



School leadership for developing professional learning communities

- Instructional leadership is the set of practices that principals use in relation to the improvement of teaching and learning. It is a strong predictor of how teachers collaborate and engage in a reflective dialogue about their practice. In most countries and economies, the majority of principals act as instructional leaders, though one-third rarely engage in any of this type of action.
- Distributed leadership is the ability of schools to incorporate different stakeholders in their decision-making processes. This type of leadership appears to advance the creation of a shared sense of purpose within schools. Nearly all schools involve their staff in decision-making processes, but they differ concerning the opportunities that are offered to students and their parents/guardians to be involved in school decisions.
- Principals who acquired instructional leadership competencies through training, or in a separate course, are more engaged in instructional leadership actions in their school than principals who have not participated in such training.

What is TALIS?

TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) is the first international survey examining teaching and learning environments in schools. It asks teachers and school principals about their work, their schools and their classrooms. This cross-country analysis helps countries identify others facing similar challenges and learn about their policies.

TALIS 2013 focused on lower secondary education teachers and their principals. It sampled 200 schools in more than 30 countries and 20 teachers in each school.

More information is available at: www.oecd.org/talis

TALIS

School leadership and professional learning communities

The role of school principals is crucial for establishing, shaping and fostering instructional quality. The new OECD report, *School Leadership for Learning: Insights from TALIS 2013*, sought to examine the association between school leadership and the establishment of professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities refer to the structural and recurrent actions that aim to encourage dialogue and collaboration between teachers in order to improve their practices. Five indicators were used in TALIS 2013 to capture this concept: 1) teacher engagement in reflective dialogue; 2) deprivatised practice¹; 3) shared sense of purpose; 4) collaborative activity; and 5) a collective focus on learning.

The OECD study conceptualises school leadership as being comprised of two domains:

1. Instructional leadership: the set of practices related to the improvement of teaching and learning.
2. Distributed leadership: the set of practices related to the ability of principals to incorporate different stakeholders in school decision-making processes.

1. "Deprivatised practice" refers to teachers observing other teachers' classes, with the goal of providing feedback on their teaching.



Table 1 shows the overall degree of association between instructional and distributed leadership, with each dimension of professional learning communities at three educational levels across the 38 participating systems.

Table 1 • **Association between types of leadership and professional learning communities' dimensions, across educational levels**

		Reflective dialogue	Deprivatised practice	Shared sense of purpose	Collaborative activity	Collective focus on student learning
Primary education	Instructional leadership	+	+	+	+	
	Distributed leadership			+		
Lower secondary education	Instructional leadership	+			+	
	Distributed leadership			+		
Upper secondary education	Instructional leadership	+				
	Distributed leadership			+		

Notes: + = positive effect; - = negative effect.

Signs in bold font indicate significant effects at $p < 0.01$; grey signs indicate significant effects at $p < 0.05$.

Results of association are controlled for other school and teacher characteristics that might influence these relationships. For more information, see Chapters 4 and 6 of the *School Leadership for Learning* report (OECD, 2016).

Since the analysis for each educational level consisted of different samples of countries and economies, caution should be taken when comparing results across levels. See Table 1.1 of the *School Leadership for Learning* report (OECD, 2016) for the list of countries and economies included in the analysis of each educational level.

Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

As the table shows, in primary and lower secondary education, principals who show greater instructional leadership work in schools where teachers are more engaged in collaboration. Also, instructional leadership seems to be a strong predictor of the establishment of reflective dialogue between teachers in all educational levels. This may indicate that the steps principals take to develop co-operation and to promote teachers' responsibility for their instruction affect teacher collaboration and engagement. Distributed leadership is also positively related to a shared sense of purpose in schools. This is found across all educational levels and suggests that involving students and their parents or guardians, along with school staff, creates a culture of shared responsibility for school issues.

What this means in practice

Instructional and distributed leadership are related to the development of different indicators of professional learning communities. Some school leaders mainly rely on instructional leadership and only partly involve other stakeholders in decision-making processes; alternatively, some school leaders may not explicitly focus on their role as instructional leaders and will instead, rely heavily on the participation of other stakeholders. The results of the *School Leadership for Learning* report show that combining instructional and distributed leadership, and using student outcomes to develop the school's goals, programme and professional development plan, appears to be the most favourable approach to establishing a professional learning community within a school. Therefore, a more integrated role for the school leader seems appropriate in order to develop these communities.

