

Examining Educational Issues with 20 Private School Educators in Ecuador

Examinando problemas educativos con 20 educadores en una escuela privada en Ecuador

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 Ximena D. Burgin ^{1*}

 Mayra C. Daniel ²

¹Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL, USA. xrecald1@niu.edu
mcdaniel@niu.edu

*Corresponding author:
Northern Illinois
University, Dekalb, IL, USA, GA-208,
xrecald1@niu.edu

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Abstract

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The Ecuadorian educational system has been transformed by the implementation of the National Ten-Year Plan (PDN, for its Spanish title, Plan Decenal Nacional), which was renewed until 2025. This qualitative study examined the self-reported perceptions of 20 private elementary school teachers regarding the Ecuadorian educational system. Study questions addressed (1) participants' perceptions of the educational system using a survey based on the 5Essentials inquiry tool developed by Langley (2009) as an evaluative measure, and (2) challenges educators identified as barriers to learners' academic achievement. Survey validity was evaluated by three Ecuadorian educators from the area where this research was conducted. Data collected from teachers were triangulated utilizing administrators' interviews and an analysis of the school's policies. Study findings suggest that participating teachers felt that they had received insufficient and limited support from school administration and parents, leading to teacher disempowerment.

Resumen

Palabras Clave
Academic support,
teacher
disempowerment,
teachers' self-esteem,
educator's role as leader;
Ecuadorian context

El sistema educativo ecuatoriano ha sido transformado con la implementación del Plan Decenal Nacional (PDN) el cual fue renovado hasta el año 2025. Este estudio cualitativo examinó las percepciones autoinformadas de 20 docentes de primaria de una escuela privada sobre el sistema educativo ecuatoriano. Las preguntas del estudio abordaron (1) las percepciones de los participantes sobre el sistema educativo utilizando una encuesta basada en la herramienta de investigación 5Essentials desarrollada por Langley (2009) como medida evaluativa, y (2) desafíos identificados por los educadores como barreras para el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes. La validez de la encuesta fue evaluada por tres educadores ecuatorianos del área donde se realizó esta investigación. Los datos recopilados de los maestros se triangularon utilizando entrevistas con los administradores y un análisis de las políticas de la escuela. Los hallazgos del estudio sugieren que los maestros participantes percibieron que recibían un apoyo insuficiente y limitado de la administración de la escuela y de los padres, lo que provocó la pérdida de poder de los maestros.

1. Introduction

In the past 10 years, the Ecuadorian education system has undergone numerous changes intended to transform schooling. The government further raised the stakes by implementing the National Ten-Year Plan (PDN, for its Spanish title, Plan Decenal Nacional), a ten-year educational plan approved in 2016 and renewed from 2016 to 2025 (Fajardo-Dack, 2016; Ministerio de Educación, 2016; Schroder, 2008). In Ecuador, education is perceived as one of the most effective tools to promote positive change and prepare young people to be productive members of society (Morales-Ramos, 2011; Patrinos et al., 2006; Patrinos, & Psacharopoulos, 2020). Since the PDN is a mandate for all private and public educational institutions, Ecuadorian teachers are expected to implement the PDN not only to improve students' current lives, but also to improve the quality of life for all Ecuadorian citizens in the future (Stanton, 2019).

Despite the implementation of the PDN, many areas of need continue to exist in Ecuador, such as public investment to increase the number of buildings in select school districts, more choice of pedagogical materials for teaching and learning, and better qualified teachers and administrators. To meet the goal of preparing teachers, the National University of Education (UNAE, for its Spanish title, Universidad Nacional de Educación) was established in 2013 to train K-12 teachers to diagnose academic issues and develop teachers' abilities to design and assess personalized instruction, build learning communities, and engage in professional development (PD) (Díaz Flórez et al, 2019). These skills will allow teachers to share information with students through pedagogical strategies that combine direct and indirect instruction, include hands-on experiential activities, and offer a balance of formative and summative evaluations. However, the PDN's stated objectives did not include teachers' participation in the reevaluation process (Ministerio de Educación, 2016).

Data were collected utilizing the 5Essentials survey, developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, to capture the influence of internal and external factors that affect teachers' practices (UChicagoImpact, 2018). The 5Essentials constructs assess teachers' perceptions about values and norms as a community system and provide information to understand teachers' pedagogical approaches within the school environment. Internal and external factors beyond the school environment also affect the culture and climate of classrooms, and therefore impact the level of student engagement and learning outcomes (Bryk et al., 2015; Katz & Kahn, 1978). The 5Essentials survey evaluated five constructs: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction. Effective Leaders referred to leadership as an input from school administrators sharing their vision and next steps with their faculty. The other constructs, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, and Supportive Environment, are closely related to Ambitious Instruction, because academic achievement involves support from teachers and parents as well as other support for students to succeed in the classroom (Bryk et al., 2015). The five constructs assess teachers' perceptions about values and norms in the community, providing information to examine teachers' approaches within diverse school environments.

This study explored in-service educators' perceptions of teachers' interactions with other educational stakeholders in one private school to understand the PDN's alignment to improving education and teacher's feedback. The PDN mandates impact the relationships among stakeholders within the school and classroom in public and private educational institutions. The survey used in this study documented teachers' perceptions of classroom issues and their perceived level of collaboration with the school leadership, parents, and other teachers. This inquiry considered what the professional literature has documented about the cultural and linguistic diversity in Ecuador's educational system and issues in teacher empowerment.

