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Learning from the Flight of the Geese: The life stories of two female principals who lead in vulnerable contexts

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Learning from the Flight of the Geese: The life stories of two female principals who lead in vulnerable contexts

Abstract

This study describes the life story of two female principals who carry out their work in particularly challenging schools in the Spanish educational context. This work is part of two larger international (ISSPP) and national research projects that aim to study the professional identity of school leaders. In this case, our objective was to analyse the construction of a leadership identity when faced with the challenges of working in a difficult school context, and to identify the main strategies adopted to achieve educational improvement in such adverse situations. The findings reveal that leading with others — and not over others — was key to achieving change. Our participating principals developed a style of leadership that is distributed and oriented towards values of social justice in an attempt to eradicate inequality and discrimination in their schools. Being a woman was also a determining factor in this professional performance. Learning from “the flight of the geese” was the essence of these professional stories, facing challenges with professional values of empathy, active listening, companionship, and commitment. Finally, we discuss the implications of this work for future research and professional practice.

Key words: professional identity, leadership, female principal. social justice, challenge context

Introduction

In the Spanish education system, educational inequality is one of the major concerns on political agendas (Vallejo & Dooly, 2013). Educational leadership is one of the key elements required for a school to succeed in improving educational outcomes and achieving equity (Day et al. 2009). The scientific literature links educational improvement with a strong and robust sense of professional identity in its school members (Robinson et al., 2009). Studies such as that conducted by Day and Sammons (2013) and Crow and Moller (2017) indicate that the development of a leadership identity has positive effects on educational achievement. Despite the importance assigned to educational leadership in the improvement of schools, relatively few studies have delved deeper into leadership identity construction in education professionals (Bolívar and Ritacco, 2016). Consequently, school leadership and professional identity are important areas of research that deserve greater attention (Cruz-González et al., 2019).

The peculiarities found in building a leadership identity in challenging contexts are important to consider (Toure and Dorsey 2018). Context undoubtedly influences identity constructions and the leadership practices adopted. As Dubar (2000) argues, an

