

Committed, resilient, or transient. School principals' perception of professional identity

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Biographical notes

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SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Building a professional identity as school leader is essential to the success of any management project. The Spanish context makes it twice as important to know its managers' perception of their role and practice as school principals. This article aims to: (a) identify principals' profiles based on both the transition from teaching to management and their expectations of permanence in the post; (b) establish relationships between these profiles and relevant aspects concerning the process of building a professional identity as school principals; and (c) to determine whether gender is related in any way to the principals' profiles and the rest of the aspects investigated. The information was obtained with an ad hoc questionnaire from which 779 valid records were obtained, corresponding to principals of schools in all Spanish regions. Cluster analysis established three principal profiles: committed, resilient, and transient. Subsequent analyses compared the three groups according to the stated objectives. The results and conclusions of the study lead to implications about the need for institutional support for school principals during their transition from teaching and allow us to specify aspects and modalities on which such support should be focused.

Keywords: School principal, educational leadership, professional identity, satisfaction at work, principal's motivation, role adaptation

Theoretical framework and rationale of the study

Identity is a key concept of the socio-cultural perspective applied to the professional development of school leaders. From this perspective, the learning of a professional role is carried out situatedly, meaning that individuals concur to a context of social interaction, framed by institutionally established rules, values, and assumptions, with their own set of values and assumptions. Both sets will challenge and occasionally transform each other. In the case of individuals, the product of such permanently negotiated transformation process is

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

a professional identity (Kafa & Pashiardis, 2019; Myran & Sutherland, 2019; Resnick, 2023). Thus, while the role is a socially prescribed, formalized, and relatively static script, identity is changing, dynamic, unplanned, and the result of the agency of the subjects; that is, of their will and ability to act beyond or even against social constraints (Crow & Møller, 2017). Precisely, the construction of a professional identity implies, to some extent, self-direction, that is, the ability to adjust such identity according to one's practice and the context in which it is developed, even challenging dominant conceptions of normative professional identity (Notman, 2017). However, although the process of constructing individual identity may occasionally take on a reflexive dimension, most of this construction is done tacitly, improvised, and reactively.

Several layers are involved in this construction. Thus, a principal's professional identity includes at least one identity as an individual, as a teacher (the profession in which they were trained and in which they acquired a particular ethos), and as a principal (which is the post they hold) (Saarukka, 2014). School principals usually arrive to the post with an already constructed professional identity as educators. However, building in parallel an identity as an educational leader is essential to the success of any principalship project (Tubin, 2017). The new role will demand a specific set of ideas, assumptions, and values from which the leadership approach and school project will be established (Saarukka, 2014).

How principals perceive key aspects of this process and perceive themselves while constructing their professional identity is very important and requires attention from educational research. Crow and Møller (2017, p. 749) argue that, although the skills and abilities principals must possess to contribute decisively to the improvement of the school have dominated political discourses and empirical research, little progress has been made in the study of how school principals perform their role—their practice—and how they perceive themselves during that performance.

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The particular Spanish context makes it twice as important to know more about principals' perceptions of their role and practice as school principals and the way they build their professional identity. The topic has been the subject of various studies with qualitative approaches (Hernández-de-la-Torre & Altopiedi, 2023; Moral-Santaella, 2020; Ritacco & Bolívar, 2018, 2019; Authors, 2021) and meta-analysis focus (Bolívar & Ritacco, 2016; Cruz-González et al., 2019, 2021; García-Martínez & Tadeu, 2018; Lucena et al., 2020a, 2020b). A prominent difficulty detected in the process of building a professional identity as educational leader is the above-mentioned coexistence among the different layers that form the role. Bolívar and Ritacco (2016) refer to a dual identity, as most principals combine principalship with teaching (although with reduced hours); a transient identity, as they return to teaching at the end of the term for which they were selected (although it can be extended under diverse conditions); and a hybrid identity, as they feel at the same time that they are representatives of the administration and the educational community; in other words, managers and pedagogical leaders (Bolívar, 2019).

This last aspect, their hybrid identity, on the one hand, as a delegated authority and, on the other hand, as *primus inter pares*, is marked by a notable lack of autonomy that all parties acknowledge. Lack of autonomy refers both to the fact that most strategic decisions are made at the level of the administration of the education system and that principals must share their authority with several collegiate and single-person bodies that have responsibilities at different levels. As Ritacco and Bolívar (2018) acknowledge, this authority, limited by the structure, obliges principals to develop social and leadership competencies in general, as well as to adopt roles that are not prescribed by the structure, for example, acting as mediators in conflicts, promoters of social cohesion and a positive work environment, etc.

Other characteristics of the Spanish educational system with remarkable impact on principals' practice will be addressed in the next section. These factors add to the challenging balance we mentioned earlier between different, and sometimes competing, identities that define principals' role. Together, they are a relevant source of conflict and psychological stress for principals. However, Spanish educational research has rarely conducted large-scale studies on principals' working conditions and well-being at work and, particularly regarding the role of emotions in the leadership practice and professional development. This is the gap that the research project that serves as the basis for this article aimed to fulfil¹. The project's general purpose was to contribute to the knowledge of the practice of school principalship, the principals' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, the challenges and difficulties they face, the conditions in which this work is performed, and the impact on their affective-emotional health, as well as their emotion management and resilience. The research methodology was mixed, combining case studies based on semi-structured interviews and an ad hoc questionnaire.

