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The Spanish Model of Teachers as School Leaders: Social Justice for Inclusion and Sustainability

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Abstract

In Spain teachers can take on variety of leadership roles. One of the most important is the tradition of selecting the principal from among the school's teaching staff. The teacher candidate proposes a program for school improvement and serves for one or two periods as principal before returning to the teaching role. This system ensures teacher leadership by requiring that the principal have classroom experience and a teacher's perspective. Teachers exercise leadership by taking a turn at administration. In this article, we present the findings of research on aspects of teacher leadership using the framework of social justice. We conducted a basic qualitative analysis of interviews with teachers who became principals in five primary and secondary educational institutions in Catalonia, Spain. We examined how these principals viewed issues of social justice and what support strategies enabled them to confront the challenges posed by increasingly diverse educational environments. We identified a gap in the training programs for teachers who become school leaders, as they do not encompass aspects related to transition and leadership handover or inclusion processes, which may impact the sustainability of educational initiatives.

Keywords: Principals; teacher leaders; training programs; transition; social justice; inclusion; sustainability

The aim of schools in a democratic society is to educate for equity and maximize the development of all students without exception (Antúnez, Silva & Salter, 2019). Educating to promote diversity, equity and inclusion is a professional challenge for teachers in the classroom, and they also have a role to play as teacher leaders in the school. This article will address the Spanish model for teacher leadership in Catalonia.

We begin with a review of the challenge of immigration in Catalonia and the need for a social justice lens (Farreras, 2025). Teacher leaders have an important role to play in what can be described as participative, cultural, and distributive justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003). The research questions focus on how a sample of teachers' view issues of social justice when they assumed the role of principal, what support they received, and how they planned for their succession to the next teacher leader.

Before hearing their voices in the results section, we describe the Spanish management model for teachers to become principals, and how they make the transition. Then we define teacher leadership to include collaborative action research and the formation of communities of practice, and professional learning communities.

In the Methodology section we describe a qualitative phenomenological study that was an analysis of interviews with teachers who became principals in five primary and secondary educational institutions in Catalonia (Spain). In the Results section we report how these principals coped with issues of social justice and what support strategies enabled them to confront the challenges posed by increasingly diverse educational environments. We identified a gap in the training programs and make recommendations for teachers who become school leaders in the concluding section.

Immigration in Catalonia, Spain

Spain is separated into 17 autonomous communities. Catalonia is an autonomous community of eight million residents. It has become a destination for people migrating from North Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and several Asian countries. Approximately 40% of these people do not have the resources to be self-sufficient (Catalan Social Action Entities ECAS, 2020).

Of the immigrants with jobs, many only have a temporary employment contract and lack housing, and education. They struggle to learn a new language and strive to become part of the community. These migratory phenomena have had serious social consequences. Especially in neighborhoods with a high concentration of families in difficult economic and social situations.

These social changes have led to an increase in the responsibilities and demands for educational leadership at the school level. New challenges demand new professional practices, especially when it comes to carrying out tasks that are not included in the functions that educational laws traditionally assign to principals (Gil-Espinosa, et al., 2024). Teacher leadership is one of the ways that Catalonian schools can respond to issues of social justice.

Social Justice Framework

The core principals of social justice should be those that are typical of democratic countries. Respect, freedom, justice and social cohesion, equality, equity, inclusion, sustainability, legality, participation and transparency are among the most important. Wenner and Campbell (2017) noted a lack of attention to social justice in teacher leadership. Projects may improve schools by focusing on what makes them run more efficiently, but there are more profound needs to be addressed from persistent gaps in achievement that result in disadvantages for students of color (Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey, & Woessmann, 2019). These differences can be approached by using a social justice lens.

Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) defined three types of social justice. Participative justice refers to the right of people to participate in decisions. Cultural justice has to do with respect and recognition of people as members of a group. Distributive justice relates to overcoming social and economic inequalities.

The Spanish Management Model for Teachers to Become Principals

The management model in public schools in Catalonia (Spain) is expressed in the regulations (Law 12/2009, developed in Decree 155/2010 and Decree 29/2015). Access to the position is made through a merit-based competition among the candidates who for the most part are teachers of the school itself.

