ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Leading schools through dialogue: the role of principals in schools as Learning Communities

Gisela Redondo-Sama[1], Shiza Khaqan[1], Teresa Morlà-Folch[1*] and Ariadna Munté-Pascual[2]

*Correspondence:
teresa.morla@urv.cat

[1] Department of Pedagogy, Universitat Rovira I Virgili, Tarragona, Spain
[2] Department of Social Work, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Leading schools to achieve educational success for all is a pressing global challenge. Previous research highlights the impacts of Learning Communities and their extraordinary academic and social cohesion results for all. Nevertheless, the evidence regarding the impact of the leadership practices based on dialogue developed in these schools remains under-researched. To cover this gap, the present work examines the role of principals who lead dialogically in the schools as Learning Communities, schools based on a set of evidence based Successful Educational Actions. The article presents the findings of qualitative fieldwork conducted with 11 principals in diverse school settings. The results indicate that leadership based on dialogue is exercised within and beyond the school walls, demonstrating how principals develop a crucial role in becoming dialogic leaders for school improvement and social transformation of the community. The research provides evidence of relevant aspects in educational leadership that facilitate progress through dialogic leadership in the face of educational challenges.

Keywords: School leadership, Dialogic leadership, Principals, School success, Community

1 Introduction

Fostering school improvement and school success for all is still a challenge in educational systems worldwide as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (United Nations, 2019). Several factors influence children´s learning and their future expectations (OECD, 2015), and school improvement has been widely included in educational and principal leadership research (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Elmore, 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2019; Louis et al., 2013; Sahlin, 2023). In fact, there is evidence of the diverse effects that different forms of leadership have on academic achievement, as on maths and reading performance (Robinson et al., 2008). Hallinger and Heck (1998) highlight the role of the community in leadership practices of principals. In fact, the role of the community has historically played a key role for social transformation (Freire, 1970). For example, Rosa Parks, an African-American Civil Rights activist, became a leader when she refused to move from the seat she occupied in one of

the "white" reserved seats in a bus in Montgomery in 1955 (Scott, 2013). Her action was influenced by Park´s education in the Highlander Folk School, a fact that contributes to the understanding of the ways the transformative and community-based approach of schools can inspire and support such social changes. In the twenty-first century, emerging forms of principal leadership in schools, illuminate how the community is crucial to transform schools, communities and neighborhoods.

The complexity of leading schools has increased in the recent decades due to globalization, advancement of a knowledge-based society, technological change, and the rise of culturally diverse societies across the world (Schleicher, 2012). School leaders are facing the pressure to ensure that every child succeeds and to lead schools to achieve excellence for all (Shields, 2010). Then, in the domain of educational leadership, several models have evolved from theoretical approaches to natural processes taking place and shaping educational institutions (Louis et al., 2013). The debate on school leadership has shifted towards different forms of leadership. Models of successful school leadership aiming at achieving excellence for all include those that have been referred to as shared: collaborative (Hallinger, 2011), distributed (Crawford, 2012; Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2010), instructional (Gurr et al., 2007), transformational (Wang, 2021) or dialogic leadership (León-Jiménez, 2020; Padrós & Flecha, 2014). Within this shift, school leadership is understood as a conjoint agency that includes a set of practices enacted by many diverse people rather than concentrated in a strong and charismatic individual. Leaders are thus understood as facilitators of environments for transformation and the conditions for opportunity, instead of generating the transformation themselves (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

The quality of education is defined by the quality of teachers who provide learning in schools. A good teacher is undoubtedly influenced by a principal with the skills and competencies to promote a quality learning environment, what Hargreaves (2004) defines as inclusive learning environments. Leithwood et al. (2019) specifies seven strong claims about successful school leadership, one of these is stated as follows: "Schools leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, ability and working condition". To improve the quality of education, the principal can provide the necessary direction and make efforts to actualize the quality of education through application of innovative educational practices. In this line, the impact of Learning Communities has been widely studied for their extraordinary academic and social cohesion results (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Rodriguez-Oramas et al., 2022; Soler et al., 2019). However, the evidence in relation to the impact of the dialogical leadership exercised in these schools is lacking. Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine the role of leadership in schools that are improving academic results and social cohesion in many diverse contexts through dialogue.

2 Theoretical background

The relationship between principals, teachers and the school community, is at the core of many works and developments in the field of educational leadership (Becker et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2008). The influential review performed by York-Barr and Duke (2004) on teacher leadership identified parental and community involvement as one of the key dimensions of the practice among school leaders. Moreover, the authors suggest a

theory of action for teacher leadership that requires the support of the principal as a condition to influence student learning. Resonating with this approach, some research demonstrates the role of the principal to foster community engagement in schools, particularly with parents (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014) and the impact of school leadership to increase parental engagement in student´s learning (Goodall, 2015).

In this line, Brown et al. (2011) argue that, in order to develop successful leadership for the twenty-first century, school leaders need to include parents and community members, build a strong academic commitment, and go beyond the institution. According to the conclusions obtained from a larger OECD study exploring educational leadership (Pont et al., 2008), the school leaders will be able to contribute to the success of their schools if they work successfully beyond the school borders with the necessary condition of improving the quality of instructional practice (Elmore, 2008). Furthermore, the publication from the OECD "Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century" (Schleicher, 2012) highlights several successful cases around the world in which school leaders in collaboration with the community are making a difference to improve their practices and student´s learning. One of these cases is a learning community being part of a network of schools working on the basis of the implementation of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs).

