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## An Evaluation of Current Leadership Practices in Secondary Schools in Madrid

Ángel Osle\* 

University of Essex, UNITED KINGDOM

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**Abstract:** This study aims to evaluate the leadership practices of a sample of secondary school principals in the Madrid region. An attempt will be made to provide some insights into their professional profile, their performance of leadership tasks, and the different elements that define their leadership model. An online questionnaire was used to collect their opinions on the day-to-day performance of their leadership role, as well as on the factors that influence their leadership style. From a methodological point of view, a quantitative approach is used within an interpretative framework, given that the emphasis is not on the generalisation of results but on understanding how school principals operate in their particular context. Results revealed that instructional leadership in Spain is still seen as a challenging goal for principals. This is closely in line with the bureaucratic nature of the headship role in Spanish schools.

**Keywords:** *Instructional leadership, leadership practice, school leadership in Spain, school principal.*

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### Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the education system in Spain underwent a succession of reforms supported by conservative and socialist governments. As Cantón (2013) argues, school principals have not always been considered a key element of educational success by Spanish policymakers. In recent years, reforms have largely focused on introducing improvements to the selection process for leadership positions, whilst neglecting to address one of the most important challenges that continues to undermine the entire system: the lack of accountability and professionalisation of headship roles. Researchers have also called for a shift from a bureaucratic model focused on uniformity to one in which the importance of student achievement is emphasised (see Murillo et al., 1999). High levels of autonomy and accountability are indeed key features of post-bureaucratic leadership models. As Stoll and Temperley (2009) note, a school leader's influence on student outcomes is dependent on their autonomy to make curriculum and staff-related decisions.

Few studies have provided an in-depth analysis of school leadership practices in specific Spanish regional contexts. Notable exceptions can be found in Aramendi et al. (2009) for the Basque region, Álvarez and Pérez (2011) for Asturias, Padilla (2008) for Andalusia, Rodríguez Pulido et al. (2013) for the Canary Islands, Cantón and Arias (2008) for the region of Castilla and Leon, Tejero and Fernández (2010) for Madrid, Camarero Figuerola (2015) for Catalonia and, more recently, Sanz Ponce et al. (2021) for Valencia.

Taking as a starting point the lack of empirical research noted above, this study has the overall purpose of providing a current account of the leadership practices of secondary school principals in Madrid. In particular, an attempt will be made to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the most common professional profile of secondary school principals in Madrid?
2. What type of duties or tasks are usually performed by headteachers in this context?
3. What leadership model is most common in secondary schools in Madrid?
4. What professional development needs do principals have?

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\* **Correspondence:**

Ángel Osle, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, United Kingdom. ✉ [a.osle@essex.ac.uk](mailto:a.osle@essex.ac.uk)



This study will hopefully offer a better understanding of school principals' day-to-day realities, challenges and needs in terms of professional development opportunities and additional institutional support. It will also aim to examine their leadership practices against current recommendations on educational leadership provided by international bodies with the goal of identifying improvement models that principals could utilize in their institutions.

### Literature Review

Whilst international research on the impact of different aspects of leadership practices is fairly abundant (see, for example, literature reviews on the subject by Tan et al., 2022 or Wu & Shen, 2022), recent empirical studies on leadership practices in Spanish regional contexts are somewhat scarce.

Aramendi et al. (2009) presented an analysis of how public schools are managed in the Basque Country. Their study used a mixed methods research design by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis. Results revealed that candidate motivations for applying for a headship role include a genuine desire to improve their schools, as well as a general interest in educational management and leadership.

Tejero and Fernández's (2010) examined the job satisfaction of school principals in Andalusia. Results highlighted that school leaders are, to a large extent, satisfied with the performance of their management team, administrators, teaching staff and students/families, as well as with their working conditions. Gender differences did not correlate with satisfaction among headteachers.

Álvarez and Pérez (2011) focused on leadership models in the Asturias region. A combination of interviews and questionnaires was used as instruments of data collection. Conclusions provided relevant insights to improve educational quality by highlighting strengths and weaknesses in current management models used in the region. Insights related to the professional development of school principals were also put forward by these authors.

Rodríguez Pulido et al. (2013) carried out an in-depth analysis of school leadership practices in the Canary Islands. This included the selection process of school principals, their training needs and difficulties encountered during their headship. Data was collected through an online questionnaire. This study collected data from 170 schools, which accounted for 20% of all schools in the Canary Islands. Several conclusions were drawn regarding the motivations of school principals when applying for a leadership post and their need to receive appropriate professional development throughout their careers.

More recently, González (2015), through a case study approach, focused on the leadership practices in four schools in Madrid. This study provided an account of leadership practices in highly successful schools, identified leadership and management strategies related to the actual work of teachers, and examined leadership strategies that contributed to student success.

Camarero Figuerola (2015) analysed the leadership profile of a sample of headteachers in primary schools in the Tarragona region (Catalonia). Through a mixed methods approach, this study collected information on principals' performance of their leadership tasks, as well as on a wide range of variables such as professional development needs, and opinions on current legislation. Results revealed an overreliance on purely bureaucratic management models and highlighted the difficulties in following a more instructional leadership model.

Similarly, García-Garnica and Caballero (2019) examined the professional development needs of school principals in Andalusia. This study used a mixed methodology that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Results highlight significant shortcomings in the professional development of headteachers. In particular, principals reported that they had not received enough training to effectively manage school resources, foster a climate of collaboration inside and outside the school, set clear educational goals and share responsibilities with other members of the community.

