

Schools Principals in Spain: from Manager to Leader

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Abstract

The article carries out a review of school management in Spain and its future lines of development, situating the analysis within the current European educational policies. A peculiar history makes the model of election by colleagues, with little autonomy, outdated and incapable of pedagogically leading the educational effort of the school. Throughout the article, there is a presentation of the tensions and dilemmas of the current school management in Spain: instructional leadership *versus* a leadership more focused on administrative tasks, on the one hand, and a greater capacity to make autonomous decisions *versus* normative regulation by the educational administration mark the main future tendencies in school management in Spain. The author argues that, duly situated and based on the lessons learned at the national and international levels, educational leadership is a tool that can be used to energize the public educational institutions.

Keywords: Schools principals, Educational leadership, Spain, School autonomy

School management is a key factor in school improvement, especially in promoting and managing a good education. There is a certain consensus, backed by the research (Robinson *et al.*, 2009), that schools with a capacity to improve depend, in a significant way, on principals who contribute actively (energize, support, encourage) to helping their schools learn to develop and overcome the challenges and difficulties they face. As described above, school principals in Spain have had few attributions enabling them to exercise educational leadership. A particular organizational culture has meant that the principals are teachers, chosen by their colleagues for a limited period of time, and with a lack of autonomy to make decisions about the teaching and the curriculum. Institutionally, there are serious limitations and a structural inability to design settings that can improve the learning of all the students (Spanish Ministry of Education 2007).

However, influenced by current tendencies that consider educational leadership as a priority (Pont *et al.*, 2009), a *progressive convergence of the educational policy* with educational leadership is beginning to take place. Significant changes are occurring in the principal's role in Spain, and these are already reflected in the new legislative regulations. A transition is underway from a bureaucratic model to one of instructional leadership, leading to an improvement in the learning and outcomes of the school. In this regard, the current *Organic Education Law* (LOE) introduces (art. 132) as a novelty among the competencies of the principal "exercising an *instructional leadership*, promoting educational innovation and fostering plans to achieve the objectives of the educational project of the center". In a similar way, the legislation of the Regions and Autonomous Communities (Andalucía, Cataluña), which have considerable autonomy, limiting ourselves to those that have been passed and published, specify and broaden the exercise of instructional leadership. Thus, the "Decree on the autonomy of schools" of Catalonia (2010a) points out that "the schools' management acquires a role of overall leadership of the action of the public schools".

In a parallel way, an Eurydice (2007) report on the school autonomy reforms in Europe points out, as a general tendency, the progressive increase in decentralization and autonomy in the European countries. The school management, with instructional leadership, has the responsibility of using the autonomy to improve the educational quality of their school. From having few organizational, instructional and management competencies, we are currently engaged in a process of truly broadening this autonomy. Therefore, a critical question in the management and organization of schools in Spain is what the principal can and cannot do to improve the teaching practice of the staff in their classrooms and, as a result, the students' learning (Bolívar & Moreno, 2006).

This article carries out a current review of the tensions and dilemmas of the school management in Spain, between an inherited organizational culture and growing demands for educational leadership. Instructional leadership *versus* a management focused on administrative tasks, on the one hand, and greater capacity to make autonomous decisions *versus* normative regulation by the educational administration, on the other, are the main future debates in school management in Spain. In any case, cultural and historical traditions carry a lot of weight, and proposals cannot be transferred from one country to another, ignoring the school culture. The principals and teachers operate in a certain *context* that

greatly conditions what they can do, and- at times- by which they are trapped. As pointed out by Hallinger, Bickman and Davis (1996), research has not paid enough attention to the influence of the organizational and social contexts on the possible leadership of the principal.

In the current conditions, a role limited to the bureaucratic management of the schools is becoming insufficient. The school's main responsibility is precisely to guarantee the educational success of all its students. The outcome cannot completely depend on what each teacher, with more or less commitment, decides to do in the classroom. Therefore, the school principal inevitably has to participate in improving the teaching and learning offered by the school. This action is currently the topic of some debate in Spain, but in the experiences and international literature (Robinson *et al.*, 2009; Louis, Leithwood *et al.*, 2010), it is becoming more and more obvious: if teachers are the key to the improvement, then principals have to create an appropriate climate in which the teachers can improve, supervising the outcome and encouraging progress. However, as we explain below, in Spain we have a set of challenges pending in going from the current management model to one of leadership for learning (Bolívar, 2006).