2.1 Schools as learning communities: sustaining change for school improvement

There is a lot of evidence around the world that through the implementation of SEAs children in these schools are succeeding educationally, and also socially and emotionally, in a dialogic learning environment that fosters social inclusion (Gatt et al., 2011). These schools are Learning Communities, some of which are in Spain, Portugal, and across some countries in Latin America such as Chile, Brazil and Peru, to name a few (Morlà-Folch et al., 2022). While the vast number of schools vary in the socio-economic contexts they operate in, many belong to socio-economically deprived contexts (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). These schools operate at different educational levels; from primary to adult education schools (Redondo-Sama, 2015).

There are seven SEAs: (1) Dialogic Gatherings, (2) Interactive Groups, (3) Family Education (4) Educational participation of the Community (5) Dialogic Model for Prevention and Conflict Resolution (6) Dialogic Pedagogical Training and (7) Extension Learning Time. These SEAs have already achieved scientific, social and political impact according to the measurements of impact, developed in social sciences (Flecha, 2015). Schools as Learning Communities apply SEAs, actions that have been recommended by the European Commission as a successful model to prevent early school leaving and to improve school performance and social cohesion (European Commission, 2011). SEAs are scientifically validated and based on dialogue in this dialogic society, for instance spreading around the world through more than 15.000 schools developing Dialogic Literary Gatherings (Flecha, 2022).

Schools as Learning Communities open the doors to the families and community members who participate in all the areas of the school, from management bodies to classroom. Since the ultimate objective of these schools is contributing to every child's success and inclusion in the current society, they engage in a series of transformations that rely on evidence-based research and are developed with community input (Gatt

et al., 2011). This transformation considers distributed (Crisol-Moya et al., 2022) and transformative leadership, and especially dialogic leadership (Padrós & Flecha, 2014) to lead educational and social change. Principals, teachers, students and other community members involved in Learning Communities are leading change in a way that goes beyond the school walls. The results of Learning Communities are precise, and evidence of their social impact has been published in different parts of the world, for example, in Mexico (Rodríguez-Oramas et al., 2022), Colombia (Soler et al., 2019) and Spain (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Garcia-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). However, less is known about the particular role of principals in promoting these transformations and how they develop dialogic leadership practices.

2.2 Dialogic leadership

The potential for school members (families, teachers, community members) to cultivate leadership skills through their participation in school affairs has been studied previously (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Bukoski et al., 2015). In that line, dialogue plays a significant role in building and consolidating leadership, especially in models that distribute leadership among different teachers to enhance its effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2019; Padrós & Flecha, 2014). For example, within school leadership, dialogue helped realize shared visions and goals, leading to an enduring transformation in a preschool (Deakins, 2007). Dialogic leadership is the process through which the leadership practices of all members of the educational community—teachers, students, families, non-teaching staff, volunteers, and any other member of the community—are created, developed and consolidated (León-Jiménez, 2020; Padrós & Flecha, 2014; Redondo-Sama, 2015). One of the key elements of the dialogic leadership approach is the involvement of all community members in managing school affairs which leads to social impact (Gómez-Cuevas & Valls-Carol, 2022). However, the school principal is crucial in fostering this leadership in all school spaces (Redondo-Sama, 2016), while also becoming a community member (Ballesta et al., 2017).

Additionally, teachers recognize that school community members have different cultural knowledge and skills learned in very diverse contexts to solve daily problems (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). By promoting the inclusion of their voices through dialogic leadership, they are taking advantage of the heterogeneous reality in the learning environments of schools (Padrós & Flecha, 2014) achieving impacts at the organizational and individual levels (Khaqan & Redondo-Sama, 2024). These features of dialogic leadership are demonstrated in deprived contexts, where majority of the students came from poverty. Some schools achieve family participation after transforming the school into a learning community, and as dialogic leadership emerges, major transformations are possible to improve community engagement and student outcomes (Flecha et al., 2024).

The dream of providing the most for all children is shared by transformative school leaders as well as schools working as Learning Communities (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Although there are commonalities and synergies within both approaches, the role of the school leader in these schools has remained under-researched. More would be accomplished if a better understanding of the development of leadership in these successful schools is provided. With the aim of addressing

this question, this paper examines the role of the principals in 10 elementary, special and secondary schools as Learning Communities. To this end, the following section is devoted to the methodological questions, the approach, data collection and analysis, the research sites and the informants. Next, we will present the section on the findings, that includes the main results that shed light on the description of the leadership enacted by the principals in these schools within and beyond the school walls, including the dialogic approach of leadership for achieving success for all within the community. Last, we introduce some concluding remarks in order to highlight the links established between the type of leadership developed in these schools and the contributions to the current state of the art, both influencing school improvement and social cohesion in the school.

3 The present study

The current research is underpinned by the use of Communicative Methodology (CM) (Gómez et al., 2011), which analyses social reality by focusing on the subjects and their world instead of on structures (Habermas, 1987). CM has been used in research projects at the highest scientific level funded by the European Framework Programmes. One of these projects developed with CM was the large-scale European Union-funded research 'INCLUD-ED. Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education' (CREA, 2006–2011), which identified SEAs that have improved students' educational outcomes in many diverse contexts in Europe. This communicative approach is based on the principle that knowledge is constructed dialogically. Therefore, it requires creating the conditions that enable intersubjective dialogue between participants and researchers to identify emerging categories and to contrast interpretations. The researcher brings into the dialogue the expertise and knowledge about developments in the scientific community, which are then contrasted with the perspectives and experiences of social agents. This article continues and confirms this research line, transferring the social impact to different contexts (Girbés et al., 2022).

