



&lt;Research article&gt;

## Social Factors Related to Leadership Skills and Educational Achievement of Primary School Principals

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//Abstract

**INTRODUCTION:** This paper aims to identify the leadership skills of principals of primary schools and their relationship to the levels of accomplishment obtained by students in their schools.

**METHOD:** A test of leadership skills consisting of 60 items was applied to 31 principals of the same number of primary schools in the state of Tabasco, Mexico. The sampling was stratified by quotas and the data were grouped according to three levels of educational achievement: high, medium and low.

**RESULTS:** The strongest leadership skill among the principals across the three levels of school achievement was understanding, while the weakest skill was ambition. The ability to understand others does not guarantee effective leadership unless it is complemented by other factors such as the shared creation of a vision, which includes all the members of the learning community, the motivation to develop it in a collaborative way, and the management and administration of the school.

**DISCUSSION:** The results are useful for understanding how the sociocultural context influences leadership skills and styles of school principals.

//Keywords

Leadership; Educational administration; Sociocultural environment; Learning; Elementary education.

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//Títol

Factors socials relacionats amb habilitats de lideratge i assoliment educatiu en directors d'escoles primàries

//Resum

**INTRODUCCIÓ:** El propòsit de l'article és identificar les habilitats de lideratge de directors d'escoles primàries i la seva relació amb els nivells d'assoliment que han obtingut els alumnes de les seves escoles.

**MÈTODE:** Es va aplicar una prova d'habilitats de lideratge, formada per seixanta ítems, a trenta-un directors de trenta-una escoles primàries de l'estat de Tabasco, Mèxic. El mostreig es va estratificar per quotes i les dades es van desagregar segons tres nivells d'assoliment educatiu: alt, mitjà i baix.

**RESULTATS:** L'habilitat de lideratge més forta en els directors de les escoles dels tres nivells d'assoliment va ser la comprensió o capacitat d'entendre els altres, i la més feble va ser l'ambició. S'observa que la capacitat d'entendre els altres no garanteix un lideratge efectiu si no va acompanyat d'altres factors, com ara la creació compartida d'una visió que inclogui tots els membres de la comunitat educativa, la motivació per desenvolupar-la de manera col·laborativa, i la gestió i administració de l'escola.

**DISCUSSIÓ:** Els resultats són útils per entendre de quina manera el context sociocultural influeix en les habilitats i els estils de lideratge que els directors escolars mostren en les escoles que dirigeixen.

//Paraules clau

Lideratge; Administració educativa; Ambient sociocultural; Aprenentatge; Educació bàsica.

//Título

Factores sociales relacionados con las habilidades de liderazgo y el rendimiento educativo en directores de escuelas primarias

//Resumen

**INTRODUCCIÓN:** El propósito del artículo es identificar las habilidades de liderazgo de directores de escuelas primarias y su relación con los niveles de éxito que han obtenido los alumnos de sus escuelas.

**MÉTODO:** Se aplicó un test de habilidades de liderazgo conformado por 60 ítems a 31 directores de respectivas escuelas primarias del estado de Tabasco, México. El muestreo fue estratificado por cuotas y los datos se desagregaron de acuerdo con tres niveles de éxito educativo: alto, medio y bajo.

**RESULTADOS:** La habilidad de liderazgo más fuerte en los directores de las escuelas de los tres niveles de éxito fue la comprensión y la más débil, la ambición. La habilidad de comprender a los demás, no garantiza un liderazgo efectivo, si no está acompañada de otros factores como la creación compartida de una visión que incluya a todos los miembros de la comunidad educativa, la motivación para desarrollarla de manera colaborativa y la gestión y administración de la escuela.

**DISCUSIÓN:** Los resultados son útiles para entender en qué forma el contexto sociocultural influye en las habilidades y estilos de liderazgo que los directores escolares muestran en sus escuelas.

//Palabras clave

Liderazgo; Administración educativa; Ambiente sociocultural; Aprendizaje; Educación básica.

## 1. Introduction

An increasing amount of research on school leadership has been conducted in recent years, because school principals play an important role in the educational achievements of their institutions, the learning outcomes and the organisation of the education centres. This research strives to identify and analyse the characteristics, styles, processes and effects of leadership in different countries and contexts (Slater, Silva & Antúnez, 2014).