This article focuses precisely on the results obtained from some of the items of this questionnaire. Specifically, we will address the following objectives:

- To identify principals' profiles based on (a) the transition from teaching to principalship and (b) their expectations of tenure in the post.
- To establish a relationship between the principals' profiles and trajectories and (a) the reasons behind their initiative to become principals; (b) the circumstances that have

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influenced their willingness to exercise that role; (c) their satisfaction with the performance of the post; and (d) their self-perception of certain skills necessary for the practice of principalship.

- To determine whether gender is associated with the principals' profiles and trajectories and its relationship with the aforementioned elements that, from our viewpoint, condition the construction of the professional identity as school principals.

Study context

For a long time and for several reasons, Spanish public policy on school principalship has been a special case among OECD countries. Firstly, school principalship has only recently begun to be considered a professional activity in the fullest sense of the word. Very significantly, from the beginning of the democratic stage, principals were elected by commissions representing all sectors of the educational community: students, families, and teachers. Professional criteria, such as proven experience or specific training, were not even a priority choosing among the candidates. Similarly, not long ago, principals began to receive specific training both as initial and regular as school leaders, which is still perceived as insufficient by most (Ritacco & Bolívar, 2018). In addition, their autonomy for decision-making on relevant matters of school management was and still is comparatively lower than that of other neighboring countries. This takes place in a framework of school governance that carries with it the paradox of a great geographical decentralization—where each region autonomously manages its education system within the framework of national laws enacted by parliament—with a great centralization in terms of the school's relationship with the educational administration on which they depend. In this system, collegiate bodies such as the school council or the teaching staff have had even more weight than the principals in many strategic and day-to-day decisions. In reality, Spanish principals are teachers who, for a

certain period that can be very variable, decide or accept to practice their profession from the school principalship, and after that period, they return to the classroom (Bolívar & Ritacco, 2016).

Although the current situation is quite different from that of 30 years ago, we need to know where we come from because our educational system still retains some inertia that continues to condition the practice of school principalship. Principals continue to be selected mostly from among the teaching staff of the school where the vacancy occurs, although there is a growing number of candidates from other schools. However, candidates currently must have an accreditation granted by the administration to teachers who (a) have received a minimum number of hours of specific regulated training; and (b) their managerial experience, if any, has been positively assessed by the inspection service. On the other hand, although the committees responsible for their election continue to include representatives from all sectors of the community, (a) the weight of representatives from outside the teaching profession is considerably lower; (b) the selection is made mainly based on the candidates' professional merits; and (c) one of the elements that have the most relative value in the scale is the specific management project for that school that all candidates must present.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative research design based on applying a questionnaire with closed questions. This method collects descriptive information from a large population based on theoretical constructs defined a priori.

Population and Sample

The study population comprises principals of schools in Spain, both public and private. The websites of the Autonomous Communities' education administrations were consulted, extracting the official list of public and private schools, adult schools, language schools, and

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

special education schools. After refining the list and removing duplicates and missing values, a mailing list was created, and an e-mail message was sent to the official addresses of 25,991 schools. The message was addressed to the school principal. After two reminders, 937 responses were received. The missing values were analyzed by identifying patterns, observing that 24.8% of the values in the sample were missing. Cases with more than 80% missing values were eliminated, resulting in a sample size of $n = 779$ valid records. Table 1 describes the resulting sample.

Table 1. Profile of the sample of principals participating in the study

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	328	36.8
Female	559	62.7
I'd rather not say	4	0.4
Age		
25-35 years	21	2.4
36-45 years	188	21.1
46-55 years	392	43.9
56 years or older	292	31.2
Principalship experience		
4 years or less	361	41
Between 5 and 8 years	234	26.6
9 years or more	285	32.4
Type of school		
Public	790	84.5
Subsidized	122	13
Private	23	2.5
School Location		
Rural area (<1,000 inhabitants)	69	7.4
Town (between 1,000 and 10,000 inhabitants)	259	27.7
City (between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants)	333	35.6
Large city (>100,000 inhabitants)	274	29.3

Instrument and measures

An ad hoc self-report questionnaire was designed for this study based on a literature analysis of the topic. A pilot test was carried out with 5 active principals who evaluated the "clarity" and "relevance" of each item, with 1 being the minimum value and 5 the maximum. In addition, in this pilot test, participants were asked to propose "suggestions or alternative texts" for the items evaluated or other possible answers that needed more clarity. Items that were unclear or impertinent or that needed to be reworded were refined and modified. The final version of the questionnaire has 38 questions organized into 5 blocks: 1) data from the schools, 2) management training, 3) professional identity, 4) principalship practice, and 5) emotional health. The questionnaire was distributed through the Lime Survey online platform and was active during May and June 2022. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and ethical use of data was ensured.

For this article, we selected the items of the third block on professional identity (see Appendix A), specifically, the items related to the principals' adaptation and persistence in the principalship post, their perception of their management abilities, the motivation and circumstances that influenced them to access the principalship post, and their satisfaction with the teaching team, the school, and the environment.