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3 individual's identity cannot be disassociated from their surrounding social, political, and
4 cultural context. Thus, in their study, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) explain that there
5 are various challenging contexts that a school principal can face during the construction
6 of their leadership identity. In particular, there is the context that includes the
7 geographical and historical location of the school, referred to by the authors as the
8 *situational* context. We can also find the professional context, which encompasses all
9 aspects of the school's professional culture; and the material context, which relates to
10 the infrastructure of the school. Finally, the principal is often faced with external
11 political and social expectations.
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16 All these contextual situations that surround the school can be influenced by socio-
17 economic and cultural levels. This is particularly true for situations in which there are
18 low expectations on the part of students and families or the school itself, and where
19 there are high percentages of unemployment, unstructured families, and poverty in the
20 context surrounding the school (Lyman and Villani, 2002). These cases are those that
21 fall under the category of *challenging context* and cannot be ignored by the management
22 team. These are complex educational realities that lead to economic and achievement
23 gaps between the most vulnerable students (or those at risk of exclusion) and the rest of
24 the student community. These are realities that require educational change and
25 responsive management that develops leadership practices adapted to the demands of
26 the school (Brooks et al., 2007). Having overcome the tendency to blame the affected
27 group itself (in terms of ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, national origin and
28 native language, sexual orientation and disability), their families, and the context for
29 low academic achievement and performance, it is appropriate to focus directly on
30 professional practices and organizational policies (Marshall and Oliva, 2010). Within
31 this framework, the need to lead in, by, and for, social justice becomes part of the issue
32 (Ryan, 2010)
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39 Leading for social justice, as stated by McKenzie et al. (2008), is linked to the social and
40 moral obligation to promote and raise the academic achievement of all school students
41 in an equitable manner. Its purpose is to energize and promote practices that prepare
42 students to live in society and to raise awareness, eradicating all those practices that
43 could be unjust or have dualistic effects. Other authors also argue that within the
44 process of achieving leadership for social justice, there must also be the aim of
45 configuring the school as a heterogeneous community, whose common sense and
46 philosophy walk towards this purpose (Shield, 2009).
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50 Another possible scenario of inequity — commonly silenced — is that generated by the
51 presence of glass ceilings or specific barriers in certain social groups, such as
52 minorities, or even gender. The intersection between the constructs of "being a woman"
53 and working in a "vulnerable school context" clearly constitutes a double challenge
54 (Jones, 2016). A number of studies mention the particularity of being a woman in
55 school management, considering it a challenge and a struggle (Murakami and Törnsten,
56 2017). In this complex scenario, which involves struggling to find a place in an unequal
57 society, women have developed the capacity for resilience along with certain leadership
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3 styles based on dialogue and communication (Popescu and Gunter, 2011), in order to
4 break the patterns adopted by indoctrinated societies over generations. As the same
5 authors continue to argue, female principals are more likely to build strong relationships
6 in schools at the micro and macro levels, that is, with all members of the educational
7 community. In a similar vein, for other authors such as Nickens and Washington (2016),
8 the crises suffered during the professional development of female principals are
9 translated into the reconstruction of identity through distributed leadership, sharing
10 responsibilities in their leadership, and not imposing their beliefs and opinions. This
11 implies a recognized sense of community and action through democratic leadership
12 (Oplatka, 2014).
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17 The construction of an individual's professional identity, which is built and
18 reconstructed in a constant flow of personal and professional experiences, is influenced
19 by the social, political and economic context that surrounds him/her, as previously
20 argued (Dubar, 2000). Thus, in a context where traditional patterns are linked to
21 longstanding hegemonic masculinities, identities develop in the face of barriers that
22 could prevent or discourage women from seeking positions of responsibility, thus
23 leading to the self-limitation of women (Schein, 2010; Arar and Shapira, 2016).
24 Recognizing these contexts, research such as that of Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) was
25 commissioned to visualize complex scenarios and the anguish of female principals who
26 have suffered social and professional exclusion. In the study by Smith (2011), the life
27 story of a female teacher is analyzed, who states that her responsibilities as a mother and
28 wife, along with other domestic issues, influenced her professional development to the
29 point that she never reached the position of school principal.
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35 The purpose of this study was to explore, using the life story approach, the professional
36 identity traits of two Spanish female principals that work in challenging contexts,
37 analyzing their characteristics, values, beliefs, strategies and actions that characterize
38 them as successful principals and promoters of social justice. Based on these
39 objectives, we established the following research questions:
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- 43 ❖ What were the main elements that contributed to the construction of the current
44 professional leadership identity of these female principals?
- 45 ❖ What strategies were implemented in order to tackle the challenges of a school
46 of particular difficulty, and to achieve educational improvement?
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49 **Methodology: biographical-narrative research and life history**

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51 Life stories are a privileged means of studying the life experiences situated in a
52 particular socio-cultural context. In the field of educational research, this type of
53 methodology provides a way of connecting the lives of professionals with their own
54 reality in order to explore the perceptions and meanings they give to their own world
55 and ways of being and acting (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2016; Sugrue,
56 2004)
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3 Through this methodology we aim to investigate in depth the professional identity of
4 school principals in complex contexts. Therefore, this study adopts a biographical-
5 narrative approach (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019) as we explore the deepest meanings of
6 the lives of two female principals, located in a particular time and place. We frame this
7 approach within the category of narrative research, because it has a hermeneutic-
8 interpretative and phenomenological character, so that the compilation of stories focuses
9 on the meanings that the individuals attribute to their experiences (Goodson, et.al,
10 2016). To be more specific, we focus on the micro or personal epistemological level, in
11 which individuals tell us of their lives through stories. Following McAdams (1993), if
12 we want to study life stories, we need to hear people tell the full stories of their lives.
13 Therefore, in accord with the purpose of our study, which was to investigate the identity
14 of two female principals, we focused on gaining an insight into all their key moments,
15 leitmotifs, and significant people in order to analyze their identity construction
16 (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

❖ **Setting/Context**

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24 This study focuses on the Spanish educational context, specifically in the Andalusian
25 Autonomous Community. This autonomous community has a school failure rate above
26 20%, a situation that gives cause for concern (Fernández-Mellizo and Martínez-García,
27 2017). Within this context are the two educational centres where our principals carry out
28 their work. Specifically, these centres are located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, that
29 is, areas with a low cultural and economic status index (ISEC) that are at risk of
30 exclusion. However, in spite of these problems, they obtain educational outcomes
31 endorsed by the Andalusian Agency for Educational Evaluation (AGAEVE) that exceed
32 the expected results for these contexts.

