

The complexity of school leadership in Spain: between leadership and educational management

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ABSTRACT

School leadership in Spain faces notable complexity arising from bureaucratization, limited autonomy, and the insufficient professionalization of the role. This study, grounded in perspectives from distributed, transformational and instructional leadership, analyses leadership teams' perceptions regarding access to the position, training, the competencies required, and the satisfaction associated with these functions. To this end, a qualitative design was employed, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 teachers holding leadership positions. The data were examined through categorical content analysis with the support of NVivo, ensuring both inter- and intra-rater reliability. The study offers an original contribution by providing updated empirical evidence on how structural and organizational conditions shape motivations, training relevance, and the relational competencies that underpin participatory leadership models. The thematic analysis identified several recurring themes: positive evaluations of initial training, diverse motivations for assuming the role (from vocation to compulsory appointment), the emphasis on communicative, collaborative and organizational competencies, and ambivalent professional satisfaction, combining fulfilment with administrative overload. In conclusion, the study underscores the need for more contextualized, practical, and sustainable policies and training programs that strengthen effective and humane pedagogical leadership, addressing the persistent gap between current training and real school demands.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leading a school today entails addressing multiple challenges. These stem from the profound social, cultural, political, and technological transformations affecting society as a whole and, consequently, the education system. In this complex context, characterized by rapid change and uncertainty, there is a need for strong leadership capable of fostering a shared vision, building community, strengthening teams, and guiding the transformation and improvement of schools [1], [2].

However, within the Spanish educational context, the transformative potential of educational leadership is constrained by several factors that limit the actions of leadership teams. Prominent among these are a rigid organizational structure, limited autonomy, an excessive bureaucratic burden, and a restrictive regulatory framework [3]. School leadership in Spain unfolds within a complex landscape, marked by a shortage of candidates, a lack of professional recognition, the absence of sufficient professional and financial

incentives, and the non-existence of a consolidated leadership career path. Moreover, in some cases, access to leadership posts is granted through administrative appointment rather than through vocation or educational project [4]–[6]. Taken together, these circumstances generate significant dilemmas concerning the leadership capacity and management effectiveness of school leadership teams, particularly in highly complex educational settings.

In response to this scenario, it is essential to have highly qualified professionals equipped with specific competencies in leadership, team management, conflict resolution, communication, and pedagogical vision [7], [8]. Nevertheless, although training is a requirement for access to leadership posts and a necessary condition for professional development, several studies highlight its limitations. The training received by school leaders tends to focus primarily on regulatory aspects, with limited connection to the realities and challenges of schools and with low practical applicability [4], [9]. In other words, the training provided is neither the most appropriate nor sufficient. In this regard, the need has been identified for continuous, relevant, evidence-based, and contextualized professional development. Such training should address not only administrative matters but also the competencies associated with pedagogical, transformational, and distributed leadership [5], [1].

In this regard, the training models questioned in various studies have highlighted the need to move towards professional development proposals that prepare school leadership teams for distributed leadership, regarded as one of the most effective approaches to managing the complexity and multiple challenges that schools must address. This model is grounded in shared, flexible, and collaborative management, whereby responsibilities and decisions do not rest solely with the headteacher but are distributed among different members of the school community [10]. Its implementation requires specific training oriented towards teamwork, collegial decision-making, and the development of participatory school cultures.

Recent literature has also emphasized the importance of other leadership models that exert a positive influence on teacher performance, professional self-efficacy, and job satisfaction [8], [11]–[13]. Among these are transformational and instructional leadership. Effective leadership is able to integrate administrative management with pedagogical support, thus enhancing both institutional organization and students' teaching and learning processes [7]. At the same time, the significant role of middle leadership has been observed, functioning as a strategic link between school leadership and teaching staff [14], [15]. Through middle leadership, in which responsibilities are shared, internal coordination is improved, project implementation is facilitated, and a culture based on collaboration and trust is fostered [16].

These diverse approaches to school leadership have been adopted unevenly in Spain, where they often coexist with traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic models. As a result, leadership practices tend to take on hybrid forms, combining administrative logics with more participatory and pedagogical approaches [17]. This tendency has been confirmed by recent studies, which show that even in contexts where distributed leadership is promoted, formal structures and bureaucratic elements continue to shape and constrain its effective implementation [18].