1.1 Diversity in Ecuador

Diversity in Ecuador is demonstrated by the different languages spoken in the country (e.g., Cofán and Quechua). The National Institute of Statistics and Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos; INEC, 2015) recorded that 93% of Ecuador's population speaks Castilian and 4.1% speak Quechua. The census information documented the country's population as 71.9% mestizos (mixed Amerindian and white), 7.4% Montubio, 7% Amerindian, 6.1% white, 4.3% Afroecuadorian, 1.9% mulato, 1% black, and 0.4% other. Researchers suggest the Ecuadorian educational system faces challenges addressing diversity and acknowledge that understanding the country's diversity is key to offering all students an equitable education (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2011).

1.2. Educational System in Ecuador

The education system in Ecuador includes four levels: pre-primary (3–5-year-old students), primary (ages 6-11), secondary (ages 12-17), and tertiary (ages 18-22). Education in public schools is compulsory and free for learners ages 3 to 17; however, additional fees, such as transportation costs, are paid by parents. Parents pay tuition for private education institutions (Ecuador, n.d.). About 20% of the total of primary students and 40% of secondary students are enrolled in private education in Ecuador (Education State University, 2021) due to parental perception that the government's financial limitations do not provide adequate resources for public educational institutions.

The PDN focused on quality schooling supporting equity, tolerance, and inclusiveness (Ministerio de Educación, 2016) impacting public and private educational institutions. The PDN's objectives included inclusiveness and equity for all children; increasing the number of students attending school, eliminating illiteracy, and strengthening adult education; improving infrastructure, revalorizing, or revolutionizing the teaching profession; and restructuring increments of the government's investment in education. Moreover, Ecuador adopted the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 due to the alignment with the goals of the PDN, which are projected to be met by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). According to Index Mundi (2020) and the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana (2019), Ecuador has shown progress toward the PDN goals, indicating the government's commitment to sustaining the progress.

The Millenium Development Goals and the PDN both identify the goal of building “a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable society” (Villafuerte et al., 2018); however, the teachers’ input was not identified as one of the desired goals. Some researchers argue that to date, teachers have not implemented innovative educational models (i.e., creativity, critical thinking, and production of knowledge) and continue using traditional teacher-centered models of instruction (López Pastor et al, 2016; Villafuerte et al, 2018). According to Van Damme et al. (2013), the educational system failed by not re-thinking education as the right of all individuals, by not making structural changes to the national system, by not updating educational approaches, and by not supporting reevaluation of the teaching profession for private and public institutions. Jæger and Karlson (2018) argued that unequal access to learning negatively impacts societies in Latin America at the macro level because of the failure to equally distribute responsibilities among stakeholders.

Gallegos (2008) explained that the National Institute to Assess Education identifies areas in the curriculum that require increased time allocations and/or changes in instructional foci and revised delivery methods. The Institute also measures the progress of objectives in the PDN and the Millenium Development Goals (Resultados, Pruebas, Censales, 2008). The Institute aimed to increase teacher quality, raise the literacy rate, and add English language instruction as a required part of the K-12 curriculum (Gallegos, 2008). The expectation was that educators could articulate philosophies for incorporating the country’s diversity into the curriculum. Positive results from this initiative were shown when 94.5% of Ecuadorians were documented as being literate in 2015 (Instituto Nacional de Educación Educativa, 2016). However, in spite of the changes enacted to address the national issue of student academics in Ecuador, success has been limited by the exclusion of the educators’ voices from the continuous improvement process. Therefore, school leadership and teachers in private and public institutions continue to implement directives provided by the Ministry of Education through the PDN, which impacts the performance of teachers who perceive their input is unrecognized and undesired.

1.3. Teacher Empowerment

After identifying “reevaluation of the teaching profession” as one of the failures of the past educational system, the Ministry of Education developed objectives including PD and continuing education regarding pedagogical strategies and subject matter content (Fajardo-Dack, 2016). The new system was to bring stability to the teaching profession and increase salaries based on annual evaluations performed by the government (Instituto Nacional de Educación Educativa, 2016).

Ecuadorian education policies reflect a hierarchical structure with teachers expected to follow prescribed directives about curricula and textbooks with little flexibility given for pedagogical choices (Fajardo-Dack, 2016; Martínez, 2014). Teachers cannot offer input into decisions affecting schools, classrooms, and students, leading to disempowerment. Bolin (1989) indicated that teacher empowerment “requires [giving] teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and the right to exercise professional judgement about the content of the curriculum and means of instruction” (p. 82). Teacher empowerment is important to critically and meaningfully transform teachers’

practice, through a reflective and evaluative process (Kimwary et al., 2014). Other issues that have disempowered Ecuadorian teachers are the lack of time for activities such as team and capacity building, and the quality of PD (Duffy, 1994; Kimwary et al., 2014).

1.4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework applied to this study is human capital theory (HCT) (Shultz, 1961). This theory assumes governments invest in educational institutions to train or educate people for the good of the system. The policies guiding investments help achieve desired or established governmental outcomes. Training or educating citizens is the means for achieving outcomes beneficial to families, the educational system, and ultimately to society (Schroedler, 2018).

HCT was initially postulated by Shultz (1961) as a way of treating education as an investment. This theory postulates that increases in one's productivity is caused by gaining knowledge and skills through education (Brewer et al., 2010; Wolter, 2011). Becker (1993) argued that education and training were the most important investments to benefit a person's income and future earnings, as well as to increase their productivity. After analyzing the costs of education as training on the job, Becker concluded that "learning is a way to invest in human capital" (p. 68). Investments made during a child's schooling years may not appear as part of the child's recorded financial information, but they still merit consideration. For example, elementary school education and middle school education are investments that can lead to success in high school. These investments may not be seen or accounted for immediately, but the time, effort, and money spent determine future earnings.

