

*Este es un manuscrito aceptado (Versión AM o post-print) de un artículo publicado por Taylor & Francis en SCHOOL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT el 5 de junio de 2019, disponible en: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1612355>*

Referencia completa:

*González-Falcón, I., García-Rodríguez, M. P., Gómez-Hurtado, I., & Carrasco-Macías, M. J. (2019). The importance of principal leadership and context for school success: insights from '(in)visible school.' School Leadership & Management, 40(4), 248–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1612355>*

## **The importance of principal leadership and context for school success. Insights from '(in)visible school'**

The aim of the research is to pinpoint which leadership-related factors and, specifically, which features and strategies used by the principals affect the school success. The work follows the International Successful School Principalship Project methodology in two case studies in Andalusia (Spain). Both schools (with differentiated environments) are classed by the research as 'invisible or visible school', depending on the evolution and recognition of their success. Case A is a high-performing and declining school (invisible) and Case B is a low-performing and rising school (visible). The results emphasise the importance of the socioeconomic and cultural school context and the characteristics and type of leadership exercised by principals in their relationships with the environment, academic outcomes of the pupils and the school's innovation process. The principal's leadership is also crucial for acknowledgement of school results.

**Keywords:** school success, invisible school, principal leadership, school context, qualitative research

### **Introduction**

This work is framed within the research carried out in Spain on the International Successful School Principalship Project (hereafter ISSPP). The purpose of this project is to describe the features and leadership strategies of school principals in a wide range of

schools and subsequently identify their effects on the teaching staff, community, school culture and pupil performance. The aim is to determine which type of leadership (features and strategies) influences school success. Leadership is understood as a complex process that goes beyond a narrow vision of the principal's remit in terms of administrative management and formal and vertical acknowledgement of leaders. Likewise, success is perceived as a process defined both by academic results and the acquisition of different social and personal skills (Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016), whose configuration also depends on the socioeconomic characteristics of the school context.

The review of the literature on school effectiveness, school improvement and educational leadership brought to light a series of research topics that acknowledge the determining role of school principal in school activity (Arlestig, Day, and Johansson 2016; Bolívar, López, and Murillo 2013; Day and Sammons 2013). These issues are closely related, exerting mutual influence on each other. This refers to:

- (1) The effects of the school context on school activity and the principal's actions.
- (2) The relation between school improvement, innovation and the work carried out by the principal.
- (3) The relationship between principal leadership and pupil performance/outcomes.

Regarding the effects of the school context on school activity and school leadership, the body of research into the running of schools, particularly in disadvantaged contexts, on one hand highlights the decisive role of said context in school life (Harris et al. 2002; Harris et al. 2014) and, on the other, the challenge posed to school leaders in the management of activities and the exercise of leadership to face these challenges (Harris 2005; Day 2002). It is also important to highlight how the research has insisted on the

decisive role of the principal in articulating a close collaboration with the environment, community and families as a key part of school leadership policy (Barr and Saltmarsh 2013; Harris and Jones 2018). Specifically, in the construction of relationships both inside and outside the community that favour the school's internal cohesion, improving its image and encouraging the forging of links between the school and its surroundings. In particular, Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) noted that families get more involved when they perceive the principal as someone who accepts and supports them. According to Hallinger (2018), however, research into leadership and the school context has mainly focused on analysing the role of context as a subsidiary item, relegated to the shadows. In this sense, Morrison (2017), highlights the importance of analysing the context from a systemic perspective to take into account the interplay between the micro, meso and macro levels of social justice leadership. And Gurr et al. (2018) recommend using the contextual leadership framework of Hallinger (2018) to do so.

As for the relationship between innovation, school improvement and work carried out by principal, the literature likewise acknowledges the decisive role of school principals not only in creation of the provisions for innovation and improvement, but also, more importantly, in maintaining them. In this regard, their leadership role in this process is highlighted (Day and Gurr 2014; Harris et al. 2014; López-Yañez 2010) and reflected in the task deployed by the principal when articulating a specific type of organisational culture cohesive enough to tackle the challenges faced. In this sense, the development of a shared vision in the school, a relation of trust with the teaching staff, the use of different information sources to resolve problems, preferential attention to teaching and learning and the capacity to respond to outside demands are elements signalled by Holmes, Clement and Albright (2013).