Another key factor is the motivation to assume leadership roles and responsibilities. Recent research has identified structural barriers such as role instability, work overload, and the insufficient professionalization of leadership positions [19], [20]. In many cases, access to these roles is driven more by institutional needs than by vocational decisions, which directly affects commitment, engagement, and continuity in leadership practice [6]. Furthermore, professional satisfaction is directly linked to motivation and depends on multiple contextual factors, including excessive bureaucratization and workload, scarcity of resources, insufficient training for team leadership and conflict management, lack of institutional support, and limited recognition [2], [21], [22].

Despite all these limitations and barriers, empirical evidence confirms that effective leadership is decisive for institutional improvement, school quality, and student outcomes [23]–[26]. Its impact is particularly positive when grounded in a clear vision and supported by participatory and inclusive practices [7], [25], [26]. Likewise, it contributes to building a positive and participatory school climate, enhancing coexistence and collegiality [11], [27], [28]. In this respect, the stability of leadership teams is associated with greater teacher retention and with the strengthening of institutional climate [29]. Taken together, these findings highlight that school transformation and improvement depend on the leadership team's capacity to exercise effective leadership, which involves energizing staff teams, managing resources efficiently, resolving conflicts, fostering innovative practices, and continually evaluating institutional development [30]. In summary, the exercise of educational leadership by headteachers in Spain is configured as a highly complex yet essential function, one that is conditioned by structural tensions—such as limited autonomy and bureaucratized management—, regulatory constraints—deriving from a rigid legal framework—, and cultural factors—shaped by school traditions and resistance to change—that collectively hinder its effective enactment [1], [19].

Based on this general framework, the main objective of this study is to examine the perceptions of leadership teams regarding access to and performance in school leadership roles. The analysis focuses particularly on the training received, the motivation to assume such roles, the competencies considered necessary for their practice, and the levels of personal and professional satisfaction involved. This study seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the factors influencing teachers' willingness to join leadership teams, as well as the quality of their experience in these roles.

Grounded in these dimensions and in response to the gaps identified in the existing literature on school leadership, the following research questions were formulated. These questions articulate the study's core dimensions and guide both the methodological design and the analysis of the findings:

- What are school leadership teams' perceptions regarding access to leadership positions within the Spanish education system?
- How do school leaders evaluate the training received for the performance of their managerial duties?
- What competencies do leadership teams consider essential for the effective exercise of educational leadership?
- What factors influence teachers' motivation to assume leadership responsibilities?
- How do school leadership teams assess their personal and professional development as a result of undertaking leadership roles?

These questions not only structure the analysis but also delineate the specific contribution of this study. In contrast to previous research that has examined isolated aspects of school leadership and relied predominantly on quantitative approaches, this study adopts a qualitative and integrative perspective. It simultaneously considers key elements such as access, training, competencies, motivation, and professional satisfaction. Its contribution lies in providing updated empirical evidence on the tensions, motivations, and competencies that shape educational leadership in Spain, with the aim of informing the design of more context-sensitive training programs and public policies that respond to the real needs and challenges faced by leadership teams.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The sample of this qualitative study comprised a total of 24 teachers currently leading the leadership teams of different schools. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that individuals held key roles in institutional decision-making and the implementation of educational policies. The diversity of schools represented—regarding type, size, and context—allowed for a broad and enriched perspective on the subject under study.

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the participants. As shown, most work in urban schools (72%), while 28% are based in rural settings. With respect to school size, more than half of the participants came from institutions with over 300 students (54%), suggesting medium to large school contexts. Regarding professional background, 75% had more than 10 years of teaching experience, reflecting a sample with a strong career trajectory in the educational field. In terms of specific experience in leadership team roles, there was a relative balance, with a slight predominance of those with more than five years in such positions (54%), thus providing valuable insights grounded in a consolidated trajectory of school management.

