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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# School leadership practices, challenges and opportunities in Spain from key agents' perspective

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**Abstract:** Research on school improvement and effectiveness has marked the development of educational reforms to decentralise educational systems, professionalise the management function, increase training programmes for leaders, and develop skills profiles and standards across the globe. This preliminary study explores the practices, challenges and opportunities for school governance and educational leadership in Spain. A qualitative exploratory approach was utilised involving 17 semi-structured interviews with national and internationally recognised key education agents from different sectors. The results show a common view regarding the lack of real school autonomy and the persistence of an excessively bureaucratic leadership model. Participants fully agree on the need to promote pedagogical and distributed leadership and, consequently, the personal, social and

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professional competences required to exercise it. The opportunities envisioned by key education agents to achieve it refer to flexibility, accountability and the provision of more material and human resources for an effective leadership. Additionally, challenges and opportunities for using frameworks or standards systems that define effective school leaders' functions and skills are identified. Schools must become learning organisations by creating spaces for reflection and continuous improvement, and by involving different agents of the educational community to enhance school governance.

**Subjects: Leadership Strategy; School Effectiveness & Improvement; School Leaders & Managers**

**Keywords: school autonomy; educational leadership; professionalisation; governance; middle leadership**

## 1. Introduction

Scholars in the educational leadership field and international reports and studies such as the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and McKinsey Report have recognised the importance of pedagogical and distributed leadership to improve educational quality (Harris, 2011; Mourshed et al., 2010; OECD, 2018, 2019; Spillane, 2006). Over the last decades, it has increasingly been recognised, at national and international levels, the need to promote management and leadership functions' professionalisation, providing educational leaders with the skills required to cultivate a collaborative culture and enhance educational quality (Mourshed et al., 2010; Pont, 2020). This responds to what Hopkins (2017) calls the fifth phase of development and research for school improvement, the "systemic improvement" phase, focused on the influence of existing knowledge and the impact of national and international comparative studies.

In this sense, research on school improvement and effectiveness has marked the development of educational reforms to decentralise educational systems, provide greater autonomy, professionalise the management function, increase training programmes for leaders, and set standards and accountability systems as strategies for educational improvement (Hopkins, 2017; Pont et al., 2008). These reforms are founded on the basis that greater school autonomy and accountability will foster innovation, quality teaching and improve school performance. While neoliberal autonomy refers to free choice, efficiency, and excellence, leading to widening inequalities between schools and students (Keddie et al., 2020), we refer to autonomy from a pedagogical and leadership perspective. This approach focuses on the creation of mechanisms, skills and means that allow a collaborative school environment, focused on developing their own development spaces and an education project contextualised and built-in collaboration with the educational administration and the community (Bolívar, 2019b). From this perspective, accountability mechanisms can create meaningful and contextualised accountability education systems that accurately monitor leaders' and teachers' efforts in addressing issues of pedagogy and student learning, thus creating highly effective communities of learning leading to sustainable improvements in performance across the system (Keddie, 2015).

Since educational leadership is heterogeneous in many respects, such as access, professional status, development, and assessment, it should always be understood as an element associated with a specific historical, social, and professional context (Raelin, 2016; Schleicher, 2012). Accordingly, Anglo-Saxon countries' educational systems are more centralised, using professional leadership and management models, while Southern European and Latin American countries use semi-professional models wherein school principals are mostly teachers performing the management and leadership functions in conjunction with teaching activities (Bush, 2009; OECD, 2016). This model of semi-professionalisation in countries such as Spain implies a diffuse professional

identity as a leader. Principals are teachers who act as leaders, which entails the difficulty of clearly establishing their functions in practice (Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Schleicher, 2012).

School governance has also gained relevance recently as a necessary element in responding to students and society's educational demands, as well as the challenges associated with educational quality and equity (Balu et al., 2009; Wilkins, 2015). Educational governance refers to the level of educational systems' decentralisation, degree of financing, accountability mechanisms, and stakeholders' participation in educational policy development (Pont, 2020; Vaillant, 2012). Central to the debate on school governance is the need to define what type of leadership and educational organisation we want, and how schools can become learning organisations and integrated learning systems (Kools et al., 2020; Senge, 2006). This study uses the term "governance" to refer to the process of school administrative and management decentralisation, focussing on distributed leadership, democratic processes, and school-based management approaches within schools as forms of government, which promote school effectiveness and social inclusion (Gamage & Zajda, 2009).

To date, most of the studies on education policy focussed on analysing educational policies and reforms. Scientific research on school governance processes and the exercise of leadership in Spain is scarce (Fullan, 2009; Gamage & Zajda, 2009; Wilkins et al., 2019). Research on school leadership in the Spanish context has mainly focussed on identifying successful leadership approaches towards school improvement and effectiveness and the change processes associated to it (Bolívar, 2019a; Moral, 2022). Since the 1990s, Spain has implemented six educational laws and reforms, some conservative and neoliberal, and others social-democratic (Escudero, 2018). This political situation has caused educational uncertainty, where several challenges persist, such as: the development of evaluation and improvement models and plans for schools; the increase in school leadership autonomy related to pedagogical organisation and use of resources; and the strengthening of pedagogical leadership functions among school managers and leaders in detriment of bureaucratic and administrative tasks (Tiana, 2020; Tintoré et al., 2022).

While professional standards for educational leadership performance could solve the complexity of the school leadership profile (functions, tasks, and competencies associated generically, normatively, and theoretically to its ideal development), it is relevant to investigate: 1) how this leadership profile can be developed in Spain; 2) the challenges and opportunities faced in practice; and 3) how the use of standards' systems can help guide, evaluate, and improve it. Thus, it is relevant to explore the views and perceptions of key education actors and agents involved in educational processes and reforms, such as school principals, education inspectors, academic experts, politicians, members, employers of regional education departments, and members of school principals' associations. Their views and perceptions in relation to education leadership standards and how school autonomy is being implemented is critical. Studies regarding the state of development of educational reforms and policies are needed, as successful leadership, management and school autonomy are key levers for school governance and continuous improvement (OECD, 2020b; Tintoré et al., 2022).