On the relationship between school leadership and pupil performance/outcomes, the literature emphasises the decisive influence the school principal has on pupils, to the extent of finding differences in their results and learning based on the role and leadership implemented by the principal throughout the school (Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016; Leithwood and Day 2008; Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2015). However, Bloom, and Owens, 2013, pointed out some differences in the influencing capacity of school leadership, depending on the context. In their work, they found that in low-performing schools the influence was focused mainly on obtaining resources and funding for the school, while in those with better performance the emphasis was on the teaching staff and curriculum.

In any case, the research findings, despite acknowledging peculiarities in each country taking part (Hallinger 2018), point to the development of principal leadership with a strong commitment to education, teaching and the curriculum, as well as pupil development in all its facets (Sans-Martín, Guardiola, and Triadó-Ivern 2016). To this is added commitment to construction of the school as a professional community and the need for principals to manage and lead the environments where the schools are established (Coronel, Carrasco, and Moreno 2012; Hernández-Castilla; Murillo, and Hidalgo 2017).

Given all of the above, it seems convenient to analyse the way principals work in schools and how they put improvement-focused educational leadership into practice.

### **Materials and Methods**

The aim of the research is to determine what factors related to leadership and, more specifically, which features and strategies applied by the principals affect school outcomes. To this end, previous works focusing on the successful performance of leadership were taken into account (Day 2005; Day and Leithwood 2007; Leithwood

2011; Moos, Johansson, and Day 2011) and the methodological framework applied by Day and Gurr (2014) for the International Successful School Principalship Project was followed.

Two case studies were analysed, focusing on the second area of analysis of the ISSPP Project in Spain, i.e., the relationship between principal actions and the contexts in which the school is located. Two public infant and primary schools in western Andalusia managed by two principals were studied. The cases were selected intentionally, specifically seeking a school that was located in a socioeconomic and cultural context with a good rating according to the analysis parameters of the sociocultural and economic indexes (SCI) of the study region and with academic results worse than what should correspond to their area and social stratum (case A). And the opposite situation; a school located in an area at risk of social exclusion due to low socioeconomic and cultural indexes (SCI) and which, despite this, achieved better academic results than would be expected from this social stratum (case B). In other words, what the literature designated an ‘invisible school with no added value’, as it apparently obtained good results, but which worsened when compared with schools with the same SCI (case A); and a ‘visible school with added value’, because its results, although low, were better than the schools with the same SCI and it is used as an example for other low-performing SCI schools to follow. In other words, the two schools were selected on the basis of what Møller et al. (2015) defined as ‘high and declining school’ to describe the case of invisibility (case A) and a “low and increasing school” to define visibility (case B).

The instruments listed in the ISSPP (Day 2005; Moral, Amores, and Ritacco 2016) were applied in each school; a review of school documentation, four in-depth interviews with the principal, four interviews with teachers who had been working in

the school for a sufficient length of time, one discussion group with parents and another with pupils in the last two years of primary school, and one interview with an outside agent (inspector in case A and counsellor from the teacher training centre referenced in case B).

The ISSPP categories (Moral et al. 2018) were taken into account for the inductive analysis and coding of information, rearranged in this research using the MaxQda qualitative data analysis program, according to three thematic cores: 1) Description of the school and its community context; 2) features of the principals and leadership styles they used; and 3) the effects of these variables on the innovation and improvement processes of the school, the academic outcomes of the pupils and relationships with the environment).

## **Results**

### ***Case A***

#### *1) The school and its context*

Case A is a state run Infant and Primary Education school with approximately 450 pupils. The staff consists of 27 teachers. The school is located in one of the wealthiest towns in western Andalusia and its socioeconomic and cultural level is medium to high. It is located in the centre of town and stands out for the breadth of its spaces, care, cleanliness and architectural refurbishment. It is the town's oldest school and a benchmark in its locality. It has always 'been noted for its good image, involvement in different educational projects and its good relationship with the administration and educational community.' (PRI).

It is a very active school, although in recent years the level of participation of teachers and families has fallen off. In the case of the teachers, due to a degree of staffing instability caused by recent retirements and teachers accessing political posts.

