

Teachers' preferences, and their expectations of principals' support, for involvement in school-based decision making: "If [only] time or involvement was recognised as part of my workload"

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that teachers are central to improving the quality of education for school-age learners (see for example Hattie, 2003) and that their actual work lives demonstrate increased intensification (Galton & MacBeath, 2008; Gardner & Williamson, 2004; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). Paradoxically, in this context teachers simultaneously face increased calls for 'professionalism' and, on the other hand, are required to implement many more externally imposed policies relating to curricula, assessment and reporting (Hoyle & Wallace, 2007; Ingersoll, 2006; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). A series of linked international studies conducted under the auspices of the Consortium for Cross-Cultural Research in Education (CCCRC) reported that while teachers in 10 countries, including Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Singapore, South Africa, and the US, reported major changes in their work lives and restricted professionalism, the one factor that appeared to lessen the effect of the external policy turbulence was involvement in school-based decision making; that is, teachers who participated in their school's decision making were more likely to be less negative toward the external policies than teachers who had no involvement (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004). This paper extends significantly the earlier research of the CCCRC by focusing on teachers' perspectives of responsibility taking.

Four indices were created and validated prior to use as a structure for gathering and analysing data: administration and coordination, human relations, teacher support and classroom learning. Specific questions addressed, and reported in this paper, centred on the order of index means, the size of the index means, and comparisons between perspectives held by the Australian teachers and combined international results. Data were gathered from 105 teachers in Tasmania. Each participant completed a 20-item survey questionnaire that employed a Likert scale. Fifteen teachers provided comments about their responses during subsequent individual telephone interviews.

Australian teachers sought more involvement in school decision-making than their colleagues represented by the 10-country means in each of the four indices and in the combined mean. With respect to three means—administration and coordination, human relations and teacher support—the Australian teachers estimated less principal support for teacher involvement than their international colleagues. The classroom learning index was the exception. These results, and those from the entire study, offer opportunities' to enhance understanding of principals and teachers with respect to teacher responsibility taking in school change.

Introduction and background

It is generally agreed that teachers are central to improving the quality of education for school-age learners (Hattie, 2003; OECD, 2005). Indeed, teacher quality and teaching quality are "the most important factors in student outcomes that are open to policy influence" (OECD, p. 9) and teachers' effectiveness differs (OECD). Moreover, teachers are expected to assume expanded responsibilities at four levels: first, with individual students; second, in classroom roles; third, school-wide responsibilities; and finally, relating to and working with parents and other school community members (OECD).

Increasing focus on the quality both of teachers and teaching, however, occurs in contexts in which there is augmented intensification and in which some teachers report having reached breaking point (Galton & MacBeath, 2008; Gardner & Williamson, 2004; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). With respect to hours worked, one-third of Australian secondary teachers reported working 50 hours or more per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003/2006). In addition to the amount

of work teachers perform, the nature of teaching work and the context in which teachers work have been investigated. Australian research has revealed a trend of simultaneous and multiple changes, teachers report expectations to perform an increasing number of externally non-teaching roles, and changes lead teachers to feelings of being overwhelmed (Churchill & Williamson, 2004; Gardner & Williamson, 2004; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). Thus it is predictable that teachers report some evaporation of time to focus on teaching and to complete critical tasks related to teaching and learning.

Teaching contexts are characterised by contradictory, simultaneous and amplified calls for 'professionalism' and augmented requirements to implement externally imposed policies relating to curricula, assessment and reporting (Hoyle & Wallace, 2007; Ingersoll, 2006; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). Timelines that support implementation and institutionalisation of change do not reflect election timelines encapsulated in the political cycle. It is unsurprising that teachers report feeling change-fatigued and disengaged from burgeoning change initiatives. The time is ripe for investigating possibilities that have the potential to ameliorate the effects of external policy turbulence.

Previous studies

A series of studies undertaken by members of the Consortium for Cross-Cultural Research in Education (CCCRE) reported that teachers in 10 countries, including Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Singapore, South Africa, and the US, reported major changes in their work lives and restricted professionalism (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004). The impact of teacher involvement in school-based decision making, compared with non-involvement, on teacher attitudes to external policy was notable.