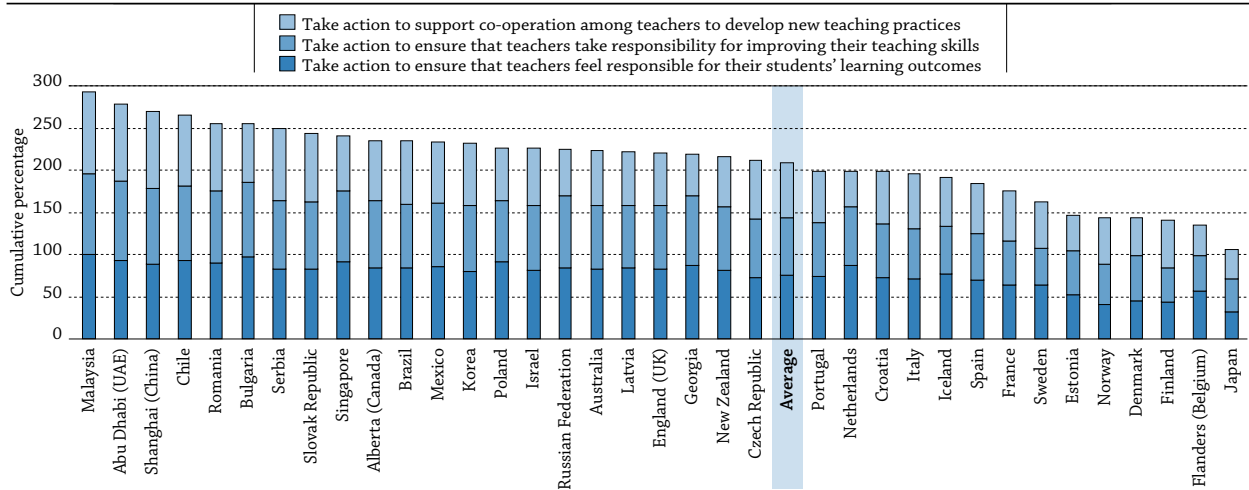
The distribution of school leadership across countries

Instructional leadership and distributed leadership are important features for advancing the establishment of professional learning communities. It is, therefore, important to observe how prevalent these characteristics are across countries and economies. Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of the indicators of instructional and distributional leadership across participating systems.

As observed in Figure 1, in most systems, the majority of principals act as instructional leaders in all of the measured indicators. However, there is strong cross-country variation in the level of engagement in instructional leadership practices. For example, in Malaysia almost all principals declare having engaged in instructional leadership activities, whereas two-thirds of Japanese principals report not engaging often in this type of leadership. Overall, about one third of all principals do not actively engage in instructional leadership actions, showing that further stimulation of leadership for learning is needed.



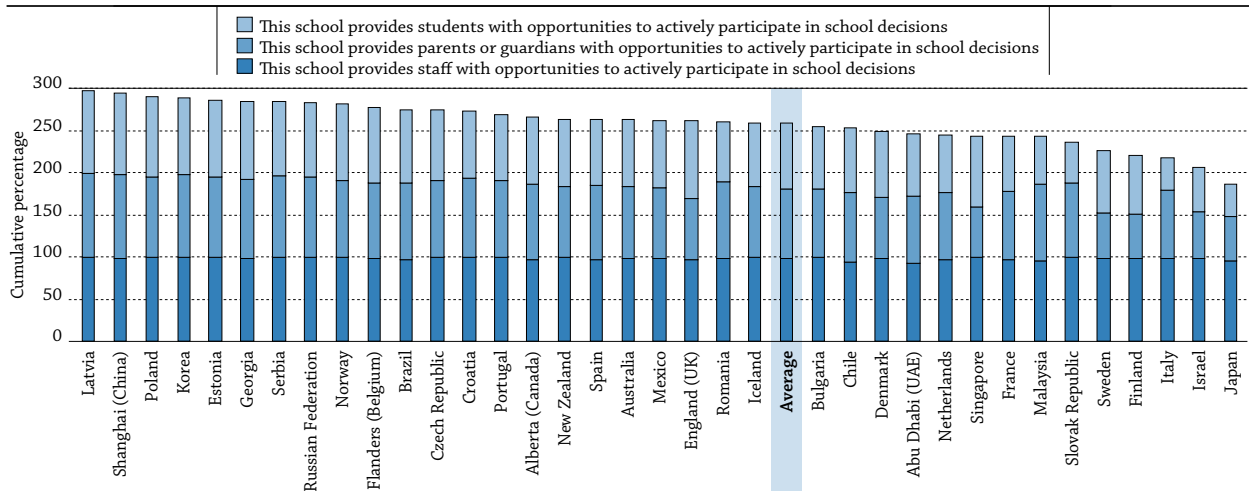
Figure 1 • Percentage of lower secondary education principals who report having engaged “often” or “very often” in the following instructional leadership activities during the 12 months prior to the study



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in descending order, based on the average percentage of principals indicating that they “often” or “very often” engage in instructional leadership actions.

Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

Figure 2 • Percentage of lower secondary education principals who report that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following distributed leadership statements about their school



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in descending order, based on the average percentage of principals indicating that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with distributed leadership statements about their school.

Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

Teacher involvement in decision-making processes at their school is one of the key factors in adopting and sustaining educational improvement. Figure 2 shows that systems are similar across countries and economies in their incorporation of teachers in school decision-making processes; however, countries and economies differ regarding the opportunities offered to parents/guardians and students to actively participate in school decisions. Given the complexity and dynamics of educational change, these subtle differences in engaging additional stakeholders in the decision-making process could represent an important difference in the quality of the educational process that takes place within the school.

How to enhance school leadership?

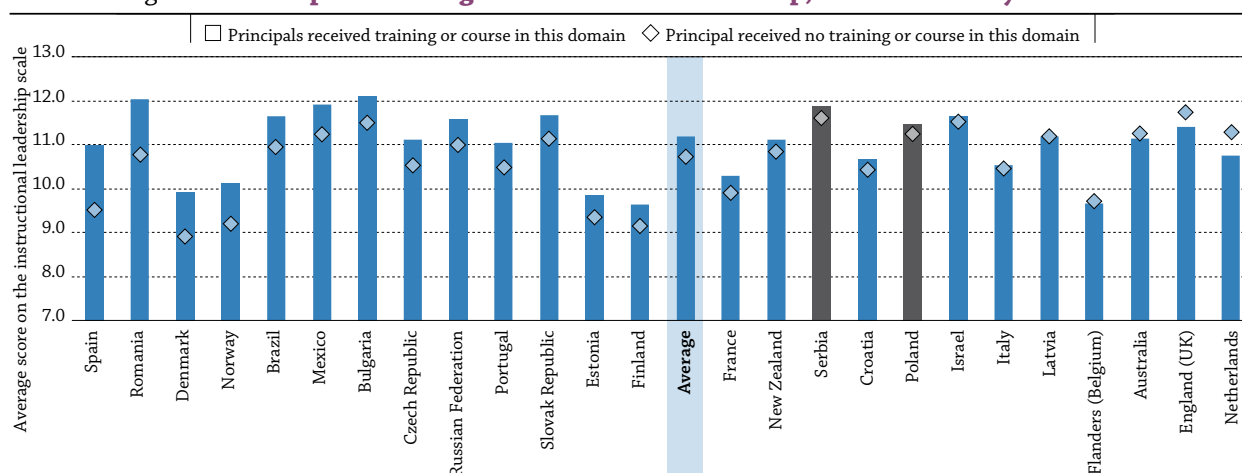
As the previous section shows, reports from principals suggest that they lack at least one of the three dimensions of instructional leadership, showing that there is still room for improvement in this area. For distributed leadership there is no



clear association between school context and principal characteristics. This may be because the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making processes may be a product of national legislation rather than school or principal initiatives².

However, the report also shows that principals who acquired instructional leadership competencies in their educational leadership training, or in a separate course, are more engaged in instructional leadership actions in their school, as can be observed in Figure 3. This suggests that instructional leadership in schools can be fostered by including instructional leadership training in leadership preparation programmes, or by encouraging principals to take courses that develop these skills.

Figure 3 • Principals' training in instructional leadership, lower secondary education



Notes: Blue bars and rhombuses represent countries and economies where the majority of principals have received training in instructional leadership. Grey bars and rhombuses represent countries and economies where a minority of principals have received such training. Countries and economies are only included where at least 10% of principals indicated that they received training or a course in instructional leadership and at least 10% indicated that they did not receive such a training or course. Countries and economies are ranked in descending order, based on the difference in instructional leadership between principals who received training or a course in instructional leadership and those who did not.

Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

The bottom line The *School Leadership for Learning* report shows that educational leadership is clearly related to the development of professional learning communities in schools at all educational levels. It is especially related to the engagement of teachers in reflective dialogue and teacher co-operation. However, there is still room for improvement and some indicators of instructional and distributed leadership need further development cross-nationally. A possible method of enhancing instructional leadership is through training for principals that focuses on this area. By encouraging principals to take notice of developments in their field through in-service training or attendance of leadership courses and professional development activities, awareness of their role as a school leader can be fostered.

2. One exception is the involvement of principals in professional development activities, since overall it shows a positive significant association with distributed leadership. Nevertheless, the association is small and marginal.

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To learn more

OECD (2016), *School Leadership for Learning: Insights from TALIS 2013*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264258341-en>.
OECD (2014a), *TALIS 2013 Results: An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264196261-en>.
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OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

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