In the families, due to the lack of dynamism of the parents' association. Despite this, it is currently still the school most in demand by families and supply teachers. Families describe it as a '5 star' school and the pupils as 'top ranking', because it is pleasant, familiar and safe, and has many resources.

It is a prestigious institution, also valued for the good school atmosphere, quality of the teachers, the innovation of its programmes and its good academic results. However, in relation to this last point, there is a certain disproportion between the achievements noted by teachers, families and even pupils of the school and the outcomes achieved in the latest outside exams. Both the principal and the majority of the education community consider that their school is the best of the five public schools in the area. However, although it does get good results, it also enjoys a better socioeconomic level. One of the teachers commented: 'Where we are, the social environment is the best in town, and that has an influence. The socioeconomic situation of the surroundings is fundamental.' (TEA-1)

According to the inspector, this latter aspect has a lot of influence, and if this factor is taken into account, this school is not the most successful. Another school stands out in the town, which does add value, but goes unnoticed because it does not have a previous background of educational success.

## *2) Features of the principal and leadership styles used*

The school head is an Early Childhood Education teacher who worked in school management here for eight years, prior to her seven-year tenure as school principal. Her school leadership project has always been very well defined. She herself states her aim as 'to maintain the status of the school and increase its resources so that neither the school nor its culture will suffer.' (PRI)

In recent years, she has also been concerned with expanding the innovation and educational inclusion initiatives. To do so, she believes it is crucial to have good links with the community, educational administration and local authorities. To this end, she intensifies the relationships with all of them, revitalising the Parents' Association (PA) and formalising the figure of parent delegates in each class.

The triangulation of instruments shows that when managing and leading she uses both formal (cycles, pedagogical coordination technical team, staff meetings, school board) and informal structures (informal meeting with staff first thing on Monday mornings over coffee; e-mails and WhatsApp) and in a circular direction (both bottom-up and top-down) and with democratic and participatory processes. Her leadership is thus distributed, but very well controlled. She distributes responsibilities and empowers other leaders: cycle coordinators, coordinators of key educational projects (ICT, Bilingualism); WhatsApp coordinators (all participants are identified by colour codes), the PA and the board of delegates (she is the one who approached its leaders). Among her modes of influence, the bureaucratic modality stands out (good knowledge of the norm), but also the ideological (appealing to shared values in the school, to its history and good name), technocratic (being a benchmark in new technologies and active methodologies) and micropolitical (informing and negotiating certain decisions beforehand with the most veteran and influential school staff members).

The principal is very highly rated in general by all members of the educational community. They define her as a 'charismatic, confident, feisty person' (TEA-1), 'who gets involved and knows what she wants for her school' (INS). In this sense, families highlight her great dedication and concern for the school, especially in terms of obtaining resources. And the teachers appreciate the network of outside contacts she has

managed to create for this purpose. Nevertheless, some of the staff are also concerned by the school's exposure and the sensation that some projects are carried out to satisfy the educational administration, without setting out from an initial diagnosis. 'The truth is that there's a lot of movement here, but also a lot of window-dressing.' (TEA-2).

Likewise, staff also criticise that her proposals are sometimes rather closed, with hardly any room for real participation by the educational community. Pupils also mentioned that the principal is more approachable as a teacher than as a leader. In terms of families, her leadership style involves a more formal and distant treatment with parents (referring them to formal participation channels and preventing the traditional exchange of informal information with teachers at different times of the school day), which has also affected the family-school relationship, making it more distant than before. In this sense, the inspector noted that there is room for improvement in her affective relations and human leadership, as she is sometimes arrogant or imposing. 'If there was a vote to choose the most popular principal, it wouldn't be her.'

### *3) Effects of principal leadership on school innovation and improvement processes; pupils' academic outcomes and relations with the environment*

The principal's influence on the school setup is clear. The role she plays affects the results achieved, both positively and negatively.