1. School management in Spain

School management in Spain has a long history (Viñao, 2005) where the model has been, especially in the high schools, *corporative* (the principal is chosen by and among the teachers or designated by them) and not professional. During the dictatorship, in primary schools the predominant model (1945-1970) was a *hierarchical-bureaucratic model*, filled by teachers after passing a civil servant exam, and giving rise to a body of school principals. From 1970 on (*General Education Law*), a *participatory*, and not professional, management was postulated, where the public administration chose the principal from among a group of three teachers proposed by the teaching staff. In any case, especially in the initial period, the principal was the representative of the administration and also a governmental agent of it, in an authoritarian rather than participatory context. Therefore, after Franco's dictatorship, there was a strong demand for a democratic management of the schools.

The *Organic Law on the Right to an Education* (LODE), passed in 1985 after the dictatorship and with the Socialist Party in power, established the participation of the school community in the functioning and management of the schools (through the "School Board"), as well as the election of the principal from among the teaching staff of the same school. A management model of a *temporal nature* was established that was *participatory* and *collegial* (management team consisting of the principal, head of studies and secretary), but *not professional*, in contrast to the model predominating in other European countries which is professional and permanent. The resulting model of the principal is weak because, on the one hand, he or she has a set of responsibilities, but the control and decision-making functions depend on the Advisory Board of each school. The so-called "School Boards" consist of an organism representing the different groups (parents, students, teachers and management team). In many cases, these boards have become more a formal structure of representation, with low participation by the families in the election processes of representation, than a dynamic platform of a democratic learning community.

The unresolved problem of the school principal has been called the “management issue”, due to the generalized dissatisfaction with the lack of consolidation of the model (Gairín, 1998; Murillo, Barrio & Pérez-Albo, 1999). Thus, the dearth of candidates for the principal’s role has drawn attention to the structural problems in the participatory model of school management. Several reasons have been pointed out: the double role, as a representative of the administration and the school community, as a source of tension and role conflicts, and difficult to reconcile in the same person; the lack of autonomy and authority for decision-making, deficits in preparation/training or economic and professional incentives, excessive bureaucratic tasks, lack of support in fulfilling the role, etc. The management role crisis and the scant participation in the collective organisms of the schools have caused the principal’s role to gradually weaken.

A later Law (*Law on Participation, Evaluation and Governing of the Schools*) in 1996 proposed serious adjustments to this model: conserving the election by the Advisory Board, this choice would be mediated by a series of prerequisites (accreditation of merits and previous training, positive evaluation reports, election by means of a Management Program), trying to bring it closer to a professional model (more time in the position, clarification of responsibilities, professional career and economic incentives). There was, then, an attempt to find a difficult balance between maintaining the elective nature of the post and, at the same time, bringing it closer to a professional model. The idea of a management team proposing a Management Program, presented by the candidate to the Advisory Board, was also reinforced. As Viñao (2005) mentioned:

“In this context, the school principal role fluctuates between its character, which persists, as agents of the Administration in charge of fulfilling and making others fulfill the laws, as well as carrying out the ministerial reforms or ideas of the moment, and that conferred to it by its original legitimacy. A legitimacy that stems from a democratic election that makes the principal owe his or her position to and depend on those who chose him or her. The search for a certain professionalization came to limit and counterbalance this legitimacy without seriously questioning it” (p. 65).

In this situation, various proposals have demanded a professionalization of the school management in Spain (Estruch, 2002) or at least one with a greater capacity for leadership (Alvarez, 2007). But the professionalization of school management can be understood in various ways: a) as a training and qualification of the teaching staff to perform as principal; or; b) as a role different from teaching, which must have specific training as well as its own recruitment process (among teachers or other non-teaching staff). The former emphasizes preserving the participatory and democratic potential, while the latter stresses a more technical role. Due to this tradition in Spain, many people think that rather than “professionalizing the managers” it would be better to “qualify the teachers” so that they can adequately perform the instructional leadership role.