According to a survey carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) on the educational systems of 22 countries, a successful school needs effective leadership, administration and management. These results are supported by multiple international-level studies that have demonstrated the relevance of the role of school principals in the good performance of schools, as well as the fact that, when the leadership of the principals is effective, the improvements in student learning become evident (Guzmán, Pérez & Hernández, 2016; López, Slater & García, 2010).

With respect to educational achievement, Schmelkes (2005) states that socioeconomic and cultural conditions, the allocation of resources and school structure are variables closely linked to school achievement. However, it has been found that, in the day-to-day running of schools in practice, when effectively encouraged by the principal, a good teacher or team of teachers in a poorly equipped school in a very marginal community can achieve learning outcomes equivalent to those of the best-equipped schools in the most privileged contexts.

Research on school improvement projects has found that one of the key success factors is the leadership of the management team (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Hernández-Castilla & Murillo, 2017; Sun, Penner & Loeb, 2017). A more in-depth analysis of factors relating to managerial activity reveals that technical aspects are included, such as planning, securing resources, effectiveness of management, resourcefulness and problem-solving. However, it also highlights the fact that personal aspects, such as commitment, sensitivity and the ability to unite people around a project are factors that combine to form part of the concept of leadership, all of which are of key importance in the professional competence of principals (Teixidó, 2008).

In Latin America, there has been a series of reforms that, since the 1980s, have given school management a central place in educational policy, as an essential tool for achieving change that leads to educational improvement (Gairín, Tafur & Vázquez, 2017; Parés, 2015; Pont, 2017). In the case of Mexico, international learning evaluations, such as PISA<sup>1</sup>, and national evaluations, like ENLACE<sup>2</sup> and PLANEA<sup>3</sup>, have shown lower levels of educational achievement in primary schools. In fact, after fifteen years of participating in PISA, Mexico's performance displays a downward trend, particularly in reading and science skills, as shown in Table 1 below. This has led to a process of revision of the educational policies in general, including the universal evaluation of teachers and school administrators, for the purpose of identifying the shortcomings

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<sup>1</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment.

<sup>2</sup> The ENLACE test (National Assessment of Academic Achievement in Schools) was applied from 2006 to 2013 in primary and high schools in Mexico in order to measure the level of performance of children and young people in the subjects of Spanish and Mathematics, as well as in Natural Sciences. In the 2014-2015 academic year, it was replaced by the PLANEA test (National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning).

<sup>3</sup> PLANEA is the Spanish acronym for the National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning.

of these education professionals in order to design training programmes and policies aimed at improving the educational indicators.

Table 1. Mexico's and OECD performance in main competencies evaluated in PISA 2000–2015<sup>4</sup>

	2000		2003		2006		2009		2012		2015	
	MEX	OECD	MEX	OECD	MEX	OECD	MEX	OECD	MEX	OECD	MEX	OECD
<b>MATH</b>			385	499					413	496		
<b>READING</b>	422	494					425	493				
<b>SCIENCE</b>					410	498					416	493

Source: Prepared by the author, based on Márquez (2017, p. 8).

Thus, it was in the 2015-2016 academic year, as a result of the 2013 education reform, that positions with management duties in primary education were subject to a competitive application process, (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2015). Before this reform, the election of school principals was based on the consideration of the merits in terms of the promotion ladder, with the seniority of the teachers' position being seen as most important, as well as the influence of the applicants' union relations. Therefore, many current principals reached school management positions primarily because of their seniority and union position, rather than merit or skills as leaders and managers (Vallejo, 2006).

The increasing relevance of the school principal as a key factor in educational achievement has led to a research movement and principal training programmes in Mexico, involving the creation of networks on leadership (such as the Network of Research on Educational Management), as well as over 50 master's degree programmes on administration, management and educational leadership, at both public and private universities. This growing interest in programmes for the development of principals' leadership skills requires a more in-depth understanding of this field, to which this paper aims to contribute.