Several quantitative studies (Ashenfelter & Krueger 1994; Duflo 2001; Heckman et al., 2006; Patrinos & Psacharopoulos 2020; Rosenzweig 1995) have sought to estimate returns on education compared to alternative investments to assist policy makers. Morales-Ramos (2011) estimated that returns on education by year of schooling in Mexico were between 8.2% and 8.4%, and the highest returns were associated with more education. Patrinos and Sakellariou (2004) utilized data from the National Statistical Office of Venezuela (OCEI; 1992-2000) to show that since the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in returns associated with the individual's level of education. Patrinos et al. (2006) compared the average number of years of school attainment and returns on schooling for countries in East Asia (e.g., Cambodia, Philippines, and Thailand) and Latin America (e.g., Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela). The results indicated the average return for countries in East Asia was 14.5% per year of schooling compared to 11.6% in Latin America. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) reviewed a database of 1,120 estimates in 139 countries to calculate the returns on schooling (primary, secondary, and higher education) and place of work (private and public), but found that there was not a linear increase in returns on education; the returns also depended on whether the work was in the public or private sector. For example, the study found that private work could return an average of 9% for one extra year of schooling (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Education can be surmised to be a path to improving and sustaining the labor force through increased job opportunities, economic growth, personal advancement, and PD.

HCT may prove helpful for understanding the Ecuadorian government's stated investment in the country's educational system. The impact of the government's interpretation on both teachers' personal and professional growth and students' academic growth cannot be overlooked. Consideration of how desired transformational change is being pursued might assume that effective change requires reflection and time to examine current practices. It seems necessary to explore how in-service teachers' perceptions about the educational system impact their teaching practices and either energize or frustrate them.

This study was guided by the following questions:

RQ1. How do educators perceive the educational system's support for the teaching profession, as measured by the 5Essentials survey?

RQ2. What challenges do educators identify within their school as barriers to supporting students' academic achievement?

2. Methodology

A qualitative study to collect data in two phases was utilized (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The initial phase provided information about teachers' perspectives through the 5Essentials survey, and the qualitative data collected supported the survey findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Additionally, results from the data collected from teachers were triangulated with administrators' interviews and institution documents (e.g., participants' daily schedules, school policies, and the PDN). The school's principal and assistant principal were interviewed to examine their interpretation of teachers' responses. The school's written policies were a reflection of the educational system (PDN) mandates and were analyzed to determine connections to the teachers' responses. Quantitative and qualitative components were combined to examine and corroborate information provided by participants (Johnson et al., 2007). The qualitative data utilized between-method triangulation to analyze where the data converged as well as inconsistencies and contradictions in the data (Denzin, 1978). The researchers were English and Spanish bilinguals, and all results, including quotations, were translated into English to ensure the meaning of the responses were intact when used to support the findings.

The 5Essentials survey for teachers was used to benchmark teachers' perceptions about their school climate, their skills as teachers, and to document strengths and areas of improvement. To establish the face and content validity of the instrument, the 5Essentials survey for teachers was translated into Spanish and reviewed by three Ecuadorian educators with more than 25 years of teaching experience (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The suggested changes were collected, and the instrument was adjusted based on the feedback.

The qualitative data were gathered through focus groups guided by five open-ended questions adapted from Langley (2009):

1. What have you observed about the leadership in your school regarding your efforts to improve students' academics?
2. What have you observed about the collaborative work with other teachers in your school

regarding the improvement of students' academics?

3. What have you observed about the supportive environment in your school regarding the improvement of students' academics?
4. What have you observed about family involvement in your school regarding the improvement of students' academics?
5. What have you observed about ambitious instruction in your school regarding the improvement of students' academics?

The overall aim of the project was to understand teachers' perceptions of the educational issues they encountered. Principal and assistant principal interviews utilized open-ended questions based on the coded results from the teachers' responses. PDN, school policies, and participants' schedules were examined to further document teachers' responses.

2.1. Setting and participants

This investigation was conducted in a private school in an urban area of Ecuador. The school's population is approximately 800 students, from K-secondary levels. Classrooms are equipped with a computer for the teacher, desks for the children, and other supplies for teaching. The school has ample space for sports facilities, such as basketball courts and soccer fields.

Participants included 20 elementary school educators with 5 to 26 years of teaching experience. The group of 13 female teachers and 7 male teachers taught subjects such as music, physical education, English, French, and technology. The principal of the institution selected and extended an invitation to the teachers to participate in the research. Moreover, interviews were conducted with the principal, who had 25 years of teaching experience and 10 years of experience as an administrator, as well as with the assistant principal, who had 13 years of teaching experience and 6 years of experience as an administrator.

During the first meeting, the researchers explained the purpose of the project and distributed consent forms to comply with IRB protocols and the 5Essentials Survey for Teachers survey, which was used as a pre-assessment measure. This tool served to document the teachers' beliefs about the school's provisions, collaborative work between administration, parents, and teachers, strategies used to adjust instruction, and demonstrated awareness of the diversity in the school community. Administrators signed consent forms prior to participation in the interviews.

2.2. Data analysis

The 5Essentials Survey for Teachers was administered to explore teachers' perceptions of their interaction with other teachers, administration, and families. The information collected from the survey was used to calculate central tendency measures (mean (M), median (Mdn), and standard deviation (SD)) to determine distribution of the responses about participants' role as educators, issues in the classroom, and the institution. The qualitative data were analyzed utilizing a constant comparison technique to compare new information to other codes that emerged from the data; which is meaningful to allow the codes to form into themes (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2007; Miles et al., 2014). Analysis of emergent and recurrent

themes in the data served to determine the participants' perceptions of ongoing school improvement efforts and their satisfaction with the current levels of support.