In a more recent study, Sanz Ponce et al. (2021) examined the leadership models followed by 68 primary school principals in Valencia. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis revealed that shared leadership practices did not necessarily correlate with an improvement in the performance of teaching staff or an increase in the degree of collaboration with parents and families.

As seen above, researchers have generally emphasised the lack of autonomy of Spanish schools and as result, the severe difficulties faced by school principals when attempting to implement instructional models of leadership. Spain does not have an embedded system of school autonomy for a variety of reasons. From a sociological point of view, Spaniards are not generally supportive of ideologies centred around free markets and competition between schools (Bolívar, 2019). In addition, the acceptance of political and administrative decentralisation, oftentimes associated with nationalist or regionalist ideologies, has yet to reach local and municipal levels. Consequently, the educational capabilities of municipalities are still limited. Lastly, Spain has a remarkably poor tradition of accountability, which is intimately linked to school autonomy. Autonomy is therefore not only hindered by limited political impulses, but also by limited social support.

## Methodology

### Research Design

By considering a variety of contextual factors, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of managing and leading secondary schools in Madrid. From a methodological point of view, this research can be framed within an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm attempts to describe different patterns of behaviour in a detailed and objective manner. In this case, the goal is to gain a better understanding of educational phenomena by delving into the perceptions and interpretations of the subjects involved in educational activities. Ballester et al. (2014) maintain that in this type of study generalisation is not sought, but rather the development of knowledge about specific communities. The interpretive paradigm aims to replace the scientific notions of explanation, prediction, and control of a purely positivist perspective with notions of understanding, meaning, and action (Latorre et al., 2003). Therefore, the focus is on understanding and interpreting a specific educational reality, while accepting its dynamic, multifaceted, and holistic nature. In Hernández's (1995) opinion, this paradigm assumes that social life is generated and maintained by interactions between subjects. In addition, pedagogical knowledge is not universal since each community has its own criteria that evolve over time. In this study, a quantitative approach is used within an interpretive framework. Data is collected using predetermined instruments of data collection and meaning is therefore derived from a set of statistical procedures.

### Sample and Data Collection

Participants were recruited from the population of secondary school principals (*director*) and deputy principals (*jefe de estudios*) in Madrid. According to the information provided by the Ministry of Education, the total population of secondary schools in Madrid is made up of 472 schools. A statistical formula for finite population with a margin of error of 0.05% was used to calculate the sample size required for this study. The composition of the sample has been determined by using a probabilistic criterion (random and stratified sampling), which involves breaking the population into groups to obtain a representative sample (Cohen & Manion, 2002). A total of 212 schools were included in this study. The calculation is based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Table 1 below presents the composition of the selected sample:

Table 1. Sample Size

Type of school	Total	Sample
Public schools	353	159
Subsidized schools	37	16
Private schools	82	37
Total	472	212

In terms of instruments of data collection, a cross sectional mixed questionnaire (descriptive and analytical) is used to describe, establish comparisons among subgroups, and examine correlations. The questionnaire is divided into eight thematic blocks (29 questions) and includes closed-ended multiple-choice, closed-ended single-choice, Likert scale and open-ended questions.

It is important to note that Section 6 of the questionnaire (leadership tasks and leadership models) includes items from the Principal's Questionnaire used in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS 2013). Specifically, a series of items that are supposed to measure a headteacher's adherence to transformational, distributed, and pedagogical leadership models were incorporated in the final version of the questionnaire.

In an attempt to increase the degree of validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was run with 10 headteachers in Spain. Their suggestions were incorporated into the final version, which is presented in Appendix 1.

In terms of internal consistency and reliability, Cronbach's alpha was applied to the Likert scale questions. In general, the reliability of our items is greater than 0.8. In some questions the reliability is excellent (0.9) or acceptable (0.7). No questions are below 0.5.

The questionnaire was created online using the software Qualtrics. A link was then generated and sent to the targeted secondary schools using the contact details available on a database compiled by the Ministry of Education. The online questionnaire provided the convenience of rapid distribution, easy recording of responses, and simplified exporting of the data. The questionnaire design was fully customised through Qualtrics. It remained active for a month and a half. In total, 186 responses were received, representing 88% of the sampled population.

## Findings

### *Participating Schools: Background Information*

The first block of the questionnaire is made up of a series of questions aimed at collecting background information of participating schools. The sample includes secondary schools from the Madrid region. Table 2 below presents the number of questionnaires completed according to the type of school.

Table 2. No Questionnaires received per Type of School

Type of school	Sample	No Questionnaires	%
State schools	159	146	91.8
Subsidized ( <i>concertada</i> )	16	12	75
Private	37	36	97.2
Total	212	186	88

The highest percentage of questionnaires was returned by private schools (97.2%). With regards to the number of students in participating schools, almost 45% of schools in our sample have over 400 students in their student body

Headteachers were specifically asked about the structure and composition of their leadership teams. Approximately 70% of schools selected a leadership team that included a Headteacher, Deputy, and Secretary. Table 3 below presents alternative combinations such as Headteacher and Deputy. As expected, private schools have the largest leadership teams.

Table 3. Members of the School Leadership Team

Members of the school leadership team	Percentage
Head, Deputy and Secretary	70.3%
Head and Deputy	2.3%
Head	8.6%
Head and Secretary	7%
Head and others	1.2%
Head, Deputy, Secretary, and others	10.6%

It is important to note that headteachers are legally responsible for managing educational institutions. Typically, school leadership tasks are distributed as follows: the head of studies is responsible for academic processes, organisational and disciplinary matters, the school administrator (secretary) oversees administrative and financial matters, and the headteacher is responsible for institutional and external relations. Occasionally, department coordinators attend the meetings of the leadership team when there is no periodic meeting with the head of studies.