Below, we describe the preliminary data analysis procedure to verify that the normality assumption was met. A descriptive analysis of all the variables included in the study was performed to confirm the assumption of normal distribution of the data, considering the criteria of kurtosis and skewness ± 1.5 (George & Mallery, 2003). Seven items did not meet this assumption and were eliminated from the subsequent analysis.

To confirm the structure of the latent variables, we performed four confirmatory factor analyses for the items of each question and calculated Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. Finally, we calculated composite variables considering the structure yielded by

the confirmatory factor analyses. The preliminary descriptive analyses, the calculation of the reliability coefficient, and the calculation of latent variables were performed with the SPSS program (George & Mallery, 2003). The confirmatory factor analyses were performed with the R program (R Team Core, 2018), using the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012), and for the fit indexes results we used the Hu and Bentler's (1999) rule of thumb recommendations. We use the following fit indexes Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The following variables are included in the analysis:

- *Adaptation to the role of principal.* Principals were asked how they adapted to the role of principal, with a multiple-choice question with the following options: 1) fast and hassle-free, 2) somewhat difficult but only at first, 3) slow and difficult, 4) slow but hassle-free, 5) I am not quite comfortable in this role. They could only choose one option.
- *Projection in the post.* Principals were asked what they would like to do in the near future, with a multiple-choice question with the following options: 1) I would like to continue as the principal of this school for a while, 2) I would like to continue as a principal but in another school, 3) I would like to leave the managerial function and concentrate on teaching, 4) I would like to leave the managerial function and play another role in the education system. They could only choose one option.
- *Satisfaction with the teaching team, the school, and the environment.* The principals were asked to indicate the degree of satisfaction provided by different elements related to the teaching team, the school characteristics, and the environment characteristics through 14 items rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = very low and 5 = very high. This variable was organized into three

components: satisfaction with the teaching staff, satisfaction with the school's achievements, and satisfaction with external recognition and influence.

Following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), the latent structure was considered acceptable for the confirmatory factor analysis yielded the following fit indices: $\chi^2 = 448.027$, $p = .000$, CFI = .91, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .079, SRMR = .050. Cronbach's alpha showed reliability coefficients of .88, .82, and .62, respectively (see Appendix B, Question 27).

- *Reasons to be a principal.* Principals were asked about the reasons that motivated them to become a principal through 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. This variable was organized into two components: empowerment and self-interest. The latent structure was considered very good (Hu & Bentler, 1999) according to the confirmatory factor analysis yielded the following fit indices $\chi^2 = 14.668$, $p = .066$, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .035, SRMR = .025. Cronbach's alpha yielded reliability coefficients of .87 and .82, respectively (see Appendix B, Question 23).
- *Perception of personal capabilities.* Principals were asked to self-assess their management skills through 12 items rated on a 5-point scale, where 1 = very low and 5 = very high (question 19 in Annex A). Confirmatory factor analysis identified two factors, labelled 'emotion-management' and 'proactive capacity',- which yielded the following fit indices: $\chi^2 = 234.429$, $p = .000$, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .066, SRMR = .044. This latent structure was considered statistically sound (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and coherent. The first factor encompassed items related to capabilities that minimize personal stress when facing threatening events, while the second factor focused on strategies

for motivation and support to reduce others' stress. Cronbach's alpha yielded reliability coefficients of .82 and .74, respectively (see Appendix B, Question 19).

- *Contextual and personal conditions.* The principals were asked to assess the degree to which specific contextual and personal circumstances influenced their decision to take on the role of principal through 8 items rated on a 4-point scale, where 1 = a little and 4 = a lot. This variable was organized into two components: institutional supports/constraints and experiences/self-confidence. Confirmatory factor analysis yielded the following fit indices: $\chi^2 = 76.272$, $p = .066$, CFI = .94, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .066, SRMR = .048. The latent structure was considered good (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Cronbach's alpha showed reliability coefficients of .66 and .62, respectively (see Appendix B, Question 21).

Data analysis

Firstly, a two-stage cluster analysis was conducted to identify homogeneous groups or profiles in terms of 'adaptation to the role' and 'projection in the post' of principal. This decision, crucial for addressing the first research goal and forming the bases of the subsequent analysis, was influenced by the competing dualities identified by prominent authors in the process of becoming a school principal in the Spanish context, which were addressed in the corresponding section (Bolívar, 2019; Bolívar & Ritacco, 2016). We classified the participating principals based on relevant categories representing both their adaptation to the position and their future career aspirations. To achieve this classification, we subjected the data from three questionnaire questions to cluster analysis. We considered the variables 'adaptation' and 'satisfaction' to represent the past-present or transitional

dimension, while the variable 'projection in the post' captured the present-future dimension or expectations resulting from this process. The cluster analysis revealed that combining the variables 'adaptation' and 'projection' effectively differentiate the participants into three groups, while the variable 'satisfaction' did not significantly impact this differentiation and was therefore discarded.

Following Everitt et al. (2011) recommendations for model selection, we performed two cluster analysis using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) alternatively. The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) tends to perform better with larger sample sizes, making the results more consistent as sample size grows, the goal is to identify the true model among a set of candidate models and places high value on parsimony (Everitt, et al. 2011; Vrieze, 2012), selecting the simpler model. On the other hand, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) is often preferred with smaller sample sizes, focusing on predictive accuracy rather than identifying the true model and tends to select more complex models (Everitt, et al. 2011; Vrieze, 2012). After analyzing BIC and AIC values in the two model solutions, the number of clusters was selected at the point where a decrease was observed (Everitt et al., 2011). Both cluster analysis yielded a similar composition, indicating that the groupings of data points were comparable across both methods.