3.1 Data collection

For this article, 10 schools were selected according to two criteria. First, the research team ensured diversity of schools to allow the identification of principal leadership practices dealing with community participation in different contexts but with similar school improvement patterns. As a result, the school sizes were different while serving different kinds of communities (i.e., urban, rural, etc.). The fieldwork comprised a range of seven elementary schools, one special education school, and two secondary schools. Most of the schools are from the Spanish context, where the Learning Communities were born. They also have a long tradition in primary schools. However, it has been decided to incorporate the experiences from a school in Brazil because of the broad experience of the director in the leadership of a Learning Community and because of her contribution in secondary education. Second, it was important to gather evidence on how principal leadership is developed in collaboration with the community, regardless of the length of time these schools have been operating as Learning Communities (classified as schools with less than 5 years since the transformation to a Learning Community, between 6–10; 11 and 15, 16–20 or more than 20 years). We considered also the level of the school (primary, elementary, or secondary), the area of the school (urban or rural), and the

socio-economic status (SES) of the school (low, medium or high). Additionally, the study examined the diversity of experience among principals, also classified by years of experience (between 1–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, or 15–20 years of experience) (see Table 1).

In each school, open-ended interviews with the principal were conducted. The interviews were carried out in-person and online, specially in cases where there were significant distances. The researchers followed a semi-structured approach for the interviews with a script prepared outlining the questions. As the interview progressed, additional questions or elaborations were asked based on the interviewee's responses. Adhering to the communicative approach, the interviews prioritized an open and dialogic interaction, ensuring the principals felt heard and understood, while also allowing social impact and co-creation of knowledge through mutual engagement (Soler-Gallart & Flecha, 2022). A substantial part of the interviews focused on eliciting principals' reports about the specificities of the school leadership in a Learning Community, the values, mission and the purpose of it. Principals were further asked to reflect on the extent to which their leadership was exercised within and beyond the school walls and the transformations that it has promoted respectively. They were also invited to comment on the relationship between their leadership and the sustainability of the school project. Finally, they contributed with their personal beliefs, motivations and experiences based on their work as principals in these types of schools. A brief profile of the principals, along with the characteristics of the schools are provided in Table 1.

3.2 Data analysis

The interviews allow us to identify differences and similarities across school contexts and places. Also, they highlight what principals found particularly significant for developing a sustainable dialogic leadership. The interviews were analysed inductively to guide the researcher's analysis in order to identify emerging concepts and themes (Creswell, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Table 1 Schools and principals' profile

School	Principal	Gender	Years on board	School area and SES	Learning Communities start
1	Miren	Female	11–15	Elementary urban, low SES	More than 20 years
2	Silvia	Female	15–20	Elementary urban, medium–low SES	More than 20 years
	Maria	Female	1–5		
3	Manuel	Male	11–15	Secondary urban, medium–high SES	Between 16 – 20 years
4	Patricia	Female	6–10	Elementary rural, medium SES	Between 11 – 15 years
5	Marta	Female	6–10	Elementary urban, medium SES	Between 11 – 15 years
6	Ana	Female	11–15	Elementary urban, low SES	Between 11 – 15 years
7	Daniel	Male	1–5	Primary urban, medium SES	Less than 5
8	José	Male	1–5	Secondary urban, medium SES	Between 11 – 15 years
9	Esther	Female	6–10	Primary school and secondary of special education needs, medium SES	Between 6 – 10 years
10	Joan	Male	1–5	Elementary urban, low SES	Between 16 – 20 years

Data were reviewed electronically; critical episodes were selected, coded and grouped into larger categories. The analysis presented here is organized according to the most significant emerging themes and the selection of those quotes present in more than one source (Denzin, 1970). According to the communicative methodology, the data analysis considered both the exclusionary and transformative dimensions (Gómez et al., 2011), focusing on the obstacles that principals face when they deal with the community, as well as those factors that contribute to overcoming these barriers. The results are then grouped into two sections, highlighting the role of principals as agents of educational change. Table 2 represents the themes against the dimensions, highlighting the strengths and obstacles for both themes. The data analysis included four codes divided into the following dimensions and categories.

3.3 Ethical dimension

All participants were given consent forms that provided comprehensive information about the study and clarified that they retain the option to withdraw from the research at any given point in time. All participants provided their written or verbal informed consent indicating their voluntary participation. To protect the confidentiality of participants' identities and personal information, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. The data was stored securely and only the researchers had access to the data. This specific study received ethical approval by the Ethical Committee of the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA) with reference number 20240719.

4 Results

The results of the analysis are organized around two main themes. In the first theme, about the leadership of principals, we explore how principals in Learning Communities mobilize all available resources, emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with families and community members. These leaders create dialogic spaces that encourage collective responsibility and enhance community involvement in the educational process. The second theme highlights how dialogic leadership, rooted in the specific contexts of Learning Communities, leads to significant school improvements and social transformation. Principals utilize inclusive decision-making processes and prioritize community partnerships to improve educational outcomes and foster equity.