The Transition from Teacher Leader to Institutional Leader

Candidates must meet the following requirements: (a) have at least five years' seniority as a career civil servant; (b) have taught directly for a period of the same duration in primary or secondary schools; c) have competence in the Catalan language; d) have the certification accrediting that they have passed a training course on the exercise of the managerial function, authorized by the Catalan Education Administration or those of other Spanish Autonomous Communities; and e) must make a management plan for an initial period of four years (Decree 29/2015).

This action plan includes all areas of school management: academic, administrative, economic, governance, relations with the environment, etc. It constitutes a commitment of the candidate with the management team with the entire school community (Antúnez & Güell, 2019; Montero, 2007).

The selection of candidates

In each school, the selection is carried out by a commission. It is made up of four representatives of the central education administration and one representing the local authority, a person from the school board who is not a teacher, usually a parent of a student, although it could be a student in the second cycle of secondary education (over 16 years of age); three teachers of the school elected by the faculty, one of the four representatives of the central education administration, who is an inspector, chairs the commission.

The selection process is governed by the principles of equality, merit, ability, suitability and publicity. To evaluate the candidacies, the following are objectively considered: a) academic merits; b) the merits related to the professional competence and experience of the applicants in the field of management and teaching; c) the positive assessment of the previous work carried out in a managerial position, where appropriate, and of the work carried out as a teacher; d) the candidate's leadership capacity; and e) the assessment of the management plan.

Continuity or succession

At the end of the first four years, the principal may choose to continue in office for three more successive periods of four years for a maximum of 16 years in total, provided that the principal's work has been positively evaluated with an update of the management plan. The leader and the teachers of the school decide together whether he continues or a successor is sought as principal.

The dismissal of the principal from his position occurs for the following reasons: end of the term of office, personal resignation, order of the educational authorities for failure to perform duties or supervening physical or mental incapacity.

The implementation of the model in Catalonia, has not managed to stabilize the permanence of principals in office during all those years, or even for a reasonable period. Changes are very frequent. Consequently, the relays and transition and succession processes are also important. These are events that, due to various circumstances, occur more frequently than would reasonably be expected (Antúnez, 2002; Aramendi & Teixidó, 2010). It can be deduced from the successive annual reports of the State School Council. Costa (2021) accurately lists and details a good number of these causes. Some coincide with the most common ones identified by Murillo and Pérez (1998). Among them is that the greater the frequency of the replacements, the fewer applicants apply for the position because they are aware of the setbacks of the managerial function.

There is a general consensus in studies on new managers, especially if they are taking up the position for the first time. It is common for them to suffer to varying degrees the negative impact of a clash with reality (Antúnez & Silva, 2024; García Garduño, Slater & Gorosave, 2011). The reality of managerial practice is not always what they imagined, perhaps naively, and that even the collision is experienced as a traumatic experience, often accompanied by a feeling of professional isolation and loneliness.

Frequent changes are also very common in international contexts (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011) and the reasons are similar to those of Spain. Taylor and Youngs (2018) list the main causes that deter and reduce the pool of potential aspirants to leadership: a) prioritizing the family; (b) safeguarding health; c) concerns about bureaucracy, paperwork and workload; and d) reluctance to move away from teaching and they remind us of another reason that, less obvious at first glance, explains them in the present times. They refer to the significant and imminent burnout of talent that occurs as *baby boomers* retire, which places the need for succession planning in management positions as a strategic issue.

Wildy and Clarke (2008) mention that the obstacles to accessing the position are based on the fear of facing four key challenges: dealing with the place (everything that happens in the school and in its context); dealing with people (students, teachers, families, supervisors, social community, etc.); dealing with the system (Administration) and dealing with oneself (insecurity, lack of preparation, motivations, etc.).

Prior teaching experience is an important factor for new school principals in the Spanish leadership model. This professional background provides them with a profound understanding of the school environment, classroom dynamics, and the specific needs of students and teachers. Having previously served as educators, new school principals are better equipped to tackle leadership challenges from an empathetic and effective perspective, thereby fostering communication and collaboration within the educational community. Moreover, this experience equips them with the skills necessary to manage interpersonal relationships, administrative bureaucracy or emotional competences (Antúnez, Silva & Salter, 2019).

Defining Teacher Leadership

The field of teacher leadership has developed relatively recently. York, Barr and Duke (2004) reviewed the literature at the beginning of this century and noted a lack of a consistent definition. Teacher leaders could be working on a variety of different projects with different titles and objectives.