Spain and Portugal have shared a singular (and unique) type of school management within the European Union (Eurydice, 1996; Spanish Ministry of Education, 2007). In both cases, the principal is chosen by his or her colleagues. In Spain, the expectations arising from a

culture of participation have not corresponded to reality. Being “elective” is not always synonymous with being “democratic”, given that it can also be “corporative”. For this reason, it is not the access procedure that guarantees its democratic nature, but rather the way of functioning and how the organization is structured. In this crisis, various causes have coincided: the election mechanisms have not worked to a large extent (40%) due to a lack or scarcity of candidates, with them having- in these cases- to be appointed by the Administration (Aramendi, Teixidó & Bernal, 2010); the inevitable transaction mechanisms with the co-workers who chose the principal do not allow any long-term improvement; finally, it has not produced the exercise of a distributed, shared or democratic leadership in a professional learning community.

In the case of the School Advisory Boards, they have proven to be scarcely operative, because the parents progressively participate very little in electing their representatives (about 14 %, less in the higher educational levels), and due to the fairly formal role of these organs, both in the contents they deal with and in the participation procedures (Fernández Enguita, 1993; Santos Guerra, 1997; San Fabián, 1997). A democratic model that is not the fruit of a shared effort becomes bureaucratic and formalistic. If the functions of the school organisms are limited to passing bureaucratic and routine issues, required at times by the Administration or principal, the participation becomes diluted in formalist meetings, eventually considered as an overload or waste of time. The current challenge is to make the School Advisory Boards, rather than a legitimizing ritual, a chance to engage in authentic participation, which depends more “on the existence of local social spaces in which human actors can learn and exercise the skills of dialogue and debate necessary for the development of a democratic citizenry” (Anderson, 1998: 575) than on representation.

The proposal, presented in the LOGSE (*Organic Law of General Planning of the Educational System*, 1990), of the principal as the instructional leader who supports the school community around a common educational project within an autonomous and decentralized framework, has not taken root. A model of participatory leadership in the management of the schools requires a collaborative culture among the teachers, where the management teams can become the backbone of the collegial dynamic of the school, capable of fostering teachers’ team work as well as the instructional and organizational autonomy of the schools. To exercise instructional leadership, it is necessary to redesign the work contexts and articulate new social spaces, areas of decision-making and dynamics of coherent support, producing a new practice of teaching professionalism. Without these conditions, the principal’s role is perceived as a difficult and unappetizing task, which would explain the lack of candidates (Coronel & Fernández, 2002; Aramendi, Teixidó, & Bernal, 2010).

Election by the school community could allow a greater leadership than imposition by external organs. However, in a context of a neoliberal accountability and performance-oriented society, in which the roles of the school and the participation of the families (more clients than citizens) have been altered, the participatory model presents serious difficulties. The corporative collegial logic impedes the practice of instructional leadership (Bolívar, 2006). Therefore, the new regulation has changed election to “selection”.

The current law (*Organic Education Law*), passed in 2006, tries to combine the professionalism of the candidates with the participation of the educational community in the process. The participatory model is re-established, granting the school community greater power in the selection of the candidates, by means of a commission in which a third of the members are representatives of the teachers, a third are from the School Advisory Board and the remaining third are representatives of the educational Administration. The candidates for principal will have to present, in addition to their curriculum vitae, a management project that includes the objectives and lines of action. At the same time, the role of the School Advisory Board is re-established in the governing of the schools, not just being limited to an advisory capacity, but also participating in decision-making. In this way, an attempt is made to find a balance between the role of the school and the intervention of the Administration, in order to assure the principal's competence and necessary training. The principal's performance, in order to improve the quality of the teaching, will undergo an evaluation procedure that makes it possible to identify problems and improve actions taken. After the positive evaluation of his or her leadership, the principal will be able to earn a specific complimentary wage proportional to his or her years of service.

Although an election with the participation of the different entities is not being debated, there is a demand for a higher level of professionalism, so that it is only possible to transfer these demands to the selection criteria and to serious ongoing training. The problem lies in balancing the principles of participation with the demands for professionalization, while assuring the most appropriate professionals for the role of principal.