In terms of innovation and improvement processes, the different schedules and methodological changes that have been applied were encouraged by the principal. The school stands out for the large number of projects carried out to foster inclusion, change the methodology and reach out to all pupils. The principal was responsible for promoting school's conversion into an ICT (Information and Communication Technology) centre, as well as the rest of the actions. She manages to influence her colleagues, and is the benchmark to follow. She applies it first, before guiding and

assisting the rest. Her status as an acknowledged expert in new technologies and active methodologies is a further endorsement. Nevertheless, her own personal interest in converting the school into a model for inclusion as soon as possible has meant that many of her proposals were perceived as closed programmes, resulting in less staff participation than there used to be. The teachers complain that ‘now everything comes more fait accompli. The decisions are already taken beforehand and it undermines your willingness, making you less comfortable working.’ (TEA-2).

As for academic outcomes, the director does not consider improvement of the academic results because she considers that her school already achieves them. She does work on some specific aspects to try to raise the score in external examinations, but what she really backs is a more ambitious and medium-term process, i.e. methodological change. She advocates pedagogical leadership and the need to reform the methodological and evaluation system as a prior step to achieving better results. In this sense, one very important aspect for the principal is attention to diversity and contributing to the good climate of the school, favouring coexistence and a sense of community through different actions such as inclusive games in the playground, the school garden, group excursions, etc. The children feel listened to and wanted and efforts are made in the school to downplay the anxiety that may arise when facing external exams. However, some teachers and the inspection team believe that projects more focused on the reality of the school could be carried out, in such a way that a prior diagnosis of the academic outcomes in the different subject areas and their comparison with the school’s trajectory in this sense might help guide the actions to be carried out. ‘Not all that glitters is gold. This window-dressing benefits us, but also holds us back.’ (TEA-2).

On relations with the environment, the principal's involvement and interest in strengthening ties with the community is one of the hallmarks of her leadership style, especially as regards the educational administration. She herself states that 'To change things you have to work hand in hand with the authority.' (PRI).

Thanks to her contacts and posts held in the administration (regional consultant in new technologies), the principal manages to achieve a lot of resources and greater visibility. However, as some teachers and the inspector suggest, the worse academic results may be influenced by the fact that, as noted above, they are taking part in more programmes than necessary and that some of them do not respond to the needs of the school. Similarly, the image of excellence of the school that is projected outside can also have an impact, so that, despite the good relations with external consultants for training purposes, they receive less support than in previous times. Likewise, the change in the approach to families (currently more formal and colder) may have encouraged a lower degree of family-school cooperation.

## ***Case B***

### *1) The school and its context*

Case B is a public Infant and Primary Education school with a single Infant Education unit, five Primary Education classes and one Special Education classroom.

Approximately 75 pupils attend the school (figure not stable throughout the course, with pupils entering and leaving due to custody or family employment issues). Some 90% are ethnically Roma and, in general, the families have serious socioeconomic problems.

The school is located in a neighbourhood with one of the lowest socioeconomic and cultural levels in western Andalusia. It was founded in 1977, being the first state run school built in the area in the drive to eradicate shanty towns and lower the high percentage of social conflict. The current ratio is very low. The situation is exacerbated

by the school's bad reputation, as it educates 'the worst children in the area' (PRI). As one member of the educational guidance team commented, 'Over the years, the standardised population has been educated in the subsidised private schools in the area, gradually leaving the most deteriorated population behind.' (EGT). The drop in pupil enrolment further threatens the school's continuity (TEA-2).

The changing pupil profile has also made it difficult to stabilise the teaching staff (TEA-1). Currently, the staff is composed of twelve teachers, including a specialist in therapeutic pedagogy. Staffing is bolstered by the guidance team that visits this school periodically and several monitors for out-of-school activities, dining room duties and early bird or breakfast club supervision. There are also university students in teaching practice internships, the social educator from Social Affairs and people running the Roma Development Project. Another effect of the drop in enrolment is that the posts of school secretary and head of studies currently remain to be filled.

One of the challenges for the school is how to combat lack of discipline and truancy, and it is currently engaged in different projects to this end. The school is open from 7:30 a.m. with the early bird classroom, through the lunchbreak until 7:00 p.m. with extracurricular activities. The difficulty of getting families involved is shared by the teaching staff and has become a priority for the principal. For this reason, the learning communities project is being implemented in the later courses. All these activities are carried out to try to get pupils and their families involved in school life, but the task is difficult. The feeling among teachers is that the families are not all that concerned with their children's education. 'Here, the issue is usually mostly to do with the families. They don't get involved.' (TEA-1). The school monitor also points out that families 'don't treat you with respect, or turn up when they're supposed to. They don't care whether the child learns to read or not.' This atmosphere helps create a degree of

tension and exhaustion among teaching staff. 'There's a lot of burnout in this school due to the situation.' (TEA-2).