3. Results

3.1. 5Essential survey results

The purpose of the self-reported data from the 5Essentials survey was to uncover contextual factors that cause variation regarding academics and to identify approaches for designing improvements. Moreover, the self-reported information provided a starting point for conversations about the educators' role and their perceptions about school. The researchers asked teachers' perspectives about the central tendency scores (M, Mdn, and SD) generated for each question. The participants noted that some questions were close to or below the mean, and a discussion about those items and constructs was important to understand the reason for those scores.

Under the "Collaborative Teachers" construct (Table 1), the teachers indicated areas of concern related to teachers' trust to their colleagues (q3), working in the school (q14), and opportunities to work with colleagues (q35). Another area of concern was the frequency of teachers' observation for feedback (q36, q37), instructional decisions based on student assessment (q38), and work with colleagues to develop instructional materials (q39, q40). The discussion indicated that the teachers did not feel comfortable working with each other. One teacher said, "I work with other teachers that I get along with." Another mentioned, "Some teachers do not want to collaborate or share their knowledge and experience...the institution does not provide events/meetings for this type of work." Many participants supported the last statement by nodding.

Table 1: Collaborative Teachers Construct

	Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
3	Teachers in this school trust each other ^a	2.5*	2.5	0.95
4	Teachers respect other teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts ^a	3.2	3.0	0.70
5	Teachers respect colleagues who are experts in their craft ^a	3.2	3.0	0.70
13	I usually look forward to each working day at this school ^a	3.0	3.0	0.92
14	I wouldn't want to work in any other school ^a	2.5*	3.0	1.12
15	I feel loyal to this school ^a	3.7	4.0	0.73
16	I would recommend this school to parents/guardians seeking a place for their child ^a	3.7	4.0	0.75
31	Over all, my professional development experiences this year have been sustained and coherently focused, rather than short-term and unrelated ^a	2.7	3.0	1.19
32	Over all, my professional development experiences this year have included time to think carefully about, try, and evaluate new ideas ^a	3.4	3.0	0.51
33	Over all, my professional development experiences this year have been closely connected to school improvement plan ^a	3.5	4.0	0.51

34	Over all, my professional development experiences this year have included opportunities to productively with colleagues in my school ^a	3.4	3.0	0.50
35	Over all, my professional development experiences this year have included opportunities to work with colleagues from other schools ^a	2.5*	3.0	1.02
36	This year, how often have you observed another teacher's classroom to offer feedback? ^b	1.4*	1.0	0.59
37	This year, how often have you observed another teacher's classroom to get ideas for your own instruction? ^b	1.4*	1.0	0.60
38	This year, how often have you gone over student assessment data with other teachers to make instructional decisions? ^b	2.0*	2.0	1.12
39	This year, how often have you worked with other teachers to develop materials or activities for particular classes? ^b	2.1*	1.5	1.29
40	This year, how often have you worked on instructional strategies with other teachers? ^b	2.5*	2.0	0.94
41	How many teachers help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classroom? ^b	2.9	2.5	1.02
42	How many teachers take responsibility for improving the school? ^b	3.5	4.0	1.10
43	How many teachers feel responsible to help each other do their best? ^b	3.4	4.0	1.23
44	How many teachers feel responsible that all students learn? ^b	3.8	4.0	1.16
45	How many teachers feel responsible for helping students develop self-control? ^b	3.8	4.0	1.12
46	How many teachers feel responsible when students in this school fail? ^b	3.3	3.0	1.24
52	To what extent do you feel respected by other teachers ^c	3.5	4.0	0.89

*Noted by participants: ^aStrongly Disagree=1; Disagree=2; Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4; ^b None=1; Some=2; About half=3; Most=4; Nearly All=5; ^cNot at All=1; A Little=2; Some=3; To a Great Extent=4

Regarding the Effective Leadership construct (Table 2), the participants did not feel comfortable sharing their feelings about the school with the administrators (q8). The participants felt overwhelmed by the number of programs within the school (q24); and did not feel they had any influence regarding how resources should be distributed (q53), in-service programming (q56), or setting behavioral standards (q57). During the discussion, participants indicated they do not feel heard when they express their concerns about what is happening in the school: "when I talk to the principal, I don't see that issues are resolved," "I have requested a clear policy about student with behavioral issues...I have not received an answer until now." Another teacher stated, "we are not included in the decisions ...we are just told what has been decided or what I have to do." These comments reflect the self-reported quantitative results indicated as areas for improvement.

Table 2: Effective Leadership Construct

	Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
	The principal...			
6	has confidence in the expertise of the teachers ^a	2.9	3.0	1.12
7	Is trusted at his/her word ^a	3.0	3.5	1.21
8	Allows discussions of feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal ^a	2.4*	2.0	1.04

9	Takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers ^a	3.1	3.0	0.64
10	looks out for the personal welfare of the teachers ^a	2.9	3.0	0.99
11	Places the academic needs of children ahead of personal and political interests ^a	3.0	3.5	1.26
12	Is effective manager who runs the school smoothly ^a	3.1	3.0	0.94
17	Makes clear to the staff the leadership's expectation for meeting instructional goals ^a	2.8	3.0	1.23
18	Communicates clear vision for the school ^a	3.3	3.0	0.73
19	Presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development ^a	3.1	3.0	0.79
20	Knows what is going on in your classroom ^a	3.7	4.0	0.75
21	Participates in instructional planning with team of teachers ^a	3.7	4.0	0.75
22	Provides teachers with useful feedback to improve teaching ^a	3.5	4.0	0.83
23	Once we start a new program in this school, we follow up to make sure that it is working ^a	3.2	3.0	0.85
24	We have so many different programs in this school that I cannot keep track of them all ^a	2.0*	2.0	0.79
25	Curriculum, instruction, and learning materials are well coordinated across the different class levels at this school ^a	3.4	4.0	0.75
26	There is consistency in curriculum, instruction, and learning materials among teachers in the same level at this school ^a	3.5	4.0	0.69
51	To what extent do you feel respected by your principals ^b	3.5	4.0	0.93
53	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in areas about planning how discretionary school funds should be used? ^c	1.7*	1.0	1.09
54	How much influence do teachers have over school policy about determining books and instructional materials used in classrooms? ^c	2.9	3.0	0.89
55	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in areas about establishing the curriculum and instructional program? ^c	3.1	3.0	0.76
56	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in each of the areas below determining the content of in-service programs? ^c	2.3*	3.0	1.06
57	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in each of the areas below setting standards for student behavior? ^c	2.5*	3.0	1.00