❖ **Participant selection**

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37 This work forms part of a larger research study included in two international and
38 national research projects: *International Successful School Principalship Project*
39 (ISSPP) and the National R+D+i Project "*Identity of school management: leadership,*
40 *training and professionalisation*". These projects analyze unique cases of school leaders
41 achieving educational improvement. The stories of Estela and Rosa were extracted from
42 these macro projects for the following reasons:

- 43 - They represent a clear example of transformational leadership in vulnerable
44 contexts
 - 45 - These principals are regarded by the school and local community as school
46 leaders
 - 47 - With the incorporation of these female principals into the centre, educational
48 and academic results have improved in spite of the vulnerable social and
49 economic context in which the school is located.
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3 These criteria have also been established as priorities in the previously mentioned
4 projects (to which this study belongs).
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6 ❖ *Collection of information*

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8 The information collection process was carried out over two school years. One of the
9 main collection instruments was in-depth biographical interviews with the informants in
10 their educational contexts. These interviews were conducted using a cascade process of
11 reflexive deepening (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019). With this process, the interviews
12 were carried out in a sequential manner. Following each interview, an analysis of the
13 female principals' narrative was carried out in order to synthesize the most important
14 elements of their discourse. In the subsequent interview, this analysis was validated by
15 the female principals themselves, in order to bring greater validity and coherence to the
16 data collection process.
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21 This process became an act of collaboration and co-creation, which required trust and a
22 close researcher-researched relationship (Goodson, et.al, 2017) in order for us to
23 become natives of their own educational contexts. We asked the participants to think of
24 their lives as a novel in a book and to summarize its main chapters. Throughout this
25 process, we nurtured a relationship with the interviewees that was based on honesty,
26 trust, and respect so that they were able to speak freely about themselves and their lives.
27 All these interviews were captured by voice recordings, and those elements that
28 emerged from non-verbal language, that is, any observations, sensations or feelings that
29 arose were noted in a log book for later analysis.
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34 ❖ *Analysis of information*

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36 The collection and partial analysis of information was carried out in a sequential and
37 simultaneous way, which allowed us to validate the information gathered according to a
38 scheme of ideas in each of the interviews with our participants. These initial validation
39 reports had as their main theme the personal and professional background that make up
40 the life story of the interviewees. In a second phase of analysis, the data obtained from
41 the in-depth biographical interviews and from the notes in our notebook were subjected
42 to a thematic analysis conducted according to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss
43 and Corbin, 1998). This second phase allowed us to identify the main categories and
44 themes that emerged from the discourses of our two participants, thus showing the
45 divergent and convergent issues. In order to facilitate the management of the collected
46 information and its analysis, we used the qualitative analysis software Nvivo 12.
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51 ❖ *Ethical considerations*

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53 Life history/story research applies a set of protective conditions for participants. As
54 Bolívar (2014) states, the aspects of a life require sensitive treatment, respect, and
55 consent, as well as an ethical commitment on the part of the researcher and the person
56 being researched. We researchers become trusted confidantes and guardians of sensitive
57 information, which, through their stories, the interviewees have allowed us to access.
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3 For this reason, throughout this research we have preserved the confidentiality and
4 anonymity of the participants in both data analysis and report writing. Similarly, the life
5 stories include the description of other people such as family and friends of the
6 participants or places and institutions that can easily identify them. Therefore, measures
7 were put in place, such as the use of pseudonyms or altering the names of places in
8 order to preserve this anonymity. Similarly, in compliance with ethical guidelines, we
9 have considered the need for the commitment required to participate in narrative studies
10 and thus, from the outset, we reveal to our participants the instruments to be used, the
11 effects of our study, and the way in which it is carried out.
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15 16 **The story of two female principals: *leading with others and not over others* for educational 17 improvement** 18