The study presented in this paper can help configure school leadership, governance, and autonomy in Spain and in other countries with similar semi-professional education leadership models such as Southern European and Latin American countries.

This exploratory qualitative study contributes to this area by interviewing 17 Spanish experts and practitioners in the educational field. The objectives are to explore the views and perceptions of these experts in relation to: 1) characteristics and conditions for exercising educational governance and leadership in Spain, 2) challenges and opportunities for effective governance and educational leadership, and 3) the need for skills frameworks or standards systems for school leadership.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Conditions of school leadership and governance

Advances in school effectiveness and improvement have shown the influence of educational leadership on education quality and student performance (Chapman et al., 2016; Day et al., 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Since the McKinsey report (Mourshed et al., 2010) several effective measures for educational improvement have been established, emphasising the importance of school leadership. In general terms, education systems have evolved towards more systemic and global perspectives in defining the nature of governance and leadership within schools (Pont, 2020).

School management must be transparent and use evaluation and accountability as learning strategies for continuous improvement and as opportunities to promote reflection amongst the educational community (Pont, 2020). However, accountability alone cannot improve schools (Ainscow & West, 2008; Bolívar, 2010; Sammons & Bakkum, 2011). Strategies such as teacher training measures, student participation, and collaboration with the community must be articulated to address the cognitive, affective, and social spheres. Therefore, school leadership has to focus on coordination, supervision, and collaboration with the education community to achieve comprehensive management systems (Iranzo-García et al., 2014). Over the last decades, pedagogical and distributed leadership approaches have gained force as suitable approaches to enhance student performance and generate commitment, empowerment, and motivation amongst teachers and students towards school success (Correa & Wagner, 2011; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2006; OECD, 2019; Shaked et al., 2017; Spillane, 2006). A school leader must be understood as a creator of appropriate learning environments and a facilitator of change within organisations. It should have sufficient autonomy in decision-making to enable focus on student learning, curriculum, pedagogical issues, and teacher motivation and development, which implies not being overloaded with administrative tasks (Harris, 2011; Stoll & Temperley, 2009). Middle leaders (formally assigned) and leader teachers need to have the space and resources to create effective collaborative spaces to address school challenges in a holistic way (Bowers, 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2021). Thus, the concept of “governance” has gained force over the past decade, emphasising the management that operates at distinct levels and is interrelated. Positioned in the paradigm of complexity, the main goal of governance is achieving sustainability and providing public services to all citizens (Prieto-Flores et al., 2018). Governance is also associated with decentralisation and autonomy (European Commission, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2019). Multilevel governance models are promoted based on distinct levels of responsibility and management teams’ and schools’ increasing autonomy to respond to local needs (Pont, 2020). We understand that autonomy integrates aspects such as curriculum management (skills, content, methodologies, materials, etc.), personnel management (selection, employment, salary supplements, training, distribution of responsibilities, etc.), budget management, and organisational management (spaces, times, collaboration processes, etc.). Gamage and Zajda’s (2009) comparative study examined governance and school autonomy models from Australia, the US, UK, Spain, the Czech Republic, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Thailand. They found evidence of a significant shift towards decentralisation, greater autonomy and decision-making of management teams, and participatory decision-making and flexible funding with accountability. Despite this progress, other authors asserted the need to combine educational policies with greater autonomy, support, and resources for schools (OECD, 2020a; Wilkins, 2015).

Moreover, studying the performance of functions, tasks, and roles associated with school management involves investigating complex systems of actions through qualitative and collaborative research methodologies that show how professionals frame education challenges and make informed decisions (Archambault & Garon, 2012). Deep institutional self-assessments are fundamental to identifying current conceptions, values, and praxis of institutions, and to develop new insights and school leadership models for social transformation (Simons, 1985). From a critical perspective, since states play a fundamental role in public policies, schools often find themselves

impoverished economically, politically, and functionally due to the lack of resources, and therefore school leadership has in practice a limited capacity to “govern”, be autonomous, and be responsible for educational achievements. The challenge is to achieve democratic governance, where microstructures or micropolitics are implemented in education centres to safeguard democratic and participatory principles, sometimes even going against or beyond the law, to not succumb to the principles of “neoliberal governance” (Keddie, 2015; Prieto-Flores et al., 2018).

### **2.2. Professionalisation of the management function: profile and skills standards**

Educational reforms implemented in different countries since the 1990s show a broad consensus on the need to establish professionalisation of school management and leadership, focussing on four strategies (Pont et al., 2008; Schleicher, 2012):

- Increasing training programmes for educational leaders
- Setting precise selection and access criteria
- Strengthening the principals’ pedagogical leadership
- Establishing profiles and skills standards for management

Professionalisation through education and training programmes is increasingly widespread because of the evidence of its impact on exercising pedagogical and distributed leadership (OECD, 2020b). For example, the TALIS report (OECD, 2019) showed that principals who receive specific leadership training are more involved in pedagogical leadership actions. Moreover, schools wherein exchange of practices between teachers is common are run by principals who encourage teachers’ collaboration and co-responsibility and promote innovative practices’ development (Pont, 2020).

Skills standards are needed to define school management performance by clearly defining its functions, tasks, and associated skills (Bitterová et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2015). Many countries (e.g., Australia, The US, UK, and Canada) recently developed systems of standards or defined leadership skills associated with school management (Militello et al., 2013; OECD, 2020a). In Spanish law, the principal’s role involves both management and pedagogical responsibilities, placing the principal in an ambiguous position and posing difficulties in acting as a true pedagogical leader (Barrios et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2019). Consequently, management roles are developed more than educational leadership and innovation (Iranzo-García et al., 2014).