Schott, van Roekel, and Tummers (2020) completed a systematic review of literature on teacher leadership to update both Wenner and Campbell's (2017) and York, Barr, and Duke's (2004) reviews and called for more conceptual clarity. Wenner and Campbell (2017) noted that teacher leadership had started with small individually initiated projects and moved on to be a part of whole school reform. They argued that there was a lack of attention to social justice, which should be at the heart of teacher initiatives. There has also been a lack of clarity and continued debate about how to define teacher leadership (Cheung, Reinhardt, Stone, & Little, 2018).

Berg and Zoellick (2019) reviewed the literature to arrive at four considerations for teacher leadership: the legitimacy that gives teachers the authority to influence others, the support that they need to be successful, the objectives of their work, and the methods they use. On an international level, Nguyen, Harris, and Ng (2019) synthesized studies between 2003 and 2017 to determine what was currently known about the nature, practice, conditions and impact of teacher leadership.

They stressed the centrality of influence as a variable in teacher leadership with trust and collaboration at the heart of the process. The intent of the process is to improve instructional quality, school effectiveness, and student learning. They found five key elements that influence the quality of teacher leadership: school culture, school structure, principal leadership, peer relationships and person-specific factors.

Wenner and Campbell (2017) defined teacher leaders as, "…teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (p. 140). This definition would include the Spanish model in which teachers spend most of their time as administrators during their term as headteacher. Continuing their craft in the classroom takes advantage of their instructional perspective. When this type of teacher leadership functions well, it is likely to incorporate collaborative action research, communities of practice, professional learning communities and social justice.

Collaborative Action Research

Teacher leadership has much in common with collaborative action research (CAR). Gordon and Solis (2018) presented studies of collaborative action research (CAR). They explain that CAR began with Kurt Lewin (1948) and was applied to education by Corey (1949). The stages of CAR are selection of the problem, needs assessment, planning, taking action, evaluating, and then repeating the planning, action, and evaluation cycle.

The most critical aspect of the process is the relational trust among group members. They need a reduced workload and embedded training. For this and another reasons, a Royal Decree on training to strengthen management functions is currently underway in Spain (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sport, 2025).

Curry, Mania-Singer, Harris, and Richardson (2018) studied two schools that were following the five phases of action research: analysis, planning, action, monitoring, reflection, and action again. They found evidence for Capobianco and Feldman's (2006) framework that suggested that quality action research programs come from communities of practice with shared goals and values.

They not only make improvements in the school, but they create communities of knowledge (epistemic communities). The participants understood the purpose of their actions, they knew how to pursue research in a practical setting, and they recognized a moral dimension to their work.

Communities of Professional Practice

Wenner and Campbell (2017) cited communities of professional practice (CoP) as a common framework to understand teacher leadership. Wenger (1998) described a community of practice (CoP) that includes the disciplines of domain, community, practice, and convening. The domain is the focus or area of concentration of the CoP. Community refers to the relationships among members and how they think and act in common ways. Practice includes the routines and artefacts that have emerged from members working together. In Catalonia, we have some experience with CoPs for principals. The study by Gairin, Armengol and Silva, (2013) concluded that convening is the extent to which members take joint responsibility.

Sustained mutual relationships with intertwining identities, the ability to assess one another's work, and a shared discourse were important parts of communities of practice that Wenger studied in business and industry. They are also integral to professional learning communities in the field of education.

Professional Learning Community

In the field of education DuFour and DuFour (2009) have popularized the term professional learning community (PLC), which they define as:

> Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (p. 14).

Professional Learning Communities focus on shared mission, vision, collaborative culture, collective inquiry into best practices, action orientation, commitment to continuous improvement, and a results orientation. Collaborative leadership combined with individual reflection makes people feel valued and allows them to take ownership to implement ideas as members of a team. This means acknowledging diverse points of view and empowering group members (DuFour, 2004). Individual self-reflection accompanies empowerment, when the teacher leader has time to consider feedback and connect practice with theory (Schön, 1983).

Methodology

We conducted a qualitative phenomenological study (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Castillo-López, Romero & Mínguez, 2022). It was designed to understand and interpret the professional practices of school leaders in response to the challenges posed by the new realities of schools such as migration, changes in school dynamics, and attention to values such as social justice, equity, and inclusion. Phenomenology is currently one of the fundamental theoretical bases of qualitative research. Its relevance lies in investigating phenomena from the perspective of people, making it an appropriate methodology for studying the meanings and intentions of those involved in educational practices.