## *2) Features of the principal and leadership styles used*

The principal has been in the school for twelve years and three in the leadership team. She was appointed to the job as the only primary teacher with a permanent post in the school. Her school leadership project prioritises family involvement in the school and attention to the pupils, placing special emphasis on improving coexistence and academic outcomes. 'This year, we're trying to improve the coexistence problems in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade... and we're getting there.' (PRI). As she herself states, working with pupils' families is crucial. 'This is why we decided to attend to them when they need it, because the problems arise on a day-to-day basis and you just can't set out a strict attention schedule to deal with them.' (PRI).

Triangulation of the data allows us to conclude that the principal mainly uses informal structures (Monday meetings, coffee mornings, break time...) to run the school. Her democratic and participatory character stands out. She herself argues that participation of the whole community is necessary in school organisation and to create a good working climate. To this end, she applies distributed leadership, delegating responsibilities and empowering other leaders, although the size of the school makes it easier for her to keep an eye on all the tasks carried out in it. In her day-to-day business, she opts for a multitasking leadership style and prefers to develop programmes that can be completed in the very short term. 'We work a lot with short-term plans, for example, over the next couple of weeks we are going to try these four things.' (PRI).

Among her modes of influence, the micropolitical approach stands out (she always relies on more personal aspects to persuade the teachers, such as specific features of the pupils and context), but she also uses the bureaucratic modality, as it

refers to regulatory issues, and the ideological approach of shared values with the school. In terms of culture, the commitment and unity among the teaching staff and the need to improve the relationship with families by committing to collaborative work are highlighted. The teaching staff play an active part in decision-making, but they would occasionally like to see more authority and initiative from the principal. 'She uses a non-directive and non-imposing style. She fails to take the initiative and doesn't set out guidelines.' (EGT). The principal does not acknowledge herself as a leader, which means that neither do the rest of the educational team. 'Since I don't really see myself as a leader... we always ask for opinions about everything.' (PRI). Above all, she sees herself as a teacher and emphasises her vocation to teach. In this sense, she advocates pedagogical leadership and argues that the principal's actions should be involved in the reality of the classroom so as not to lose sight of this perspective.

The principal is highly rated by the different sectors of the educational community. The pupils highlight her great capacity for listening and the interest she shows towards them. In general, they describe her as a hard-working principal, committed and socially responsible. They also emphasise 'her love for this context and for the reality of each family.' (TEA-2). Specifically, the work she carries out with families is one of the aspects most highly rated by her colleagues. Nevertheless, teaching staff and the rest of the education team also think that she should sometimes exert more authority and guide the school towards a well defined line. In this sense, the school guidance counsellor noted that 'She hasn't developed clear priority lines in her school leadership project and we aren't all pulling in the same direction.' (EGT).

*3) Effects of principal leadership on school innovation and improvement processes; pupils' academic outcomes and relations with the environment*

Although the principal seems not to play a marked leading role in the school, her influence (positive or negative) can be seen both in the innovation and improvement processes and the academic outcomes or community relations.

In terms of the innovation and improvement processes, changes in *leadership* team members in recent years have slowed down the development of new innovation proposals in the school. Over the last five years, the figure of the head of studies has been eliminated and the secretariat has been available only in a few years, which has led the principal to take on all these functions, attending to the most urgent issues. Among them, providing a response to the pupils' needs and peculiar characteristics of the context.

The principal's personal commitment to her educational community favours the accomplishment of different innovations. In this sense, she promotes different methodologies and organisations (interactive groups, work by projects, learning communities) and maintains others from previous teams. The organisation of support is one of the peculiarities and a good practice to emphasise, as the principal, supported by the teaching staff, decided to arrange the schedule in such a way that for most of the school day there were two teachers per classroom. Despite her involvement, the lack of more 'authoritarian and firm' leadership (EGT) has also led to teachers becoming too comfortable and lackadaisical and this may be affecting the school's transformation and improvement, slowing down the process.