2. Autonomy of the schools and educational leadership

In agreement with a growing movement among European educational policies (Eurydice, 2007), the demands for an increase in autonomy in the schools in Spain are continuous and increasing. The latest Education Law of 2006 opened the door to this autonomy, and some educational laws in the Autonomous Communities (Andalusia, Cantabria, Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura) have identified some paths to follow. At the same time, the new legislative regulations (Organic Regulations in Andalusia or the Decree of Autonomy of the schools in Catalonia) make its practice specific. The current challenge is, on the one hand, for these legislative declarations not to remain –as occurred in other cases (Bolívar, 2004)– mere rhetoric by continuing an over-regulation of life in the schools and the professional practices of the teachers. On the other hand, another challenge is for these regulations to contribute to increasing the efficacy and equity of education, instead of emphasizing its inequality. The *Education Law of Catalonia*, one of the most advanced in this matter and based on these ideas, says in its preamble that giving autonomy to the schools,

“has the purpose of making the system more flexible and allowing the creation of networks of schools united by common projects and committed to the systematic improvement of the education. It also implies the acceptance of the diversity of schools and the rejection of uniformity as a value of the educational system”.

Rejecting “uniformity” as a value of the system means opposing a modern idea of French origin (“*égalité républicaine*”), quite rooted in Latin countries, where a requirement for

equality is that all the schools be regulated with the same legislation. But if, as is evident, the management styles, vertical or rational, for producing educational change have been shown to be useless (Fullan, 2001), the only solution is to favor the emergence of autonomous *lateral dynamics* of change that can return the protagonist role to the agents and, thus, achieve a greater degree of sustainability. In any case, there is agreement that autonomy can be a means and incentive for mobilizing the educational and social actors, making the functioning of the public schools dynamic, by means of an institutional identity around common objectives that provide cohesion to the educational activity of the schools.

Moreover, autonomy corresponds to the “new types of regulation” of the public policies in education (Maroy, 2009; Dupriez, & Maroy. 2003). Expressed in a general way, from a bureaucratic-hierarchical regulation ruled by uniform norms for all, and assuring their fulfillment, the movement is toward a *post-bureaucratic regulation*, in which there are very few norms, with an emphasis on the outcomes achieved. In the latter, there is a high level of autonomy, as the important thing is to show the levels of achievement. In the bureaucratic model, school autonomy means lessening the control and delegating certain tasks. In the post-bureaucratic model, school autonomy is linked to the evaluation of schools. This “post-bureaucratic model” has also been called “new public management” or “new governance” in the public services, in this case, education, oriented toward increasing its efficacy.

The report “*School Autonomy in Europe. Policies and Measures* (Eurydice, 2007), which analyzed 30 European countries, points out that the northern European countries give more autonomy to the schools than those in the south, and they also obtain the best results on international evaluations like PISA. Spain, along with Portugal and Greece, is among the countries with more limited autonomy. Meanwhile, the TALIS report of the OECD (2009: 197) shows a management in Spain with little capacity to improve the teaching-learning processes as, according to the perception of the educational agents, it obtains the lowest score on instructional leadership and administrative leadership, falling below the mean.

Without strong instructional leadership, there can be no school autonomy, as pointed out by the OECD (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008). Without doubt, the effectiveness of a teacher in the classroom depends on his or her capacities and commitment, as well as the characteristics of the context in which he or she works and the external setting (social and political). But the creation of an environment, motivations and conditions that favor doing a good job in each classroom is something that depends on the leadership of the principal. In fact, there is usually no revitalization or improvement project in a school that does not have a good management team behind it, even though it may not be a direct protagonist. Therefore, as stated also in a development of the report by the OECD (Stoll & Temperley, 2009),

“School leaders can only have an impact on student outcomes if they have sufficient autonomy to make important decisions about the curriculum and teacher recruitment and development and if their major areas of responsibility are focused on improving student learning. Countries are increasingly opting for decentralised decision making, and balancing this with greater centralisation of accountability regimes such as

standardised testing” (p. 13).

Educational policy has to make it possible for each school to “build” its own autonomy, through its own projects, stimulating the endogenous dynamics of each school, as with the autonomy project-contracts, due to their current high level of support, so that each center constructs its own capacity for development and improvement. In this way, once the action proposals in the educational project of the school have been specified, in a type of “program-contract” autonomy, they must be negotiated and agreed upon with the educational Administration. This idea of the “contract-program” is present in some countries (Portugal, France), proposed in the Education Law of Catalonia (broadly developed in the “Decree of the autonomy of schools”), and included by the Education Ministry in the “*Action Plan 2010-2011*” within General Objective 7, which states as measure 5:

Impulse multi-annual program-contracts, between the educational Administrations and the schools, with the appropriate financing, human resources and necessary materials, and their flexible management, as well as the technical support and teacher training, to specifically achieve the increase in the academic success of the students.