Currently, skills standards function at the international level as guides describing the management figure’s desired profile, wherein coincidence is observed in the realisation of key skills and evolution towards a systemic leadership model. Fullan (2003) presented these standards as generic personal characteristics (ethical purpose, dynamics of change, emotional intelligence, commitment, knowledge sharing, and coherence). By contrast, Day and Sammons (2016) focussed on successful leadership skills (defining vision, values, and objectives; improving teaching-learning conditions; aligning roles and responsibilities; redesigning syllabi; improving teacher quality; building relationships within and outside the school community; and sharing common values). Similarly, the US National Policy Board for Educational Management (2015) established professional standards for educational leaders and affirmed that interdependent domains, qualities, and values of leadership were integral to student success. In Spain, different associations of principals have developed a proposal for a “Spanish framework for good school management”; although it is far from being applied in reality, it is a crucial reference point. This framework sets a series of skills that the principal might group into five dimensions (FEDADi, 2017): 1) strategic goals and interventions; 2) management, organisation, and operation of the school establishment; 3) pedagogical leadership; 4) participation, collaboration and institutional climate management; and 5) ethical and professional standards.

### **3. Study context**

This exploratory research was conducted within a competitive research project framework approved by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (RTI2018-094851-B-I00) entitled

“Working conditions of school principals and the impact on their emotional economy: Analysis from a national and international perspective”. This project is led by the University of Seville in collaboration with Rovira i Virgili University (Tarragona) and Camilo José Cela University (Madrid).

The project aims to contribute to developing a knowledge base for school principals’ tasks and responsibilities, conditions under which such work is carried out, impact on principals’ affective-emotional health, and their emotional management and resilience. In the first phase, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted wherein various nationally and internationally recognised Spanish educational experts and practitioners were interviewed. The education policy context in Spain, which has implemented six educational laws and reforms since the 1990s, has caused several persisting challenges in real implementation of leadership and governance within schools. Moreover, regarding pedagogical leadership, in the latest implemented Spanish Education Law (LOMCE, 2013), the concept of management, as opposed to leadership, reappears with force, which is indicative of system recentralisation (Bolívar et al., 2013) in terms of granting more skills in the field of assessment and control over school operations. The semi-professional system for school principals in the Spanish context and the socio-political characteristics make this an interesting case to explore the gaps between educational leadership theory and real possibilities to develop autonomous leadership, according to regulatory frameworks and international scientific literature. In this context, it is relevant to explore the views and perceptions of key experts and agents with extensive experience and professional trajectories in the educational leadership field, such as academics, education inspectors, members of school leadership associations, politicians, teachers and school principals. The aim is to configure school governance and autonomy in Spain from several perspectives, and identify current challenges and opportunities to translate leadership and the school governance theory into everyday practices of schools and its leaders. This can in turn inform other countries with similar semi-professional education leadership models such as Southern European and Latin American countries.

#### 4. Method

The qualitative methodology of this study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) allowed us to understand how key informants perceive educational leadership based on their knowledge and experience (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research focuses on acquiring profound understanding of social situations and contexts, where data collection occurs naturally based on the experiences, viewpoints, and meaning provided by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Silverman, 2006). An exploratory qualitative method was selected to gain deeper understanding of key education experts’ and practitioners’ experiences, understanding, and views on the state of educational leadership and governance in Spain (Flick et al., 2004). Key education agents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews via purposeful sampling to explore the phenomena from diverse perspectives. The main criteria for selecting key informants were proven experience in the design and reform of educational systems and policies, experience in education management and leadership functions, and educational innovation.

The sample included 17 key education experts and practitioners (see their profile and experience in Table A1 in the Appendix). The study participants are four academic experts and university professors with previous experience in education management and leadership roles (ACAD); two school principals (PRINC); three education inspectors employed by the Ministry of Education of the Spanish Government (INSP); four presidents of prestigious education and school principals’ associations (ASSOC); and four politicians (POLI) of the State School Council, Spanish representatives in UNESCO and OECD, and members of the Education Departments of different autonomous communities of Spain. All of them received information about the study’s purpose and signed informed consent. The confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected were explicitly guaranteed.

This project has been favourably evaluated by the Ethical Committee Concerning Research into People, Society and the Environment of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (code: CEIPSA-2021-PR-0020).

In line with the qualitative approach of this research, four main strategies have been used to ensure that the credibility criteria were met (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002):

- Exchange of opinions with researchers specialised in the subject and in educational research with whom the adequacy of the research methods and the consistency of the results were discussed.
- Checking with participants who have been offered the possibility to confirm or amend their opinions, sharing with them both the verbatim transcripts of the interviews and their preliminary results.
- Collection of all the data by means of recordings, which made it possible to listen back and watch the interviews on multiple occasions to capture all the richness and density of the participants' views on the topic.
- Triangulation of stakeholders through a multi-voice design, using semi-structured interviews with key education agents from different education levels, backgrounds, expertise, and job profiles to contrast the evidence collected and strengthened the research findings.

#### **4.1. Research instrument**

A semi-structured interview approach (script designed ad hoc, open questions) was used to gain a deep understanding of the research problem through the participants' perspectives and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview (see Table A2 in the Appendix) was designed with main topics for discussion, using open-ended questions and prompts and allowing the participants to talk in-depth about other leadership-related issues that were important and relevant to them.

The "question-and-answer" structure was deliberately avoided to promote dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, giving participants the opportunity to express themselves freely on each topic. The open-ended questions and prompts focussed on management functions and tasks, access to principal position, principals' identity, motivation among teachers to exercise school leadership, school principals' professional career, school autonomy, educational leadership training, and the assessment and accountability of school leadership.

To respond to the research objectives, questions 1, 2, 3, and 8 of the interview scripts were selected (see marked in bold in Table A2 of the Appendix). These specifically dealt with the professional profile expected and the principals' actual functions and practices, establishment of standards to define the expected professional profile, challenges in everyday practice of management tasks, ways to enable pedagogical leadership in schools, and school autonomy's role in education improvement.