Castillo-López, Romero and Mínguez, (2022), concluded that this type of methodology is particularly relevant to be applied in marginal educational contexts or those of specially vulnerability because it facilitates access to the subjectivity of the participants and their interpretations of reality. Our objective was to understand the professional practices of the leaders themselves. We analyzed them to derive results and conclusions aimed at proposing improvement strategies, Simultaneously, we made recommendations to enhance leadership competencies through training processes.

The research questions for this study addressed social justice, support for teacher leaders and plans for succession. To what extent did teachers view social justice as inclusive and sustainable leadership when they assumed the role of principal? What support did teachers receive as they assumed the leadership role? How did teacher leaders plan for succession beyond their term as principal?

Sample

The sample included five principals, four of whom were primary school principals and one who was a secondary school principal. In our study, purposive sampling was used because the participants were directly relevant to our objective. We ensured that they had specific experiences or characteristics that were essential for a deep understanding of the topic.

This method of sample selection allowed us to include diverse perspectives, capturing different points of view, contexts, and experiences to reflect the complexity of the topic. We were able to optimize resources and time because we focused on the most significant and relevant cases (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Below, we listed some characteristics:

- Principal 1: He has been a school teacher for 19 years, and he has been a principal for 18 years in the same school. He started in management before 2010 and did not require specific training. He recently completed leadership training at the University of Barcelona.
- Principal 2: She was a primary school teacher for 14 years, and she has been a principal for 2 years. She was the middle school coordinator. She completed management training and pedagogical leadership in the Department of Education.
- Principal 3: She was a primary education teacher for 14 years. She has been a school teacher for 12 years and has been a principal for 2 years. She completed management training and pedagogical leadership at University of Barcelona.
- Principal 4: She has been a principal for 20 years, and she came to the school at request of Department of Education with the objective of improving educational results. She has been a principal for 2 years in the same school. She started in management before 2010 and did not require specific training.
- Principal 5: She was a secondary school teacher for 16 years. She has been a school teacher for 15 years in the same school. She has been a principal for 1 year at a different secondary school. She completed management training and pedagogical leadership at Institute of Continuing Education of the University of Barcelona.

Site

We selected three schools located in the metropolitan area of Barcelona that have high concentrations of migrant families. School principal 1 is in a region that has a large concentration of people from Morocco and China. School principals 2 and 3 are located in a municipality adjacent to the city of Barcelona with a population of approximately 15,000 inhabitants. More than 20% of its population is of foreign origin, mainly from South and East Asia and North Africa (IDESCAT, 2024). Principals 4 and 5 are located in the city of Barcelona. All of them have between 350 and 600 students. Table 1 shows general information.

Table 1
Characteristics of the schools

	Schools				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Number of students	440	350	446	312	650
Staff number	32	29	30	23	75
Population of the city	120,000	13,100	24,400	1686,000	1686,000
Population born outside of Catalonia (IDESCAT, 2024)	60,000	4,500	3,066	900,000	900,000

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Data Collection

The main method of data collection was the semi-structured interview with a duration of between 50 and 70 minutes. The interview protocol was reviewed and validated by school principals and experts on the subject. The interviews were carried out in the schools themselves. Participation was voluntary and everyone agreed to the informed consent. The topics discussed with principal interviews focused on training programs, transition, succession, inclusion and sustainability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using Atlas-ti v25 qualitative data software. An inductive process was carried out to identify the units of meaning, categories and core concepts. Five interviews were analyzed, obtaining 22 categories and 4 meta-categories (Sabariego Puig, Vilà & Sandín, 2014). The results and their discussion are presented below.

Results and Discussion

In this section we report the teacher leaders' views of the importance of their experience as teachers, and then we address the research questions.

Actions aimed at inclusive and sustainable leadership

In this section the results of the first question are presented: To what extent did teachers view social justice as inclusive and sustainable leadership when they assumed the role of principal? Careful planning in these times of constant change ensures the sustainability of institutional policies, the continuity of projects, and the possibility of incorporating ideas and approaches that enrich leadership and management (Hargreaves & Fink, 2011).

Leaders highlighted significant shifts when transitioning from teaching to management roles, emphasizing social justice and inclusion as central to their leadership approach. They stressed that teacher leaders who are still in the classroom and who, in the future, want to move into school leadership, will have to demonstrate a strong commitment to addressing diversity by providing tailored support to meet the unique needs of each situation. Their work will be oriented toward driving meaningful change and improvement, supported by well-structured teams, strategic medium- and long-term planning, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Teacher leaders aim to build strong external connections by working collaboratively within networks and engaging with the wider community beyond academic activities, further enhancing inclusion and social justice.