5 Educational leadership within and beyond the school walls: Being a principal in a Learning Community

The moral purpose and main motivation of the principals in Learning Communities is the mobilization of all resources of the community. Building strong relationships with families and community members becomes effective at Marta's school when she

Table 2 Dimensions and categories

	Role as principal	School improvement
Exclusionary dimension	1	3
Transformative dimension	2	4

describes them as "our allies in our teaching". Patricia leads a small rural school that profoundly changed in a very short period. In her school, the families used to argue and had big issues among them. Since they started to participate in the school, they began to respect and support each other. She defines herself as a leader who aims to motivate and mobilise pupils, teachers and other members of the community, for improving teaching and learning.

> *I would define my role in the school, firstly, as a pedagogic leader, and as a part of it, my main role is to motivate or, as I usually say, to rush all the members of the community in doing their tasks (education, care, planning…) Maybe the difference between a Learning Community and other schools is that in the other schools I found that the other teachers thought that my role of motivating the other members of the community was not so appropriate. (Patricia)*

In her quote, she highlights a collective and shared understanding among the teachers for mobilising the community and getting them involved in the school life. She identifies this purpose as a particular feature that characterizes these principals. For example, Marta, who is on the board of a large urban school, highlights the importance of building capacity, also, beyond the school walls. She develops her leadership by involving parents, volunteers and other community members in the SEAs implemented in the school.

> *The main difference between a Learning Community and a school which is not a Learning Community is its openness (…) Every action has a projection outside the school, because we are permanently being observed by relatives and volunteers who are participating and collaborating with our work The environment is not against us, on the contrary it becomes our ally in our teaching. (Marta)*

In the same vein, Esther, the principal of a school with children with special educational needs, also highlights: "The families, since this is being engendered, enter the school as if it were their home and come for something that makes sense, they see how they can collaborate…" To this end, Joan stresses the importance of egalitarian dialogue and always bears in his mind the importance of the community, as reflected in his words:

> *It's about going out the school door, living with them, and sharing. Every morning, I go out the door, and we talk about anything: how they are, whether they are going to the doctor, the weather, or whether they have a letter from the town hall that they don't understand... When can I talk to you? Right now, come in, won't you? This increases our confidence when we ask them to come in and work with us. (Joan)*

From this close contact, Joan adds an example of how trust builds community involvement in the school. There was a grandmother who initially became engaged in the school by spending time in the library, in which there were activities mainly aimed at expanding the learning time for students and families. This grandmother transformed the memories she had from her childhood experience in school. This transformation was possible because of the dialogue with the teachers, and gradually her participation in the development of SEAs expanded. She began participating in Interactive Groups twice a week, significantly contributing to the school community. Joan describes her transformation:

> *There was a grandmother who used to tell me what a pain in the ass, what a pain in*

Redondo-Sama *et al. Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*   (2025) 14:12

Page 9 of 17

the ass! .... Ultimately, she went to the library because she didn't feel safe being with the teachers as she hadn't studied. Now, she comes two days a week to Interactive Groups, and Grandma is in everything. And now she says you've already messed me up... But that's what that egalitarian look is all about: talking to each other. (Joan)

Beyond the individual commitment of the principals to make it happen, they create dialogic spaces that enable everyone to play a role and have a responsibility, generating further leadership practices. In this other case, Silvia refers to the "mixed committees", which is a management board of the school based on dialogue and composed by teachers, pupils, parents and other members of the community. She acknowledges the barriers to increase family engagement in the management for the school and how the mixed committees work for, create, promote and develop leadership. Since her school became a Learning Community and started to implement those committees, among other actions, pupils' performance improved by 58% within a five-year period.

Teachers usually are keen to lead but for some families this is more difficult because most of the mothers have not had any participatory experience before. Therefore, it is very important to have shared spaces where everyone can freely express his or her ideas and if necessary, decisions are taken as well (...) The mixed committees are very necessary. (Silvia)

Dialogic leadership has been identified as a cross-national element. Ana, the Brazilian principal interviewed, shows how decision-making processes include children's and families' voices through dialogue. Mixed committees work across different contexts and cultures. In her large urban school, located in a very poor area and serving mostly African Brazilian community, these dialogic spaces have contributed to empower children and families who engage in the management of the school.

A Learning Community gives more space for the voices of others. Students and families attend to the school's daily life and participate in decisions about the mixed committees. As a principal I accompany the processes. I had to make decisions on my own before. (Ana)

This dialogic approach is embedded in the principals' actions and reflections. In the same vein Patricia, who leads a very small rural school in Spain, includes multiple voices in making decisions. She deeply values others' knowledge and capitalises in families' and students' cultural intelligence. She accounts for their contributions that scaffold her leadership.

I also ask the parents for advice, I often meet with them, with the parents' association at least once a month, and I also ask the children for advice. Sometimes I ask them: "If you were the principal, what would you do?", and it is amazing how their contributions make you reflect on that particular issue. I learn in the school every day, but it is its purpose, isn't it? (Patricia)

Leadership is based on equity. The principals interviewed account for their positions in the structure of the schools and are concerned about the importance to re-situate themselves in a more equal relation grounded on dialogue, honesty and argumentation. Accounting for others voices and developing a dialogic management of the school

is even more evident in Miren's experience. Her school has been running the Learning Communities project since 1995, always with competence and passion; they are an example of moving from individual management to collective enthusiasm.