As for the academic outcomes, the principal proposes improvements in performance, as she considers that the results, beyond the comparison with other schools with the same SCI and which have risen in the last two years, are much lower than what should be achieved. In this sense, reading and writing and mathematics are

worked upon as priority subjects. She points to methodological changes as one aspect influencing the improvements in academic performance.

However, she considers encouraging a suitable climate to develop an optimal atmosphere that promotes learning a priority. From the school, attempts are being made to forge closer links between families and tutors through collaboration commitment contracts with the families for their children's education. These commitments revolve around school attendance, behaviour, the organisation of study time and the acquisition of values and social skills, also outside the school. In fact, two of the most important achievements in recent years are the drop in disruptive conduct among pupils and truancy.

With her involvement and democratic leadership, the principal emphasises the importance of educational team coordination and a flexible organisation of spaces, times and groupings. Likewise, she favours setting out from an initial assessment to establish the reinforcements, adaptations and programmes necessary.

As for community relations, the principal's work with families and the local authority stands out. The humanity she displays towards the school's parents is notable. She tries to help them at all times, both on educational issues and in other more personal and professional affairs. This can be observed in the number of mothers working in the college and the fact that they are allowed to sell fruit and vegetables during break time. Organising the school as a learning community also favours it being open to its environment for as long a time as possible. Despite the conflicts that arise, the principal always tries to build bridges between family and school.

On occasions, these practices are not shared by the teachers, who call for greater firmness with parents. Nevertheless, they also acknowledge how difficult this is.

‘Families are very complicated and there can be really significant personal confrontations, and I’ve seen some, between them and the principal.’ (EGT).

Collaboration with the community is vitally important for the principal, especially on such priority issues as preventing truancy. She coordinates with representatives of all the institutions in the area and also carries out a follow-up through the Local Authority Social Services Roma Development Programme. ‘Here, I see all the teachers daily, and I also meet once a week with the principal, who is responsible for the issue of absenteeism.’ (Social Educator).

In relations with the educational administration, although they are good, the teachers demand greater influence from her as the school’s leader. In this sense, the most troubling concern is the gradually dwindling number of pupils enrolled in the school and the change in its profile. The principal’s efforts to increase the participation of the most conflictive families are reaping the benefits, but may also be affecting the preference of other families for the concerted schools in the area. ‘Little by little, the families are taking part. The school is gradually becoming a point of reference for them.’ (TEA-2). Regarding the drop in enrolment, ‘I think the director has been unable to address the situation. There is uncertainty about whether the school may be closing soon.’ (EGT).

## **Discussion**

In light of the analyses presented, the leadership role is crucial in a school’s evolution. This has been identified in several works (Bolívar 2012; Day 2005; Hallinger and Huber 2012; Harris and Jones 2018; Pont, Nusche, and Hopkins 2008). In both schools and based on the testimonies gathered, the principals condition and define the reality of their schools.

Likewise, contexts are determining factors in leadership building and definition of the actions and managerial styles, coinciding with the outcomes reported in other research (Hallinger 2018; Morrison 2017; Harris 2002; Harris et al. 2014). The first context (case A) has a favourable socioeconomic environment and a very positive outside image. This leads principal A to focus her school leadership project on achieving resources and the planning of numerous projects in order to maintain this status. In the second case (B), the environment is very complex and sometimes hostile, with an external image that has been deteriorating. This means that the principal tends to deal with 'emergencies' arising from the school surroundings. So, she defines her school leadership project around improving family participation. To achieve successful school performance, increasing commitment levels and involvement of families with the school are crucial factors to reduce conflict and truancy, while improving academic outcomes and the all-round education of her pupils. This priority of collaboration with the community is the basis for development of a successful school, as recommended by Gurr et al. (2018), and Bolívar, López, and Murillo (2013).