19 **▪ Personal/Professional backgrounds** 20

21 As we explained in previous sections, we are all a collection of events and
22 circumstances. The fact is, it is the attitude we adopt to deal with these circumstances
23 that makes us special and different. In order to give the readers an idea of the
24 fundamental elements of the professional identity of our female principals, it is essential
25 to reveal their personal and professional backgrounds, that is, those decisive and crucial
26 moments that mark a before and after in their professional work and that shaped their
27 current professional leadership identity.
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31 Estela was born in 1962 and spent her early academic years in an educational
32 system characterised by rigidity, obscurity and oppression of freedom of expression and
33 thought. She tells us that witnessing such harsh scenes of inequality and social injustice
34 at school and in society caused her to have a high degree of commitment and critical
35 awareness of social issues, while at the same time increasing her vocation to be a
36 teacher in order to fight against such injustice.
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40 After becoming a teacher, Estela began her professional career in a small school
41 in a rural village. The school was characterized by its lack of facilities and didactic and
42 educational resources. In spite of this, the family and the village were very involved in
43 the school. Because it was a rural village, traditional and patriarchal thought was even
44 more predominant, but there was also a feeling of community and togetherness. This is
45 one of the reasons why Estela came to regard the family family as an important point of
46 reference. Throughout the five years that she worked in that school, she highlights that
47 the family were involved in numerous initiatives to improve the situation in the school,
48 which was so complex due to the scarcity of resources and the poor condition of the
49 furniture. Further, as a result of the commitment shown by the community, several
50 schools for parents and trans-generational projects were enjoyed. Due to the patriarchal
51 scenario that Estela valued, these courses and activities had as their axis the notion of
52 equality for all. From this professional experience, Estela learned a great lesson, that is,
53 family and community are great tools that can be deployed in the fight for a fair and
54 equal education.
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3 Caring for her sick mother forced Estela to change her professional destiny. In
4 this case, it was a school located in a metropolitan city, although with great deficiencies
5 in professional culture. The methodology was very traditional and there was no
6 perceived atmosphere of collaboration among the teaching staff. This greatly distressed
7 Estela and was the reason why, after three years as a teacher, she decided to create a
8 management team that would be led by her. However, this attempt ended in failure and
9 the school continued to be led by the same male principal that had been in post six years
10 previously.
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15 *It was a great disappointment. I was very eager to improve certain aspects of the*
16 *school. I felt like the school had become stuck and was plodding along with bad*
17 *practices that were undoubtedly affecting the students. I did not feel supported in*
18 *the application process; however, I tried. On reflection, I think my proposed*
19 *initiatives scared them. It was more a fear of change, a fear of breaking*
20 *paradigms in which teachers felt comfortable*
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23 However, Estela did not stop fighting for methodological innovation and inclusion in
24 her school. Gradually, numerous initiatives inspired other professional colleagues to
25 work with her and to value those new ways of teaching that she employed.
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29 *I began to feel that my work was becoming more valuable when my colleagues*
30 *asked me to collaborate. I proposed a (self-)training project for teachers in*
31 *which we all learned from each other, and it was a success. I also helped to set*
32 *up a parents' school. I started to feel supported and backed up by others, I felt*
33 *happy professionally.*
34