Noted by participants: ^aStrongly Disagree=1; Disagree=2; Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4; ^b Not at All=1; A Little=2; Some=3; To a Great Extent=4 ^cNo influence=1; A Little Influence=2; Some Influence=3; A Great Deal of Influence=4

Concerning the Involved Families construct (Table 3), the participants reported between disagreement and agreement regarding the relationship between the teacher and the parents as a partnership to support students' education (q1). During the discussion, all teachers indicated that parents do not support teachers' academic activities or parents are not engaged in finding solutions to behavioral issues in the classroom. Some of the examples provided related to "students do not submit homework and parents do not do anything about it," "if the student does not behave properly in the classroom, we [teachers] do not have a policy to follow," and "if a parent complains, the administration tells me to fix it." The answers for this construct confirmed the limited support from school administration and/or teachers' participation in setting standards for student behavior.

Table 3: Involved Families Construct

	Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Teachers and parents/guardians think of each other as partners in educating the children ^a	2.6*	3.0	1.23
2	Staff at this school work hard to build trusting relationships with parents/guardians ^a	2.9	3.0	1.15
47	Teachers feel good about parent/guardians' support for their work ^b	3.1	3.0	1.36
48	How many parents/guardians support your teaching efforts? ^b	2.9	3.0	1.42
49	How many parents/guardians do their best to help their children learn? ^b	2.9	3.0	1.37
50	To what extent do you feel respected by the parents/guardians of your students? ^c	3.2	4.0	1.06
59	How many of their parent/guardians attend parent/guardian-teacher conferences when you request them? ^d	3.5	4.0	0.99
60	How many of their parents/guardians volunteer time to support the school (e.g. help with school wide events)? ^d	3.3	4.0	1.05
61	How many of their parents/guardians contact you about their child's performance? ^d	4.2	4.0	0.92
62	How many of their parents/guardians respond to your suggestions for helping their child? ^d	3.2	4.0	1.17
67	To what extent does this school involve parents/guardians in the development of programs aimed at improving student outcomes? ^e	3.5	4.0	0.89
68	To what extent does this school involve parents/guardians in commenting on school curriculum? ^e	3.2	4.0	1.20
69	To what extent does this school include parents/guardians leaders from all backgrounds in school improvement? ^e	3.1	3.0	0.89
70	To what extent does this school develop formal networks to link all families with each other (e.g. sharing parent phone numbers)? ^e	3.9	4.0	0.46
71	To what extent does this school encourage more involved parents/guardians to reach out to less-involved parents/guardians? ^e	3.6	4.0	0.68

* Noted by participants: a Strongly Disagree=1; Disagree=2; Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4.

b None=1; Some=2; About Half=3 ; Most=4; Nearly All=5. c Not at All=1; A Little=2; Some=3; To a Great Extent=4. d None=1; Some=2; About half=3; Most; All=4. e Not at All=1; A Little=2; Somewhat=3; A Great Deal=4

About the Ambitious Instruction construct (Table 4), the participants did not indicate concerns regarding this construct. The participants stated that in general students show respect to each other, participate in classroom activities and discussions, ask questions, and provide feedback to their classmates. However, some students are very disruptive, making it challenging to teach students who are willing to learn.

Table 4: Ambitious Instruction Construct

Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
To what extent do the following characteristics describe discussions that occur in your classrooms			
73 Students build on each other's ideas during discussion	2.9	3.0	1.21
74 Students use data and text references to support their ideas	3.2	3.0	0.77
75 Students show each other respect	3.5	4.0	0.69
76 Students provide constructive feedback to their peers and to you	3.5	4.0	0.69
77 Most students participate in classroom activities at some point	3.9	4.0	0.37

Scale: Never=1; Rarely=2; Sometimes=3; Almost Always=4

Table 5: Support Environment Construct

Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
27 Teachers expect most students at this school to go to college/university ^a	3.7	4.0	0.75
28 Teachers at this school help students plan for college /university outside of class time ^a	2.5*	3.0	1.05
29 The curriculum at this school is focused on helping students get ready for college/university ^a	3.1	3.0	1.15
30 Teachers in this school feel that it is part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college/university ^a	3.5	4.0	0.69
58 How much influence do parents/ guardians have on plans for school improvement? ^b	4.6	3.5	6.30
63 For how long does a student have to be absent before you contact their parents/guardians? ^c	4.8	5.0	0.38
64 How often do you solicit information from parents/guardians about their child? ^d	3.4	3.0	0.74
65 How often do you send home correspondences to parents /guardians about the work students are doing in class? ^d	4.1	4.0	1.10
66 In a typical week, how much time do you spend in total communicating with individual parents/guardians about their child's performance in the subjects you teach? ^e	2.7*	3.0	0.67
72 How often does this school conduct workshops or trainings for parents/guardians on student learning? ^f	3.0	3.0	0.58

* Noted by participants: a Strongly disagree=1; Disagree=2; Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4.

b No Influence=1; A Little Influence=2; Some Influence=3; A Great Deal of Influence=4.