Table 1. Participants (N=24)

Sociodemographic characteristics	N	%
Type of school		
Urban	17	70.8
Rural	7	29.2
Number of students enrolled		
0-100	3	12.5
101-300	8	33.3
More than 300	13	54.2
Years of teaching experience		
Fewer than 10	6	25
11-20	10	41.7
More than 20	8	33.3
Years of experience in leadership teams		
0-5	11	45.8
6 or more	13	54.2

2.2. Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview. Its semi-structured nature provided a balance between the systematization required for comparative analysis and the flexibility to adapt according to each participant's responses, thereby enriching the data gathered. The interview consisted of 20 open-ended questions organized around four predefined dimensions: training, access and motivation, competencies, and satisfaction. The content of the instrument was grounded in previous literature, ensuring its theoretical relevance. In addition, an expert review was conducted with the participation of 10 specialists in educational leadership and management, aimed at evaluating the clarity, coherence, and relevance of the questions. Based on their feedback, the necessary adjustments were made to ensure the reliability and consistency of the instrument, thus defining its final version. Although semi-structured, the interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives within the framework of the predefined dimensions.

2.3. Data collection and analysis procedure

For data collection, the researchers conducted the semi-structured interviews via the Google Meet platform between October 2024 and February 2025. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed manually to obtain a textual format. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and depth of responses. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new relevant themes were identified.

2.3.1. Category tree

Based on the analysis of the interviews, a category tree was developed with the purpose of organizing the information collected in a structured manner. The final version of this tree was the result of a three-stage process. In the first stage, researcher 1 constructed an initial version of the tree using a deductive approach, based on the design of the interview. In the second stage, researchers 1, 2, and 3 each analyzed a different interview, in order to propose adjustments and improvements to the initial version. The modifications included the incorporation, elimination, and relocation of categories. As a result of this collaborative work, the final version of the category tree was defined.

In addition to structuring the information obtained, the category tree reflects the conceptual relationships among the themes. The dimension training was positioned as a starting point, since it influences participants' motivation and access to digital leadership practices. In turn, these factors contribute to the development of competencies, which ultimately relate to the perceived satisfaction with the implementation of such practices. This hierarchical organization supported a more coherent interpretation of the data and facilitated the identification of interdependencies between emerging themes.

2.3.2. Categorical content analysis

In order to strengthen the validity of the study, a pre-analysis was conducted. Researchers 1, 2, and 4 independently analyzed one randomly selected interview. To assess inter-rater consistency, the kappa index was applied, yielding a high level of agreement between researcher 1 and researcher 2 ($k=0.798$). In view of this high reliability, it was decided that they would analyze the entire set of interviews.

Subsequently, both researchers analyzed the same interview at two different points in time, with the aim of calculating intra-rater reliability. The results showed adequate indices (researcher 1: $k=0.83$; researcher 2: $k=0.82$), supporting the consistency of response categorization by the evaluators, in line with the guidelines proposed by Landis and Koch [31]. This process was carried out following the methodology of categorical content analysis [32], focused on the understanding and semantic categorization of discourse. For this purpose, the qualitative analysis software NVivo (version 1.7) was employed.

3. RESULTS

Following the analysis of the data obtained through the interviews, Table 2 presents the total number of codifications corresponding to the different categories analyzed. This information served as a guide for structuring the thematic presentation of the study's findings. The pre-analyses conducted enabled the researchers to identify the most relevant aspects highlighted by the interviewees. This strategy contributed to strengthening the validity of the findings.

3.1. Training

Overall, the evaluation of the training received for undertaking leadership roles is positive, although nuanced by certain criticisms regarding its practical applicability. Participants highlight its usefulness as a starting point, while acknowledging significant shortcomings in its connection with practice. In general, the

training received could serve as a foundation that subsequently shapes participants' access to leadership positions and their perception of the competencies required.