Secondly, an analysis of variance was performed to calculate the effect of the identified profiles on the factors found in the responses to the questionnaire items related to building the participants' professional identity as principals. The effect size was estimated using the eta square coefficient (Cohen, 1988). Thirdly, Student's t-test mean comparison and Pearson's chi-squared independence test were performed to determine a possible association between gender and the study variables. The missing values were removed in these tests according to

the listwise cases. All tests were performed with the SPSS program (v. 28.0).

Results

The first objective of this study was to identify the principals' profiles regarding their adaptation to the role and projection in the post. Firstly, we asked the principals how they considered their adaptation to the principal role. Of the total number of principals, 404 (59.6%) considered that their adaptation was somewhat difficult but only at the beginning, followed by 168 principals (24.8%) who considered that it was fast and hassle-free. Sixty principals (8.8%) said it was slow and difficult, and 22 principals (3.2%) said it was slow but not difficult. Finally, 24 principals (3.5%) indicated that they did not yet feel comfortable in the role of principal. On the other hand, we asked how they see themselves in the near future concerning their permanence in the principalship post. In response, 467 principals (68.9%) stated that they would like to continue as principal in this school for a while longer, and 12 principals (1.8%) said they would like to continue as principal but in another school. Moreover, 199 principals (29.3%) preferred to leave the managerial function and refocus on teaching.

The cluster analysis included the previous two questions. Specifically, three homogeneous groups were identified, described below:

- (1) **Resilient principals:** 42.6% of the participants (n=289) considered that adapting to the role of principal was difficult at the beginning (100%) but they would like to continue as principal in this center (100%).
- (2) **Committed principals:** 29.6% of the participants (n=207) considered that their adaptation to the role of principal was fast and hassle-free (61.2), and they would like to continue as principal of this center (88.6%).

(3) **Transient principals:** 27.7% of the participants (n=188) considered that adapting to the role of principal was difficult at first (61.2%), and they would like to leave the principalship and return to teaching (88.6%).

To delve deeper into the principals' identified profiles, we analyzed the items of the questionnaire related to: (1) the aspects that produce the most satisfaction, including (a) the teaching staff, (b) the school's achievements, and (c) the acknowledgment of the environment and its positive influence on the school; (2) the reasons that led them to become principals were (a) empowerment and (b) self-interest; (3) self-assessment of their personal abilities in terms of (a) proactive capacity and (b) emotion management; and (4) the influence that different personal and environmental circumstances had on their decision to accept the role, including (a) the support received and the institutional constraints, and (b) the experience and self-confidence to perform the role. Table 2 presents descriptive data and the results of the analysis of variance.

We found significant differences between the three profiles established by cluster analysis: in satisfaction with the school's achievements, $F(2, 660) = 3.771, p = .02$, and satisfaction with the recognition obtained and the influence of the environment, $F(2, 660) = 6.127, p = .00$. However, there were no significant differences between the three profiles in satisfaction with the teaching staff. Tukey's post-hoc HSD test showed that resilient principals and committed principals ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.61, M = 4.07, SD = 0.65$) were more satisfied with their school's achievements than transient principals ($M = 3.94, SD = 0.64$). Satisfaction with the acknowledgment received and the influence of the environment was significantly lower in transient principals ($M = 3.34, SD = 0.64$) than in resilient principals ($M = 3.52, SD = 0.57$) and committed principals ($M = 3.53, SD = 0.65$).

Concerning the personal reasons that motivated them to become principals, there were significant differences between the principals' profiles, both for reasons associated with

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

empowerment in the teaching profession and those linked to self-interest, $F(2, 672) = 3.841$, $p = .02$. Specifically, Tukey's post-hoc HSD test indicated that resilient principals and committed principals rated empowerment-related motives significantly higher ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.01$, $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.22$, respectively) than transient principals ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.14$). With some nuance, resilient principals rated self-interest motives significantly higher ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.80$) than transient principals ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.78$) and committed principals ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.83$).

Significant differences were observed in the ability to manage emotions as a function of the identified profiles, $F(2, 673) = 3.324$, $p = .03$. Specifically, Tukey's HSD post-hoc test showed that transient principals rated this element significantly lower ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.52$) than resilient principals ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.55$) and committed principals ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.64$). No significant differences were observed in the principals' assessment of their proactive capacity as a function of their identified profiles, $F(2, 672) = 2.490$, $p = .08$.

There were no significant differences between the different principals' profiles in the influence of institutional or personal circumstances, either due to the perceived support and institutional constraints, $F(2, 674) = 0.161$, $p = .85$, or to the principals' experience and self-confidence, $F(2, 674) = 0.258$, $p = .77$.

The eta-squared coefficient indicates, in general, a small effect size (Cohen, 1988) in all the analyzed factors. However, when comparing the effect size of the identified profiles in the studied factors, satisfaction with acknowledgment and external influence ($\eta^2 = .018$) is one of the factors on which the different principal profiles have a greater effect, followed by empowerment ($\eta^2 = .013$).