Consultation about change and participation in its implementation were valued highly by the Australian teacher cohort in the CCCRE study (Churchill & Williamson, 2004). Only half of the respondents in another study (Gardner & Williamson, 2004) expressed satisfaction regarding their experiences of school decision-making in relation to their role, and there were commonly expressed concerns about decision-making that included reference to 'symbolic' participation or no opportunities for teachers to participate. Enhancing teacher responsibility-taking and support for teacher involvement in implementing change are concepts that are canvassed in the literature (Collet, Menlo, and Rosenblatt, 2004; Gardner & Williamson, 2005; Geijsel, Slegers, van den Berg & Kelchtermans, 2001).

This study

The current CCCRE study on which this paper is focused sought participation from teachers and principals—in Australia, Canada, China, Hungary, Israel, Japan, The Netherlands, Singapore, South Africa, and the US—in order to provide data about each group's preference for teacher involvement in decisions and responsibilities at the school level. These decisions and responsibilities included, for example, involvement in deciding the distribution of the school budget, improving the school's relationship to its community, developing induction programs for new teachers, and setting policies for student behaviour (Appendix A provides the complete set of 20 survey items). These items were grouped according to one of five indices—Administration and coordination, Human relations, Teacher support, Classroom learning, and Evaluation. In addition to seeking data about each group's preference for teacher involvement, responses were sought about teachers' perceptions of principal support for teacher involvement and principals' estimates of teachers' wish to be involved.

This paper will be limited to findings from the current study with reference to the Australian cohort of teacher participants; thus, the emphasis will be on teachers' preference for responsibility taking and their estimate of principals' preference for teacher responsibility taking in relation to the 20 items. Reference to principals' perspectives will be made where this provides illumination of teachers' perspectives.

In addition, mean scores were calculated for each of the 20 items, for each of the indices (Index means) and for the complete set of 20 items (Grand mean).

Research questions

Aspects of the research questions that pertained to the teacher sample and for the purpose of the limited results on which this paper focuses were:

1. What was the influence of demographic variables on the Australian teacher involvement scores, that is, their preference to be involved in decision/responsibility taking at the school level?
2. What was the pattern of results for the Grand mean and Index mean scores?
3. Did the comments of Australian teachers help explain the differing levels of preference for teacher involvement and of their estimate of principal preference?

Accordingly this paper centres on the order and the size of Index means, the size of the Grand means, and some comparisons between perspectives held by the Australian teachers and combined international results.

Method

Four indices were created and validated prior to use as a structure for gathering and analysing data: Administration and Coordination (A) (4 items), Human Relations (H) (5 items), Teacher Support (T) (5 items), Classroom Learning (C) (4 items). Evaluation (2 items) was added subsequently. Means were calculated for each of the twenty questionnaire items in order to measure attitudes of 105 teacher-participants (and 50 principals) towards teacher involvement in educational change. Grand means of twenty questionnaire items were used to measure attitudes and perceptions of teachers towards teacher involvement in educational change.

Teachers indicated their preferences and their estimate of their principals' preference by selecting a response from a five-point Likert scale.

It was hypothesized, based on the Getzels-Guba systems model of school operation (as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 1987), that the means for each for the first four domains of change would increase in listed order, that is, using the first initial for each index, AHTC. The two-item Evaluation index was omitted from all analyses other than its inclusion in the Grand Means.

A simple correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between demographics and involvement preferences and estimates of participants.

Fifteen teachers (and the 50 principals) who completed survey questionnaires indicated their willingness to provide more detailed responses and were invited to provide reasons for their responses during a telephone interview. The comments provided by the sub-group of teachers enabled further investigation of their thinking.

Participants

One hundred and five Tasmanian teachers participated in the Australian study. A process in which surnames were chosen at random from the telephone directory and teachers with the same or similar surname were identified on a publicly available on-line email list was used to select participants. All members of the teacher sample completed survey questionnaires; fifteen of these teachers were interviewed subsequent to their return of the survey questionnaire.

Demographics

The teachers were 69 per cent female and 30 per cent male and 15 per cent under 30 years old and 31 per cent over 50 years old. Thirty-two per cent of teachers had taught 1 to 10 years, 30 per cent had taught 11 – 20 years, and 37 per cent had taught more than 20 years (Table 1). Tasmanian schools vary in size from urban schools with over 1000 students to one small island school of 12 students. City schools typically have enrolments of around 500 to 800 students and rural schools 100 to 300 students.