DIR11: *“Overall, positive, generally. Of course, there were things that could have been improved, but I think that was somewhat beyond the control of the people who organized it.”*

DIR07: *“It is useful, especially when you already know you are going to take on the headship, then it is a bombardment of information. Above all, in many areas, but yes, it helps you to say: I am going to take this on and I am going to need all these things. And then across all areas, not only management, catering, financial and administrative issues, but also that pedagogical dimension a headteacher must have.”*

DIR18: *“The training requires quite a lot of dedication, both during the course and in preparing the final project. In general, I consider it relatively useful. In some aspects, especially methodological issues, they provide guidelines or directions that, in many cases, are already part of the teacher's own background and do not add much that is new. I am not saying the course should not exist, but I do think it could be better connected with the practical reality of leadership work.”*

One of the most frequent criticisms concerns the excessive theoretical and regulatory focus, to the detriment of practical content addressing day-to-day needs. Constant legal updates and limited real applicability hinder its usefulness.

DIR17: *“The content focuses heavily on theory and regulations, which also change constantly, making it difficult to keep up. In that sense, the practical usefulness is limited, since many of the skills required for the role are really acquired through day-to-day experience.”*

DIR22: *“Although nowadays there is a lot of talk about LOMLOE, about more competence-based learning and less focus on content, in the end the training is all content. Everything focused on regulations, on very complex cases, but then, when the time comes to apply all that in day-to-day practice, sometimes you do not even remember what those cases were like. And in the end, you have to keep calling other headteachers, the inspector, or whoever, to help you solve the doubts because the training does not prepare you enough to face the reality.”*

DIR08: *“The training is ultimately very focused on administrative matters... procedures, protocols and so on, and that is not the reality you later face.”*

DIR15: *“What I remember about that training is that it was very intensive in some legal aspects and regulatory issues which, in the end, I have not come across in all these years. And yet, another set of issues that are common in schools, such as school incidents or complicated situations with families, were not addressed in a way that might have been more useful.”*

In addition, several interviewees highlighted the limited contextualization of the training, particularly in schools with specific characteristics, such as those located in rural areas or those dedicated to adult education.

DIR14: *“The courses are almost always scheduled in the afternoons, which is when we have classes, so we cannot do any kind of training unless it is specific training organized for leadership teams in adult education centers. So, the training we do is either offered through lifelong learning, which provides specific courses for us—and those are indeed useful—or we look for training ourselves through working groups, seminars and so on.”*

DIR10: *“The training opportunities do not take our reality in a rural area into account at all. We have to spend long hours driving to cities, which involves a huge investment of time, resources, and many other things. Although this has improved somewhat, especially after the pandemic, when digital formats became more important, it is still a problem for us.”*

Finally, concrete improvements were suggested to promote more accessible and practice-oriented training, such as mentoring by experienced professionals or greater emphasis on the real management of schools. These suggestions not only reflect training needs, but may also be related to teachers' perceptions of their competencies and their overall satisfaction with their professional development.

DIR04: *“Initial training should place greater focus on school organization and the actual role of the leadership team. They teach us the basics, but they do not prepare us for the daily management of the school, how to make decisions, or how to coordinate the teaching staff. It is important to delve more deeply into these practical aspects, since when we take on a leadership role we face situations that cannot be learned from books.”*

DIR23: *“What I miss is mentoring—that training could be expanded with small groups led by an experienced mentor. I think that would be the ideal option because you would always have someone experienced to turn to.”*

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the interviews with leadership teams

Category tree	N Cod.	% Cod.
1. Training and professional profile	208	33.55
1.1. Prior training	64	10.32
1.2. Training during tenure	34	5.48
1.3. Perception of competencies	60	9.68
1.4. Satisfaction with personal and professional development	50	8.07
2. Access and motivation for access	146	23.55
2.1. Reasons and circumstances	46	7.42
2.2. Presentation of project or extraordinary appointment	80	12.90
2.3. Proposals for improvement	8	1.29
2.4. Previous team	12	1.94
3. Proposals for improvement	118	19.03
4. Miscellaneous	148	23.87

Note: “N Cod.” = number of times the variable was coded.

“% Cod.” = percentage of the total coded references.

3.2. Access and motivation

Access to leadership positions is driven by diverse motivations. In some cases, teachers take on this role motivated by the desire to improve the functioning of the school or by dissatisfaction with previous management.