### *Participating Headteachers: Background Information*

30.5% of our participants were female, while 69.5% identified as male. Headteachers ranged in age from 31 to 65 years (standard deviation: 7.40). 68% of them were between the ages of 50 and 59, 26.4% between 40 and 49, and only 12.8% were younger than 40 or older than 60.

Their professional experience in previous leadership roles ranges from 2 months to 30 years. 47.58% of respondents had led their school for more than nine years. In addition, 31.4% of respondents had between five and eight years of experience. Almost 13% of headteachers have at least one year of leadership experience, while 7.26% had between two and four years.

72% of headteachers were appointed through a competitive process. 23% of principals were appointed *ad hoc* by the Local Authority. Statistically significant differences were found depending on the type of school and number of members in the management teams. 77% of headteachers in state schools were appointed via a competitive process. In contrast, 50.5% of headteachers in subsidised/private schools were directly appointed by the governing board. In schools with small leadership teams, 48.5% principals were appointed via a competitive process. This percentage increases up to 80% in schools with larger leadership teams.

### *Discharge of Duties and Leadership Tasks*

Participants were surveyed about the tasks they perform as part of their leadership role and the challenges they face. In addition, several questions were posed regarding the discharge of the duties set out by the Spanish legislator (see Table 4). Headteachers also rated the extent to which those duties were fulfilled (low, medium, high). Most participants (94.8%) reported fulfilling all their responsibilities regardless of their self-perceived leadership style. According to 98.2% of respondents, school organisation and day-to-day operations are the most frequently performed duties. 80% of headteachers stated that timetabling and other HR issues are the least performed

Table 4. Leadership Duties

Duties	Actions/Tasks
Representative of the central administration	Chair school board and academic events
Instructional leadership	Lead and promote the educational project of the school
School organization and day to day operations	Manage and monitor procedures and operations
Liaise with the educational community	Promote and develop appropriate channels of communication with PTA
Management of staff	Appraisals and performance monitoring
Management of financial resources	Manage financial resources in accordance with approved budget

Principals were also asked to evaluate how difficult it was to perform those duties. 71% of headteachers have difficulty dealing with duties related to instructional leadership, especially those who identified themselves solely as managers. As for the school's organisation and day-to-day operations, 66.4% of respondents cited this task as their most frequent duty, but they also rated it as the second most difficult to fulfil. Representing the educational administration is perceived as difficult by 60% to 65% of headteachers between the ages of 40 and 49. Staffing-related responsibilities are perceived to be less difficult as a leader's managerial experience increases, especially for female headteachers and principals over 60.90% of all headteachers feel they perform their responsibilities to a high degree regardless of their leadership experience. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the promotion and development of the school's educational project is only performed by half of respondents (33% women and 17% men; 62% of them have between 2 and 8 years of experience and 45% are between 40 and 60 years of age).

98% of principals consider their commitment to the community to be very high. Headteachers also see high levels of commitment from teachers, whether in terms of school success (95%) or school projects (91%). It is noteworthy that those with the most experience perceive lower levels of commitment in all stakeholders, especially teachers' commitment to school success, parents' commitment to the school project, and students' commitment to their own results.

#### Professional Development

71% of headteachers had received some form of training before taking over their leadership role. There were significant differences depending on their age. Prior training was certainly more prominent in younger headteachers (94% versus 51% in the case of headteachers aged 55 and over). One of the more recent requirements for gaining access to leadership positions is previous training. Hence, younger headteachers are more likely to have received initial management training. It is noteworthy that no significant differences were found in relation to the type or size of school.

The initial training received by headteachers was evaluated based on Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2007) 4-dimensional model, which measures satisfaction, learning, behaviour, and impact. Principals were asked to rate their initial training on a scale of 1 to 5. Overall degree of satisfaction was the most highly rated dimension, while impact received the lowest rating

Table 5. Level of Satisfaction with Initial Training

Dimension	Mean	SD
Overall satisfaction	4.10	0.83
Learning	3.88	0.86
Behaviour	3.85	0.84
Impact	3.22	0.97

In terms of their professional development during their headship, 82% of principals claim to have received professional development courses during their leadership period. No significant differences were observed in relation to the type of school. In the assessment of their training based on Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2007) model, results did not experience any variations: overall satisfaction was the highest rated while impact received the lowest scores.

Table 6. Level of Satisfaction with their Professional Development during Leadership Period

Dimension	Mean	SD
Overall satisfaction	4.25	0.87
Learning	3.60	0.83
Behaviour	3.72	0.81
Impact	3.15	0.89

The questionnaire also included a series of open-ended questions to explore their future professional development needs. In comparison to the other sections of the questionnaire, this section had a lower completion rate, but some trends were identified. Table 7 below provides a summary of the responses

Table 7. Professional Development Needs

Professional development needs	No responses
Management of day-to-day operations	66
Legal related issues	45
Staff management	40
IT related	28
Methodology and leadership strategies	18
No needs identified	1

Most of the training needs identified here are related to the day-to-day management of their schools: administrative, financial, and academic. A clear need for professional development in legal matters was also identified. Headteachers also expressed the need for “quick and clear information on upcoming legislation” (ID225). In addition, they would like training on group dynamics, mediation, and conflict resolution strategies (ID 151). Principals referred to the need for “professional development in different leadership models, such as pedagogical, transformational, or distributed leadership”.

Also mentioned were “seminars” (ID 152) or “conferences on monographic topics” (ID 288) such as curricular content, the use of information technology to cope with the increasing bureaucratic burdens, stress management, emotion management, foreign language instruction (English), coaching courses, and training on special educational needs.