c Never contact parent/guardian because of absence=1; 1 Month or Longer=2; 2-4 Weeks=3; About a Week=4; 0-2 Days=5. d Never=1; 1-2 Times a Year=2; About Once a Month=3; Weekly=4; Daily=5. e None=1; 5-15 Minutes=2; 15-45 Minutes=3; About an Hour=4; 2-3 Hours=5; f Never=1; Once a Year=2; 2-3 Times a Year=3; More than 3 Times a Year=4

Regarding the Support Environment construct (Table 5), the participants indicated they spent between 5 to 45 minutes communicating with parents/guardians about students' performance (q66). The communication time could be related to issues from the parent involvement construct. This seems to indicate that communication to resolve academic issues is not properly performed; however, if parents are not supporting the teachers, communication may not be the solution. Solutions negotiated with administration may be required to tackle specific classroom issues when other stakeholders are involved. Question 28 indicated a disagreement regarding teachers preparing students for college/university outside the class time. The institution does not offer this preparation after school as part of the curriculum. The participants did not indicate other questions as an issue for this category.

3.2 Open-ended data

The inductive approach of the data analysis generated two themes: (1) limited academic support, and (2) teacher disempowerment. Participants also mentioned that some of the issues they confronted in the classroom might be resolved more effectively if school administrators and parents took the time to observe classes to better understand the teachers' role.

The dissonance between administrators, teachers, and parents suggests the teachers were working to solve educational and behavioral problems. Participants were united in stating their overwhelming need for PD to learn how to use technology. One teacher stated, "if I don't print materials that I want to use at home, I may not be able to have them available for my lesson at school," "how can I compete with my students, when they know more about technology than what I know?" and "I don't want to look bad with my students while using technology so I do not use it when I doubt my ability." The participants also indicated that students spend too much time with electronics: "when I ask them what classroom game they would like to play, the students only choose the computer." The teachers did not feel prepared to utilize current technologies and shared that the administration would not provide the resources they need to learn technology skills; therefore, they preferred to continue with the strategies they have been using.

3.2.1 Limited academic support

Limited academic support was contextualized as the lack of necessary educational resources to support teachers' work. These problems were discussed in the context of classroom issues related to teacher interaction with administrators, parents, and colleagues. Regarding the administration, teachers identified limited time to meet, discuss, and share pedagogical successes and failures with other teachers. The participants indicated that the limited time to interact with other colleagues during the school day did not allow them to develop formal collaborations. For example, a teacher commented, "If we want [academic] achievements, meetings should be held by areas and blocks, monthly and quarterly...these meetings would help us discuss and identify students with learning difficulties." As the teachers were revealing issues, they were also providing possible solutions such as "meetings will improve communication to participate in the strategies implemented" and "planned teacher meetings to do group activities and improve interpersonal relationships to lead to professional support." In relation to collaborating with other teachers, the participants pointed out that "planning with teachers in complementary areas would help us...so that everyone can talk about the same problems, support each other and seek a common goal." However, the participants mentioned

the “lack of interdisciplinary work” due to the limited “collaborative work among teachers to organize classroom activities that would encompass several subjects,” adding that “there is not a systematic approach to solving academic problems... teachers solve them on their own.” Teachers described “being professionals who do not seek help and noted help is not offered either” due to time constraints and the demands of their profession.

The participants explained limited collaboration from parents to comply with school requirements such as “providing medical exams or tests to identify possible [cognitive] problems” and limited support related to discipline. One participant shared, “I have a student whose mother has left me to solve the behavioral issue of the child. I can’t do anything if the medical documentation is not in the student’s file... so I am left with no protocols to deal with the problem.” Another teacher said, “at least the parent could talk to their children about respecting me.” Several teachers protested the students’ lack of interest in completing homework due to the amount of screen time the students have at home. A participant indicated, “I asked a parent to do something about it [homework]; the parent’s response was that you should provide extracurricular support if needed to solve the problem.” The teachers articulated the need to ensure they can focus their energies on supporting academic achievement instead of trying to solve problems that should be handled by others.

The qualitative data demonstrated the importance of nurturing supportive relationships in educational settings. In addition, data supported the issues found in the two quantitative surveys. Teachers indicated that they are not part of the process of setting standards for student behavior. They also voiced concerns about the perceived lack of responsiveness from the school administration regarding policies and regulations guiding classroom behavioral issues.

The qualitative findings provided by the teachers’ responses were shared with the principal and assistant principal to contextualize the academic support issues in the institution. Both administrators indicated that “each teacher should be able to solve issues in the classroom, but if that does not work, the teacher can report the issue to the assistant principal.” They indicated that “school procedures explained the protocols to initiate conversations with other departments to solve behavioral issues such as speaking to the social worker and the psychologist.” For example, the school’s Code of Coexistence, which aligned with the PDN, (Código de convivencia (CC) includes agreements for administrators, students, teachers, and parents. These commitments regulate the disciplinary sanctions to be implemented if needed. The administrators explained that resolution of classroom issues is delineated by levels: first stage is the classroom manager, then the head of the subject area, and finally the assistant principal. The administrators provided examples about the social worker visiting students’ homes to determine solutions for an academic issue or the psychologist talking to the students to find solutions. However, they also acknowledged the need for parents to support students and help solve academic or behavior issues listed in the Code of Coexistence. The principal indicated that different methods of communication with parents are employed in the institution to solve students’ problems. “For example, we utilize emails, meetings, visits, and informal conversations when the student is dropped off” that follow the CC guidelines.