These agreements involve, as a co-responsibility, placing outcomes related to the increase in the students’ academic success at the center of the program (objectives and evaluation). In exchange for the resources provided by the Administration, the school commits itself to applying the action plan agreed on and giving the results to the school community and the educational administration. The eventual renewal of the co-responsibility agreement is subject to the results of the evaluation.

Consequently, in practical terms, school autonomy can be understood as the creation of tools, competencies, supports and means that make it possible for the schools, together with the local setting, to build their own space for development, according to some collectively accepted objectives and a project contracted with the administration or community. Only in this way can the internal development of the schools follow a path that can rebuild and improve education.

Instead of a merely bureaucratic management, as also occurs in other non-educational organizations, there is a demand for more flexible school organizations, capable of adapting to complex social contexts. For this reason, as we have analyzed in other articles (Bolívar, 2000), the organizations with a future are those that have a *capacity to learn to develop* and deal with change. To achieve this, they need, among other things, the autonomy that will allow them to undertake their own projects and learn from the experience, while fomenting the local capacity of each school to improve, providing the necessary resources and fostering a commitment to improvement. None of this will be possible without a redesigning or restructuring of the schools, so that they become true organizations of learning, not only for the students but also for the teachers.

In a parallel way to the crisis of models based on vertical and bureaucratic control, there has been a loss of confidence in externally planned changes to improve education, as demonstrated by the “failure” of the successive reforms. We now trust more in mobilizing the

internal capacity for change (of the schools as organizations, of the individuals and groups) in order to produce an improvement in education. The idea is to favor the emergence of *lateral and autonomous dynamics* for change that can give the lead role back to the agents and- for this very reason- have a greater degree of sustainability. The changes must, then, be initiated from within, preferably in a collective manner, motivating the players themselves in the search for their own development and improvement objectives, as demonstrated by the current experiences and literature on “professional learning communities” (Stoll & Louis, 2007). In this context, the leadership is not restricted to the management team, but rather it is *shared or distributed*, and occupies a privileged position (Harris, 2008).

3. Toward a principal with capacity for educational leadership

Within this situational framework, we can ask what the principals in Spain can or could do to improve the efforts of the teachers in their classrooms and, consequently, the students’ learning. Obviously, it is necessary to go from a “transactional” model, like we the one have had in Spain (Bolívar & Moreno, 2006), in which colleagues choose the principal according to their somewhat corporative interests, to a more “transformational” model, as observed by Leithwood *et al.* (1999), among others. The dependence of the voters, as in politics, makes it difficult to advance in a proactive and transforming manner. Breaking these links of dependence (Fullan, 1998), along with other external regulations, is necessary for educational change.

If the schools should guarantee the basic competencies to all the students, the school principal is there to make this possible. Therefore, the principal cannot limit him or herself to tasks of managing or organizing human resources. He or she must instead devote energy to anything that can produce an improvement in the teaching. However, it is difficult, within the current structures, to exercise educational leadership. The schools as organizations, as the sociology of teaching has clearly shown, are “weakly articulated”, with each teacher functioning independently in his or her classroom. Thus, the opportunities for the principals to supervise what goes on in the classes or exercise “educational leadership” are few or non-existent. The inviolability of the choices and actions made by the teachers in class about what and how they teach impedes any educational supervision by the principal.

The atomization and fragmentation of teaching, with the habitual individualism in the high schools, actually impedes both collaboration and joint evaluation of what is planned at a general level and in the specific practice in the classroom. When the organization is weakly articulated and the individual teaching practices depend on the will of each teacher and the “logic of trust”, talking about instructional leadership becomes scarcely significant, as Elmore (2000) points out, given that the institutional structure, in theory, impedes it. There is resistance by teachers to any type of supervision or orientation of their teaching, based on corporativism and individualism, which translate into non-intervention by the direction. A long tradition, built into the school culture (especially in High School), means that the principal of the public schools does not usually know what occurs in the classrooms, and the information he or she might have usually arrives via indirect routes. Given that isolation is one of the main enemies of improvement, an instructional leadership should contribute to

creating a shared vision of the school.