Several headteachers referred to the need to set up exchanges or working days with principals at other schools. Along with sharing experiences, they are interested in “knowing more about the leadership practices of successful schools at national and international levels” (ID 130).

#### *Leadership Models*

The online questionnaire included various items that intended to measure headteachers’ potential alignment with the most common leaderships models found in the literature. It is important to point out that, according to our respondents, the average headteacher spends 35% of their time on administrative tasks and management meetings; 21% on curriculum development tasks and meetings; 15% on student relations, 14% on parent relationships, and 15% on dealing with other institutions.

One of their most important duties is to foster an educational environment that promotes effective teaching and learning. On average, 81% of principals stated that they had to intervene to solve disciplinary problems in the classroom. Additionally, principals are expected to monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their schools by undertaking lesson observations. 28.5% of headteachers report observing their teaching staff on a regular basis. Furthermore, 69.3% of principals take actions to ensure that teachers are held accountable for the learning outcomes of their students. Typically, these actions involve analysing the results achieved by pupils in various assessments conducted throughout the school year.

Parents’ involvement in their children’s education is highly dependent upon the level of communication they maintain with the school and the accuracy of the information they receive. Approximately 79.4% of headteachers report that they frequently inform parents about the progress of their students.

Creating mutually supportive networks with principals of other schools can be beneficial. A mere 35.6% of principals report that they maintain collaboration with principals of other schools; this is a clear area for improvement in Spanish schools.

Depending on the type of education system, principals are usually responsible for setting goals and improving educational programmes. In our survey, 88.3% of headteachers claimed to perform this task, which does not differ significantly from the OECD average. On the other hand, only 39.8% of principals performed tasks aimed at designing a professional development plan for their schools.

Given the variety and complexity of tasks that must be undertaken by a school principal, it is natural to think that they should share their leadership responsibilities with members of their management team. Table 8 below shows the percentage of headteachers reporting shared leadership elements in relation to a variety of tasks.

Table 8. Shared Responsibilities in Leadership Tasks

Task	Percentage
Recruitment of staff	24
Disciplinary measures and sanctions (staff)	19
Establish salary scales	2
Set salary increase/ bonus	4
Disciplinary measures and sanctions (students)	60
Set policies of student assessment	27
Approval of admission criteria	21
Budget allocation	27
Selecting pedagogical resources	39
Selecting course content	14

The percentage of headteachers who claim to share responsibilities is significantly lower than the OECD average. 60% of principals declare sharing responsibilities in relation to the management of student discipline – the average of all OECD countries and regions is 62.0%; while only 27% of our participants report sharing responsibilities in establishing evaluation policies, well below the OECD average (56%).

Among our respondents, only 27% share decisions regarding budget allocations. 39% of headteachers report sharing responsibilities in the selection of pedagogical materials, while only 14% of principals share responsibilities when choosing course content - this is substantially lower than the OECD average (38.8%).

## Discussion

### *Headteachers' Professional Profile and Background*

The average headteacher is typically a 50-year-old male with 25 years of teaching experience, 9 years of leadership experience, and a self-perceived leadership model based on a purely managerial role. 79.5% of respondents are men and 30.5% are women. It is important to note that 84% of secondary school teachers in Madrid are women and 16% are men and, therefore, one can conclude that there is a certain gender imbalance, which is more pronounced among headteachers over 55. According to Santos (2015) and Martínez et al. (2020), this gender imbalance may be caused, among other factors, by women's self-exclusion due to sexism ingrained in certain spheres of society, family, and education.

A total of 43% of principals are between the ages of 46 and 54 and 48% of them have a minimum of 9 years of leadership experience. These figures highlight that older headteachers with more teaching experience are those who currently hold leadership roles. In addition, leadership positions are held for long periods of time, although the percentage of women over 55 putting themselves forward to repeat as headteachers drops to approximately 59%.

It is also noteworthy that half of the respondents have at least 9 years of experience. Day and Bakioglu (1996) believe that these professionals are in the autonomous phase of their careers, i.e., well settled in a leadership role that gives them security and enables them to perform well. Reflecting on the nature of managerial roles, Santos (2015) notes that extensive experience does not automatically translate into effective performance. For this to happen, principals must be able to acknowledge their own mistakes and be receptive to criticism. Additionally, our headteachers gained much of their previous leadership experience at the school they currently lead. Results highlight that 47% of principals have previous experience in another leadership position.

In the public sector, leadership positions are filled similarly to those in private schools - one candidate is usually chosen from a pool of existing leadership team members. This was in fact the case for 72% of headteachers in state schools, which suggests that the promotion of more open and competitive appointment processes is clearly needed in this context. On this subject, Barrios et al. (2013) dispel the myth that teachers do not wish to take on leadership roles by pointing out that more and more teachers are receiving managerial training. Nevertheless, it is also true that highly qualified and motivated teachers are not being encouraged to hold management positions in the Spanish context.

In terms of their motivations for taking on a leadership role, headteachers mentioned the potential improvement of their schools as one of their main motivating factors. Rodríguez Pulido et al. (2013) have found similar results in their research. In addition, our sample of headteachers cited reasons such as improving school operations and fostering innovative education.

As far as skills and abilities are concerned, Campo (2010) points out that interpersonal skills (empathy, assertiveness, and active listening) emerge as the most developed skills in the Spanish context, as opposed to purely managerial abilities such as delegation or motivation. In other words, collaborative work and teamwork are highly regarded, whereas more individual skills such as self-management or autonomy, are not as widely praised.