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Table 2. Analysis of variance

	Resilient Principals	Committed Principals	Transient Principals			
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>dg</i>	η^2
Satisfaction with the teaching staff	3.88 (.61)	3.84 (.70)	3.76 (.68)	1.704	659	0.005
Satisfaction with school accomplishments	4.10 (.61)	4.07 (.65)	3.94 (.64)	3.771*	660	0.011
Satisfaction with acknowledgment and external influence	3.52 (.57)	3.53 (.65)	3.34 (.64)	6.127***	660	0.018
Empowerment	3.34 (1.01)	3.26 (1.22)	3.03 (1.14)	4.552**	672	0.013
Self-Interest	2.95 (.80)	2.78 (.83)	2.77 (.78)	3.841*	672	0.011
Proactive Capacity	4.02 (.52)	3.98 (.60)	3.91 (.51)	2.490	675	0.007
Emotion Management	3.87 (.50)	3.91 (.55)	3.78 (.52)	3.324*	675	0.010
Institutional Support/Constraints	2.96 (.59)	2.99 (.62)	2.97 (.62)	0.161	674	0.000
Experience/Self-confidence	2.77 (.63)	2.74 (.58)	2.78 (.66)	0.258	674	0.001

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .000$.

The third objective of the study was to establish whether the profiles identified through cluster analysis and the aspects included in the questionnaire related to principals' identity are associated with gender. Firstly, no significant relationship was observed between the identified profiles and gender, $\chi^2 = 1.71$, $p < .788$. Secondly, we found significant differences associated with participants' gender only in the factor institutional support/constraints, linked to the influence of various aspects on their motivation for the post (Question 21). Specifically, women rated the influence of the support received and the institutional constraints on access to principalship higher than men. No significant gender differences were observed in the rest of the variables, as shown in Table 3, which presents the descriptive data and the results of the Student's t-test.

Table 3: Mean Comparison

	Man	Woman	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Satisfaction with the teaching staff	3.81(.64)	3.85(.67)	-0.837
Satisfaction with school accomplishments	4.03(.63)	4.06(.64)	-0.663
Satisfaction with recognition and external influence	3.43(.61)	3.50(.62)	-1.297
Empowerment	3.30(1.11)	3.20(1.12)	1.035
Self-Interest	2.82(.79)	2.88(.81)	-0.990
Proactive Capacity	3.96(.54)	4.02(.54)	-1.473
Emotion Management	3.90(.49)	3.85(.55)	1.252
Institutional support/constraints	2.88(.59)	3.02(.61)	-2.850**
Experience/Self-Confidence	2.75(.64)	2.78(.61)	-0.700

** $p < .01$.

Discussion and conclusions

Our first research objective was to identify different profiles, considering two aspects related to the construction of the participants' identity as principals: their adaptation to the role of principal and their projection in the post. Cluster analysis identified three principals' profiles: committed, resilient, and transient. Resilient principals are those who found adapting to the role difficult and yet have continued and wished to continue in the role. Committed principals generally adapted easily to the new role and also wanted to continue being principals. Finally, transient principals had a difficult transition initially and intended to leave the position, returning to teaching in the short term. Some conclusions can be derived from the results associated to these categories.

The resilient category represents 42.6% of our sample and making it the most prevalent profile among the three identified. This significant finding indicates that while

adapting to the role of principal can be challenging, a notable percentage of teachers maintain their motivation to remain in the position. Educational institutions face various difficulties and challenges, from everyday unforeseen events to multi-causal crises and catastrophic events. Developing resilience in school leaders is essential for schools not only to survive these challenges but also to emerge stronger in confidence and to build a sense of self-efficacy (Sutherland, 2017). Case studies in our country have shown that motivation, commitment, and a service-oriented attitude were key factors in developing a strong identity as resilient leaders (Hernández-de-la-Torre & Altopiedi, 2013; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2022).

With a 27.7%, transient principals appear as a qualified minority. Experiences strongly shape identity (Haybi-Barak et al., 2024; Shaked, 2022), and in these cases, the turbulences of the practice were tough enough to prevent the participants from developing a clear identity as leaders, as other studies have also reported (Carrasco & Díaz, 2021; Constantinides, 2023; Cruz-González et al., 2023; Miscenko et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, Spanish school principals are teachers who take on a new professional identity for which they have been scarcely prepared. Although resilient and committed principals compound a robust majority of more than 70% who are willing to remain at the post, continuity in principalship should be reinforced with the support of professional development programs. These programs should include induction, expert and peer coaching and other modalities focused on the analysis of the practice (Cosner et al., 2018; Goff et al., 2014; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017; Huber, 2013; Lochmiller, 2014; Lofthouse, 2019).

The second objective of our research was to observe how these profiles are associated with different elements that contribute to building the principal's identity, specifically: (a) the reasons for the principals' appointment to the post; (b) satisfaction with the teaching staff, the school's achievements, and the support and acknowledgment they receive; (c) their

assessment of their abilities; and (d) the circumstances that influenced their access to the post of principalship.

First, it was crucial to understand the factors that determine the motivation to pursue the position of school principal, given the global phenomenon of declining interest among teachers in becoming school principals, largely due to the increased responsibility, workload, and growing complexity of the role (Bush, 2015).