If the management is limited to making things run well (first level necessary), leadership in a transforming sense means involving others in a goal for change and improvement of the organization. Between resolving the most immediate management tasks and reacting to the numerous administrative requirements (which, paradoxically, have increased and are more complex in recent times) and giving a proactive sense to the collective action, lies the transforming role the management teams can play in the curricular innovation of a school (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). School management is generally mainly transactional or, in other cases, simply reacting to the numerous requirements of the different requests made. The leadership must be directed, therefore, toward transforming the usual ways of teaching into new scenarios of learning. The management team has to juggle between *transaction* with the colleagues and the need for transformation that may be demanded by other parties. In this regard, Elmore (2008) states,

A large part of the practice of improvement for leaders is making the invisible visible. Most people in school leadership positions are more or less socialised to a relatively dysfunctional culture. Part of that socialisation process is learning to take most aspects of the organisation and its culture for granted and to focus on a narrow range of things that the default culture tells you that you *can* do. Part of the process of teaching leaders to actively manage the process of improvement is to make all the implicit rules, norms, and agreements that set constraints on action explicit, and subject to analysis and change.(p.51)

Leadership can be described in relation to two main functions: *providing direction* and *exercising influence* (Louis, Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). These roles can be combined in different ways, giving rise to different models of leadership. When both are designed to improve the learning of the students, we can talk about *educational or instructional leadership*. The issue is, then, which school management practices create a context for better work by the teachers and, together, the whole school, positively impacting on improvement in the students' learning. The principal can perform two main types of actions in this sense: establish a climate or culture that favors professional development (Instructional Climate); and take explicit steps to engage with individual teachers about their own growth (Instructional Actions).

The next agenda in the improvement of the principal's performance, according to the main tendencies in the literature (Day *et al.*, 2009; Macbeath & Nempster, 2009), is leadership focused on learning (*learning-centered leadership*), that is, linking leadership to the students' learning. Learning-centered leadership uses as the core of its action the quality of the teaching offered and the learning outcomes reached by the students. Achieving this is no longer only the job of the principal, as it is a mission distributed collectively among other members of the teaching staff. This context is, according to Elmore (2008),

In an institutional structure in which the governance of schools is increasingly defined

by accountability for performance, leadership is the practice of improvement – like it or not (Fullan, 2005). We can talk about broader, more philosophically-grounded definitions of school leadership, but the necessary condition for school leaders' success in the future will be their capacity to improve the quality of instructional practice (p. 42).

The transformational dimensions of leadership (redesigning the organization), together with the instructional or educational leadership (improvement in the education offered), have converged in the past few years in a *learning-centered leadership* (of the student, the teacher and the school itself as an organization). This perspective is not just one more model among those that have revolved around leadership, but rather it expresses, in the school context, the essential dimension of leadership, whose causal relationship is reflected in various studies (Swaffield & Macbeath, 2009). Leadership for learning implies, in practice, at least five principles (Macbeath, Swaffield & Frost, 2009): a focus on learning as an activity; creating conditions favorable to learning; an explicit dialogue and explicit, debatable and transferable practice; distributed leadership; a shared sense of accountability. The creation of a culture focused on the students' learning requires: promoting cooperation and cohesion among the teaching staff, a sense of a job well done, and developing an understanding and vision of the intended objectives and outcomes.

A broad program of the OECD (*Improving School Leadership*) proposes that the improvement in school leadership goes through four main lines of action: (re)defining school leadership responsibilities; distributing school leadership; developing skills for effective school leadership; and making school leadership an attractive profession. This report points out that the school leadership responsibilities must be redefined for better student learning, recognizing that “the roles and responsibilities associated with improved learning outcomes are at the core of school leadership” (p. 10). One of the main tasks of the school principal is to contribute to improving the teaching practices and professional performance of the teachers, with the final objective of increasing students' learning; that is, a *leadership focused on supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality* is widely recognized as a core component of effective leadership” (Pont *et al.*, 2008: 44).

Leadership practices have changed dramatically in the last two decades, particularly in educational policy contexts, where the schools have greater autonomy and, at the same time, greater responsibility for the academic outcomes (Stoll & Temperley, 2009). As the improvement depends more on each school, and the school, with greater autonomy, must accept responsibility for the results obtained, the educational leadership of the management teams acquires greater relevance. Although the forms and uses of the evaluation of schools according to their students' performance may be debatable, the truth is that they are having an important effect on school management (Elmore, 2005). Therefore, the core of the leadership for learning action is the quality of teaching offered and the learning outcomes obtained by the students. In fact, beyond resolving the everyday administrative issues, the management teams are already developing new practices based on the current demands.