A long-term sustainable vision was also emphasized, with leaders focusing on developing enduring projects capable of achieving lasting outcomes. This required building consensus and securing the support of all stakeholders, including teachers, students, families, and community partners. Through these efforts, teacher leaders placed social justice and inclusion at the core of their management practices, ensuring these principles shaped their strategic and operational decisions.

We have seen teacher leader's ability to adapt to an ever-changing environment does not guarantee the sustainability and institutionalization of educational proposals. A commitment is

required in the medium and long term. Strategic planning and leadership development geared towards social justice and inclusion are indispensable to building education policies that endure and evolve with the needs of the education community (UNESCO, 2009).

The implementation of committed structures and the creation of external links strengthen the support network necessary to give continuity to the educational project of the school and to carry out a succession of management because, as Hargreaves and Fink (2011) point out, once the handover and transition have been carried out, a longer-term phase begins because it includes the preparation of the people who will be the future successors and includes several years of training.

Teacher Experience and Leadership

The Education Law established the foundations for the professionalization of management several years ago (Law 12/2009). This law was deployed, mainly, through Decrees 102/2010 and 29/2015 that point out that one of the key components to professionalize the principalship is training and experience as classroom teachers. The decrees state that this training must be innovative and adjusted to the demands and challenges faced by school principals. Studies such as that of Silva, del Arco and Flores (2018) have shown how, management training has developed leadership competencies.

Training as principals before taking up the position has been a success according to one of the principals: "The training has contributed to the improvement of my work. I believe that it generates commitment to yourself, to the teachers and the management team and has helped me to establish clear and defined goals" (P5).

Having previous experience allowed classroom teachers to face the task with a more situated knowledge because they know the school reality of the needs of classroom teachers, and they know the needs of families. Two of the principals accessed by indications of higher instances before 2010 in 2008.

> I arrived at school and that same year the principal told me, "-I don't want to continue and, as you are one of the few permanent ones in this school, I see you are capable of taking the position". So after a year of being at the center I found this proposal and that's how I agreed.

Previous training was not a requirement at that time, and it caused the principal to dedicate himself to trying to understand the operation, he pointed out that "to be honest in the first years, I dedicated myself to surviving and little else. I entered the principalship with little experience and without any training. A little training ... would have helped me" (P1).

Spending a few years working as a teacher and then working as a principal allowed him to gain authority to influence others, to have the support he needed to succeed and he was able to guide the objectives of his work.

The evaluations of the participants identified that the training they received as principals could be updated. Lifelong learning is necessary. The majority of training programs had uniform and standardized learning content that did not include content related to the analysis of the diversity of specific contexts. Principal 2 said, "I think that the master's degree in directing is only instructive. I have also been doing leadership training for emotional well-being and in the master's degree this topic is addressed only in a very general way" (P2).

Support and collaboration

The second research question could be the heading of this section: What supported teachers as they assumed the leadership role?

Principals alluded to strategies of mutual support of school leaders. They could assist each other in their professional development. The implementation of strategies aimed at professional development has allowed them to be reflective managers who are implementing projects that are coherent with the school reality. This idea coincides with the study carried out by Harris, et.al. (2017). Principal 5 said,

> In order to have good practices it is necessary to reflect on our work, sharing the knowledge and experience that already exists in the school is essential. Learning from others and with others brings us closer together as a teaching team (P5).

There are three key aspects of support that contribute to the Spanish model of training school leaders working more and more and complementing the previous training they receive before entering the position. First inspectors provide support. Segura, Gairin, and Silva, (2020) state that school inspectors can help managerial leadership improve through counseling, evaluation, and supervision. For their part, Antúnez and Silva, (2020) mention that the inspector has elements to diagnose whether the leadership that is being developed in the school is the most appropriate. They have the necessary formal and informal information channels and, above all, direct observation through their frequent visits and face-to-face meetings with principals.

This is what one of the participants commented. "The project is from the school, but the inspector knows it very well and thoroughly. In my opinion, for it to take root in the school, the continuity and support of the inspectors is desirable" (P1). Another of the principals told us that he has not always had good inspectors, but that, currently the service has improved, "I have to say that we are very happy with the inspector, there is very good communication. He explains everything to you, helps you and is very present at school" (P4).