#### **4.2. Data collection and analysis process**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and December 2020 by videoconference due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The average duration of each interview was approximately one hour. They were transcribed and analysed following a thematic analysis approach, which allowed the identification of emerging categories and themes relevant to the participants using an inductive-deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first readings and analysis of the interviews sought to identify categories and patterns in the data based on the principles of meaningfulness and occurrence (inductive approach), but the following ones have sought to link these emergent categories to conceptual and theoretical ideas about educational leadership (deductive approach).

In the organisation of all the material and in data processing (coding of the meaning units of each interview; grouping the codes into emergent categories and the categories into themes) the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti (version 9) has been used.

### 5. Findings

Through the thematic analysis of the interviews with key agents in educational leadership, 16 categories emerged, which were grouped into four themes: profile management function, challenges in management practice, contextual school leadership standards and frameworks, and autonomy (see, Figure 1).

#### 5.1. Theme 1: management role profile

This theme refers to school principals' ideal professional profile and skills according to the key education agents interviewed, as well as considerations about the functions that principals should perform today and the need to promote pedagogical leadership distributed and adapted to the context of the educational centre. The key education agents highlighted management skills related to flexibility, emotion management, social skills, and teamwork for continuous improvement of the school:

They must have self-knowledge and control of their emotions; in short, they must have personal growth, which will be necessary (POL4)

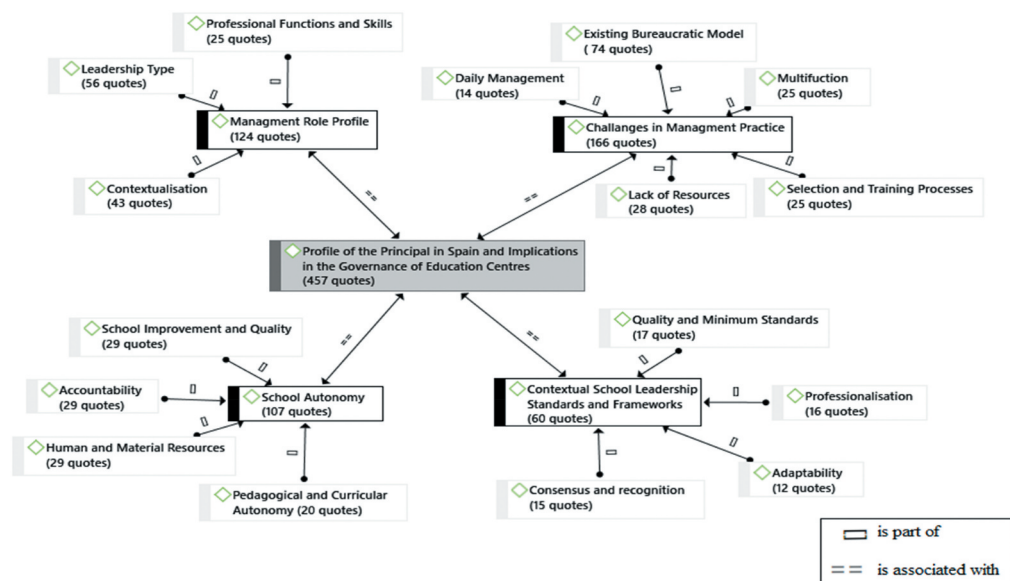
They have to be people with a level, apart from training and experience, who are proactive and believe they can improve things (PRINC1)

Having teaching experience or experience in other management and coordination positions, besides having the minimum personal skills (vocation, empathy, etc.), is necessary because:

the figure of the principal goes beyond a simple technician. The fundamental role of a principal is to facilitate things; he or she has to make it possible for what has to happen in the classroom to happen . . . He or she has to have coaching skills. He or she has to be an active person in terms of updating according to their needs because he or she detects that there are things that have changed, give up stability, etc (ASSOC4)

In relation to the type of leadership exercised, it is key that principals exercise pedagogical leadership, with the main function being to promote educational quality and improving learning spaces and student results.

**Figure 1. Emerging topics and categories.**



The role that management should have for the satisfactory performance of a school institution is to exercise pedagogical leadership and lead an educational project that is very clear about its objectives, its roadmap. I am referring to medium-, short-, and long-term objectives that provide evidence, with this evidence giving results that are analysed to look for improvement (ASSOC2)

The complexity of the management functions makes the appearance of distributed leadership necessary, where the distribution of responsibilities and the complementarity of skills among the team is the main purpose. As the following quote shows, different leadership types and approaches need to be mobilised in conjunction, including pedagogical, distributed and transformative leadership:

should be a weighted combination of three types of leadership, in addition to obviously the administrative one that is and should be clearly and effectively delegable: transformational or people-based leadership, pedagogical leadership, and distributed leadership (POL2)

In turn, the directive function must adapt to each centre and its environment, considering contextual characteristics and conditioning factors such as students' and families' socioeconomic profiles, internal organisation, faculty, relations with the environment, and other institutions. A deep knowledge of the school context is essential to establish contextualised responses adapted to the needs of the centre, as well as the priorities and the type of objectives to be achieved.

After making it clear what must be done and fulfilled, it must be left in the hands of the centres and the management teams to specify it, since they are the ones who have the key and know the particular characteristics of each school (POL3)

Relationships with the inspection and with other institutions of the place where the school is located. For example, the city council or socio-cultural entities that you did not know about but that are very important for [school] development (PRINC2)

## **5.2. Theme 2: challenges in management practice**

The key education agents expressed the need to make changes and reduce administrative tasks to professionalise the management function and promote pedagogical and distributed leadership. Real day-to-day management practices focus on solutions to problems, having a perspective limited to one school year, which makes strategic planning and the exercise of pedagogical leadership difficult.

