators address in their work with the management teams makes difficult the task of establishing the influence of these professionals in a possible change in institutional practices. Finally, given the exploratory nature of our study, we did not collect information from the institutions that would allow to evaluate the effectiveness of the technical coordinators' support with regard to the improvement of school results or processes.

In spite of the above, we believe that the case studied and the results presented here could be informative of what local administrators with similar characteristics could define as a strategy to support their educational institutions. For that reason, and with regard to the possibilities opened by this field of research, we believe that the challenge of identifying the scope of these six dimensions of practice contribution to the improvement of institutions in other contexts remains. Similarly, evaluating the impact of these dimensions of practice in terms of improvement of processes linked to teaching and learning results of the students in schools that receive technical support from their local administrators, is also a challenge.

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