> *To me, leadership means to transmit trust and enthusiasm, to encourage the participation of the families, to ensure that everyone feels like a protagonist of this Learning Community. For this reason, it is crucial to listen to and attend to everyone. (Patricia)*

All the principals interviewed have in common their educational leadership inside and outside the school walls. In fact, in their interviews, they are aware that they are agents of change, as this leadership beyond the school gates has had many impacts. Nevertheless, principals shared similar concerns about the challenges their schools may face and the extent to which their leadership practice is exercised. Two main risks were raised by newly appointed principals, on one hand, changes in the teaching staff and on the other hand, new teachers who do not know the scientific basis of the project. In this line Patricia points:

> *It is important to have a stable teaching staff and school board to ensure the sustainability of a Learning Community. I think that if the teaching staff changes, then the project is threatened. Besides, if the teachers have not been trained, they may not be capable enough to implement the successful actions in a proper way (Patricia).*

More experienced principals like Silvia have already faced teachers' turnover in her school. Being aware of that challenge, she identifies some strength in the fact that the leadership is being created, developed and promoted among the families and the pupils. Mothers who come from minority groups in her school have been empowered though participating in curricular activities in the classrooms and they support the new teachers. Children have become leaders of their own learning processes and "explain to the new teachers how the groups and the coexistence committee work and why it is better to read classic literature in dialogic literary gatherings altogether". The following section develops the impacts on school dynamics and educational results.

5.1 Leading for efficiency and equity: School improvement and social transformation

Increasing the dialogic leadership in Learning Communities gives the principals a greater knowledge of the context. They include in their leadership practice the context in a broader sense, not only the teachers and the school organization. Furthermore, it enables a sensitive context linked to some of the claims for successful leadership (Leithwood et al., 2019). Many of the cases analysed illustrate this process; for example, Marta describes the process of engaging teachers in approving the school programme, that concerns the curriculum and teaching. This enables teachers to take on the leadership for learning.

> *When we have to approve the school programme in the teachers' meeting, I normally write a proposal. But I sometimes leave it incomplete so that the other teachers intervene and take part in the task. Often this process takes more time, but in the end, we have a programme that has been created by everyone, and everyone has been responsible for writing it.(Marta)*

In the case of Silvia, she reflects on the advantage of including other groups from the community in the management:

> *Including the work with the associations from the community has given me a greater knowledge to manage the school in a better way and to find possibilities to improve education for the children. (Silvia)*

Certainly, this is consistent with some of the strong claims that have defined successful school leadership; while improving school-community relationships, leadership is progressively related to the improvement of the students´ learning outcomes. All the interviewees identify similar characteristics when describing their role as school leaders in the Learning Communities. Understanding their leadership as a vehicle to improving teaching and learning, they emphasized a unique aspect: aiming to enable others to be committed, motivated and engaged with the community. To this end, directors such as Joan, Maria and Silvia emphasise that the key to this leadership is the strength of the arguments, debates with all the members of the community based on egalitarian dialogue, which allow them to reach broad consensus.

The principals interviewed highlight how the transformation into a Learning Community based on dialogic leadership has improved the school´s results and fostered a harmonious environment, as the involvement of the whole community has facilitated the transformation of the school and its community. Providing an excellent education and achieving the best results for all the children mobilizes the principals to make it happen. This purpose becomes a collective dream for the whole community and to make it possible, the school implements SEAs. Their leadership is strongly grounded on research and focuses on achieving success for all, as Marta states.

> *To drive a Learning Community, it is essential to know the SEAs, because what moves us is to implement them to achieve the maximum educational success for all our students. (Marta)*

Leadership in the schools classified as Learning Communities, grounds on critical theory and scientific research. In line with dialogic leadership (Padrós & Flecha, 2014; Redondo-Sama, 2015), principals embody the dialogic learning theory, which is the basis of the project, and they intervene following the latest contributions in educational research. After eighteen years in the school, Miren still remembers when they received the scientific training to transform the school into a Learning Community. The theoretical principles and the dialogue with researchers impressed her and that experience changed her.

> *Ramon Flecha told us about egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation instead of adaptation, the creation of meaning, solidarity, equality of differences... and one sentence especially impressed me: The school you want for your children is the school for all. All this led me to change my teaching practices with a strong commitment to the school and later I assumed the role of the school principal. (Miren)*

A very similar feeling is described by Patricia whose school has only developed the project for two years.

My leadership is completely based on the principles of the dialogic learning; at least I try it every day. Moreover, I am also doing my research related to the Learning Communities in Andalucía, and I have been reading about the scientific evidence. It has made me stronger and a better person; that is why I try to put it into practice every day. (Patricia)

Both, theory and research are combined with passion and enthusiasm from the principals' perspectives. Their enthusiasm does not come from thin air but it is built on the children's and school success. These schools serve as an example of how to achieve an improvement in academic results, as well as social cohesion. Silvia and Miren, who are the most experienced principals on board in the school as Learning Communities, have kept her enthusiasm for twelve and fourteenth years respectively. Both have never lost hope and their enthusiasm has remained based on evidence, on "credible solutions" that reflect the direct experience of their children's success.