Furthermore, principals emphasise the importance of continuous innovation and improvement within the broader community, as well as the significance of the ethical dimension of their role, as they strive to fulfil their duties according

to the principles of fairness, honesty, and empathy. Sources of dissatisfaction come from inadequate resources, conflicts among teaching staff, and excessive workload.

### *Performance of Duties and Leadership Tasks*

Headteachers were asked to rate their compliance with current legislation in their performance of leadership tasks. Over 95% of principals stated that they fully comply with all legal requirements. Additionally, they reported having difficulty fulfilling responsibilities that can be framed within an instructional leadership model. These tasks are significantly more challenging for males and principals aged 40 to 49. As Cantón and Arias (2008) point out, the discharge of these duties is seen as particularly challenging due to a generalised lack of professionalisation of leadership posts.

Duties related to their role as representatives of the central administration are also difficult for those headteachers with a leadership experience ranging from 5 to 8 years. According to more than 50% of respondents, building relationships with different stakeholders has been extremely challenging. Even though it is one of the duties that they are supposed to fulfil more often, institutional representation is the aspect they deem least important. A further 93% of principals mentioned that managing time is one of the most challenging aspects of their job. Time management is often the major cause of managerial stress (Vázquez Recio, 2002).

As expected, the largest number of leadership tasks relate to the support, advice, and motivation of teaching staff, since these are considered the essential pillars in the operation of successful schools. There is also a range of tasks that are directed toward students such as teaching, participation in school assemblies, monitoring of teaching and learning, and attending evaluation meetings. Additional duties include maintaining regular contact with the PTA and promoting joint activities with the purpose of getting families involved in the school. Other common administrative duties include presiding over the school council and overseeing academic events. On the other hand, headteachers are less likely to set up networks with other schools – principals do not see the benefit of communicating with other schools or with the broader community, since they do not think that this will improve academic results.

Organisational and operational tasks are perceived as the most challenging by principals aged 40 to 49. As managerial experience increases, HR related tasks such as recruitment or discipline are perceived as less challenging. The perception of difficulty in fulfilling these tasks is significantly lower among female headteachers and those over 60.

According to our respondents, the distribution of leadership tasks within the management team is one of the most significant components of effective leadership. Nevertheless, it appears that the shared leadership elements referred to by headteachers are limited to their own management team rather than a true distributed leadership open to the entire community.

Headteachers rated their own commitment to school improvement as very high. According to principals, teachers and families usually demonstrate lower levels of commitment. They recognised, however, that one of the most significant factors in the success of their schools is the high expectations placed on students. Results suggest that the ability of school leaders to manage schools with a creative vision and strong sense of empowerment needs to be reinvigorated in order to reduce the level of mistrust and fatigue found in more experienced school leaders. To foster and maintain commitment in the educational community, it is important to establish and nurture bidirectional relationships (Bazarra, 2012) and involve individuals from diverse groups with the objective of transforming the school into an authentic learning community (Gairín, 2011).

### *Professional Development*

In general, more experienced headteachers did not receive initial training, yet they value continuing professional development very highly. Headteachers who had received some form of initial training rate it as satisfactory, even though it did not seem to have a great impact on improving student outcomes.

Participants reported receiving additional training as part of their ongoing professional development. In their opinion, the most valuable part of their CPD activities is the potential application of their training to their current context, while the least valuable aspect is the actual impact – or lack thereof – on student performance. Consequently, this is an aspect that should be considered when designing future professional development programmes.

Each principal's training needs are dependent on their personal characteristics – especially age and previous leadership experience – and are correlated with the stages of adaptation, stability, and self-realization that every headteacher experiences. In other words, training should become more diverse and concrete, as their experience in the role increases. In particular, headteachers expressed a need for continued professional development in three areas: management-related issues, staff-related matters, and knowledge of legislative frameworks. Results are consistent with previous studies conducted by Vázquez Recio (2002) and Padilla (2008). Interestingly enough, these topics are already included in the training provided by the central administration. How these courses are designed, taught, and assessed should therefore be revisited in the short to medium term. Furthermore, as noted in a recent study by Cabrera Lanzo et al. (2021), the use of self-learning strategies, such as online learning, should be utilised and properly supported by the administration as part of an on-going and non-linear professional development programme.

Most headteachers are very much aware of the difficulties in developing pedagogical or instructional leadership models. Thus, professional development should equip principals with leadership skills to facilitate the development of wider relations with the community, as well as collaborative networks among headteachers. With no such resources, it is very easy to fall into purely bureaucratic management models. Principals also emphasised the need for further training in areas such as stress management, time management, and organisational skills. In addition, they harshly criticised the financial cuts suffered by schools in recent years, as well as the need to increase financial, material, and human resources (additional staff and administrative support).

### *Leadership Models*

Principals are limited in their use of pedagogical leadership strategies due to the current legal framework. Bolívar (2019) notes that Spanish headteachers have only limited autonomy and are unable to take appropriate action when needed. In addition, Mellado et al. (2017) point out that headteachers lack appropriate training to implement a learning-centered leadership model.

The development of pedagogical leadership models remains an unresolved issue in the Spanish context. The long and latent transition from an administrative to a post-bureaucratic management model has resulted in a succession of regulatory reforms (organisational, structural, etc.) that have never materialised in practice. Therefore, certain aspects remain highly controversial. These include a) the transient itinerary of leadership posts, which implies that headteachers will return to their teaching duties after their leadership period; b) leadership positions limited to four years; c) a lack of autonomy in decision-making processes.