What they do is manage problems, but not manage the institution or plan with a future perspective in general terms (ACAD4)

In the whirlwind of everyday you can spend many days without seeing anyone (ASSOC2)

The fact that school principalship in Spain is based on a bureaucratic management model, wherein administrative tasks and compliance with external requirements are prioritised rather than the pedagogical field, also emerged as a difficulty. Administrative management has increased due to accountability, with excessive external control on management, through new requirements and applications:

Currently, if you talk to the principals and ask them where their maximum level of concern is, it is always the subject of administrative management or the 'business management' of the school. With my experience of all these years (assessments, renewal of mandates ...). I have seen this whole perspective and I was required more to comply with the administrative and management requirements, and I was never asked too much about the improvement of the results of the students (PRINC1)

The principals are extremely anxious about the new applications that management invents with the sole aim of greater control (ASSOC3)

Key education agents also expressed the need for greater autonomy, faculty participation, and tasks delegation, with distributed leadership being essential.

Because a principal cannot assume the entire bureaucratic burden of the centre. There are coordinators, tutors, etc ... leadership has to be distributed, so does the bureaucratic burden (INSP3)

According to participants' views, principals have a multifunctional role: they comply with the educational and pedagogical field but also deal with economic and school management in the event of possible conflicts and mediation issues. This generates an excess of responsibilities and functions and, ultimately, a work overload.

Management has become a profession of offices, a profession in which many professions are performed at the same time (ASSOC1)

The managerial function is like an iceberg, you can see the top part, for example, the principal walks around the school. But then there is the bottom part which is the part that cannot be seen, and it is everything the principal does for the school to improve (communication, management, mediation, etc.) (PRINC2)

Therefore, it is necessary to make changes and reduce administrative tasks to focus on the pedagogical and organisational field. Thus, the need to professionalise the management function stands out, which implies improvements in the selection processes and provision of specific training.

What we need is to define well the skills needed to perform these functions. It is related to the moment of selection of principals. I think that at this moment this system is the big problem we have. The selection of principals is too ambiguous, with very little technical consideration and very little based on a defined profile (ASSOC4)

It is necessary to train potential principals in greater depth and to establish a legal structure that allows them to develop their role more professionally (ACAD1)

Another proposal refers to the possibility of having more specialised personnel for different tasks to deal with aspects the principal is currently managing, allowing a greater delegation of tasks to facilitate pedagogical leadership. These specialised support professionals could be computer scientists, secretaries, and administrative and legal advisers, among others:

It is time to do away with the figure of the current secretary, who is a teacher who assumes the functions of secretary and even some functions of the head of studies in the management of human resources; all these functions are attributable to a manager (INSP1)

Should be provided with specialised support staff who attend to all the information demands required of the school and thus the principal can dedicate more time to other tasks related to leadership and the improvement of the school (POL2)

### **5.3. Theme 3: contextual school leadership standards and framework**

The need for standards for school management and the establishment of a conceptual framework for good school management emerged as key issues according to the key education agents interviewed. They also perceived the standards to improve the management function's professionalisation and education system's quality as fundamental. These define the principals' functions and skills to achieve as indicators so that the results of the school and its students can improve.

Without the framework being the total answer, it allows us to have a series of standards that publicly affirm what school leaders should think (beliefs, values), what they should know (knowledge, understanding), what they should know how to do (skills and personal qualities) and, ultimately, through all these three groups, what they do (POL1)

Each school should have its own standards, and what we should do is to analyse the permanent improvement of the school and the permanent improvement of the professional practice, whether of teachers or principals ... and also there could be some common indicators in the educational system (ACAD3)

Having standards facilitates the specification and definition of the profile of school principals. This means that this figure is promoted as a profession and, therefore, that there is a known and common framework of action to exercise effective leadership. This was perceived as a way to strengthen principals' professional identity.

Standards and Frameworks have a potential to strengthening or defining the professional identity (ASSOC3)

A professional principal has the training and skills to meet the standards, but must fit in with and know the school (if not on staff at this school) (PRINC1)

The established common framework for good management must be adaptable and flexible to each school's characteristics by determining common bases without homogenising school management. It must be dynamic and open to change based on the distinctive characteristics and types of schools:

Another thing is that this should not prevent each institution from having its own standards, and what we should do is analyse the permanent improvement of the institution and the permanent improvement of the professional practice of teachers or managers, so that there may be some indicators common in the educational system, although they cannot be unique or unifying ... Each institution and each manager should have their own work programme, and this is what should be assessed, because if they are not, what we are doing is working to certain standards that in practice are different in each context (ACAD4)

It should be adapted to the different types of privately owned centres. Our empirical research has shown that there are differences between these three types of schools – state-owned, associated, and private – in terms of quality of leadership (POL2)

This framework (standards and indicators) must be developed from the consensus and common work of all the associations of principals in Spain, the competent government, and academics and experts on the subject.

This model of standards has to be agreed by three parties: from the normative base, from the academy and research, and from the associations (INSP3)

The Framework for Good Management (FEDADi, 2017) is understood as a document that characterises the principal's profile endorsed by the associations of Spanish principals (but not management). Some key education agents consider that the acceptance of this framework by management could facilitate the performance of the management function.

But we always have to say that this framework of standards for internal regulation of the profession is defeated by administrative regulation. If this framework of standards were accepted, there would be things that we could not do because it goes against our framework of standards – ethical and professional – that we have accepted (ACAD2)

It can be a first step if it is recognised by the Ministry at least as a working document (ACAD1)

#### **5.4. Theme 4: autonomy of education centres**

The key education agents interviewed define autonomy by considering different elements and its three modalities: pedagogical autonomy, organisational autonomy, and economic autonomy and/or resource management. They understand autonomy as a form of decentralisation to provide education centres with greater contextualisation of their social reality and a greater capacity to conduct projects for school improvement:

Autonomy is subordinated to improving the results of the school, and from that perspective, autonomy is linked to responsibility (ACAD2)

School autonomy is an undoubted factor of quality if it is accompanied, on the one hand, by a guarantee of competence in its management, ensured by selection systems; and, on the other, accountability mechanisms (POL2)

Assessment is key, as long as it is adapted to each school's characteristics. In the Spanish context, most key education agents believe that education is overregulated and there is a divergence between the autonomy described in current educational policies and regulations and the exercise of such autonomy in actual practice. Autonomy must be accompanied by greater control of results, setting clear goals in management projects, clear regulations on the responsibilities and functions of the management team, processes for evaluating progress and accountability through achievement indicators, and projects and management contracts with the schools:

Autonomy is necessarily related to accountability, that is, with self-responsibility for the results obtained (INSP2)

Making decisions autonomously and responsibly, under the mandate of a principal and with annual accountability to the administration and the educational community, explains what and why is done (ASSOC4)

Regarding exercising autonomy in educational centres effectively, the key education agents referred to the need to professionalise the principal's profile. They considered autonomy as closely linked to the type of school since, depending on ownership and context, one type of autonomy or another will be required:

Autonomy means that each school is a different reality and has specific needs (POL1)

Autonomy is necessary to improve the management of human, material, and functional resources in education centres, and to make effective decisions for educational transformation and innovation. One area requiring greater autonomy is the pedagogical curriculum. As a possible measure to provide schools with greater pedagogical autonomy, some key education agents suggested reducing syllabus requirements, enabling the selection of essential elements and their adaptation to the context of each education centre:

We should have more autonomy, of course. In what area? In the curricular field. We have to slim down the syllabus so that it helps us work and enrich it with what each centre deems appropriate according to its context (INSP3)

Another essential measure is having autonomy in selection, hiring, maintenance, and consolidation of personnel, and having teachers with specific profiles to achieve the centre's educational objectives.

How can a school be autonomous when the principal does not have control over his or her teaching staff? Although appointed as the head of personnel, it has no impact on his or her hiring (in state-owned schools) (PRINC1)

The key education agents believed that the autonomy in managing material resources is limited by regulations and budgets, especially in state-owned schools. This implies limitations when making innovations or improvements at schools:

We cannot spend more than 10% of the ordinary budget on inventory material. But if I want to change the computer room, I have to spend 18%, otherwise I can't do it (ASSOC1)

## 6. Discussion

The results indicate a broad consensus on school principals' professional skills for exercising successful pedagogical and distributed leadership. Flexibility, collaboration and teamwork, leadership contextualised to each school, professional development programmes, and connection with the community is emphasised (Day & Sammons, 2016; Moral et al., 2018). Additionally, emotion management and mobilisation of educational leaders' emotional and social skills emerged as a relevant, consistent with recent studies emphasising resounding leadership, which highlights self-knowledge, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in school management (Fullan, 2003; Goleman et al., 2013; Trakšelys et al., 2016). Educational leadership must be understood as a social, emotional, and intellectual practice (Bowers, 2020; Crow et al., 2017).

Thus, it is necessary to create organisations that learn, exercise school governance, and distribute pedagogical leadership to promote quality education and improve students' academic results (Chapman et al., 2016; Day et al., 2010; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Kools et al., 2020). Therefore, spaces for reflection and continuous improvement must be created that involve different agents from the educational community and where educational leaders can have an influence, promote collaboration and active participation, and affect the education centre's culture and characteristics (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Senge, 2006).

By contrast, the views reported by key education agents regarding the real practice of school principals in Spain referred to lack of real autonomy and the existence of a bureaucratic model with an excessive administrative workload and excessive management of organisational processes. Previous studies also highlighted the difficulty in exercising educational leadership and governance because of the ambiguous position and responsibilities of Spanish school principals (Barrios et al., 2013; Tintoré et al., 2022). The decline in government participation in the function of education provision has made school leaders accountable for assessment and funding agencies (Bolívar, 2010). Accordingly, the discourse of decentralisation and autonomy is giving way to a "post-bureaucratic" model wherein autonomy is linked to the assessment of schools, often without the necessary means and resources (Gairín, 2020; Gamage & Zajda, 2009; Pont, 2020). This coincides with Wilkins's (2015) view on the use of the professionalisation of school management as a new form of remote power, through subtle mechanisms such as turning principals into inspectors, measuring educational results using external assessments only, and professional technification of leadership.

The key education agents indicate that for school principals to have greater autonomy and school governance, a series of changes are needed, such as reduced administrative tasks, long-term strategic planning, and improvement of the selection and training processes for principals (FEDADi, 2017). It is necessary to have more human resources to delegate tasks to promote principals' professional development; increased cooperation, trust, satisfaction, personal well-being, and innovations in school education (OECD, 2020b). In addition, "Middle leadership" (with formal teacher profiles) and teacher leadership (Day et al., 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Lipscombe et al., 2021), practiced by teaching teams in interaction with all agents of the

educational community, is key for school improvement because it promotes creation of learning communities and deep collaborative processes, such as team teaching, feedback based on classroom observations, joint activities in different classes, and mentoring processes among new teachers (Bolívar et al., 2013; OECD, 2020a).

This study's results also show the importance of the context and of having skills frameworks or standards that become roadmaps adaptable to different socioeconomic and geographical contexts, since, in the exercise of leadership, practice must be linked to context (Gunter, 2013). The key education agents' views, in this sense, agree with previous studies indicating the need to define frameworks and standards, as well as systems of accountability and school governance, adaptable to different educational contexts (Mourshed et al., 2010; Pont, 2020). Following previous research, the key education agents highlighted that accountability must be associated with an evaluation understood as a process, and simultaneously articulated with training programmes for school principals, active participation of the educational community, and joint reflection processes (Iranzo-García et al., 2014; Sammons & Bakkum, 2011; Schleicher, 2012). In this regard, the key education agents saw the Framework for Good Management as a starting point, although its application has been limited to date (FEDADi, 2017). Numerous countries such as Canada, the US, Australia, and UK have developed systems of professional standards for educational leaders, although there is still no common framework that can be adapted to different realities and contexts (Militello et al., 2013; OECD, 2020a). This implies the coexistence of many frameworks and standards in relation to leadership skills that should facilitate the transformation of schools into learning organisations.