### Characteristics and leadership skills approach

Studies on leadership have different theoretical and methodological approaches that characterise them and focus on different variable incidents (See Table 2). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the leadership methodology known as the Trait Approach was developed. In its origins, the Trait Approach aimed to identify individuals who were born to lead, since it was thought that effective leaders shared certain characteristics which were generally associated with birth-related qualities. Therefore, it was common practice for leaders to take tests in order to identify their strong and weak leadership skills, which would then be compared to the attributes of the ideal leader. Thus, leaders would be able to ascertain which traits they should develop in order to improve themselves (Humphreys, 2016). Paradoxically, the hundreds of studies conducted to detect the ideal leader traits actually found different sets of characteristics, as they did not consider the situational or contextual variable, which may mean that in some cases the features of an effective or ideal leader change radically depending on the context (Northouse, 2016; Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The PISA evaluation model stipulates the application of tests every three years, using competences in reading, mathematics and sciences as a base. However, in each application, it concentrates on one of these competences, while only a survey of the others is conducted.



In contrast, although it shares a leader-centered perspective with the Trait Approach, the Leadership Skills Approach considers that the skills required by a leader can be learned and developed and that, rather than being born with certain features or attributes, people can actually develop leadership skills through learning and the experiences acquired in the course of their professional activity. Within the framework of the Leadership Skills Approach, studies such as Grimson & Loeb's (2011) not only specify the principals' skill set, but associate these skills with positive educational outcomes, therefore finding that areas of strength are relative and vary depending on the principal and the school context.

Table 2. Leadership theories

<i>Theories</i>	<i>Leadership based on the following questions/concepts</i>	<i>Illustrative texts</i>
<i>Leadership as the property of leaders</i>		
Trait	What is leadership? Do I have the right qualities to be a leader?	Stogdill (1974); Judge & Long (2012)
Style	Do I know my preferred leadership style? Do I know how to obtain a balance between a concern for tasks and for people? Have I had the correct in-service training on the behaviours required to achieve the right style?	Northouse (2016)
Contingency	Have I reflected on the context that affects which leadership style is appropriate? Do I know how my subordinates will respond to particular styles?	Fiedler <i>et al.</i> (1978); Hersey & Blanchard (1982)
<i>Leadership &amp; Followers</i>		
LMX (Leader Member Exchange)	Leaders and followers negotiate their roles. Process of leadership making.	Dansereau, Graen & Haga (1975); Graen & Cashman (1975); Graen & Uhl-Bien (1991)
Transactional	Motivate and empower followers. Rewards for good performance and threat or discipline for poor performance. Do leaders need to have control of rewards and penalties?	Burns (1979); Bass (1990)
Charismatic & Transformational	Do I have a vision and a mission? Can I empower my followers to live the vision? How can I ensure my leadership has positive effects on production outcomes?	Antonakis (2012); Burns (1979)
<i>Leadership as a social process</i>		
Distributed leadership	How is the practice of leadership distributed over leaders, followers and the situation? How is the task stretched and accomplished through the work of a number of individuals? How can I enhance the individual and capacity of the team to accomplish the task? Decentralised leadership Teacher leadership Communities of practice Democratic leadership Social interaction a critical part of distributed leadership.	Gronn (2002); Spillane (2006); Spillane, Halverson & Diamond (2001); Harris (2014); Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2006); Bryant (2003)

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<i>Theories</i>	<i>Leadership based on the following questions/concepts</i>	<i>Illustrative texts</i>
Sustainable leadership	Preserves and develops in-depth learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future.	Hargreaves (2007); Hargreaves & Fink, (2006)
Leadership for social justice	Its aim is to create a new model of social justice organizations capable to transform people, the material conditions in which they live, and ultimately the structure of society.	Theoharis (2007)

Source: Adapted from Humphreys (2016, p. 25) and expanded<sup>5</sup> by the author.

In the Mexican context, Silva, Aguirre & Cordero (2009) conducted research with twelve national and international experts on the subject in order to identify the ideal competencies and skills for administrative positions at primary level. They identified four key areas: relation to the context; pedagogical work; administrative area; and personal and social skills. In this last area, there is a notable emphasis on self-management skills, as well as the ability to organise one's own work (knowing the characteristics of one's role and improving personal working habits). Developing social skills (ability to encourage, negotiating skills, conflict solving, empathy, becoming involved with the community, self-regulation) is crucial in this respect, as well as intellectual skills, such as critical thinking and reading.

This study forms part of growing body of research on leadership skills, in a particular social-educational context, namely the state of Tabasco in Mexico, which has historically been considered an educational system with low learning results at all educational levels in the PISA, ENLACE and PLANEA tests, ranking among the bottom three states nationwide in the PLANEA tests in 2015 and 2017 (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, 2015; 2017).