In spite of the aforementioned importance of the school management in improving teaching,

we do not want to attribute causal factors to the role of the principal that do not pertain to it. In this sense, as pointed out by Elmore (2000), it is necessary to *de-romanticize* leadership; that is, stop projecting on it what should be good qualities for organizational functioning and, instead, defend a *distributed leadership* among all the members (Harris, 2008), that contributes to enabling the staff in the improvement process. At the same time, it is important to focus the attention, on the one hand, on fomenting *teacher leadership* (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Harris, 2004) and, on the other, on the schools as *effective professional learning communities* (Stoll & Louis, 2007). The idea is to produce a robust school culture, with involvement of all the agents (including the family and the community) in the process that Kruse and Louis (2008) call “intensification of leadership”. Without building a sense of community that values learning, the leadership will not get very far.

The change in the 21st century involves creating schools that assure all students everywhere the right to an education, understood now as the dominion over those necessary subject matters that allow them to participate in the social life without the risk of exclusion. This change implies a new policy, based on knowledge about how schools improve and, at the same time, capable of mobilizing the energy of the schools and coordinating the different components of the system. As Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) states, “I suggest that this task will require a new paradigm for education policy—one that shifts policymakers’ efforts from *designing controls* to *developing capacity* among schools and teachers to be responsible for student learning and to be responsive to student and community needs and concerns” (p. 6).

All of this has contributed to the fact that instructional leadership in the schools is becoming, at the national and international levels, a first order factor in the improvement of education, as well as a priority in education policy agendas. Diverse international reports demonstrate this trend. On the one hand, the TALIS (OECD, 2009) report analyzes the relevance of a leadership for the learning (chap. 6: “Leading to learn”) of the student, the teachers and the school itself as an organization. The OECD has decided to intervene in this dimension through their program titled *Improving school leadership*, in which Spain participates (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2007). Entering this dimension is justified given that, as stated at the beginning of its study:

“School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling. [...] The above developments and challenges have made school leadership a priority in education policy agendas across OECD and partner countries” (Pont *et al.*, 2008: 9 and 16).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Bolívar (2006), based on a study carried out for the National Institute of Quality and Evaluation (INCE), argues that the current school management model, established in 1985 and with later successive reforms, has not adequately resolved the question of school

management, among other reasons due to the lack of candidates and its non professional nature. It is surprising, then, that educational policy has ignored for so long a group of professionals with such a decisive role in the school outcomes. We are going to point out some conclusions that, according to the previous analyses, can suggest interesting proposals.

In the first place, a prime objective of the educational policies in the 21st century is to guarantee to all the students the necessary learning that allows them, without risk of exclusion, to integrate and participate in public life. School management exists, without doubt, to make this possible. But when it is limited to administrative tasks, without intervening in the teaching-learning processes, it cannot do so. The principal must redesign the work contexts, articulate the individual work of the teachers around a common improvement project, and transform the organization so that the school can guarantee good learning to all students. We need, then, the best principals who can exercise educational leadership, professionalizing their recruitment. Doing this, as suggested in the report by the OECD (Pont *et al.*, 2008), first requires making school leadership an attractive profession. Attracting the best candidates must be encouraged through remunerations, a professional career and training.

Secondly, it is necessary to have *adequate initial and in-service training* to respond to the increase in duties and responsibilities, especially with regard to the skills and strategies needed to improve school outcomes. It is not enough to choose just any teacher for the position, as has occurred up until now. Certain prerequisites of experience and initial training must be called for. Meanwhile, interpreting leadership as a continuum, it will be necessary to organize induction programs and ensure in-service training to cover the different needs and contexts. In this regard, the OCDE report (Pont *et al.*, 2008) devotes chapter 4 to “Developing skills for effective school leadership”, which includes experiences developed in different countries.

School management has been based on a set of regularities that govern the organization of the schools. However, the new management is calling for a change in role that cannot take place as long as the organizational structure remains unaltered. Therefore, autonomy is needed so that, in a transformational way, the principal can organize the curriculum and the teaching staff to achieve improvement in the school outcomes. Autonomy, then, serves school improvement, for which it must be accountable, for example, through “program-contracts”. Making educational or instructional leadership possible requires, then, changes in the current organizational structure of the schools in ways that facilitate the desired actions.