Pedagogical, management, and organisational autonomy have been shown to be crucial for exercising school governance and improving school effectiveness and student results, especially in decision-making on curricular aspects, as well as in the selection and training of faculty (Stoll & Temperley, 2009). Accordingly, integration of participatory processes and institutional self-assessment is necessary to promote different agents' empowerment and active participation by creating microstructures or micropolitics in each centre (Keddie, 2015; Prieto-Flores et al., 2018). Principals or leaders must be prepared to exercise greater autonomy along with greater accountability for the results provided by decentralised governance, besides professionalisation (Pont, 2020).

The key educational agents consider teaching experience or experience in other management and coordination positions as key skills, in addition to having minimal personal and social skills. This view is in line with the perspectives of other authors who consider specific training in school management as necessary, with previous experience acquired as teachers and in leadership practice is essential to the development of the leader's profile (Bolívar, 2010).

This study's findings in the Spanish context are in line with other studies that studied school governance and autonomy in countries such as Australia, the US, UK, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Thailand, and that emphasised the importance of participatory decision-making, distributed leadership, and professional development and resources for school principals and schools to decentralise education systems and respond to school needs (Gamage & Zajda, 2009; OECD, 2020a; Wilkins et al., 2019). While in Europe and the OECD, the leadership framework is moving from a centralised system and bureaucratic leadership to a decentralised system and pedagogical leadership (OECD, 2020b), this is weakly developed in real practice in Spain. The findings of our study are in line with a comparative study conducted by Wilkins et al. (2019) between Switzerland, England, Spain and Australia, which found out that Spain had scarce levels of school autonomy and participatory governance. Similarly, a comparative study (Tintoré et al., 2022) published recently between Spain and Portugal, which share analogous principals' and teachers' selection, access, and progression models and a leadership model extremely focused on bureaucratic features and limited levels of autonomy, found out that while certain levels of curricular autonomy exist, there is a lack of real school autonomy in terms of the management and leadership of schools.

While school context and system-level have different implications for school leadership across countries, some common global trends have been developed and impacted schools across the globe, including the need to promote effective school leadership frameworks through professional development programmes, and the definition and implementation of shared professional standards and skills for schooling efficiency and equity (Lipscombe et al., 2021; Pashiardis, 2014).

Based on this study, five recommendations are presented to exercise school leadership and governance in Spain, that can also inform other countries with a similar semi-professional education leadership model and education system:

- Establish standard systems and common skills frameworks for schools that are shared and developed jointly by all education agents and stakeholders. These must be flexible, adaptable and contextualised to each education centre's characteristics and to the different regional, national and international educational contexts (Bolívar, 2019b).
- Create systems to assess school principals' professional skills, understood as a process for continuous improvement, allowing for self-evaluation and formative assessment of performance in the leadership practice itself (Iranzo-García et al., 2014).
- Provide Spanish schools and leadership teams with real autonomy that allows sufficient resources to implement strategic planning and processes to respond to each school's needs and socioeconomic characteristics. This autonomy must be accompanied by systems of internal accountability ("professional accountability") and contracts with school management teams based on objectives focussed on internal capacity building of colleagues (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2021).
- It is also necessary more permanency of educational laws in Spain (Barrios et al., 2013; Tintoré et al., 2022) and more support and provision of opportunities for professional development for both leaders and teachers.
- Design training programmes to exercise management and leadership that have a systemic vision and promote the acquisition of transversal skills towards distributed and pedagogical leadership. This includes the ability to promote teamwork, professional and personal development, and emotion management, as well as projects that involve the community and the entire system. Leadership training programmes must involve both, leaders and teachers, especially in contexts and countries like Spain, where leadership is semi-professional and teachers can be leaders (Bowers, 2020; Iranzo-García et al., 2020). This is even more relevant in these types of contexts because the identity of leaders is more diffuse and their real autonomy weaker (Bolívar, 2019b; Tintoré et al., 2022).

Regarding this study's limitations, the methodology used allowed us to deepen the participating experts' perception but not to generalise it to other contexts. The interviews were conducted by videoconference to comply with COVID-19- related regulations and restrictions, which may have limited interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee. It would be necessary to conduct more empirical research to analyse the day-to-day lives, experiences and perspectives of other involved agents, such as management teams, teachers, families, and students, to have a more comprehensive view of the educational community on governance and school leadership. Furthermore, comparative studies involving different regions and countries, with different educational policies on leadership and school management would provide evidence on the conditions or factors that favour the exercise of distributed and pedagogical leadership to inform future educational leadership policies.

## 7. Conclusion

The contribution of this preliminary study is to explore the role and practice of school leadership and governance in the Spanish context according to the perception of a group of key education agents involved in educational reforms, leadership and innovation. Study participants had professional experience in schools as school principals or teachers; were renowned academics in the field; or were education practitioners including school principals, education inspectors, politicians, and staff of regional education departments and school principals' associations in Spain. We intentionally selected participants with different backgrounds, professional profiles, roles, and responsibilities in educational leadership to capture richly diverse perceptions and views. This is an exploratory study,

the preliminary findings of which could inform subsequent studies in this area and the development and exercise of leadership in other countries with similar semi-professional leadership models.

The study's findings show a common view among different education agents on the current practices, challenges and opportunities of school leadership in Spain. Persisting challenges include the lack of real autonomy, a still excessively bureaucratic model, a lack of clear principals' training, selection and promotion model and non-contextualised school accountability systems that hinder the implementation of a decentralised model and a genuine pedagogical leadership.

Regarding the perceptions and views in relation to the characteristics and conditions for exercising educational governance and leadership in Spain, participants emphasised the need to promote 1) pedagogical and distributed leadership, 2) management skills associated with it, and 3) the need to contextualise leadership practices in each school's specific context. Accordingly, it is fundamental to promote professional development programmes focussed on effective leadership skills and competencies, as well as assessment tools that allow self-assessment and a continuous process of improving leadership practice and performance in schools. This requires moving from a model centred on administrative and bureaucratic tasks to one focussed on shared responsibilities and participatory decision-making.