As common elements, both directors are described as very hard-working, involved with the community and driven, with clear visions, although they differ in what they expect from their schools. Their leadership styles shape the processes that take place in their schools and indirectly affect the achievements of their students, reflecting on their practice, as recommended in previous works (Coronel, Carrasco, and Moreno 2012; OECD 2016). In previous research, Day (2005) stated that 'identity, trust and being enthusiastically committed' (575), among others, are fundamental aspects identified in successful leaders, and these principals are viewed this way. Both consider that success involves not only improving academic outcomes, but also the assumption of shared social values (Höög, Johansson, and Olofsson 2005). This commitment, moral

purpose and social justice is especially notable in the second case. Perhaps it is present in the first, but in a more superficial way, projected over the outside image of the school. The principal of school B is clearly trying to create an inclusive community and to transmit values to the families. This feature has also been identified as another characteristic of successful leaders (Day and Gurr 2014; Garza et al. 2014).

The principals differ in their managerial styles. The principal in case A presents features of educational leadership. The actions undertaken by the school are designed to improve the teaching methodology, the use of new resources in class, enhance people assessment processes, etc. This can be seen in the multiple projects in which the school takes part and the training going on within it. What does seem clear is that the foundations are being laid for the development of the school's internal capacity for change, with a commitment to sustain ongoing teacher learning (Hopkins et al. 2014). Alongside this, there are timid features of leadership distribution; attempts to encourage participation of the different agents (family, teachers and pupils) are seen, but in practice the principal does not always leave room for this involvement. She prioritises the immediate outcome rather than greater participation. In fact, some teachers consider that this leadership is not at all democratic, as proposals for change are usually all but ignored. Stability seems to be more important than influence, in terms of Leithwood (2011), and the leadership model maintained is highly centralised around the figure of the principal, which does not easily give rise to a distributed leadership model, as would be desirable (Murillo 2006) and natural (Hallinger and Heck 2011). In the second case (B), the principal's leadership is more inclusive. The priority is to work alongside families to increase their level of commitment to education, and consequently that of their children, to help mitigate the problems of truancy, discipline and poor performance. So, in both cases, the reciprocal influence of contents and leadership

styles is clearly seen, albeit in different directions (one more focused on the figure of the principal per se and the other towards distribution).

Another difference between the schools is that in B the posts that complement the principal have been suppressed (due to the administrative imperative, there is no head of studies or school secretary, as this is a small school) and this slows down the changes and improvements. Linked with this scenario and in the same school (B), there is another obstacle derived from the principal's character; she, the teaching staff and outside agents seem to agree that the principal does not seem to have a great capacity for leadership, as she is unable to defend her project more vehemently. The principal does not feel like or feel acknowledged as a leader. Despite these hurdles, the distribution of responsibilities is a fact and participation of all sectors a reality, which materialises among other aspects in the joint decision-making with teaching staff or in the presence of parents during the school day. The changing pupil profile and a reduction in the teacher/pupil ratio has also meant that the teachers that remain are those who really want to work in challenging contexts and have more options to develop an individualized teaching. In these contexts, the commitment of the stable teaching staff is enhanced and the principal's role is even more decisive (Day 2005; Hallinger and Heck 2011; Harris 2002). The new situation and the threat of school closure is becoming an opportunity to break with the past culture and foster new improvements (Gurr et al. 2018).

Educational leadership-related aspects are very important for both principals and teaching staff, but they are sometimes eclipsed by disciplinary issues, conflicts with some families and pupil apathy. As an advantage, curriculum development in school B is framed within a learning community. This means not only participation in the school, but also in the learning processes through the use of active methodologies, interactive

groups, scaffolding... And in the long term all these tools contribute to the improvement of curricula and learning (Dickson and Mitchell 2014).

Regarding performance, the first case sets out from a privileged position (it gets good results), however, due to its reality and socioeconomic index, these should be better. In the case of the second school, the reality is the opposite. So, another interesting feature on which to reflect is related to the previous experience of the principals in these contexts. The study began with two principals with broad teaching experience in their schools and who are positively acknowledged (albeit for different reasons). In case A, the principal identified was experienced in the post and had a strong extrinsic motivation (she is rewarded by the community thanks to the positive image projected by the school). In the second case, the principal interviewed initially did not wish to shoulder the responsibility of school leadership, but when faced with reality, acquired a high intrinsic motivation (a desire to change the reality of the school). This difference may explain the better academic results achieved by the latter (logically taking into account the socioeconomic index of the pupils). Intrinsic motivation is the kind of motivation that helps achieve a more effective performance (Deci and Ryan 2008; Höög, Johansson, and Olofsson 2005).