35 Her last and current professional assignment was in an Infant and Primary School in a
36 challenging context, which will be explained in detail in the following sections.
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39 Rosa is the second female principal of our study. She was born in 1967 in a
40 small village near the capital of Granada. For Rosa, teaching and literature were always
41 two of her greatest vocations. Due to her family's economic hardship when she was
42 young, for several years Rosa had to combine her work as a seamstress with her studies
43 of Hispanic Philology.
44
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46 When she finally finished her studies to become a teacher, Rosa got a job as a teacher in
47 a high school. For a long time, Rosa happily carried out her duties as a teacher,
48 involving herself in numerous initiatives of methodological innovation in the centre.
49 However, one event changed her perspective and her career path. The birth of her son
50 made Rosa reconsider changing her workplace to one that was more accessible and
51 closer to home.
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56 *The birth of my son forced me to leave the high school where I worked. The*
57 *distance from my home was very long and I could not combine domestic and*
58 *professional tasks. My husband worked all day and the situation was*
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3 *complicated. I made the decision to request a transfer to a closer high school*
4 (Rosa, female principal)
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6 Her new work context was very different. It was a high school located in a
7 disadvantaged neighbourhood. This centre was characterised by its great cultural and
8 ethnic diversity, and by its great need for improvement. Paradoxically, this would be the
9 institute where Rosa would become the principal and transform this small institute, —
10 thanks to her professional team — into a centre of reference for inclusive education and
11 cultural richness.
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15 **▪ Re-construction of professional identity in the face of the challenge of leading in a**
16 **school of special difficulty**
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18 The stories of the female principals participating in our study share one common
19 feature. After a long professional career, they took on the position of principal in
20 challenging centres. In the face of this challenge, several key points were highlighted.
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23 Research from a life history/story approach allows for the creation of a climate of trust
24 and dialogue between researchers and researched throughout the investigative process.
25 The continuous reflection and exploration of life stories is a fundamental aspect of the
26 study of the life history of our protagonists. In both stories, one reflection was shared in
27 common: “lead with others and not over others to achieve educational improvement”.
28 After they related their professional experiences and their new challenge as principals,
29 our participants explained that in order to tackle this challenge, they had to reinvent
30 themselves, and adopt a resilient attitude:
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35 *“When I started working at the centre there were a lot of demands and actions*
36 *to be taken. The professional culture of the teachers was very individualistic and*
37 *the methodology too traditional. A change was very much needed to motivate*
38 *and engage the students. I didn't know my professional colleagues well, and at*
39 *first I was limited to making progress on my own”* (Rosa, female principal)
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41

42 *“I had had some difficult experiences in the past, and had learned some great*
43 *professional lessons from them. The first years as a teacher were decisive in*
44 *proving that the school was in need of great changes, and I found myself very*
45 *much supported by my professional colleagues to assume the position of*
46 *principal”* (Estela, female principal)
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49 At this initial time, the two principals chose to adapt positively to the adverse
50 circumstances surrounding their work, opting for teamwork and commitment to
51 achieving improvements in their educational centres.
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54 Several events were decisive in this. In the case of Rosa, knowing the story of one of
55 her students at the school was the driving force behind her initiative to become
56 principal. The students in her school had different educational and family/emotional
57 needs. Many of them came from shelters and others lived in very poor family and social
58 conditions. Rosa was aware of this, and Najya was the final straw in that “almost full”
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3 glass of reasons to act. Najya, at only 13 years of age, was a student living in a poor
4 family with no financial support to feed their three children. Najya was an artistically
5 gifted student who stood out from her peers. However, language difficulties had always
6 limited her educational performance. One day Najya fainted in class due to an apparent
7 lack of food. This awakened something in Rosa.
8
9

10 *I think the moment that changed my professional attitude was when I discovered*
11 *Najya's story. It struck me and was my turning point and my reason for*
12 *becoming a principal. I had to learn a lot to make improvements in the centre*
13 *and I realized that experiences such as that make you re-construct yourself*
14 *(Rosa, female principal)*
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18 Estela describes the great change she experienced when she led as principal. Most
19 importantly, and as she explains, it was fundamental to have the support of her
20 colleagues to build a professional environment of collaboration and awareness to
21 achieve a fair and equal school.
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24 *I had never been a principal or a member of the management team before.*
25 *Everything was new to me. Together with my management team, we were*
26 *analyzing which were the weak points to be strengthened in order to achieve*
27 *improvements in the school, and we all came to the same conclusion: a*
28 *professional team with values of commitment and professional mutual support,*
29 *and with a strong critical conscience with social injustices was needed (Estela,*
30 *female principal)*
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34 Re-configuring their identity was essential. To do this, our principals identified the
35 support and commitment of the rest of the educational community as being of
36 fundamental importance. However, some sectors were reluctant at first:
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39 *Family was one of the main challenges. It was a humble and disadvantaged*
40 *neighbourhood. There were families very committed to the education of their*
41 *children, but others were very limited due to their terrible economic, social and*
42 *work situation. This made absenteeism high, and also the involvement of the*
43 *families to eradicate it. Therefore, one of the first initiatives was to build a close*
44 *and continuous link with social services and other associations with the*
45 *objective of achieving social and educational integration of these students. Their*
46 *help and collaboration was essential to initiate the change (Rosa, female*
47 *principal)*
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51 Estela believes that the family is the basis for real improvement, particularly in
52 challenging schools. In this regard, Estela explains that at the time when she started in
53 her role as principal, the family and other professional sectors were essential for
54 beginning to achieve change. To do this, Estela had to create links and connections.
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58 *After all, students look to family role models as examples. I wanted to*
59 *participate in improving these family habits at home. In many cases, homes were*
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3 *not always the best example, but this could be improved. It is therefore essential*
4 *that the families themselves see the school as a place of trust and support.*
5 *Therefore, we promoted, from the beginning, many projects that would achieve*
6 *this inclusion of the family in everyday school life. In this way, we not only*
7 *wanted to educate the students, but also to give the parents tools so that they*
8 *could also participate in this education (Estela, female principal)*
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12 This initiative for the inclusion of the family in the school made Estela and her
13 professional team, little by little, become aware of the cultural and personal richness of
14 the students and family of her school. At the same time, this approach also improved the
15 family's trust and perception of the professionals.
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21 *I knew the context of my students and their families much better. I placed all the*
22 *highest expectations on them. In the past I was also a student without resources,*
23 *and I saw myself reflected in them, I felt part of their history. I wanted them to*
24 *see their circumstances as a challenge to become better, but also as a source of*
25 *potential; therefore, many activities and projects were aimed at valuing their*
26 *cultural diversity, their customs and traditions, what made them different...*
27
28 (Estela, female principal)
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30
31 Estela detected many complexities when it came to the inclusion of her students in
32 classroom teaching, due to their lack of motivation or interest. However, by involving
33 them in this way she was able to connect with them. This was, as she recalls, the
34 starting point.
35