Meanwhile, this leadership is not limited to occupying a formal position at the top of the pyramid, but instead the initiative and influence is distributed among all the members (*distributed or collective leadership*) of the school. Assigning the initiative for change to one person, impeding the leadership of the others, would keep the organization from learning. Based on “organizations that learn”, the need is highlighted to distribute the revitalization tasks among the whole teaching staff, as mentioned elsewhere (Bolívar, 2000). After all, a school’s capacity for change will not depend on the cusp, but rather on diluting the management’s leadership, so that –as a quality of the organization– it produces a shared

multiple leadership among the members and groups. If we want the teachers to take on a more professional role, with leadership roles in their respective areas and settings, they must take on management and authority in their respective contexts. Furthermore, setting up the schools as professional learning communities has indirect effects on the students' learning, especially when the joint work is focused on instruction (Louis, Leithwood *et al.*, 2010: 50).

The principal, as transformational leader, in the formulation by Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach (1999), has some basic goals: to stimulate and develop a collegial climate, contribute to the professional development of the teachers, and increase the capacity of the school to resolve its problems. Other dimensions of this transformational role consist of building a collective vision and setting practical objectives, creating cultures of collaboration and high expectations of levels of achievement, and providing the staff with psychological support and material. The leadership model has three important characteristics (Elmore, 2008):

“(1) It focuses on the practice of improving the quality of instruction and the performance of students; (2) It treats leadership as a distributed function rather than as a role-based activity; and (3) It requires more or less continuous investment in knowledge and skill, both because the knowledge base around instructional practice is constantly changing and because the population of actual and potential leaders is constantly depleting and replenishing itself”(p. 58).

The literature on school efficacy is consistent with regard to the importance of a good principal in schools that work well. The “educational leadership effect” is normally an *indirect or, preferably, mediator effect*: the director is not the one who works in the classrooms, but he or she can contribute to creating the conditions and context that make it possible to work well in them. Without doubt, a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom depends on his or her capacities and commitment, as well as the characteristics of the context in which he or she works and the external environment (social and political). But the creation of an atmosphere, motivations and conditions that favor good work in every class is something that depends on the principal's leadership (Day, Sammons, Hopkins *et al.*, 2009). In his review on leadership and change, Louis (2009) refers to Voltaire's metaphor (at the end of *Candide*) about dedicating ourselves to “cultivating our garden”, with these words:

“If organizations are seen as gardens, then leaders cannot command them to grow. They must contend with the unpredictability, environmental influences, teamwork and risk factors that characterize trying to help anything develop. Leaders can only promote growth by “rearranging the conditions and structures”... For gardens, those conditions are sun, moisture, soil, nutrients, and temperature; for schools, they are time, space, materials, money, training, collegiality, respect, trust, and personnel (pp. 131-132).

Therefore, although other factors and variables have their effects, the role of the management team becomes a “catalyst” in the promotion and management of good education. In fact, there is usually not a revitalization or school improvement project that is not supported by a management team with an educational leadership shared with the teachers in a common

project. But this "so complex and extremely delicate task cannot be carried out by principals with the technical profile of an administrative nature, with a temporary perspective, and with prior training that is as meager as it is simple" (Alvarez, 2007: 87), as has occurred until now in Spain. New legislative regulations are necessary to make this role possible, as the new legislation in Catalonia (2010b).

In sum, if, as it seems, the management teams have to lead the educational dynamic of the school, then they will unavoidably have to become involved in the improvement of the teaching and learning. They cannot depend entirely on what each teacher, with more or less success, does in the classroom. Undoubtedly, this is a point of conflict, but in the international experiences and literature it becomes increasingly clear: if the teachers are the key to the improvement, the principals have to create the right climate so that the teachers can be better. However, it must be recognized that in Spain we have a set of challenges pending before we can approach this desired way of working. Changing the school structure is not easy, but with new legislative orientations, public discourse and good practices, it is possible to alter it. In a performance-oriented society, with the new demands (increase in autonomy, better outcomes, accountability), we find ourselves at a point of no return in going from principal as manager to principal as leader.

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