## 2. Objectives and research questions

The main objective of this research is to study the leadership skills of 31 primary school principals in the state of Tabasco in Mexico, and detect any correlations between these skills and the levels of achievement obtained by their schools, in order to identify common skills shared by the principals whose schools have obtained high educational results.

The research questions to be answered in the study were as follows: Which are the dominant and deficient leadership skills of the sampled primary school principals in the state of Tabasco? Are there differences between the strong and weak leadership skills that principals have depending on the achievement levels displayed by their students? Do contextual and sociocultural factors have any impact on the dominant and deficient leadership skills of the principals?

<sup>5</sup> The sections "Sustainable leadership" and "Leadership for social justice".

### 3. Methodology

Based on the results of the 2009 Enlace test, broken down by school, a non-probabilistic sampling was used, taking into account two criteria. The first was set in line with the Mexican Federal Government's classification for primary schools: general, indigenous, Conafe<sup>6</sup> and private. Therefore, the number of schools in the sample was determined, according to the proportional number of schools of each system that operate in Tabasco: 15 general, 6 indigenous, 5 Conafe and 5 private schools (see Table 3). The second criterion was the level of educational achievement attained by the schools. For the high level, the schools that achieved the highest scores in the ENLACE database were selected, while the lowest-level schools were those classified in the lowest positions. Finally, the medium-level schools correspond to the average position in the table. The proportion of schools at each achievement level can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Educational system, characteristics and number of sampled schools

Educational system	Characteristics	Level of achievement			
		High	Medium	Low	Total
General	Located in urban, suburban and rural regions	5	5	5	15
Indigenous	Located in areas where an indigenous language is spoken	2	2	2	6
Conafe	Located in areas of high marginalisation	2	2	1	5
Private	With support from private individuals	2	1	2	5

Source: Prepared by the author.

In order to identify the strongest and weakest skills possessed by the 31 principals of the primary schools in the four educational contexts (general, indigenous, Conafe and private schools in Tabasco, Mexico), a cross-sectional, descriptive and comparative study was designed. To this end, a test comprised of nine identification questions and 60 substantive questions was developed and conducted. These items explored which were the principals' strongest and weakest leadership skills. The following skills were measured<sup>7</sup>:

Table 4. Leadership skills and description

Skill	Description
Diligence	To work with arduous, careful and rigorous effort.
Perseverance	To remain firm in the development of action despite difficulty or opposition.
Understanding	Ability to understand and establish empathy with the problems and feelings of others.
Confrontation	Ability to remain firm when facing and resolving conflicts.
Public Speaking	Ability to speak in front of groups of people (parents, teachers, authorities, colleagues).
Problem-solving	Cognitive ability that enables a person to proceed at a given time to achieve a desired goal.

(This table continues on the next page)

<sup>6</sup> The National Council for Educational Development (Conafe) is a body attached to the Mexico's Federal Government. Its primary purpose is to research, design, implement, operate and evaluate new educational programmes designed to fit the needs, interests, practices, and overall context of students living in rural areas, in dispersed communities of migrant workers, peasant or indigenous populations. These are all marginalised communities living below the poverty line.

<sup>7</sup> These skills were obtained through a focus group with five primary school principals. They validated the fourteen basic skills required by a principal.



<i>Skill</i>	<i>Description</i>
Role Models	Quality of being admired by the educational community because of one's values and abilities.
Disposition	Ability to get along with others
Flexibility	Open to adapting one's time to the needs of the working group.
Ambition	Desire and determination to succeed in plans and objectives.
Organisation	Ability to comply with duties at assigned times.
Time Management	Ability to coordinate one's time and complete activities on time.
Loyalty	To be loyal to superiors, colleagues and ideals
Common sense	Natural ability to judge the events of the real world in a reasonable, prudent and logical way.
Versatility	Knowledge and ability to perform different functions or activities within an organisation.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Although leadership is necessarily exercised in social groups and involves groups of people, there are leadership skills that correspond more closely to issues that have an intrinsic relationship with the leader's personality, such as loyalty, diligence, common sense, problem solving, role models, organisation, time management and versatility, while others are more associated with motivation, such as ambition and perseverance. A third group of leadership skills corresponds to social skills, such as understanding, confrontation, public speaking, being a role model, flexibility and disposition (See Table 4).