Table 1

Participants by gender, age and teaching and or principalship experience (years)

Participant group	Female (%)	Male (%)	Age (years)			Teaching experience (years)				Principalship (years)		
			<30	30-39	40-59	<10	11-15	16-25	>25	1-5	6-10	>10
Principals	28.0	72.0	0	2.0	98.0	14.6	18.8	47.9	18.8	44.9	28.6	27.5
Teachers	68.6	31.4	15.4	19.2	65.4	32.4	16.2	25.7	25.7	-	-	-

Results

Means

Teachers' actual involvement wishes as measured using the 5-point Likert scale ranged between 3.28 and 3.78. Specifically, the scores were: Administration and coordination 3.28, Human relations 3.44, Teacher support 3.61, and Classroom learning 3.98. These results were consistent with the 10-country pattern, although the Australian teachers' wishes for involvement were higher for each index. Figure 1, Appendix B illustrates these scores.

Figure 2, Appendix B presents the teachers' estimates of their principals' preference for teacher involvement, which ranged between 2.71 and 3.63. Specifically, the Administration and coordination score was 2.71, Human relations 3.20, Teacher support 3.27 and Classroom learning 3.63. These results were consistent with the 10-country pattern other than for the Classroom learning index. With respect to teachers' estimates of their principals' preference, Australian teachers' wishes for involvement were lower than the 10-country means for three of the four indices. The exception was Classroom learning.

Overall, the Grand mean for teachers' actual involvement wishes (TA) (3.59), which was slightly above the 10-country result was greater than the Grand mean of teachers' estimates of the extent to which they estimated principals would support their involvement (TB) (3.25). The greatest variation between TA and TB means was for the Administration and coordination index. Overall, teachers expressed a preference to be involved in responsibility taking to a greater extent than they estimated their principals would support. This result was evident in the 10-country comparisons, although to a lesser extent.

Influence of demographics

Years of teaching experience was linked to increased teacher preference to be involved in Administration and Coordination, Human Relations and Teacher Support. While the influence of teaching experience on Teacher Preference results was prevalent, no single correlation between years of experience and any one index was predominant.

Teaching experience did not have a significant correlation with their estimate of principal preference for teacher involvement; their perceptions of principal support were quite possibly linked to their perceptions of their principal at the time rather than teachers' own personal preferences.

Principals who had more years of teaching experience tended to estimate higher levels of teacher aspiration to participate in decision-making in the Classroom Learning items.

Teachers' and principals' comments

Administration and coordination index

Australian teachers estimated principals' preference for teacher involvement lowest for responsibilities in the Administration and coordination index. For example, setting policies and criteria for hiring teachers' (Item 12) attracted nearly double the number of opposing comments than comments in support. Conditional opposition was expressed in almost one-third of principals' comments; this was not surprising in the Australian context where typically policies and criteria are developed centrally.

Another item to which principals were strongly opposed was 'deciding on distribution of the school's budget' (Item 15). There was a positive correlation between gender (in this case, being male) and teacher preference to be involved in administration and coordination.

The following examples provide comments made by teachers and principals that reflected some of the concerns expressed by participants in both groups.

For example, with respect to the importance of an impartial process:

Teacher - I wouldn't want very much involvement and I don't think the principal would either. I think it could become 'jobs for the boys.'

Principal - While it's good for involvement and for teachers to understand the process [and the issues], for example, 'equity', it also opens up an enormous challenge if [subject] departments are vying for more...needs to be a just distribution.

Idealistic preferences as opposed to realistic ones, the latter resulting from intensification, were evident:

Teacher - Some, possibly quite a few, of my answers would change if some time or involvement was recognised as part of my workload. The practice has been to increase the responsibilities without any reduction in teaching or other duties.

Principal - Teachers have [heavy] workloads and pressures they have to deal with.

Teachers expressed a keen interest in being involved in budget decisions that directly impacted on their work. Nonetheless workload often diminished their involvement preference.