Leadership is based on the enthusiasm and the conviction that our pupils can have the best possible education if we all work for it. (Silvia)
My enthusiasm is nourished by the results, despite the odds I usually face. For this reason, I am so committed, education is the key for equality, and this has been my life experience. Also, I had great and committed people working with me, which made it easy. I believe in what I do. (Miren)

School improvement in Learning Communities is not only about performance on standardised tests, it is also about the main purpose of education: to improve children's lives. For this reason, principals are deeply involved in including the whole community to raise their children. They devote themselves as school leaders to extending the improvement beyond the school walls, making a real difference in the school and in the community. Patricia reports some improvements the school experienced in two years.

The quality of the teachers has improved, we plan and organise the teaching in a more realistic way. The relationship with the families has improved, and the perception that society has of our school has improved very much too. Even children from other villages are coming to our school. Children are more motivated and committed. They realize that we work for improving their lives and their families, and they return it to us. I can say that it has contributed to meaning making in the school. (Patricia)

In Manuel´s words this is a "project of enthusiastic people with a shine in their eyes" and within this project many different leadership roles can be played. For the last eight years leadership in his school has moved from relying mainly on one or two people to be exercised among many others. In the end, the leadership developed by the head teachers interviewed shows how the involvement of the whole community improves school results and encourages social transformation. The following example demonstrates a transformation that the principals themselves have experienced directly as Esther explains:

Some people have even told me, 'You are not the same as you were ten years ago.'

I am on the way, but I try to be more dialogic and egalitarian and listen to their voices. This has also impacted the pupils' way of being and learning. The other day, the families also told me how they behaved in the assembly and the get-togethers. They know more, but their behaviour is much, much better than it was years ago. (Esther)

In other words, their story shows the transformation among all the community agents. Along the same lines, Maria points out,' You transform yourself. Now, I look back, and I see that at some point, I transformed myself.

6 Discussion and implications

The insights gleaned from the principals' experience in schools as Learning Communities have significant implications for leading schools through dialogue, applying innovative educational practices based on scientific evidence with social impact. Resonating with the findings of Leithwood et al. (2019), school leaders argue their practice is aligned with most of the elements of the successful educational leadership.

First, principals seem to be effective in engaging teachers, pupils, families and volunteers in improving students' learning and participating in the school management. They create specific structures for building knowledge and capacity through dialogue. Leadership roles and responsibilities were developed among the participants who shared a strong academic commitment in all the spaces of the school. Principals in schools as Learning Communities exercise moral purpose and mobilise the whole community to provide the educational success for all their students. As demonstrated previously, this successful leadership is a consequence of including the whole community (Padros & Flecha, 2014).

Secondly, leadership practice in these schools is grounded on dialogic learning and informed by research. As a consequence, the school and the community promote the implementation of SEAs, to achieve both efficiency and equity. Interviewees state how the implementation of the SEAs give meaning to their tasks. Sense-making is an aspect that previous literature has already highlighted is significant for developing successful leadership (Sahlin, 2023). Along this line, it is observed that the length of time principals have been in charge does not determine the search for meaning, but that both the most junior and the most senior principals are fully aware of the role of the school for guaranteeing excellence for all, because as shown by Leithwood et al. (2019), interviewees show that they are conscious of the impact of their leadership to improve teaching and learning.

Third, principals devote their time to create a school embedded within a larger community-based organization, not only to improve children's lives, but also to transform their sociocultural context. By giving to the community that sense of worth and empowerment, principals strive for equity and inclusion. It generates synergies between school and community that go beyond the school border (Elmore, 2008). In this vein, the participants in this research, through their stories, demonstrate that their leadership extends beyond the school, with the school principal becoming a role model for the community.

In line with previous research (Brown et al., 2011; Elmore, 2008; Sahlin, 2023), this indicates the relevance of developing successful leadership inside and outside the school walls to foster school improvement and educational success for all. This article presents

the results of eleven leadership experiences based on dialogic leadership, which, through an equal dialogue with all stakeholders, achieve a shared commitment to school success that becomes sustainable in the community and ensures educational management of the highest excellence. The experiences of the principals reported in this article might be an example of transformative educational leaders who make a real difference in their schools and mobilize teachers, families and communities "to replace deficit thinking with deep and meaningful relationships" (Shields, 2004: 128). They showed their capacity to make things happen by creating inclusive learning environments (Hargreaves, 2004). They enabled others to create a collective dream, achieve their shared purposed and engage in social and personal transformations (Freire, 1970). The principals who participated in this research have a role in the process though which leadership practices of all the members of the educational community are created, developed and consolidated.

7 Conclusion and limitations

Without denying that differences in leadership practice are required within different contexts, the principals in schools as Learning Communities share principles and practices that work in many diverse contexts. Results discussed in this article have referred to urban and rural schools, small and large, public and private, across cultures and in two different countries. The evidence on which this article is based is found in ten schools. Despite not having a large sample, the qualitative and communicative methodology used to address the issue has allowed us to shed light on the role of the principal in these schools and to identify possible transferable elements among their practices. Although it is interesting to continue in this line and to study the transferability of this leadership in other educational contexts, the analysis presented in this article can be a starting point to obtain more solid evidence on school leadership in the Learning Communities project.

The challenges faced by school leadership teams and the fact that much that remains to be done cannot be denied, but research such as this provides evidence of the keys in educational leadership that facilitate progress in the face of such challenges with innovative educational practices. In short, dialogic leadership, as presented through eleven experiences, demonstrates how the dialogic approach enhances one's sense of self-efficacy and connection to the task at hand, showing that with egalitarian dialogue, we can transform the school context and that all efforts to guarantee educational success for all children are worthwhile.