The content of the chart was validated based on the expert judgment of ten primary teachers, who were invited to act as judges. They participated in the validation of the items used to measure the skills. The judges all have teaching and management experience and are impartial (not included in the sample). They are well respected and have a good reputation in their communities, and were willing to collaborate. The chart was sent to the judges by e-mail.

## 4. Results

### The principals' profile

The profile of the principals in the sample was as follows: 21 men and 10 women, whose ages ranged between 20 and 49, with the majority in the 40-49 age group. Slightly more than half of the principals had 15 years' experience (55%) and 67% of them held permanent positions. With respect to their education and qualifications, 3% had studied at teachers' college, 39% held a bachelor's degree, 3% had completed a specialization programme, 32% had master's degrees, 7% had doctoral degrees and 16% indicated another type of studies. Moreover, 19% of the group were studying a postgraduate programme: 3 on a specialization programme, 1 on a master's degree and 2 on their doctoral degree.

### Strong skills of the principals

The strongest skill among the primary school principals of the schools across the three levels of achievement was their ability to understand. This was related to the ability to listen to others, to understand them and support them. For the school principals, this entails providing support to



teachers, students, administrative staff and parents within the educational organisation. Besides this common factor, certain abilities stood out depending on level of achievement. For instance, persistence and loyalty were the dominant abilities in the case of the principals of institutions with the highest level of educational achievement (see Table 5). In the case of principals of schools with average educational achievement, the most notable skill after comprehension ability was the ability to solve problems, followed by diligence, persistence, public speaking, organisation and common sense, which were all ranked with the same score, as shown in Table 5. At the low achievement level, the strongest skill displayed by principals was also understanding, followed by diligence, public speaking, role model, organisation, loyalty and common sense (see Table 5).

With respect to the comparison between educational contexts, understanding happened to be a dominant skill of principals across all the education systems. As such, it ranks highly at the high, middle and low levels of general schools. In Conafe schools, understanding was the dominant skill displayed by principals at high-achieving schools. In the case of indigenous schools, understanding ranks as a strong skill for high- and low-level principals. Finally, at private schools, understanding is also a dominant skill in medium- and low-level school principals (see Table 5).

Table 5. The strongest leadership skills of the principals of the schools according to levels of achievement

Educational system	School achievement level	Strong skill	Frequency	Percentage	
General	High	Perseverance	2	40	
		<b>Understanding</b>	3	60	
		Total	5	100	
	Medium	Perseverance	1	20	
		<b>Understanding</b>	2	40	
		Problem solving	2	40	
	Low	Total	5	100	
		Diligence	1	20	
		<b>Understanding</b>	3	60	
	Conafe	High	Loyalty	1	20
			Total	5	100
			Medium	<b>Understanding</b>	2
Low		Diligence	1	50	
		Organisation	1	50	
		Total	2	100	
Indigenous	High	Public speaking	1	100	
		Perseverance	1	50	
		<b>Understanding</b>	1	50	
	Medium	Total	2	100	
		Public speaking	1	50	
		Common sense	1	50	
Low	Total	2	100		
	<b>Understanding</b>	2	100		
	Private	High	Loyalty	1	100
Medium		<b>Understanding</b>	1	100	
Low		Diligence	1	33.3	
		<b>Understanding</b>	1	33.3	
		Role models	1	33.3	
Total	3	100			

Source: Prepared by the author.

### Weak abilities of primary school principals

According to the findings of the study, the weakest skill displayed by principals at all levels of achievement was ambition, which involves the will and determination to achieve success with respect to one's plans and purposes, despite any difficulties that may arise. A person with ambition avoids mediocrity and always strives to achieve higher goals. The second skill that was remarkably absent was common sense, which is the ability to solve the problems of everyday life and deal logically with the activities and decisions of day-to-day work. Like ambition, common sense was a skill that principals at all levels seemed to lack. In the case of schools at the high achievement level, other skills that were lacking included time management and versatility. At the middle level, in addition to those mentioned above, there was a lack of confrontation and disposition skills. Confrontation skills were also lacking in the case of the low achievement level (see Table 6).