36 Estela and Rosa *decided to row against the current*. Never alone, and as they relate, the
37 change would not have been possible without the commitment of the rest of the
38 educational community.
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42 *"The school needed a radical change. After I became a principal, the first thing*
43 *we did was hold a meeting with the teaching staff. In this meeting we explained*
44 *what we wanted to achieve: a school for everyone and with everyone's*
45 *collaboration. To do this, we spent many months designing the school's*
46 *Educational Plan and everyone had to make their contribution and state that*
47 *they agreed with it. I believe that this helps all the professionals at the centre*
48 *feel involved and included. Of course, "engaging" and motivating the students*
49 *was another important pillar. We carried out training and (self-) training in*
50 *inclusive and active methodologies, and of course, initiatives and projects that*
51 *had equal opportunities and gender as their focus. Undoubtedly, we put our*
52 *focus on an equal and fair society"* (Estela, female principal)
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57 *"When I became a principal, I asked all my professional colleagues to have a*
58 *"dream" meeting. I wanted us all to be in a "dream" phase for a few weeks and*
59 *to write together what we wanted for our centre and how we could achieve it. In*
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3 *that meeting, my colleagues came up with wonderful dreams, and through*
4 *consensus we prioritized actions. The three main priorities were: a united*
5 *professional team, training in new inclusive methodologies, and initiatives*
6 *aimed at achieving equal opportunities for our students” (Rosa, female*
7 *principal)*
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10 During that dream phase, the students had to dream too, of course. In this way, Rosa
11 created a dream box, in which all the students of the school participated by writing
12 down a dream to be fulfilled in the school. All these dreams were considered and
13 analyzed. Rosa wanted to see what values her students wanted for their school.
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17 *Absenteeism, lack of motivation, disinterest... I think it's all because the students*
18 *don't feel part of the school. I wanted to eliminate this. It was hard work, but I*
19 *was very clear about one thing: projecting my confidence and positive*
20 *expectations onto them was key. From the different dreams of the students, we*
21 *carried out projects, exhibitions, workshops and even demonstrations (Rosa,*
22 *female principal)*
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25 In spite of the complex scenario in which they found themselves, with effort and
26 professional encouragement, the positive outcomes began to appear.
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29 *“In that initial stage of school management, I remember that I was very clear*
30 *about my role. I had to distribute duties and tasks to my colleagues in the*
31 *management team, delegate responsibilities, and trust. I did not want to be an*
32 *authoritarian principal, I wanted the responsibility to be shared and for*
33 *everyone to feel that they were participating in the improvement of the school.*
34 *To this end, I believe that active listening and empathy are important when*
35 *exercising leadership in school management” (Estela, female principal)*
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39 *“I needed the commitment of all members of the school, but also that of our*
40 *local community. I can say that the school we have today is the result of the*
41 *intra-centre relationships that were created years ago. We joined forces within*
42 *the school so that school failure and vulnerability would not happen again. But*
43 *that was not enough, we involved associations against violence, poverty,*
44 *absenteeism, etc. We also strengthened our ties with the city council and the*
45 *Social Services unit. Our educational programmes were also aimed at social*
46 *issues. We wanted our professionals to feel part of the change, not only them,*
47 *but also our students. We wanted them to see that what they were doing in the*
48 *institution had a social impact” (Rosa, female principal)*
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53 The female principals argue that their previous professional and personal experiences
54 were also key to their current professional identity. Their historical period, their
55 different professional destinies, the typology of students and schools in which they
56 worked, and their family factors were tracing the silhouette and body of their
57 professional development. In the face of different challenges, they realized that what
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3 they knew up to that moment was not enough. They had to go beyond the stipulated,
4 inhabit new identities, and plan their actions towards achieving a better society.
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6 **Discussion**