A variety of responses and comments were offered about Human relations items, quite possibly as a result of the personal nature of communication. Some of the comments pertained to the importance of open communication and others contained expressions of hesitancy about some forms of feedback. It was evident that some teachers felt that their principals valued their expertise and skills while other teachers perceived that there were role expectations that should not be overstepped.

Teacher support index

Teacher support was the index for which principals' level of support for teacher involvement was second highest. With respect to this index many principals reported valuing teacher input in support and mentoring roles. Teachers' preference was to offer input where they felt they had the most potential to support colleagues. One teacher referred to the "sink or swim" experience of new teachers and commented that teachers could offer much regarding induction (Item 17). One principal while noting positive outcomes of involving staff in support and mentoring roles expressed hesitancy about teachers working with a "non-performing" colleague.

Classroom learning index

Classroom learning was the index of which for which teachers and principals expressed the highest levels preference of for teacher involvement.

With respect to teacher involvement in decisions about the curriculum (Item 5), one principal stated:

Teachers are the most informed about the curriculum.

Another principal who estimated higher teacher preference, than his preference for teacher involvement, in innovative scheduling (Item 19) commented:

Teachers don't always have the greater good at heart ... sometimes [there are] conflicting interests.

Student behaviour attracted comments from teachers and principals that point to the potential of this issue to be contentious and that highlight divergence between the needs of teachers and those of the principal.

Teacher - Those of us who have to deal with the [students'] behaviour can be removed from those who finally deal with the behaviour...[there is a problem with the principal] not wanting to be seen to cause a problem for the Department [of Education]...a problem with advocating a policy but not following it.

Principal - As an administrator, I am particularly concerned to retain students and give them second and third chances...teachers are somewhat less patient, understandably.

While principals' support was strongest for teacher involvement in Classroom learning index items, tensions were visible in comments that compared school-wide and classroom priorities and between administrative and educational priorities.

Discussion

The rank order of Index Scores—increased from Administration and Coordination to Human Relations to Teacher Support to Classroom Learning both for Teacher Preference and for Teacher Estimates of Principal Preference—points to the influence of continuing traditional teacher role expectations (Getzels-Guba as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 1987). This pattern of results occurred in the Australian study and across the ten-countries.

The comparison between Grand Means for Teacher Preferences and Teacher Estimates enabled match or mismatch of principal support anticipated by the teachers. Teachers in Australia expected a shortfall in principal support, to a greater extent than indicated in the 10-Country trend. It was revealed in the analysis of the data gathered from Australian principals that the principals' estimates of teachers' preference exceeded teachers' actual preference for all Index means; and, the Australian principals' estimates exceeded the 10-country scores. Moreover, the Australian principals' preference for teacher involvement exceeded principals' estimates of teachers' preference. Both sets of principal means (preference and estimate, and Grand mean and Index means) exceeded teacher means (preference and estimate, and Grand mean and Index means). Thus teachers' estimates of principals' preference and principals' preference for teacher involvement showed the most divergence. This has implications for the ways in which principals and teacher work together in schools.

Comparisons between Index means for the first four indices revealed larger differences for Administration and Coordination than for the Grand means in both the Australian and the 10-Country result sets. Human relations differences were less and teacher Support and Classroom Learning differences were approximately average.

The comparison differences for Administration were considerably larger than for the Grand Mean in both country groups, and the Human Relations differences were somewhat smaller, with the Teacher Support and Classroom Learning differences about average. In both groups teachers appeared to believe that principals would be less supportive of their involvement in Administration and slightly more supportive of Human Relations involvement.

It is notable that the Australian teachers were particularly pessimistic, when compared with the Ten-Country group, with respect both to the support they anticipated from principals and to the extent they underestimated principal support. Moreover, the Australian Principal preference was for more 'strong involvement' than teachers appeared ready to offer.

Comments offered by teachers pointed to possible influences on their preferences and estimates expressed in this study. One consideration, on arrival in a new school, is that challenges and instability can influence, albeit temporarily, a teacher's efficacy and potential to contribute to school-wide initiatives. More generally, some teachers mentioned teachers' view of their roles and of their principal's role and the way in which they performed their role. Teachers valued opportunities to have input or take responsibility when they are asked, when they knew they are being consulted and particularly in circumstances where they could see the relevance to their work.