This qualitative exploratory study offered a perspective of the Spanish case by capturing the views and perceptions of different key education agents on how the "ideal" and conceptual discourse of school governance and autonomy is implemented and operationalised in practice in school management and leadership. Spain's case can be of interest in similar policy contexts, with a diffused trajectory in terms of educational reforms and professionalisation of school leadership, which has been evidenced by several reforms since the 1990s.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Profile of key education agents interviewed	
ID	Experience
ACAD1	Professor at the University. Teaching experience in primary education. Was principal of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the University and vice-rector for Innovation and Quality and Research. Expert in innovation, quality, school leadership, and university administration.
ACAD2	Professor at the University. Teaching experience in high school. Expert in pedagogical leadership and professional development. Collaborator of Federation of Associations of Principals of Public Educational Centres of Spain (FEDADi).
ACAD3	Professor at the University. School management experience. Was principal of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the University. Expert in school leadership and management, development of professional teaching and managerial skills, leadership in innovation processes.
ACAD4	Professor at the University. School management experience. Was dean of the faculty and principal of university department and the Institute of Educational Sciences. International consultant for educational reform programmes in Spain and Latin America.
INSP1	Education inspector. Teaching experience. Expert in school management, school organisation, and design and development of the curriculum and reforms of the educational system.
INSP2	Education inspector. Principal of a high school. Trainer of management school teams, technician in coexistence in the school organisation team of the Basque Institute of Evaluation and Research. Chaired the board of the European Forum of Educational Administrators (FEAE).
INSP3	Education inspector. Teaching and management experience in schools. Expert in education, school organisation, and training of management teams.
ASSOC1	Member of the board of the Association of Principals of Institutes. Professor of secondary education. Professor of the permanent classroom of open training of the University. More than 25 years of experience in managerial positions.
ASSOC2	Member of the board of the Association of Principals of Primary and School Residences. Principal of a school. More than 18 years of experience in managerial positions.
ASSOC3	Member of the board of FEDADi. More than 27 years of experience in managerial positions. Presided over the Association of Principals of the Institute of Madrid and was a member of the State School Council and the Permanent Commission.
ASSOC4	Member of the board of the Association of Public Education Principals of Catalonia. Principals' trainer. Adviser to management teams. More than 36 years of experience in managerial positions. Chaired the FEAE in Catalonia.

(Continued)

**Table A1. (Continued)**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Experience</b>
POL1	Member of the Ministry of Education. School organisation consultant. Member of the FEAE. Was principal of the management team training programme. Member of the board of the school organisation team at the Basque Institute for Educational Evaluation and Research.
POL2	Was president of the Spanish State School Council. Held the position of education counsellor in the permanent delegations of Spain to the OECD and UNESCO. Was deputy minister of education and president of the Madrid School Council. Experience in educational research, practice, and policy.
POL3	Secretary of state for education. Worked with international organisations (UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, Organisation of Ibero-American States, etc.). Was secretary general of education of the Ministry of Education and Science. Expert in the history of educational systems in Spain, educational policy, and legislation.
POL4	Member of the Ministry of Education. Member of the Commission for Families, Equality, and Social Welfare. Experience in management positions. Was secretary of training in the Teaching Federation.
PRINC1	Ex-principal of a public school for more than 18 years. Expert in school management and trainer of principals.
PRINC2	Ex-principal of a private school for more than 10 years. Education adviser and educator of the International Baccalaureate Educators Network.

**Table A2. Interview for experts on school leadership in Spain**

Number	Interview question
1	<b>Literature and experts call for a principal profile with multiple facets: manager, mediator, promoter of change, pedagogical leader, representative of the educational community and/or management, etc. What type of principal do you think our educational system needs? What changes in educational policy and organisation of the schools do you think would have to take place to achieve this? What do Spanish school managers do? What are their main functions in practice? How does the socio-cultural context of the school condition this practice?</b>
2	<b>Our educational system lacks official standards that define the profile of functions and skills that school administrators should have. Professional associations of principals have proposed one. Do you think it is necessary or convenient to officially establish a system of standards? If so, what should the process be to arrive at that system of standards? Or do we adopt a system of standards from professional associations or from neighbouring countries?</b>
3	<b>According to the TALIS report, the magnitude of administrative tasks is a common feature of the management function. Moreover, it appears to be the main source of stress for practising principals. How could or should these tasks be reduced to enable pedagogical leadership in schools?</b>
4	Our model of access to management has progressively moved from an approach based on choice by the educational community to another based on selection criteria, largely professional. Regarding this model, do you know problems or dysfunctionalities that its development is having in practice? What weaknesses and strengths do you find in the current model?
5	Regarding the effective possibility of a teacher forging an identity as a principal (something that requires certain continuity in the position and certain seniority) ... is it currently possible? Is it easier or more difficult than in previous stages? Do you know any cases of long-term principals?
6	Some of the legislative changes in the managerial function were justified in the past as measures to alleviate the absence of candidates to exercise it. Do you think this problem persists? If so, how should it be alleviated? If you don't believe it, what has made school management more attractive?
7	Some international reports propose facilitating the professional career of teachers as principals. Do you think it's convenient in our country or do you think it's better that the school management be performed for a limited time to later return fully to teaching? If you think it is convenient to promote the development of a professional career as a school principal, in what ways should we do it? From your point of view, what are the advantages and disadvantages of making management compatible with teaching?

(Continued)

**Table A2. (Continued)**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Interview question</b>
8	<b>In many countries, the strengthening of the figure of the principal has been achieved by simultaneously endowing the school more autonomy. In fact, one of the OCDE recommendations on public policies for schools is “more autonomy with adequate support”. However, in Spain, this challenge seems to be one that is continuously announced but permanently postponed. Should our schools have more autonomy? Management teams? in what respects?</b>
9	Now we ask you for an analysis of training for the managerial function in our country. What have we achieved? What are we missing?
10	And finally, regarding the evaluation of principals and accountability: what should we do that we don't do and what do we do that we shouldn't do?
11	Any additional comments to improve the managerial function in Spain?



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