Regarding time to collaborate with other teachers, the administrators provided the schedules

for the entire institution. As the researchers looked at the schedule, they noticed that the class periods lasted 45 minutes and elementary school teachers were scheduled from 8:30am to 12:45pm, with a recess of 30 minutes at 10:00am. When asked about the afternoon, the administrators indicated that lesson planning occurs in the afternoon after students leave the institution at 1:00pm. The institution includes scheduled “time for teachers to discuss student issues with classroom managers and the heads of the subject area” in the afternoon or during recess. It was evident that “the daily schedule did not allow extended time for teacher collaboration.” The collaboration is expected to happen during PD. However, one of the administrators said: “Based on my experience, teachers do not seem to use PD time to collaborate with other teachers.”

3.2.2 Disempowerment

There is a plethora of literature about the benefits of empowering teachers, school administrators, and students in schools (Blase & Blase, 2004; Bolin, 1989; Fajardo-Dack, 2016; Kimwarey et al., 2014). Empowerment refers to investing with power or authority to make decisions about critical events that need solutions (Klecker & Loadman, 1998). These processes utilize the skills, abilities, and competence of those involved in making decisions to effectively produce changes (Bolin, 1989; Duffy, 1994). This means that teachers need to be empowered to set a direction for themselves to grow and resolve problems in a transformative approach (Kimwarey et al., 2014). Teacher disempowerment is defined as “the deprivation of teachers’ power over their labor and labor process” (Tsang, 2019, para. 2). This second theme, disempowerment of teachers, is closely related to limited academic support. Participants identified the issues they faced in the classroom and the need for other stakeholders (administration and parents) to jointly work to improve students’ academic achievement. However, the participants indicated that their voices are not heard and that they are ignored when they bring up academic issues to school administrators and parents. The teachers feel they must solve problems on their own. A participant provided an example regarding an issue with a parent and homework submission.

After trying different things, I talked to the [student’s] parent, and the parent said there is nothing I [the parent] can do about it. I met with the principal and presented the issue regarding the student who does not want to do his homework. I asked the principal to intervene; however, the answer was you [the teacher] have to find a way for the student to submit the homework. I realized I did not have the support of the administrator and I did not have a way to solve the problem.

After the teacher finished sharing the example, other teachers indicated that they had experienced similar issues in the past. The disempowerment and isolation these teachers experienced was affecting their professional performance, as well as their motivation and interpersonal relationships with colleagues. The teachers expressed that they are not part of the decision-making process regarding school policies or guidelines in the classroom. About issues with colleagues, the participants stated that collaboration is encouraged among teachers; however, time and/or venues to discuss classroom issues are not provided. This lack of collaboration limits the teachers’ ability to engage in interdisciplinary work, learn from others’ experiences, and possibly develop mentorship opportunities. Collective knowledge would

allow a teacher to resolve issues with support from an enriched network. When participants were asked about examples of productive collaborations, one indicated

... that would not happen because the school will have to pay for a teacher who is not teaching... if they don't give us time to solve current academic issues, how are they going to authorize this time release? The school administration does not support collaborative work.

Several teachers nodded in support of the statement of limited collaborations. Other comments expressed that the school administration does not offer initiatives where teachers come together to share experiences, instructional materials, or ideas. The participants indicated that the school administration does not hear their needs or provides solutions to classroom problems. In addition, they stated that they do not feel supported by the administration; therefore, they feel isolated and have no tools to confront the challenges in the classroom. As in the previous theme, the qualitative data revealed areas in which educational stakeholders have contributed to teachers' disempowerment. Moreover, the results of the qualitative data supported the findings from the two quantitative surveys. For example, the teachers indicated they have the skills and experience for preparing lesson plans, engaging students, providing a safe classroom environment, and self-reflecting about the teaching profession. However, they said they are not asked to help determine the content of in-service programs or set standards for student behavior because the decisions are made by school leadership. Another issue related to parents not appreciating teachers as partners in educating their children. The participants indicated that the parents demonstrate permissive behavior regarding their children, so support from parents was not present and teachers had to find other strategies to motivate and engage students. The teachers described several examples of students interrupting classroom activities and parents indicating that this is normal behavior. The teachers felt disempowered because communication with the parents was not effective for demonstrating the need for parents' collaboration in improving their child's classroom behaviors.

Moreover, the teachers expressed that they did not receive support from the school administration in terms of policies to guide action plans for behavioral issues in the classroom. This disempowerment is closely intertwined with the theme of limited academic support. Although the issues presented by the participants in this study may appear to be different, the categories are closely related, in that the solution of one issue will improve the other categories. For example, school administration listening to teachers' concerns and problems in the classroom could lead to policies, meetings with parents, and the development of support for the teachers. However, the different experiences that participants have with administrators, parents, and colleagues have led them to work in isolation to solve academic problems in the classroom on their own. Due to past experiences, the teachers do not think they can change the status quo and improve school and classroom practices.

When the teachers' perceptions about disempowerment were shared with the administrators, the latter responded by identifying two issues. The first issue related to the paid tuition to attend the private institution. The administrator indicated that the "process [to solve classroom issues] takes longer and brings frustration to the teacher; however, it [the issue] is usually solved." Teachers need to be more patient within private institutions because "we don't want to lose

students.” The other issue has to do with the Código de la Niñez y Adolescencia (2014). The administrators explained that Article 67 states: “Psychological abuse is that which causes emotional disturbance, psychological disturbance or decreased self-esteem in the abused child or adolescent.” The administrator continued, “although this type of law is good to protect the child, the law has been misused in the past.” Thus, “teachers feel that even verbal reprimands may bring issues with the Department of Education and their jobs may be in jeopardy.” “I [the administrator] also believe that teachers perceive that they are blamed for the issues in the classroom.”