Conclusion

Communication arises as a critical issue from this study. A vital component of communication is the development of a 'common language' for teachers and principals to facilitate discussion of professional matters and to diminish the likelihood of miscommunication. Opportunities to develop shared understanding within school contexts are provided when principal and teachers complete these items, followed by discussion and exploration of answers and the thinking behind the answers.

The concept of shared goals and pathways to achieve goals is at risk when teachers and principals miscalculate the intent, willingness and capacity of each other, regarding involvement, contributing their skills and pursuing shared goals (Collet, Menlo, and Rosenblatt, 2004; Geijsel, Slegers, van den Berg & Kelchtermans, 2001). Furthermore, the inclusive nature of school with respect to staff is likely to influence the manner in which teachers view intensification (Galton &

MacBeath, 2008; Gardner & Williamson, 2004), their efficacy (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004) and ways in which they consider externally imposed initiatives (Gardner & Williamson, 2005; Hoyle & Wallace, 2007; Ingersoll, 2006; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). Development of teacher quality to assume responsibilities and that empower teachers and enhance their efficacy lead to spin-offs for the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Hattie, 2003; OECD, 2005).

Establishing opportunities for teachers and the principal to compare and contrast preference for teacher involvement in school-based responsibility and estimates of each other's preferences for teacher involvement offers several potential benefits: (1) enhancement of school decision-making through collaboration and taking advantage of collective skills and expertise of the principal and teachers; (2) delegation of responsibilities which enhances teachers' educational leadership qualities and skills; and (3) optimal development of and progress towards shared goals.

Two related areas, time and responsibilities, necessitate attention to facilitate use of teacher expertise. In order for teachers to have opportunity to participate more broadly to their schools consideration of how their time is used currently, of what it means to be a teacher, and of the potential and feasibility for reallocating responsibilities from teachers to enable new responsibilities to be assumed must be undertaken in collaboration with teachers.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The survey (Teacher version)

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS' RESPONSIBILITY-TAKING IN SCHOOL CHANGE

Please circle or highlight the one response that best indicates your answer in each scale.

	How much do <u>you wish</u> to take part in <u>this</u> responsibility?	In your opinion, how much does your <u>principal think teachers should</u> take part in <u>this</u> responsibility?
1. In deciding upon the number of students for different classes	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
2. In developing new courses for students	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
3. In organizing supportive assistance for the teachers	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
4. In developing policies on professional benefits for teachers in the school	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
5. In planning school changes in curriculum content, method and materials	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
6. In developing professional learning programs for teachers	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
7. In formulating changes in the school's teacher-principal relationships	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
8. In implementing the new teaching and learning changes in the school	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
9. In giving organized feedback to the school's principal and colleagues	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
10. In conducting staff meetings	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
11. In setting policies for student behavior	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
12. In setting policies and criteria for employing teachers	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
13. In evaluating the effects of school changes	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
14. In developing and conducting information programs for teachers, e.g., disseminating professional learning	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
15. In deciding on the distribution of the schools' budget	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
16. In setting policies for changes in parent involvement	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
17. In developing approaches for the induction of new teachers	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
18. In creating new ways to improve the schools' relationship with the community	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
19. In planning innovative ways of timetabling	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much
20. In organizing new programs for the use of volunteers in the school	None Little Some Much Very much	None Little Some Much Very much

Your age _____ Your years as a teacher _____ No. of students at your school _____

Your gender _____ Gender of your principal _____ School size: small medium large

Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview of approx. 20 minutes? Yes No