From an academic perspective, there have been suggestions for improving the managerial function and the status of school leaders in Spain (Moral & Amores, 2014). A variety of strategies have been considered, including a) equipping headteachers with a pedagogical approach conducive to effective practices; b) providing greater support and supplementary resources; c) increasing the level of professionalisation and training; and d) strengthening disciplinary powers. As discussed in López Rupérez et al.'s (2022) recent review on pedagogical leadership in secondary schools, principals need to devise strategies with the aim of establishing an effective pedagogical leadership that is suited to this particular level of instruction. It may be beneficial to intervene in training areas that, according to the available evidence, may have the greatest impact on improving student outcomes. For instructional leadership to be viable and effective in secondary education, it is essential to encourage collegiality, as well as a clear and visible involvement of the school principal.

When attempting to put these suggestions into practice, a series of obstacles were soon identified. From a structural point of view, the traditionalist inertias embedded in Spanish schools slowed down or prevented progress towards change and improvement. In addition, teachers' resistance to the supervision of their functions (Beltrán de Tena et al., 2004) adds another dimension to the debate about the formal or moral authority of principals. It is evident that in this context, no regulation is in place that empowers headteachers to make decisions about instructional aspects and foster innovation.

This study has also highlighted that Spanish principals need to make more decisive use of shared leadership strategies. Mellado et al. (2017) point out the significance of creating shared educational purposes and goals, as well as supporting headteachers who transform their schools by providing appropriate learning spaces. Additionally, these authors emphasise the importance of fostering a positive institutional climate and building learning communities to ensure the well-being of teachers and headteachers. Egido (2015) also notes that instructional leadership has a positive impact on student success by creating a common and shared project, enhancing student-teacher relations, introducing innovations in the teaching-learning process, and keeping administrative burdens low. Along these lines, García-Garnica and Caballero (2019) highlight the benefits of a shared leadership in encouraging student commitment to learning, motivating improvement processes, informing permanent teacher training, and promoting better working conditions. For this to happen, headteachers must have greater autonomy in decision-making processes.

It is also worth considering the possibility of developing participatory leadership models that are linked to different levels of autonomy within a school, allowing for a contextualised, non-standardised type of leadership. In addition, the implementation of new policies must take into account improvements in student achievement as well as public perception. At present, the promotion of school leadership is a systemic issue that demands resolute action, taken both from a funding perspective as well as from a professional development point of view.

### **Conclusion**

Current headteachers are expected to lead in a climate of change while being accountable to their own colleagues, the Administration, parents, and the wider community. They must also ensure that educational reforms are appropriately implemented. Studies focusing on school leadership in a highly contextualised manner should be a contributing factor to the improvement of educational leadership.

This study has explored the leadership practices of a sample of secondary school principals in the Madrid region. It has provided some insights not just on their professional profile, but also on the performance of leadership tasks and the different elements that define their leadership style.

Results revealed that instructional leadership in Spain is still seen as a challenging goal for principals. This is closely in line with the bureaucratic nature of the headship role in Spanish schools (Cantón & Arias, 2008; García Olalla et al., 2006). Spanish headteachers perform a range of leadership duties such as supporting teaching staff, managing resources strategically, collaborating with other stakeholders, and setting and assessing educational goals. Other practices, however, are rarely performed due to the difficulties inherent to a highly bureaucratic system. These include the supervision of teaching staff, the introduction of curriculum changes to improve teaching and learning, income supplementation, disciplinary action for teachers who fail to meet their responsibilities, and participation in school networks that facilitate the sharing of good practice.

Results have also revealed that there is a certain desire in headteachers to use some distributed strategies and share responsibilities among members of the school community. These include the provision of opportunities for development, and the creation of collaborative teams to address educational concerns and encourage community involvement. It appears, therefore, that a transition is taking place towards a leadership model that gives greater importance to the promotion of a cooperative culture in which decisions and responsibilities are shared.

In terms of professional development, more training opportunities are needed at different career stages to develop the skills needed to effectively lead schools in a changing environment. Some of the biggest challenges relate to curricular issues (student support and achieving good overall results), organisational issues (disciplinary issues, relations with students, and the local community), and personnel issues (absenteeism, student motivation). As the number of years in compulsory education increases, the conditions in which schools fulfil these tasks have become more complex. Nowadays, it is important to respond to a diverse student population and overcome the challenges these differences create.

It is also clear that the Spanish administration needs to take action and implement measures that will make leadership roles more attractive to qualified candidates. Although some principals may consider a leadership role as an appealing option, their motivation derives primarily from intrinsic reasons, such as personal development and educational improvement. To develop efficient leadership practices, it is not enough to have well-trained headteachers and attract good candidates; it is also crucial for educational policies to develop actions that facilitate and promote the performance of leadership tasks. Currently, the Spanish administration has begun taking some of these steps; however, successful leadership that leads to real improvement demands a higher degree of independence and autonomy.

This study has highlighted that school principals are aware of the importance of their roles in improving the quality of learning for all students. Furthermore, it is vital that policymakers promote initiatives to support and redefine the nature of leadership duties, providing adequate training opportunities for the entire management team, and turning leadership roles into an attractive profession with a selection procedure based on clear professional criteria.