With respect to principals' deficient skills depending on the educational system, it was observed that, at many general primary schools, ambition is an underdeveloped skill at all three achievement levels. In the case of medium- and low-level Conafe primary schools, ambition was the principals' weakest ability, while, at the indigenous schools, it was classified as a non-existent skill at all three achievement levels. Finally, at private schools, there was a lack of ambition at low-level achievement schools (see Table 6).

Table 6. The weakest leadership skills of the principals of the schools according to educational system and levels of achievement

<i>Educational system</i>	<i>School achievement level</i>	<i>Weak skill</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	
General	High	<b>Ambition</b>	3	60	
		Time Management	1	20	
		Common sense	1	20	
			Total	5	100
	Medium	Disposition	1	20	
		<b>Ambition</b>	2	40	
		Common sense	2	40	
			Total	5	100
	Low	Confrontation	1	20	
		<b>Ambition</b>	4	80	
		Total	5	100	
	Conafe	High	Common sense	1	50
Versatility			1	50	
Total			2	100	
Medium		Confrontation	1	50	
		<b>Ambition</b>	1	50	
		Total	2	100	
Low		<b>Ambition</b>	1	100	
Indigenous	High	<b>Ambition</b>	1	0	
		Common sense	1	50.0	
		Total	2	100	
	Medium	<b>Ambition</b>	2	100	
Private	High	Common sense	1	100	
		Common sense	1	100	
	Low	<b>Ambition</b>	1	33	
		Common sense	2	67	
		Total	3	100	

Source: Prepared by the author.

## 5. Discussion

The research findings give us some insight into one of the fundamental premises of Contingency Theory: the contextual variables determine the leadership style that is best suited to a particular job situation. Moreover, there is no single leadership style that is appropriate for all situations; instead, the success of the leaders depends on the degree of adaptation between the qualities of a leader and the leadership style that a specific situation demands (Roya & Matthew, 2017).

Let us start by discussing why understanding was the strongest skill among most of the school principals, regardless of whether they run high-, medium- or low-achieving schools. This skill is defined as the ability to listen with empathy to the needs and problems of the members of the educational community. The question is whether a caring principal always has a close enough relationship with his work team to motivate and positively influence them to achieve the school's vision. According to studies carried out all over the world, to obtain satisfactory levels of achievement, a good school principal requires a combination of other skills, such as persistence, diligence, organisation and ambition.

Understanding is definitively a positive quality, but unless it is complemented by the abovementioned skills, the principal may become an "indifferent" leader, who, according to Sánchez (2008), is characterised by their permissiveness and tolerance, a friendly relationship with all the collaborators and an incapacity to formulate objectives or goals for the school, or to supervise teacher's activities and projects. In these cases, the principal shows a high degree of complacency and indifference towards the behaviour of the school and its members.

Within this context, when understanding becomes indifference, Hallinger & Murphy (1986) state that, in low-income environments, the principals' efforts to improve students' performance are a key factor, because the parents of these students already have low expectations of their achievements, whereas principals in high-income environments responded to parents' pressure and ultimately associated students' results to their parents' professional profile (pp. 346–347).

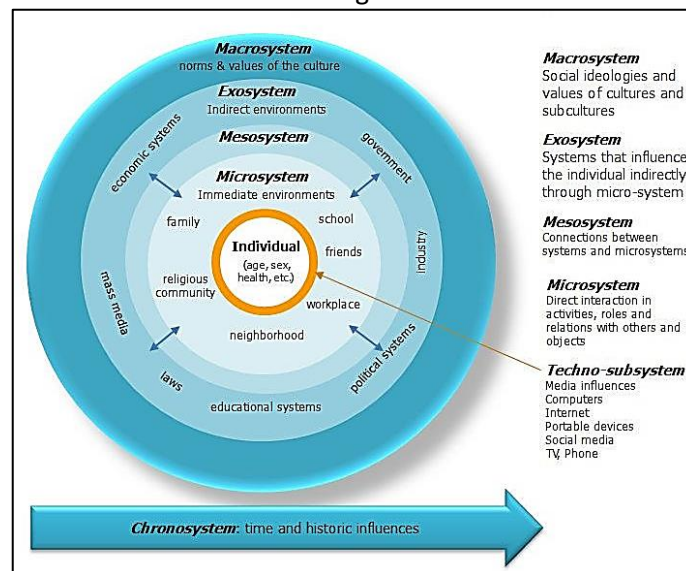
Regarding the weakest ability of the principals studied, the results are the same again: at all the levels of achievement, another skill that all the school principals lacked was ambition, which is defined as the energy that motivates us to reach planned goals and objectives, the desire to be able to achieve our vision (i.e., a positive ability that drives us to strive to reach goals beyond our individual interests. Ambition in a school, as a principal's skill, entails having a vision to share with others, knowing how to make effective use of the available resources and producing new ones to achieve the objectives set. It also involves guiding the team through the difficulties. Ambitious principals tend to become inspirational leaders.