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9 The purpose of this study was to investigate the professional identity of two school
10 principals who achieved educational improvements in challenging centres through their
11 professional performance as inclusive leaders with a great critical awareness of social
12 injustices.
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15 The study of the life stories of school leaders provides us with a greater understanding
16 of how education professionals built their identity and committed to transforming the
17 school into a centre built on practices and values of collaborative professional culture
18 and inclusion. Investigating this professional identity does not only involve examining
19 an individual's behavioural and professional patterns. This identity is the result of
20 numerous internal — and sometimes external — battles. Therefore, contemplating all
21 these elements as a whole is what a true identity study really provides. Our study,
22 following those of Sugrue (2014) or Kelchtermans (2016), place value in the
23 professional trajectory, the personal context, childhood experiences or family
24 circumstances, and even the motions were decisive in the identity development of our
25 school principals. Other works such as those of Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) and
26 Cruz-González, Pérez and Domingo (2020) showed, in their life history studies, how
27 these personal, contextual, political and professional elements were decisive in the
28 development of a leadership identity for educational improvement. Those critical
29 incidents that occurred in the lives of professionals are a decisive aspect in
30 consolidating a leadership identity.
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37 It was important to study the professional life stories of our principals in order to
38 understand the different strategies developed in the process of improving the schools in
39 which they worked. Thus, other studies such as Carpenter et al. (2015) focused on this
40 element, arguing that the school context where a professional's work is carried out is
41 key to the development of effective leadership. In this regard, the authors warn that this
42 leadership must be adaptive and should also take into account the various social,
43 contextual, and professional circumstances of the school itself.
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48 The essential values that frame the educational practices of our principals are related to
49 the equality of the students within their schools. The principals sought to break with
50 hierarchical traditionalisms in school management and to make a detailed diagnosis of
51 the real needs of the school from the very voices of the students, family, and teachers.
52 Szeto and Cheng (2018) argue that in order to develop social justice leadership in
53 schools, these hierarchical models must be destroyed and new forms and models based
54 on horizontality and collective participation must be chosen. Unique cases such as those
55 of Estela and Rosa show an educational model based on openness to freedom and
56 respect, the fundamental principles of leadership for social justice (Furman, 2012;
57 DeMatthews, 2018)
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3 Estela and Rosa showed how first-hand experience of situations of discrimination or
4 invisibility as 'women' had provided them with the impetus to fight for a better school.
5 As the findings of Popescu and Gunter's (2011) and Britzman's (2003) study reveal,
6 early experiences lay the foundations for later personal and/or professional challenges.
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9 Throughout the storytelling we appreciate how the gender factor influenced the
10 development of their life trajectories. The birth of their children, professional loneliness
11 or the care of relatives all colour in the outline of our participants' professional lives. A
12 body of work has noted that these situations are very common in the Spanish
13 educational context, and in many cases they lead to a lower number of aspiring female
14 principals (Coronel, Carrasco and Moreno, 2012; Santos Guerra, 2000). However, our
15 female principals decided to break the pattern. In order to rebuild their professional
16 identity, they opted for the construction of a horizontal and participatory professional
17 culture. Bush (2013) and Day, Crow and Moller (2017) state that this is an
18 indispensable strategy for achieving solid and successful school leadership. In addition,
19 our principals considered the family to play an essential role in participating towards the
20 development of the school day. Thus, the creation of a relationship of trust and mutual
21 support was, for our participants, a starting point from which to work towards an
22 inclusive school for all (Moorosi, 2010). In the words of Theoharis (2010) "by
23 understanding (not judging) families' lives and beliefs, by committing to reaching out
24 and listening to families, and by using persistent, diverse, and native language
25 communication"(p. 369).
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33 For Estela and Rosa, their institutions were never vulnerable or marginal; in fact, their
34 schools were "fortunate due to their cultural and human richness". They chose, from an
35 alternative perspective, to have high expectations in these contexts and to transform
36 their difficulties into possibilities (Flecha & Soler, 2017). Thus, the professional team of
37 the schools they lead chose to regard diversity as a valuable opportunity to contribute by
38 bringing new knowledge and skills to their professional practice. Therefore, the
39 education in their centres was not impregnated with hegemonic and dominant
40 discourses and practices, but rather came from their own backgrounds and experiences
41 (López, 2016; Shields, 2010).
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46 To bring about change and improvement, our principals started by building strong and
47 solid relationships with their colleagues at the school. They felt that in order to achieve
48 a united professional group it was essential to care about their welfare and professional
49 inclusion in the school. Leithwood et al (2009), on the basis of their research, argue that
50 to develop a professional culture of distributed leadership, teachers and the community
51 must feel part of the school's dynamic, and they must identify with its values and goals.
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55 However, this was not the only approach that was needed. In addition, the support and
56 collaboration with agents outside the school community was key to generating
57 improvements in the school. Involving other actors and organisations from the local
58 community improved student motivation and inclusion and led to the creation of a
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3 network of committed and supportive links between school and community (Day et al.,
4 2009).
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6 **Implications for professional practice and future research**