Appendix B: Means for teachers preferences and estimates

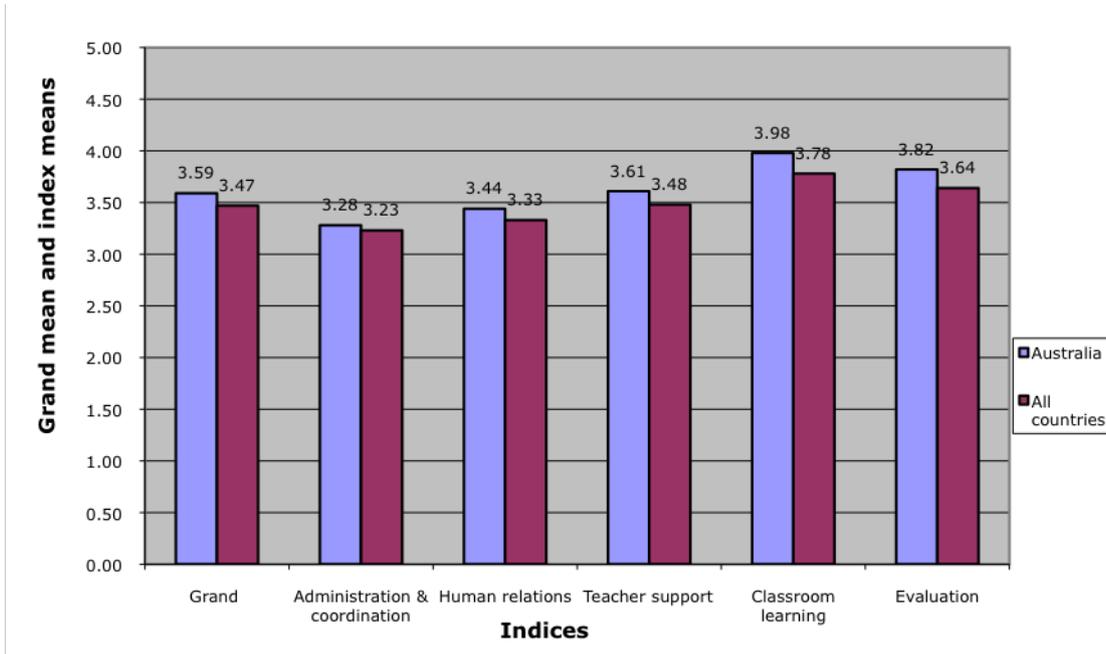


Figure 1. Means for teacher preferences for involvement.

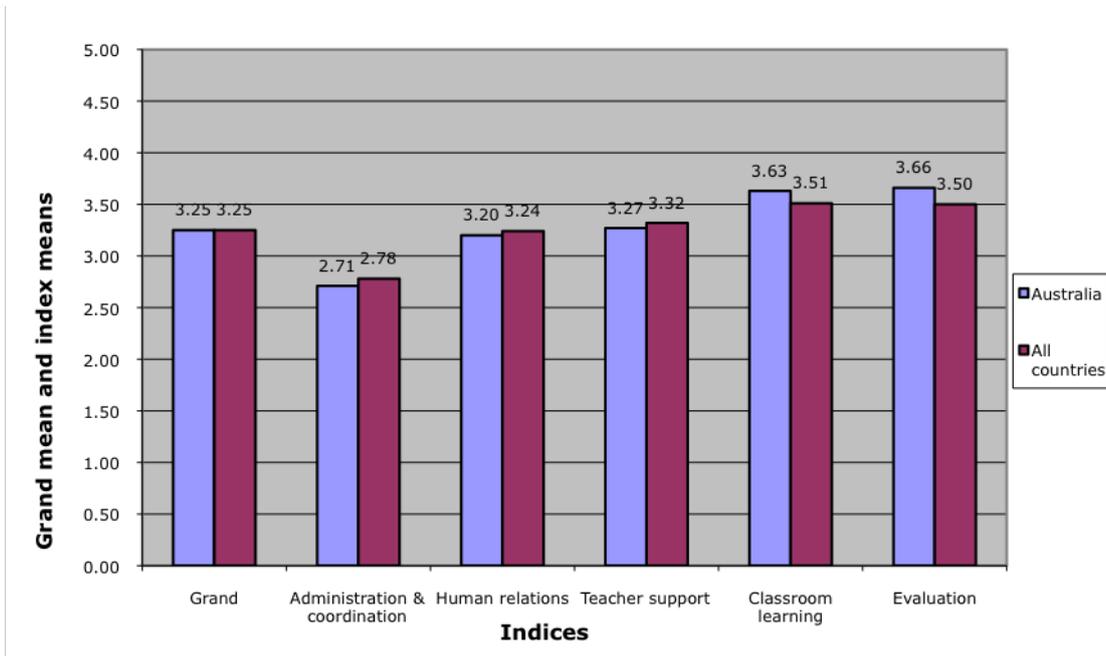


Figure 2. Means for teacher estimates of principal support for teacher involvement.