Our study found in both resilient and committed principals an orientation towards achieving greater empowerment (having more autonomy and decision-making power). However, the two categories present different profiles concerning the motives that we classified under the label "self-interest," which includes obtaining professional prestige, economic complements, and professional promotion. Resilient principals show somewhat higher self-interest than committed principals. Significantly, transient principals reached the post with weaker motives of empowerment and self-interest than their committed and resilient colleagues.

Both types of motivation relate to the classification of intrinsic and extrinsic motives, commonly discussed in other studies. A substantial body of literature, both international (e.g., Walker & Kwan, 2009) and Spanish (Aramendi et al., 2010; Coronel et al., 2012; Martínez-Ruiz & Hernández Amorós, 2018; Rodríguez-Pulido et al., 2013), indicates that intrinsic motivations (such as personal growth and development) and institutional motivations (improving the school and its educational community) prevail over individual motivations in pursuing the position of school principal.

In one study, based on a survey, García-Rodríguez et al. (2020) found a very high preponderance of intrinsic factors (professional development, the possibility of improving their school, etc.) over extrinsic factors (prestige, career advancement, fewer class hours, higher salary, etc.) in the motivation toward the position of principalship. Also, in our study,

intrinsic factors (based on achieving more empowerment to undertake improvements) were preferentially chosen by all three groups, although the choice of extrinsic motives was also observed in all the groups. In any case, extrinsic motives are insufficient to encourage teachers to assume a responsibility as great as school principalship.

The work of García-Rodríguez et al. (2020) yielded another interesting result for our study, establishing a significant relationship between the predominance of extrinsic motives while indicating difficulties in the relationship with students and other educational community members. This indicates that principals who are extrinsically motivated to occupy the post are not as well equipped as the rest—and therefore, they identify more difficulties—to deal with aspects of the role that go beyond the profile of principal and enter the realm of social relations (Crow et al., 2017). This would help to explain why, in our study, the transient principals—those who present the least motivation of any kind from the outset—are more likely to leave their management post.

Concerning satisfaction with their performance in the post, the most important conclusion is the significantly lower satisfaction found in the transient principals compared to the other two groups, which hardly differ from each other. This conclusion refers both to satisfaction with the achievements of the school they lead and to the support and acknowledgment they obtain. Regarding satisfaction with teacher relationships, we did not find a significant difference among the three profiles, although the score was slightly lower for transient principals. Likewise, Tejero-González and Fernández-Díaz (2009), in a compilation of the factors associated in various studies with satisfaction in school management, specifically identified the support of the management team, the educational community, the relationship with the teaching staff, and professional recognition. Blose et al. (2022) also emphasized the role of collaboration and the ability to get help and support from different sectors regarding the principals' satisfaction. Martínez-García and Gil-Flores (2018)

stated very forcefully that the existence of a collaborative culture in the school is the most relevant aspect to explain satisfaction with the school management. In fact, they pointed out in their study that satisfaction increases when principals manage to involve the educational community in decision-making. Another factor that increased the satisfaction index was the presence of some kind of shared leadership. Although this activity is much more scarcely reported than the previous ones, the collaboration with other principals constituted the third relevant factor of satisfaction with the post in the study of these authors.

The same pattern—similar results in resilient and committed principals and significantly superior to those of transient principals—was found in the participants' reported ability to manage emotions. Moreover, transient principals report lower scores on their perceptions about personal traits related to proactive capacity. Although there is a non-significant difference between the three profiles on this factor, it is consistent with the previous result showing that transient principals may have lower self-perceptions of their personal capacities (proactive capacity and emotional management).

These results confirm the relevance of the emotional dimension in shaping principals' professional identity (Crow et al., 2017; Nordholm et al., 2020). According to Crow et al., (2017) this dimension consists of “the dialogical struggle of seeking coherence of multiple and competing identities”. In our study, the profile of the transient principal resonates with the thesis proposed by Bolívar and Ritacco (2016) that principals in Spain have an ambivalent identity, simultaneously balancing roles as both teacher and a principal.

On the other hand, there is ample empirical evidence indicating the strong impact that crises and internal conflicts have on principals' career expectation (Beusaert et al., 2016). In this regard, our study has identified several factors that contribute to disenchantment with the new role and hinder the development of a professional identity as an educational leader. In short, lower levels of intrinsic motivation when initiating the post, lower levels of satisfaction

with the school's achievements and with external acknowledgment, and their lower self-perception of their capacity for emotional management could explain why transient principals desire to leave the principalship post, given its complexity and the demands, not only for specific skills and competencies but also for a willingness to exercise them (Crow & Møller, 2017). Again, increasing support and training actions should focus on providing newly appointed principals with specific tools for emotional management. This recommendation aligns with Zembylas (2014) who proposes a 'critical emotional reflexivity' as central target of the preparation programs for educational leaders.

Finally, no significant differences were found among the three profiles regarding the influence of contextual and personal issues on principals' decision to occupy the post. All three profiles have similar scores on institutional support/constraints and experience/self-confidence factors. This result might indicate that the only factors that influence the decision of remaining at the post are related to the process, which encourage us to reinforce the support that principals receive while in the post.