## **Recommendations**

### *Recommendations for the Spanish Administration*

- I. Clearly define the role of headteachers. Currently, principals act as representatives, mediators, disciplinarians, teachers, etc. This clearly limits how much time a principal can spend on tasks associated with instructional leadership.
- II. Headteachers should be given meaningful autonomy within their schools. Although the necessary channels of accountability must be established, principals must be given real autonomy over the day-to-day operations of their schools.
- III. Review the appointment process for leadership posts. Most positions are filled through a competitive process, but 90% of the time there is only one candidate for each position. This means that applicants are selected through a competitive model but without real competition, which indicates a low level of appeal to teachers.
- IV. Introduce an incentive system for headteachers. Financial incentives do not necessarily attract teachers who wish to take on a leadership role nor do they motivate them to do so. As a result, the incentives proposed here are related to the specific needs of the schools, such as increases in the budget for specific areas, etc.
- V. Redesign management training programmes. More dynamic and personalised training programmes are needed for headteachers. Currently, most training programmes focus on the legal and normative aspects of the leadership role. Rather, training should be tailored to the needs of headteachers, i.e., individualised and flexible programmes that are adapted to different learning contexts and needs. In an attempt to foster distributed leadership in schools, all employees should have access to training, not just managers.

### *Recommendations for Universities*

- I. Teacher training courses need to be reviewed in terms of their curriculum content and include management and leadership skills as part of initial teacher training. All teachers, regardless of their position, must exercise a certain level of leadership in their own classrooms.

- II. Encourage universities to be responsible for leadership training. Coordinate certain aspects, such as hours, content, evaluation, etc., to enable standardization.
- III. Encourage research and innovation projects in schools to promote educational improvement.

#### *Recommendations for Schools*

- I. Collaborate with other educational institutions. Share resources and expand capabilities. Analyse the needs of the environment and develop joint solutions.
- II. Rethink communication between schools and families. Promote a more active and close communication with families by utilising ICT tools and social media.
- III. Collaborate with the educational community so that a common line of action is ensured. School projects must involve not only teaching staff, but also students, parents, and the rest of the community.

In terms of recommendations for future research, there is a clear need for additional empirical studies in Spanish regional contexts. It would be highly beneficial to focus on different geographical areas, and examine the impact of certain variables, such as rural versus urban schools, which I assume would have a statistically significant influence on the type of leadership practices adopted by headteachers. Moreover, it might be interesting to investigate leadership practices in highly successful Spanish schools. Using a case study approach, one could analyse how and to what extent successful practices are developed. By understanding how tasks are delegated, we could gain a clear insight into how pedagogical responsibilities are distributed. In addition, it would be beneficial for future studies to include other faculty members (head of studies, secretary), as well as teaching staff. Potential applications of this type of research could result in the design of a training programme aimed at Spanish principals. By using different training pathways that combine both theoretical and practical knowledge, the programme would centre on the development of those leadership skills needed to implement effective practices.

#### **Limitations**

Due to the temporal constraints involved in this project, a purely quantitative approach was adopted. A mixed methods approach reliant on the use of semi-structured interviews and a qualitative analysis should provide additional insights into some of the themes included in this study.

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## Appendix

### Online Questionnaire (English version)

#### *School background information*

Q1 is your school private or publicly managed? Select one of the options below

- Public
- Private
- *Concertada* (partially subsidised)

Q2 Please indicate the total number of students enrolled in your school in 2021/22

Q3 Please indicate the total number of members of staff

Q4 Please indicate the percentage of students with

- Special needs (diagnosed)
- Learning difficulties
- Low social economic background

Q5 Members of the school leadership team (select all those that apply)

- Headteacher
- Deputy Head (*Jefe de Estudios*)
- Secretary / Registrar (Secretaro)
- Other

Q6 Student results in 2020/21. Please provide the following data

- Percentage of students who passed their year
- Percentage of student who failed
- Percentage of students who were promoted by did not pass the previous year

#### *Headteachers: background information*

Q7 Age

Q8 Gender

Q9 Indicate your previous professional experience in years

- As Headteacher
- As Deputy Head (*jefe de Estudios*)
- As Secretary
- As Coordinator
- As teacher
- Other roles

#### *Appointment to a leadership role*

Q10 How were you appointed to your leadership position? Select one of the options below

- Competitive process with several candidates
- Competitive process – only one candidate
- Extraordinary / ad hoc appointment by the administration

Q11 Did any of the following reasons motivate you to apply for a leadership position? Please rate from 1 to 5 (highest)

- Improve the effectiveness of the school 1 2 3 4 5
- Financial reasons 1 2 3 4 5
- Have more autonomy 1 2 3 4 5
- Have more decision power 1 2 3 4 5
- Social prestige 1 2 3 4 5
- Have more contact with the education community 1 2 3 4 5
- Fostering innovative projects 1 2 3 4 5

Q12 Any other reasons not mentioned above that you would like to mention?

#### *Professional development*

Q13 Did you receive any training before being appointed to your leadership role? Give details

Q14 Have you received any training after your appointment? Give details

Q15 Can you please rate the following dimensions according to the training received from 1 to 5 (highest)

- Overall satisfaction 1 2 3 4 5
- Learning 1 2 3 4 5
- Behaviour 1 2 3 4 5
- Impact 1 2 3 4 5

Q16 What kind of training would you like to receive in future? Please give details

*Skills and Character traits*

Q17 Can you please rate the following skills from 1 to 5 (Highest) depending on how important they are to you when performing your leadership role?

- Adaptability to change 1 2 3 4 5
- Communication 1 2 3 4 5
- Emotional control 1 2 3 4 5
- Autonomy 1 2 3 4 5
- Teamwork 1 2 3 4 5
- Leadership 1 2 3 4 5
- Organisation 1 2 3 4 5
- Problem solving skills 1 2 3 4 5
- Interpersonal relations 1 2 3 4 5
- Self-management 1 2 3 4 5
- Ethical commitment 1 2 3 4 5
- Resilience 1 2 3 4 5
- Orientation towards learning 1 2 3 4 5
- Enthusiasm 1 2 3 4 5

Q18 Select three traits from the list and rank them in order of importance and relevance in the performance of your leadership role.