We are convinced that in order for teacher leadership initiatives to take root in the school culture and to motivate other principals to access the position, it is crucial to have inspectors who are not only present, but also actively engaged with the educational community. This collaboration can be a decisive factor in improving the quality of education and fostering a more effective and dynamic working and collaboration environment.

Second, communities of professional practice are a key strength to school leadership. Reflecting on professional practices allows learning from the experience of other people who are in similar situations (Schön, 1983). Experience has taught us that when concerns are shared with colleagues, the dimension is revitalized. The advantages of using and belonging to a professional community of practice (CPP) creates nodes of collaboration and knowledge management. We have experiences that have worked, such as Network of care for families and children in the Raval area [XAFIR by its acronym in Catalan] (Bosco & Iglesias, 2015), which have taught us that continuity is essential. One of its conclusions is precisely that changes affect the achievement of objectives. Therefore, it is necessary to plan its development and think about sustainability because it is an effective tool that benefits schools and is feasible to implement (Cross, 2013).

If we consider that schools are organizations that face increasingly diverse challenges, these CPPs can help people who exercise managerial tasks to advance in the search for solutions,

strategies and concrete proposals (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Some of the topics that principals address in their continuing education seminars are, for example: development of protocols for deploying regulations; "strategies to improve meetings; actions to renew the internal and external image of schools; emotional management, actions to address diversity in classrooms, strategies to promote curricular reforms" (Decree 175/2022).

This strategy constitutes a valuable action for personal and group self-regulation. Seminars promoted by principals and inspectors in schools have made it possible to strengthen knowledge and training. The seminars arose from informal administrative meetings where the main objective was planning and, currently, they have become spaces to review their projects and contrast their own experience with that of other schools.

> We set a day every two weeks. We have an area training program. I like that we do core training, huh! I think this enriches a lot and above all it enriches the experience of all of us as principals together with the Inspectorate (P2).

Third, school principals design and manage their own professional development. Learning from expert colleagues based on individual initiatives is an example to start the journey. Weinstein, et al., (2016) points out that first-time principals tend to attribute greater importance to the help they receive from colleagues in their closest circles than to certain institutional supports that are further removed from their reality. When we asked what actions help principals to lead schools, Principal 4 pointed out:

> The experience of the other colleagues puts you on alert. The fact that they help you with their cases and that they warn you that this is not being complacent but something much more complicated is good because you already know what you are facing. Seminars help us learn through experience and feeling that you are not alone is very comforting (P4).

Reflection on practices and collective learning from similar experiences has enabled principals to find effective solutions to the challenges they face. Through interaction with colleagues, principals not only reinforce their knowledge, but also build a sense of community that helps them face the challenges of a more socially justice-oriented leadership, as Wenner and Campbell (2017) point out.

Succession of Direction and Educational Change

The third research question could serve as the heading for this section: How did teacher leaders plan for succession after their term would end? The immigration crisis creates a key moment for leaders to focus their work on inclusion and sustainability (Farreras, 2025). Sustainability encompasses a series of processes relating to the decisions and actions that are carried out in the school to manage the transfer of the principalship from one person to another. The results obtained coincide with the ideas of White and Cooper (2011) because sustainability is a process of planning and the design of a strategy that ensures a project of continuity and leadership. From the moment the position begins to be exercised, the principal is already thinking about a new cycle of transition that constitutes a continuous cycle of improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). In the case of schools in Catalonia, this process is regulated (Department of Education, 2024). The outgoing principal has to transfer to the incoming principal all administrative and economic documentation.

Transition is often conceived as a momentary episode, a formal ceremony of transfer of powers when, on the contrary, Sorenson, (2005) argues that entry and exit planning is needed along with the time to plan. The principals said that the succession they experienced was not a single administrative action, but a series of actions that lasted over time until the period of adaptation and the transition from the teaching function to the managerial function was accomplished.

Our study aligns with the findings of Hargreaves (2005) and Loken (2023), as principals reported that the transition process involved collaborative decision-making with teachers and the outgoing management team, as well as mentoring from outgoing principals and, in some cases inspectors facilitated their new leadership.