DIR01: *“There were many things that were being done very well, but there were others that could have been done differently. We understood that doing things differently could lead to an improvement in the school.”*

DIR03: *“I did not agree with how the school was operating and thought there could be another way of working.”*

DIR24: *“We saw that the school was heading towards passivity. There was a lack of direction, and we focused it towards the values of global citizenship in the 2030 Agenda and children’s rights.”*

However, other teachers assume the position due to the lack of volunteers or as a result of direct appointment, which highlights the limited motivation or the fatigue associated with the role. Such differences in access and motivation also appear to influence the competencies emphasized by participants and their satisfaction with professional development.

DIR18: *“Because there was no one else willing to take on that responsibility, and because I am a very socially committed person.”*

DIR02: *“I was always appointed by obligation... In the end the inspector came, interviewed, and one day the phone rang: ‘I am appointing you headteacher’.”*

DIR24: *“I was appointed because the previous headteacher retired and no one else wanted to do it, so the inspector appointed me.”*

3.3. Perceptions of the competencies required of school leadership teams

With regard to perceptions of the competencies required of those who are part of leadership teams, participants emphasized the importance of communicative and relational skills. These are considered essential for effective leadership, negotiation, and the building of an educational community.

DIR01: *“It is key, in this position it is key. A person without communicative skills is not suited to this role.”*

DIR06: “You need to have a dialogical disposition; you have to deal with families, teachers, dining hall supervisors, and support staff. So, you must have that ability to dialogue, to listen in order to reach agreements.”

DIR09: “Good relationships with the educational community, because in the end families and the surrounding context are also decisive in our day-to-day life and in the work we carry out with students. And of course, that understanding, that closeness, that empathy, which is somewhat assumed to be part of our profession, so to speak.”

DIR16: “I think you need to have social skills. Try to avoid conflicts that can be anticipated, because you observe and notice, and you can foresee those conflicts.”

DIR17: “Active listening is very important [...] in the true sense of the word; you have to know how to listen and pay attention [...] and that does not mean you always have to agree.”

At the same time, teachers also highlighted the relevance of the ability to guide and inspire their team, taking into account shared leadership, collaboration, and task distribution.

DIR03: “What you must never be is authoritarian, I am completely sure of that, because it is the opposite of being a natural leader. If you are authoritarian, you will impose fear on others, but you will not lead anything in life. I think you need to be a democratic person, obviously.”

DIR10: “Teamwork, that is, the leadership team is not just the headteacher, but also the deputy head and the secretary, for a joint decision-making process; and then also teamwork with the rest of the teachers.”

DIR13: “Because you cannot try to take everything on. Things need to be done, so let’s distribute them in the best possible way. Not saying: you do this, you do that... but rather: well, this is what needs to be done—who would like to take part in this group?”

DIR16: “You definitely need to have the capacity to delegate, and also ensure that students feel they have a genuine place within the school.”

Participants also highlighted the importance of being familiar with educational legislation, knowing how to apply it, and being an organized individual with strong management skills.

DIR05: “You must have knowledge of the legislative framework. That part of ministerial orders, royal decrees... you need to know it. It is very dry, unpleasant and boring [...] although you do not have to memorize it, you do need to know where to find it. So perhaps it is not about memorizing laws, but about knowing where to look them up.”

DIR21: “You really need to know how to follow the regulations. You must keep yourself constantly updated, especially in recent years with all the changes, and you need to have a clear grasp of the legislation and be able to convey it. Regulations are a structural part of the role.”

DIR14: “I think you need to be a very organized person. You deal with a lot of paperwork, [...] more and more every time, and unless you are organized and can say, ‘right, this week I will deal with this’, plan carefully, make extensive use of an agenda, and delegate tasks among the team, it becomes unmanageable.”

Finally, some teachers placed great importance on involvement, commitment, and values such as inclusion, considering them fundamental pillars of effective school leadership. These competencies, in turn, could be closely related to participants' satisfaction with their professional and personal development, forming a possible interrelated pattern between the categories.

DIR12: “I believe the most important thing is commitment to people—not just to the students, of course. People, families, students, teachers; that must come first and always be above everything else.”

DIR19: “It is also about daring to take those steps, to get involved in things, not becoming complacent.”