That Tabasco's principals lacked ambition more than any other skill reflects not only individual conditions, but the cultural situation, as this lack is widespread at most levels and in all educational systems. As mentioned above, Tabasco ranks at the bottom in terms of student achievement in the country, which is not a result of any cognitive deficit of its population, but rather a series of historical conditions and sociocultural variables revealed by the indicators. There is no educational policy designed to put an end to this region lagging behind. There are no associations or networks to integrate the school principals within a state project for educational improvement. The relations between principals and educational authorities are merely bureaucratic in nature. In addition, in the case of the participants in this study, except those

who work in private schools, they arrived at their posts without any preparation and without greater motivation than an increase in their salaries.

The cultural context and the school environment reinforce each other. The relationships within the school collective are influenced by a bureaucratic culture that does not recognise or offer incentives for an attitude of initiative and ambition, but rather encourages routine practice. A possible and provisional approach to the internal dynamics of this phenomenon can be obtained from the logic of the Systemic Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), since it enables us to appreciate the mutual interaction between the micro and macro level. The fact that the principals have shown so much similarity in leadership skills, across the different educational systems and levels of achievement, relates to the dynamics between microsystems and macrosystems (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development



Source: Castro (2018).

## 6. Conclusion

The macrosystem of Tabasco, particularly in terms of the culture, has a tendency for the agents to show an understanding attitude, in this case, with respect to the school microsystem. According to Geertz (2003, p. 56), culture as “a series of symbolic devices to control behaviour” enables individuals to be constituted as such depending on the cultural patterns that govern them. The mutual reinforcement lies in the fact that the significance of such patterns is historically constructed, hence the mutual interaction between the microsystem and the macrosystem in the cross-profile appearance of understanding skills shown by principals.

According to Jawas (2017) in his research on the influence of sociocultural factors on leadership practices, although empirical studies demonstrate similarities in leadership styles and practices in countries everywhere, there are local leadership practices that are influenced by the educational conditions, sociocultural practices and economic factors. This leads to the conclusion that the educational leaders, as well as their followers or collaborators, are influenced by the social and economic context, and the culture

in which they live. While school principals exert an influence in their schools, they are also influenced by the culture of the school and the society of which they form part.

The importance of promoting research that combines environmental variables that influence the attitudes of leaders with school achievement levels is based on assessing the mutual reinforcement between the macro context and micro context at the school level. As indicated earlier, according to the Leadership Skills Approach, the qualities of the school leader are not aligned to a universal model, but rather they are set within their context. Far from advocating a deterministic view, this approach suggests that skills can be acquired not only in terms of the cultural influence of the macro context; moreover, they can be learned and unlearned according to the challenges and demands posed by their environments.

Being a leader in any field is never easy and, in sociocultural contexts such as the focus of this research, the situation becomes more complicated because, to make changes requires us to tackle trends that have prevailed for generations and which lead to conformism and indifference. Therefore, training principals and school leaders is essential for achieving change, because these are the people who must implement national, regional and local educational policies in schools. However, it is necessary to take into account the fact that effective management practices depend on the features and characteristics of educational systems and also on the cultural and work conditions of the school (Vaillant, 2015).

Schools are not islands; they belong to the mainland of educational systems that should integrate them and guide them. Long term initiatives must evolve from such systems with the aim of improving poor educational results, with programmes to train school principals and promote a culture that values knowledge and the people involved. Meanwhile, in Tabasco, Mexico, and around the world, there are school principals who, against all odds, manage to achieve outstanding results, even with very poor facilities and a student population from low-income families. For these school principals, it must be said, whatever other skills are lacking, determination is not.

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