The third objective examined possible gender differences in the profiles and trajectories identified and in the set of elements studied. At this point, gender differences were observed only in the circumstances that influenced access to the post, specifically in institutional support and constraints. In this case, women value more than men the support received from the educational community, colleagues, and the administration to access the post of principalship.

Thus, our study recognizes only some gender differences in the aspects studied. It is well-known, however, that gender is a determining factor in building identity, not only of the individual but also of the professional. This is especially so because cultural and political factors make women's experience of leadership different from that of men (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017; Moorosi, 2020; Murakami & Tørnsen, 2017). Jones (2017) explored how

dominant discourses—which imbue the concept of leadership with traditional masculine values and confine women to domestic and caregiving roles—impact the professional lives of female directors and how they access the post. This suggests that, although women may appear to be able to decide between a variety of identities, this choice is constrained by such discourses and must be continually negotiated. We believe, however, that these differences in how men and women build their professional identity as educational leaders are compatible with the similarities that the two groups present in our study in terms of the reasons for accessing the position, their satisfaction with it, and their expectations of continuity.

Limitations and Implications

Our research examined some aspects related to how participants perceive themselves in the role of principal and what these aspects tell us about the nuances of the process of building their professional identity as school leaders. It has the advantage of having used a broad sample of active principals. However, it has the limitation of leaving unexplored many personal aspects (such as life experiences, training, or emotions experienced in managerial practice), cultural aspects (related to both the social culture and the organizational culture of the centers in which the role was performed), and political aspects, all of which are highly influential (Crow et al., 2017) and which can be understood only through in-depth interviews. In addition, as individual identity is socially constructed through interaction with others in an institutional context and within a cultural and political context, the interviews should include others involved in the institutional context (Crow & Møller, 2017).

The identification in our study of a group of principals who wish to leave school management, slightly more than a quarter of the participants, implies the need for decisive support for this group. The reasons for disappointment are varied. As García-Rodríguez et al. (2020) state, the process of socialization in the new role may seem like a minefield to many

new principals due to difficulties that they classified into three categories: (a) the relationship with teachers and students, (b) with families and authorities, and (c) with administrative tasks.

Another possible source of disappointment is the role conflict that frequently occurs while building a new professional identity. Although the principals value above all the tasks related to pedagogical leadership, such as interpersonal relationships, intervention in situations of conflict of interest between teachers, parents, and administration, intervention in student discipline problems, and communication processes (Vázquez et al., 2016), in practice, the administrative tasks consume the most time (Aramendi et al., 2010; Araújo et al., 2023).

In any case, the research available on the main reasons for dissatisfaction among principals allows us to precisely select the sources of support needed by school principals. Tejero-González and Fernández-Díaz (2009) noted some: the institutional support they receive, the possibilities of professional advancement, the economic supplement, the lack of time, the lack of autonomy, and the general and material conditions of the school. Steward (2014) suggested that the pressure of the day-to-day problems and challenges that principals face recurrently eases in climates of mutual trust and acceptance, where risks can be taken to devise new and useful responses to difficulties.

Another aspect that support for new principals should encourage is their self-efficacy. Given that our study has provided evidence of the importance of principals' satisfaction concerning various aspects, professional development programs should encourage systematic reflection on the practice to make the participants aware of their decisive role in their school's achievement, an element with more than sufficient empirical evidence (Hallinger et al., 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Versland & Erickson, 2017; Yada & Savolainen, 2023). Giraldo-García and Orozco (2023) demonstrated a significant increase in participants' self-efficacy in a professional development program for junior school leaders based on self-directed

individual learning, self-reflection, and sharing experiences and perspectives with other leaders. In short, mentoring and the support of experts and peers during the first years of initiation into school principalship are invaluable sources of support for school principals that should be systematically and institutionally promoted.

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SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

ANNEXES

Annex A. Questions analyzed from the questionnaire on professional identity

19. How do you assess your ability concerning...?

	Very high	High	Adequate	Low	Very low
Flexibility/adaptation to changes					
Tolerance of uncertainty					
Communication/Interpersonal relationships					
Emotional control					
Assertiveness (ease to express your viewpoint)					
Teamwork					
Leadership					
Problem-solving					
Resilience					
Generating enthusiasm					
Acknowledgment of limitations					
Receiving/accepting criticism					

20. How do you rate your adaptation to the role of principal?

	Fast and hassle-free
	Difficult but only at the beginning
	Slow and difficult
	Slow but sure
	I do not feel comfortable in this role

21. Assess the influence that the following circumstances have had on your willingness to serve as Principal.

	Little or none	Some influence	Quite influential	A lot of influence
The support of the educational community				
The support of a group of colleagues				
Institutional or administrative support				
The characteristics of my current school				
The conflicts I have managed				
An improvement/innovation that I have led				
Experience in management teams				
My personal characteristics (values, skills, etc.)				

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

22. Indicate the statement with which you feel most identified concerning what you would like to do in the near future (choose one option).

	I would like to continue for a while as Principal of this school
	I would like to continue to hold the position of Principal but in another school
	I would like to leave the principalship function and concentrate on teaching
	I would like to leave the principalship function and play another role in the educational system. Which one?