DIR16: “We should all uphold values and genuinely believe in inclusion. But truly believe in it, not just because it is required by the regulations.”

3.4. Satisfaction with personal and professional development

Interviewed teachers also emphasized their satisfaction both on a personal and a professional level. However, some of them pointed out that these positive aspects are sometimes overshadowed by difficult and challenging moments. Overall, satisfaction with personal and professional development could be considered the result of the combined influence of training, access and motivation, and perceived competencies.

DIR02: *“It is personally enriching and of course it allows you to know and do things that you can see. I mean, the transformation of this school from what it was before to what it is now—well, it is a completely different institution. You have the capacity to make small changes [...] and that is wonderful.”*

DIR18: *“I am very happy... Leading a school, if you have chosen to do so, can be gratifying. It requires a huge number of hours, but I feel satisfied.”*

DIR02: *“If I had to evaluate it, I would say it is a balance: on the one hand, very rewarding because there are many things we have achieved and I feel responsible for having done them with the management team; on the other hand, there are other things that, well, were left unfinished.”*

DIR20: *“It is positive because you see that your work is very useful, right? And that it truly has rewards in the lives of the students and in the practice of others. On a personal level, there have been exhausting, exhausting times, when you take home the whole desk from the office and more. And then there is the sense of responsibility that often comes with unusual circumstances, unexpected problems, and sometimes tough situations.”*

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research have provided an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on the process of access to, and development within, school leadership teams. The various opinions gathered through semi-structured interviews revealed highly multifaceted and complex perceptions. These perspectives intertwine elements related to vocation, organization, training, and the personal domain—a result consistent with the insights of previous studies on educational leadership [29], [33].

A closer examination of training aspects for undertaking leadership responsibilities has revealed, among other issues, the existence of significant shortcomings regarding the practical applicability of these training programs. In this respect, teachers value the training opportunities available to prepare for leadership roles positively. However, consistent with the findings of García-Martínez *et al.* [34], they view the process as insufficient, particularly concerning the transfer of acquired knowledge into practice. Earlier research has also highlighted the misalignments between the content of training programs and the actual requirements of school leadership tasks [35], [36]. Many of the professionals interviewed in this study reported that training tends to be excessively focused on regulatory and administrative matters, to the detriment of essential elements such as conflict resolution, interpersonal skills, or the everyday management of a school. Altogether, these findings reinforce the notion of training that remains distant from the reality of school life, a gap repeatedly underscored in previous literature [37], [38].

In connection with the above, teachers expressed the need to contextualize leadership training programs with regard to the specific characteristics of individual schools. Such particularities may relate, for example, to the geographical location of schools or to the profile of the student population they serve. This concern has also been raised by other authors [39], [40], who have emphasized that effective leadership requires sensitivity to the unique features of the immediate context, alongside adaptive competences that are not always incorporated into conventional training programs. Following the recommendations of Day and Sammons [41], who highlight the value of experiential and situated learning, the interviewees in this study also suggested the inclusion of more practice-oriented approaches, such as mentoring schemes, guidance provided by leadership experts, or peer-tutoring initiatives.

With regard to motivations for taking on leadership roles, teachers expressed a wide variety of views, ranging from a transformative sense of responsibility to reluctant acceptance driven by the lack of other volunteers. These diverse motivations may correspond, as Halsey and Drummond [42] point out, to different forms of leadership (vocational and circumstantial). In this respect, circumstantial leadership often emerges as a consequence of structural factors that hinder teachers' willingness to assume managerial responsibilities. When headship is taken on as an obligation, and as Connolly *et al.* [43] caution, negative consequences may arise for motivation, engagement, and the effectiveness of teachers' leadership. By contrast, vocational or pedagogical leadership is defined by a clear intention to foster institutional improvement [44]. In line with Shields [45], some participants highlighted motivations such as the desire to improve school dynamics or address organizational shortcomings.