Effective change planning and its implementation as an institutional practice has been reflected throughout the organization and in each of the people who work in it. As identified by Macmillan, Meyer, Northfield (2004), one of the most experienced principals, commented that the cost of effective handover through planning, implementation, guidance and advice is very small in relation to the effects that can be caused by a poorly prepared, poorly implemented, or non-existent process. He pointed out that,

> when there is no time to make an adequate replacement and if I do not have some mechanisms or guidelines to be able to help the person who enters, then it is impossible to make a good managerial succession...on the other hand, if you know that you have finished the mission and you already know that you will leave, then you have time to prepare the person, but otherwise, it is impossible (P1).

This statement coincides with Bartlett (2011) and Gordon and Patterson (2006), in that the impact of managerial transitions varies drastically depending on the conditions that surround them. The leadership of teachers who access management is one of the pillars of any organization. It is necessary to guarantee and generate the conditions so that the decision-making processes respond to the objectives established. in educational projects and to ensure that actions promote continuity and sustainability using resources in the most efficient way possible.

Conclusions

Regarding teacher leadership, we believe that a teacher leader develops a vision of the school, that allows them to better understand classroom dynamics, student needs, family expectations and, above all, collaboration between teachers. This knowledge is key to making informed decisions focused on the well-being of the educational community when they decide to take the lead in a school.

Another element we are interested in highlighting is that by fostering teacher leadership, teachers acquire essential skills such as conflict resolution, team management, strategic planning and effective communication. These skills are fundamental to lead a school in an efficient and collaborative way as highlighted in what will be the new training decree for principals (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Teachers who take on leadership roles may be more open to implementing changes and innovations in the classroom. This ability to innovate is crucial when they move into management roles, as they can drive educational transformations on a larger scale.

We are convinced that strengthening leadership from the teaching stage prepares future principals to face the challenges of school management. The accumulated experience enables them to adapt better to new roles and take on responsibilities more confidently and effectively because they understand the importance of planning with a strategic and sustainable approach.

It is a good thing that, as part of the Spanish model of school management, all people have exercised teaching functions before accessing management, the importance of initial and continuous training is also recognized to enhance professional skills and knowledge of the educational context. Collaboration and knowledge transfer through communities of practice are also positively valued because it helps leaders to increase their influence beyond the walls of the institution, generating a positive impact on the educational community.

We are convinced that, after taking care of the processes of handover and management transition, leaders maintain a long-term vision, ensuring that educational projects are sustainable and viable over time. This perspective will allow educational initiatives to be integrated, little by little and effectively, into the institutional culture, promoting an enriched and sustainable learning environment that benefits all the people who live and work in the school.

The change from being a classroom teacher to being a school principal entails a transformation that requires a deep understanding of the educational landscape. For new principals seeking to assume leadership roles, prior teaching experience and specialized training have been among the most valued aspects in the Spanish model. Having a comprehensive view of classroom dynamics, as well as the needs of students and their families, combined with leadership training, will enable them to develop skills that promote more effective governance in schools. As Spanish society and educational leadership continue to evolve, the training of teacher leaders must center on issues such as inclusion, sustainability, and support for transition processes.

Recommendations

Recommendations resulting from this study include:

- Offer specific training programs focused on inclusive leadership. These programs should equip teacher leaders with strategies to address diversity, equity, and inclusion effectively, first in the classroom and after in the school. The training should cover how to create supportive environments for students with diverse needs, backgrounds, and learning styles.
- Establish formal mentoring programs that connect experienced principals with teacher leaders transitioning into leadership roles. These mentor principals can offer invaluable guidance, support, and practical advice to help address the complexities of school management.
- Provide tailored resources designed to support teacher leaders during this critical transition, focusing on essential areas such as strategic planning, conflict resolution, and effective communication. Emphasize the significance of well-structured succession processes to uphold a long-term vision and ensure the sustainability and continuity of educational projects within the school community.
- Training is crucial before accessing the position, at the beginning of the management period and during its development, however, having experience as teachers and

becoming school leaders is a success of the Spanish model and the people who participated in our study confirmed it. These ideas are in line with the Ministry's new guidelines for the training of school principals (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sport, 2025). Even so, it is too early to draw conclusions about improvements. We can say that the process of strengthening teacher's leadership competences is in progress.

Ethical Statement

The research was carried out respecting the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were duly informed about the objectives, procedures, and possible implications. Documents and interviews were made in a safe and respectful environment. Both the design of the study and its implementation complied with the ethical guidelines of the University of Barcelona.

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