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand teachers’ perceptions about their instructional methods and their educational interactions with school leadership, parents, and other teachers as components of governmental policies to achieve educational goals (Schroedler, 2018; Shultz, 1961) using the 5Essentials survey, focus groups, administrator interviews, and school documents. Thus, academic success for students occurs when teachers, parents, and other stakeholders collaborate to assist students. The limited academic support the participants indicated as the norm has led to disempowerment in relation to administrators and parents (Jæger and Karlson (2018).

The areas of improvement uncovered through the 5Essentials for each of the constructs were supported by data from the open-ended answers. Effective Leadership in the 5Essentials relates to the collaborative work between principals and teachers to implement a clear vision for the schools’ success. Some participants stated they did not feel there was a safe space to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the school principal. The teachers indicated they had “some” influence in the decision-making about in-service programs and setting standards for student behavior. Becker (1993), Bryk et al. (2015), and Day and Gurr (2014) explained the importance of effective leadership for sharing a clear vision about effective implementation of change.

The participants acknowledged the importance of working with other teachers but they also expressed feelings of isolation in their work. Most indicated that they do not conduct observations of each other that might give them ideas to improve their own instruction or opportunities to offer feedback. In addition, collaborations among teachers did not focus on developing instructional materials for classroom activities or on making instructional decisions based on students’ needs. As reflected in the M and Mdn scores, some teachers’ responses show limited collaboration among the teachers to enrich each other to benefit students’ learning outcomes. Concerning Involved Families, the answers on the survey seem disconnected with those from the focus groups. The answers from the participants indicated that they felt their relationships with students’ parents or guardians were positive. However, the participants indicated that the parents do not support their efforts regarding the students’ behavior in the classroom, such as showing respect to the teacher or homework completion. Future research is needed to understand the barriers and challenges teachers face when interacting with students’ parents or guardians, as well as teachers’ issues in public educational institutions to uncover commonalities between

educational settings. The participants expressed little concern about the constructs of Supportive Environment and Ambitious Instruction.

5. Conclusions

This exploratory qualitative study investigated private school teachers' perceptions of Ecuador's education system support for educational practices and educators' roles. Since 20% of primary students and 40% of secondary students attend private institutions (Education State University, 2021) and the PDN is implemented in private and public institutions, it seems that the disempowerment issues expressed by teachers in private institutions should be investigated in public institutions to determine how to include teachers' voices in the process. The results of the study revealed areas for improvement regarding support to enhance educational practices related to collaboration between teachers and administrators, collaboration among teachers, and communication among educational stakeholders. Additionally, educators' roles have been minimized due to their lack of participation in the decision-making processes regarding the educational system. The PDN has not included a process of continuous improvement to include all stakeholders' voices to assess the implementation and achievement of the desired educational goals.

A collaboration gap was found between teachers and administrators in this urban private elementary school. The administrators understood the complexity of the education system in regards to encouraging collaboration with parents and alleviating classroom issues, but the limited opportunities for collaboration blocked the teachers from acting on what changes were needed to achieve desired academic outcomes. To accomplish the educational transformation desired by the school administration and the educational system's mandates in Ecuador, teachers should be involved in important conversations (Fajardo-Dack, 2016) not only with parents but also during implementation of institutional procedures such as the CC. When the participants discussed how to empower teachers, several voiced comments such as "financially incentivize teachers to collaborate," "plan meetings so teachers from other disciplinary areas can socialize," and "provide professional development to learn how to use technology" in the classroom. However, these solutions would need to be negotiated with the administration based on pre-established goals and objectives.

The limited collaboration among teachers is an issue that can be resolved by providing venues for teacher mentors to share their knowledge and experiences with both junior and experienced teachers. Currently, the teachers report feeling isolated and not belonging to a community. Currently, the administrators do not see the need to create spaces for sharing pedagogical challenges and successes; however, there is a need to create school environments in which teachers feel safe to express their thoughts (Kimwary et al., 2014). Conversations between teachers and administrators would bring a better understanding of students', teachers', and institutions' needs.

Another issue that was clearly indicated in the data was the communication gap between teachers and parents. Villafuerte et al. (2018) indicated that effective communication is not only about using the correct words or language, but is also about the interaction among people; thus, the

teachers need to develop their own communication strategies. Moreover, the CC provided information about parents' commitments in relation to school expectations. Thus, it was unclear if teachers were following the established protocols to work collaboratively with parents.

The limited role of educators in decision making evidenced their disempowerment. Teachers are expected to implement new initiatives or comply with educational requirements developed by experts who are far removed from the classroom realities (Bolin, 1989). Teachers, with support from school administrators, should have ways to develop strategies to improve communication between teachers and parents (Villafuerte et al., 2018). Teacher disempowerment may impact the success of governmental and institutional policies and teachers' investment. Teachers are an essential group for effectively producing changes in the classroom (Duffy, 1994). Only when teachers have a safe space in which they can ask questions about the current school system and what is happening in the classroom can policies be aligned to practices that support learners to become productive and engaged citizens (Giroux, 2010). In addition, the findings of this study relate to support from school leaders for teachers to solve classroom issues presented about Latin America by the Inter-American Dialogue (Stanton, 2019).

5.1 Limitations

The study has limitations in the generalizability of its findings. The small sample size may be an impediment to inferring conclusions for all teachers in Ecuador. However, the nature of the exploration of the issues provided information to help understand the problems teachers face in the classroom. Another issue is the private school setting where the research was performed. Private schools represent the minority of schools in Ecuador, especially among elementary schools. Although data were triangulated utilizing focus groups, interviews, and school documents, the teachers' qualitative data were self-reported showing their attitudes about collaboration being a hindrance. Future research would benefit from gathering data utilizing observations to better explore the issues uncovered by this study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

Author's contribution

Research design, data analysis, methodology, manuscript review XB and MD. All the authors have read and approved the submitted version.

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