According to the accounts of participants in this study, the competences considered key to effective leadership encompass not only technical skills but also organizational, social, and emotional capacities. Consistent with the findings of Barakat *et al.* [46], this breadth of skills underscores the understanding of school leadership as an integral and multidimensional activity. Among the most valued qualities were empathy, the capacity to build meaningful relationships with the wider school community, communicative ability, and conflict management. As argued by Kin and Kareem [47], these relational skills are prioritized

over more administrative or technical aspects. These findings also align with the perspectives of distributed and transformational leadership [48], [49]. In addition, interviewed teachers emphasized the importance of teamwork, delegating responsibilities, and engaging in shared decision-making. Collectively, these practices reflect the characteristics of a more participatory and horizontal form of leadership [50].

At the same time, teachers also highlighted as essential functions the knowledge and command of normative frameworks, the capacity to organize teaching staff effectively, and the ability to adapt continually to legislative changes. In this regard, previous studies [51], [52] have drawn attention to the excessive administrative pressure and bureaucratization of school leadership roles as key factors contributing to significant strain in these positions. Within a regulatory context marked by instability, the requirement for ongoing updating further intensifies the workload of headteachers. This demand is not adequately offset by sufficient institutional support, giving rise to tensions between the pedagogical dimension of leadership and the administrative impositions placed upon it [53].

As for the potential personal and professional consequences of involvement in school leadership roles, a large proportion of the interviewed teachers reported high levels of satisfaction. This assessment was particularly positive when leadership was assumed voluntarily and accompanied by the achievement of meaningful changes in school dynamics. This finding is consistent with Whitworth and Chiu [54], who argue that leadership can serve as a powerful driver of professional development and vocational growth. As Day *et al.* [55] and Young *et al.* [56] observe, this may be attributed to the opportunity the role affords to inspire and exert a positive influence across the educational community. Nevertheless, some teachers also reported significant emotional strain associated with managerial responsibilities. Although not the dominant experience, certain professionals referred to feelings of exhaustion and isolation, as well as excessive time demands arising from the role. For this reason, and in line with recent studies on mental health in education [57], [58], teachers stressed the need to pay closer attention to the emotional well-being of school leaders as a critical factor in ensuring the long-term sustainability of educational leadership. Ensuring adequate formative, structural, and emotional conditions has also been highlighted in previous research as essential for the development of sustainable and human-centered school leadership [59].

5. CONCLUSION

Based on this understanding, several key recommendations are put forward to strengthen the practice of school leadership. Firstly, leadership training programs should be reviewed to incorporate practice-based methodologies, such as mentoring, peer learning, or professional coaching, that support the development of contextually relevant and practically applicable leadership competences. Secondly, it is recommended to move towards organizational models that reduce administrative overload and foster distributed leadership through collaborative structures and institutional support networks. Lastly, the need is highlighted for policies that integrate the emotional well-being of leadership teams as a strategic priority, ensuring working conditions that enable committed and human-centered leadership. These proposals, closely aligned with the voices gathered in this study, provide a valuable foundation for designing responses more attuned to the real-world challenges faced by schools.

Taken together, the findings of this research refine certain aspects identified in previous literature and provide an updated empirical perspective on the aspirations and challenges currently faced by school leadership teams. Within teachers' accounts, several tensions emerged as central to leadership practice: ambivalence in the motivations for taking on the role, the prominence of relational skills, a marked gap between the theoretical and practical dimensions of training programs, and the duality between professional satisfaction and psychological or personal exhaustion. These findings reveal a complex scenario that requires more comprehensive and context-sensitive responses from educational authorities. Consequently, policies that foster willingness and motivation to assume leadership positions become particularly relevant. Likewise, it is essential to ensure appropriate formative, structural, and emotional conditions that enable the practice of sustainable and human-centered school leadership. Finally, while the qualitative nature and small sample size limit the generalizability of the results, the study nonetheless provides a rich and context-sensitive understanding of school leadership. The research was confined to compulsory education schools and employed a cross sectional design, which calls for future studies to expand to more diverse contexts and apply mixed method approach.

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Cecilia Latorre-Coscolluela	✓			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants provided informed consent prior to the start of the interviews. Before participation, they were informed about the purpose of the research, the interview process, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Autonomous Community of Aragón (Meeting on January 25, 2023, Record No. 02/2023).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the results of this study are not publicly available due to participant privacy concerns. However, the data necessary to replicate the findings are included within the article.

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