So, when it comes to analysing the influence of principals on their pupils' performance, it is important to take several factors into account. On one hand, the expectations that both have regarding learning (Day 2005), as it is a basic element in the development of a successful leadership; and on the other, the ability of leaders to build a true professional learning community that manages to transform the organisation, in terms of Moral, Amores, and Ritacco (2016). In the cases studied, these capacities vary, as shown. Thus, for example, they are greatly influenced by the visions they have of their respective schools and the degree of leadership distribution. As Spillane and

Diamond (2007) suggest, case B seems to be closer to these characteristics and influential as a driver of change in its environment.

The work environment and the relationship of trust with families are other fundamental elements for sharing goals in school (Hargreaves and Fullan 2014; López-Yañez 2010). In this sense, for both principals they are a goal to be reached, given the lower involvement of families in both schools in recent years. Another factor to consider in this influence is the context; as commented earlier, the difficulties are greater in the second school.

The structural conditions of the school and the development of a curricular programme coordinated with the teaching staff are also relevant in the influence on learning, as Sans-Martín et al. (2016) point out. School B is smaller, but has no school leadership team; in school A, the opposite is the case. However, the larger size of the school and more teachers linked to the leadership (principal and two assistants) is related in case A with a less distributed and democratic style; the opposite occurs in case B. In addition to the resources that define the contexts of the school, other factors related to the 'external context' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) are also relevant, such as the demands, support and relations with local authorities and the educational administration. In case A, the fluid relations that the director maintains with the educational administration allow her to have more support and continue to project the image of her school's success. Nevertheless, this negatively affects her in terms of educational support from the local authorities, as they consider that her school does not need it. In case B, the opposite occurs. The principal actively coordinates with municipal services and associations and thanks to this there are fewer cases of truancy and the educational commitment of the pupils and their families is increased. Nevertheless, she does not articulate smooth flowing communication with the

educational administration or take any actions to highlight the improvements taking place in her school. The principal has been unable to deploy sufficient leadership to rely on the alliance with the educational administration. In this sense, the school's progress loses visibility and far from serving as a reference for other schools with the same SCI (Møller et al. 2015), the low expectations of success from the administration and the community are maintained, to the extent of threatening its continuity. Una mejor relación con la Administración también supone oportunidades para tratar de conseguir una mayor inversión en su centro a fin de mejorar la calidad de sus servicios y evitar su cierre. Esta escuela reproduce la situación general que se está viviendo en España en relación al crecimiento de la escuela concertada (financiada con fondos públicos pero de gestión privada) en detrimento de la escuela pública. En los últimos años aumentan los centros concertados y disminuyen los centros públicos y privados (Ministerio de Educación, 2018). El apoyo a centros concertados con financiación pública (cuyo coste para el Estado es menor que el de la red pública) está contribuyendo, por tanto, a la creación de guetos educativos ante la concentración de las familias pobres en determinados centros públicos y la migración de las clases medias a los centros concertados (Fernández-Enquita, 2008). Las diferentes clases sociales se aglutinan así en torno a tres tipos de centros: privados (clase más alta), concertados (grueso de la clase media) y pública (clase más baja). Esta situación exige un cuestionamiento crítico sobre la gestión de los recursos públicos y la distribución (no segregadora) del alumnado en las escuelas. La continuidad del éxito de la escuela B, y la evitación de su cierre, también dependerá del compromiso de la Administración con la escuela pública, la igualdad de oportunidades y la justicia social.

Despite the study limitations, in terms of the difficulty of synthesising the large amount of information collected and showing the richness and complexity of

ethnographic research, what is clearly reflected in both cases is that school leadership appears as a determining element to understand the functioning of schools and the processes that lead to their improvement. In both cases, the leadership exercised by the directors is affected and influences the factors that describe the contexts of the school (Gurr et al. 2018; Hallinger 2018; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). The relationships and supports received from the educational administration are decisive for the recognition of the achievements of schools, their prospects of success and the future of the schools. In this sense, further research is needed, qualitatively documenting (Hallinger 2018) the experiences carried out by the principals to establish parameters on which to sustain school policies that affect the success of the school.

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