Authors' contributions
G.R-S. Conceptualization, methodology, Review & Editing, funding acquisition. S.K. writing-Original Draft. T.M.-F. Formal analysis, data curation, writing-Original Draft. A.M.P. Conceptualization, methodology.

Data availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
All participants were given consent forms that provided comprehensive information about the study and clarified that they retain the option to withdraw from the research at any given point in time. All participants provided written or verbally informed consent prior to enrolment in the study. This specific study has received ethical approval by the Ethical Committee of the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA) with reference number 20240719.

Consent for publication
At the beginning of the study, all participants were informed of the purpose of the publication of the article.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References
Ballesta, J., Amiama, J. F., & Castillo, I. S. (2017). Dialogic gatherings: Two experiences that connect the school with its environment. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 237*, 1039–1044. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.149

Barr, J., & Saltmarsh, S. (2014). "It all comes down to the leadership": The role of the school principal in fostering parent-school engagement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213502189

Becker, K., Miller, L. R., Cashmore, S., & Becker, D. (2014). Dual-Role Educator-Parents: How Public Educators Navigate Their Own Children Through Public Education. *International Journal of Sociology of Education, 3*(3), 218–243. https://doi.org/10.4471/rise.2014.15

Bolívar, J. M., & Chispeels, J. H. (2011). Enhancing Parent Leadership Through Building Social and Intellectual Capital. *American Educational Research Journal, 48*(1), 4–38. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210366466

Brown, K., Benkovitz, J., Muttillo, A. J., & Urban, T. (2011). Leading Schools of Excellence and Equity: Documenting Effective Strategies in Closing Achievement Gaps. *Teachers College Record, 113*(1), 57–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811111300102

Bukoski, B. E., Lewis, T. C., Carpenter, B. W., Berry, M. S., & Sanders, K. N. (2015). The complexities of realizing community: Assistant principals as community leaders in persistently low-achieving schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 14*(4), 411–436. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2015.1021053

Crawford, M. (2012). Solo and Distributed Leadership: Definitions and Dilemmas. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 40*(5), 610–620. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212451175

CREA. (2006–2011). INCLUD-ED. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (6th Framework Program). Brussels, Belgium: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission. Project Nr. CIT4-CT-2006–028603.

Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational Research. Planning, conducting and evaluation quantitative and qualitative research.* Pearson

Crisol-Moya, E., Romero-López, M., Burgos García, A., & Sánchez-Hernández, Y. (2022). Inclusive Leadership From the Family Perspective in Compulsory Education. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research, 11*(2), 226–245. https://doi.org/10.7821/naer.2022.7.937

Deakins, E. (2007). The role of meaningful dialogue in early childhood education leadership. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 32*(1), 38–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910703200107

Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (2016). *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership.* Jossey-Bass.

Denzin, N. K. (1970). *Sociological Methods: a Source Book.* Aldine Publishing Company.

Elmore, R. (2008). Leadership as the practice of improvement. In B. Pont, D. Nusche, & H. Morman (Eds.), *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice* (pp. 37–68). OECD.

European Commission. (2011). *Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda.* COM(2011) 18 final. Brussels. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0018:FIN:EN:PDF

Flecha, R., Guo, M., Khalfaoui, A., López de Aguileta, A., Puigvert, L., Rodrigues de Mello, R., Rodríguez, A., & Valls, R. (2024). *Guía Comunidades de Aprendizaje.* Hipatia Press. https://hipatiapress.com/index/2024/08/02/guia-conunidades-de-aprendizaje/

Flecha, R. (2022). *The Dialogic Society.* Hipatia Press. https://hipatiapress.com/index/2022/12/04/the-dialogic-society/. Accessed 3 June 2024

Flecha, R. (Ed.). (2015). *Successful Educational Actions for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe.* Cham: Springer.

Flecha, R., & Soler, M. (2013). Turning difficulties into possibilities: Engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 43*(4), 451–465. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2013.819068

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

García-Carrión, R., & Díez-Palomar, J. (2015). Learning communities: Pathways for educational success and social transformation through interactive groups in mathematics. European *Educational Research Journal, 14*(2), 151–166. https://doi-org.sabidi.urv.cat/https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904115571793

Gatt, S., Ojala, M., & Soler, M. (2011). Promoting social inclusion counting with everyone: Learning Communities and INCLUD-ED. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 21*(1), 33–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2011.543851

Girbés, S., Sebastián, J., Rodríguez, X. P, Fontanals, M., Campeny, G., Gómez, B., & Soler-Gallart, M. (2022). Co-Creation processes contributing to the societal impact of science: Contributions from the Net4Impact network. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences, 11*(1), 54–81 https://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.10009

Gómez-Cuevas, S., & Valls-Carol, R. (2022). El Impacto Social desde los Movimientos Bottom-up: el Caso de la Escuela de Personas Adultas La Verneda-Sant Martí. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research, 12*(3), 221–246. https://doi.org/10.17583/remie.10544

Gómez, A., Puigvert, L., & Flecha, R. (2011). Critical Communicative Methodology: Informing real social transformation through research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17*(3), 235–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410397802

Goodall, J. (2015). Ofsted's judgement of parental engagement: A justification of its place in leadership and management. *Management in Education, 29*(4), 172–177. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020614567246

Gronn, P. (2000). Distributed properties: A new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management & Administration, 28*(1), 317–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X000283006

Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed Leadership. In K. Leithwood, P. Hallinger, K. Seashore-Louis, et al (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration* (pp. 653–696). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Gu, Q., Sammons, P., & Mehta, P. (2008). Leadership characteristics and practices in schools with different effectiveness and improvement profiles. *School Leadership and Management, 28*(1), 43–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/1363243070 1800078

Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., & Mulford, B. (2007). Instructional Leadership in Three Australian Schools. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 35*(3), 20–29.