23. To what extent are you motivated by the following personal reasons for being the school Principal:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Earning merits for professional promotion					
Accepting the assignment from school colleagues					
Gaining more social prestige					
Receiving an economic supplement					
Having more autonomy					
Having more decision-making power					

27. Rate the degree of satisfaction currently provided by the following aspects:

	Very high	High	Adequate	Low	Very low
The involvement of the teaching staff in the school's functioning					
The achievements of the management team					
The hallmarks of the school (culture, values, etc.)					
The students' participation and collaboration in the school projects					
Ongoing initiatives and projects					
The social acknowledgment I receive as Principal					
The teachers' relationships with the families					
The teachers' willingness to work as a team					
The support of the Administration/the Owner towards my managerial task					
Coordination and cooperation with the school's social environment (other schools, associations, etc.)					
The teachers' relationship with the management team					
The degree of compliance with the agreements					

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The teachers' professional competence					
The freedom and autonomy to decide					

Annex B - Table X: Descriptive of items and latent variables**Question 19. Capabilities**

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Min - Max
Proactive Capacity // Number of items = 6 ($\alpha = .82$)	775	3.99 (0.54)	1 - 5
Leadership	778	3.77 (0.76)	1 - 5
Enthusiasm	776	3.84 (0.78)	1 - 5
Communication/Interpersonal relationships	778	4.11 (0.76)	1 - 5
Teamwork	778	4.21 (0.74)	1 - 5
Assertiveness (ease to show your point of view)	778	3.99 (0.75)	1 - 5
Problem-solving	775	4.06 (0.70)	1 - 5
Managing emotions // Number of items = 6 ($\alpha = .74$)	776	3.87 (0.53)	1 - 5
Resilience (recovering after setbacks)	776	3.91 (0.86)	1 - 5
Tolerance of uncertainty	779	3.58 (0.90)	1 - 5
Flexibility/adaptation to changes	779	4.16 (0.72)	1 - 5
Receiving/accepting criticism	776	3.79 (0.78)	1 - 5
Recognition of limitations	776	4.04 (0.80)	1 - 5
Emotional control	778	3.75 (0.79)	1 - 5

Question 21. Influence of Circumstances

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Min - Max
Support/Institutional Conditions // Number of items=4 ($\alpha = .66$)	684	2.96 (0.61)	1 - 4
The support of the educational community	684	3.20 (0.83)	1 - 4
The support of a group of colleagues	684	2.39 (1.03)	1 - 4
Institutional or administrative support	684	2.39 (1.03)	1 - 4
The characteristics of my current school	684	3.15 (0.78)	1 - 4
Experience / Self-confidence // Number of items=4 ($\alpha = .62$)	684	2.77 (0.63)	1 - 4
My personal characteristics (values, skills,...)	685	3.15 (0.71)	1 - 4
An improvement/innovation that I have led	684	2.75 (0.88)	1 - 4
Experience in management teams	685	2.46 (1.15)	1 - 4
The conflicts I have managed	684	2.70 (0.88)	1 - 4

Question 23. Motivation

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Min - Max
Empowerment // Number of items = 2 ($\alpha = .87$)	675	3.23 (1.12)	1 - 5
Having more autonomy	675	3.22 (1.21)	1 - 5
Having more decision-making power	675	3.25 (1.17)	1 - 5
Self-interest // No. of items = 4 ($\alpha = .82$)	675	2.85 (0.81)	1 - 5
Earning merits for professional promotion	675	2.64 (1.23)	1 - 5
Gaining more social prestige	675	2.32 (1.05)	1 - 5
Accepting the assignment from the school colleagues	676	3.52 (1.18)	1 - 5
Receiving an economic supplement	675	2.94 (1.14)	1 - 5

Question 27. Satisfaction

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Min - Max
With the Teaching Team // No. of items = 6 ($\alpha = .88$)	662	3.83 (0.66)	1.5 - 5
The teachers' professional competence	663	3.79 (0.81)	1 - 5
The teachers' willingness to work as a team	662	3.74 (0.92)	1 - 5
The involvement of the teaching staff in the school's functioning	663	3.88 (0.94)	1 - 5
The teachers' relationship with the management team	663	4.03 (0.76)	1 - 5
The degree of compliance with the agreements	663	3.82 (0.75)	2 - 5
The teachers' relationships with the families	663	3.75 (0.83)	1 - 5
With school accomplishments // No. of items = 4 ($\alpha = .82$)	663	4.05 (0.64)	2.5 - 5
The students' participation and collaboration in the school projects	663	3.90 (0.87)	1 - 5
The hallmarks of the school (culture, values, etc.)	663	4.15 (0.78)	2 - 5
Ongoing initiatives and projects	663	4.02 (0.80)	1 - 5
The achievements of the management team	663	4.13 (0.70)	2 - 5
With outside acknowledgment and influence // No. of items = 4 ($\alpha = .62$)	663	3.47 (0.62)	1.6 - 5
The support of the Administration/the Owner towards my managerial task	663	3.04 (1.15)	1 - 5
The social acknowledgment I receive as Principal	663	3.21 (0.92)	1 - 5
Coordination and cooperation with the school's social environment (other schools, associations, etc.)	663	3.56 (0.91)	1 - 5
The freedom and autonomy to decide	663	3.67 (0.94)	1 - 5