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9 The life stories of Estela and Rosa highlight the importance of a leadership identity
10 oriented towards values of social justice. Students from difficult schools often feel a
11 sense of disidentification or disengagement with the school (Hancock and Zubrick,
12 2015). Actions aimed at the inclusion of students in school life would allow them to be
13 more motivated and engaged in school. At the same time, it would strengthen the trust
14 and relationship between teachers and students, which would serve to promote a more
15 real connection between the curriculum and the educational reality of the school.
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19 *Leading with others and not over others* was something that Estela and Rosa always
20 adopted as a professional guiding principle. As researchers in the field of educational
21 improvement seem to suggest, working collectively and horizontally is one of the keys
22 to success. For this reason, we believe that professional teams should orient their ways
23 of working towards values of cooperation and horizontality in order to achieve a true
24 transformation towards improvement (Leithwood et al., 2009)
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28 Another notable implication of this study is related to teacher training. On the basis of
29 the findings reported here, we consider that teacher training in distributed leadership
30 that is oriented towards values of social commitment should be expanded (Browne-
31 Ferrigno, 2003). On several occasions, aspiring principals do not know how to carry out
32 their work in complex contexts, which require a strong and consolidated leadership
33 identity. This is why preparation programs for principals must consider these issues
34 (Coleman and Campbell-Stephens, 2010). Training educational professionals in critical
35 social knowledge and cultural issues provides added authenticity to their subsequent
36 professional actions. This view has been argued by authors such as Toure and Dorsey
37 (2018), who explain that with the inclusion of these aspects in professional training
38 programs for teachers and school leaders, we would be closer to ending the stereotypes
39 and discrimination in classrooms that have been so ingrained since the distant past.
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45 Finally, we encourage future researchers to consider the life history stories of unique
46 individuals, who can offer insights into the fundamental pillars of performance (Sugrue,
47 2014). Undoubtedly, the story of these female principals provides a clear example of
48 empowered women who dedicate their professional lives to empowering others. These
49 stories can also give visibility to certain discourses that have often been silenced due to
50 their critical and challenging nature, and will undoubtedly be of value in the
51 professional development of novice teachers or aspiring school principals.
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55 **Acknowledgments**

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