Habermas, J. (1987). The theory of communicative action. Vol. 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason. Boston, MA: Bacon Press.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1998). Exploring th Gu, Q., Sammons, P., & Mehta, P. (2008). Leadership characteristics and practices in schools with different effectiveness and improvement profiles. *School Leadership and Management*, *28*(1), 43–63.e principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980-1995. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, *9*(2), 157–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701800078

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Leadership for Learning: Does Collaborative Leadership Make a Difference in School Improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 38*(6), 654–678. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411 43210379060

Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(2), 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111116699

Hargreaves, A. (2004). Inclusive and exclusive educational change: Emotional responses of teachers and implications for leadership. *School Leadership & Management, 24*(3), 287–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/1363243042000266936

Khaqan, S., & Redondo-Sama, G. (2024). A systematic review of the role of dialogic leadership: Characterization and impacts. *Educational Research Review, 44*, 100618. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100618

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. Department for education and skills. National College for School Leadership.

Leithwood, K., & Sun, J. (2012). The nature and effects of transformational school leadership: A meta-analytic review of unpublished research. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 48*(3), 387–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11 436268

León-Jiménez, S. (2020). "This Brings you to Life" The Impact of Friendship on Health and Well-being in Old Age: the Case of La Verneda Learning Community. *Research on Ageing and Social Policy, 8*(2), 191–215. http://https://doi.org/10.4471/rasp.2020.5538

Louis, K. S., Mayrowetz, D., Murphy, J., & Smylie, M. (2013). Making sense of Distributed Leadership: How Secondary School Educators look at Job Redesign. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management, 1*(1), 33–68. https://doi.org/10.4471/ijelm.2013.02

Marion, R., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2001). Leadership in complex organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly, 12*(4), 389–418. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(01)00092-3

Morlà-Folch, T., Davis, A. I. R., Cuxart, M. P., & Valls-Carol, R. (2022). A research synthesis of the impacts of successful educational actions on student outcomes. *Educational Research Review, 37*, 100482. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100482

OECD (2015) Education at a Glance 2015. OECD. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2015_eag-2015-en

Padrós, M., & Flecha, R. (2014). Towards a Conceptualization of Dialogic Leadership. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management, 2*(2), 207–226. https://doi.org/10.4471/ijelm.2014.17

Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Morman, H. (2008) *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*. OECD.

Redondo-Sama, G. (2015). Dialogic leadership in learning communities. *Intangible Capital, 11*(3), 437–457. https://doi.org/10.3926/ic.651

Redondo-Sama, G. (2016). Leadership and community participation: a literature review. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, *5*(1), 71–92. https://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2016.1998

Robinson, V., Lloyd, C., & Rowe, K. (2008). The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of the Differential Effects of Leadership Types. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*(5), 635–674. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131 61X08321509

Rodriguez-Oramas, A., Morla-Folch, T., Vieites Casado, M., & Ruiz-Eugenio, L. (2022). Improving students' academic performance and reducing conflicts through family involvement in primary school learning activities: A Mexican case study. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 2*(2), 235–254. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1973374

Sahlin, S. (2023). Professional development of school principals - how do experienced school leaders make sense of their professional learning? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143223 1168235

Schleicher, A. (2012). Ed., Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from around the World. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264xxxxxx-en

Scott, J. T. (2013). A Rosa Parks moment? School choice and the marketization of civil rights. *Critical Studies in Education, 54*(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.739570

Shields, C. M. (2004). Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(1), 109–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03258963

Shields, C. M. (2010). Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 46*(4), 558–589. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X10375609

Soler-Gallart, M., & Flecha, R. (2022). Researchers' Perceptions About Methodological Innovations in Research Oriented to Social Impact: Citizen Evaluation of Social Impact. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 21*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211067654

Soler, M., Morlà-Folch, T., García-Carrión, R., & Valls, R. (2019). Transforming rural education in Colombia through family participation: The case of school as a learning community. *Journal of Social Science Education, 4–2020*, 67–80. https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-3251

Spillane, J. (2010). Conceptualizing School Leadership and Management from a Distributed Perspective. *The Elementary School Journal, 11*(2), 253–281. https://doi.org/10.1086/656300

Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective. *Educational Researcher, 30*(3), 23–28. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003023

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

United Nations. (2019). Sustainable development goals. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/. Accessed 3 June 2024

Wang, S. (2021). How Does Principals' Transformational Leadership Impact Students' Modernity? A Multiple Mediating Model. *Education and Urban Society, 53*(4), 425–445. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124520931955

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What Do We Know About Teacher Leadership? Findings From Two Decades of Scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255–316. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074003255

Publisher's Note