- Effective manager
- Dynamic
- Team player
- Innovative
- Charismatic
- Reflective
- Creative
- Autonomy
- Other \_\_\_ give details

*Leadership tasks and duties*

Q19 To what extent do you perform the following duties and what degree of difficulty do you face when doing so?

- Representative of the central administration 1 2 3 4 5
- Instructional leadership 1 2 3 4 5
- School organization and day to day operations 1 2 3 4 5
- Liaise with the educational community 1 2 3 4 5
- Management of staff 1 2 3 4 5
- Management of financial resources 1 2 3 4 5

Q20 To what extent do you perform the following duties and what degree of difficulty do you face when doing so?

- Chair school board and academic events 1 2 3 4 5
- Lead and promote the educational project of the school 1 2 3 4 5
- Manage and monitor procedures and operations 1 2 3 4 5
- Promote and develop appropriate channels of communication with PTA 1 2 3 4 5
- Appraisals and performance monitoring 1 2 3 4 5
- Manage financial resources in accordance with approved budget 1 2 3 4 5

*Leadership models*

Q21 On average throughout the school year, what percentage of time in your role as a principal do you spend on the following tasks in this school? Rough estimates are sufficient. Please write a number in each row. Write 0 (zero) if none. Please ensure that responses add up to 100%. (Question taken from TALIS 2013)

- Administrative and leadership tasks and meetings including human resource/personnel issues, regulations, reports, school budget, preparing timetables and class composition, strategic planning, leadership and management activities, responding to requests from district, regional, state, or national education officials \_\_\_\_\_%
- Curriculum and teaching-related tasks and meetings including developing curriculum, teaching, classroom observations, student evaluation, mentoring teachers, teacher professional development \_\_\_%
- Student interactions including counselling and conversations outside structured learning activities, discipline \_\_\_\_\_%
- Parent or guardian interactions including formal and informal interactions \_\_\_\_\_%
- Interactions with local and regional community, business, and industry \_\_\_\_\_%
- Other \_\_\_%

Q22 Please indicate how frequently you engaged in the following in this school during the last 12 months. Please mark one choice in each row (Question taken from TALIS 2013) by selecting never, sometimes, often or very often.

- I collaborated with teachers to solve classroom discipline problems.
- I observed instruction in the classroom.
- I took actions to support co-operation among teachers to develop new teaching practices.
- I took actions to ensure that teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills.
- I took actions to ensure that teachers feel responsible for their students' learning outcomes.
- I provided parents or guardians with information on the school and student performance.
- I checked for mistakes and errors in school administrative procedures and reports.
- I resolved problems with the lesson timetable in this school.
- I collaborated with principals from other schools.

Q23 How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements as applied to this school? Please mark one choice in each row by selecting strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree (Question taken from TALIS 2013).

- This school provides staff with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions.
- This school provides parents or guardians with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions.
- This school provides students with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions.
- I make the important decisions on my own.
- There is a collaborative school culture which is characterised by mutual support.

Q24 During this school year, does this school provide any of the following to parents or guardians? Please mark one choice in each row (Y/N) (Question taken from TALIS 2013)

- Workshops or courses for parents or guardians.
- Services to support parents' or guardians' participation, such as providing childcare.
- Support for parental association(s)
- Parental meeting(s)

Q25 Please indicate the frequency that each of the following occurs in this school following a teacher appraisal. Please mark one choice in each row (never, sometimes, most of the time, always)

- Measures to remedy any weakness are discussed with the teacher.
- A development or training plan is developed for each teacher.
- If a teacher is found to be a poor performer, material sanctions such as reduced annual increases in pay are imposed on the teacher.
- A mentor is appointed to help the teacher improve his/her teaching.
- A change in a teacher's work responsibilities (e.g., increase or decrease in his/her teaching load or administrative/managerial responsibilities)
- A change in a teacher's salary or a payment of a financial bonus
- A change in the likelihood of a teacher's career advancement
- Dismissal or non-renewal of contract

Q26 How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements as applied to this school? Please mark one choice in each row (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) [Question taken from TALIS 2013].

- The school staff share a common set of beliefs about schooling/learning.
- There is a high level of co-operation between the school and the local community.
- School staff have an open discussion about difficulties.
- There is mutual respect for colleagues' ideas.
- There is a culture of sharing success.
- The relationships between teachers and students are good.

*Degree of satisfaction*

Q27 Please rate your degree of satisfaction with the following items (5 being the highest)

- Level of commitment of teaching staff 1 2 3 4 5
- Student collaboration in school project 1 2 3 4 5
- Opportunities to develop innovative educational projects 1 2 3 4 5
- Social recognition 1 2 3 4 5
- Tasks performed by the leadership team 1 2 3 4 5
- Communication with parents 1 2 3 4 5
- Procedures for managing resources 1 2 3 4 5
- Support from the central administration 1 2 3 4 5
- Relationship between leadership team and teaching staff 1 2 3 4 5
- Links with the wider community 1 2 3 4 5
- Overall quality of teaching and learning 1 2 3 4 5
- Level of autonomy 1 2 3 4 5
- Other \_\_\_\_\_ please give details

*Impact on academic results*

Q28 Which of the following factors have a more positive impact on student results in your school? Select a maximum of 3, 1 being the most important variable.

- Low turnover of teaching staff
- Organisational autonomy
- Improvement in the quality of teaching and learning
- Parent and family support when implementing changes
- Development of a sense of belonging to the school community
- Networking and collaboration with other schools
- Promoting exchange of best practice among teaching staff

Q29 Any other comments not addressed above that you would like to make? \_\_\_\_\_