Research in Educational Administration & Leadership

Volume: 9, Issue: 3/ September 2024

School Leadership in Multicultural Contexts During COVID-19: The Case of Melilla, Spain

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is increasingly present in schools, especially in Melilla (Spain), where cultural diversity is one of its defining features due to its geographical location on the border between Africa and Europe. In the light of the importance of educational leaders in dealing with this diversity, this research proposes two main objectives. First, to analyze initial and ongoing training in terms of interculturality, skills, and knowledge that an educational leader must have in their position, and second, to determine the impact of COVID-19 on school management in education centers. We used a qualitative methodology with semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect data, and content analysis as a data analysis method. The participants (school leaders) represent the six districts that comprise the city of Melilla, nine infant and primary education and six secondary education school leaders. The results reveal that the training received by educational leaders is rather limited and not very useful in practice. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the

Article Info

Article History:
Received:
December 4, 2023
Accepted:
July 4, 2024

Keywords:
Multiculturalism, Interculturality, School management, COVID-19.

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inequality gap between families from the schools, given that the situation exacerbated their economic status.

Cite as:
Abdelkader, N. C., García-Carmona, M. & Lucena, F. J. H. (2024). School leadership in multicultural contexts during COVID-19: The case of Melilla, Spain. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 9*(3), 166-214. http://10.30828/real.1397526

Introduction

Today's changing society, in which cultural diversity is one of its defining features, must be addressed from all areas of life: social, political, economic, educational, and alike. School principals carry out a great deal of management work in their schools to address this cultural diversity with the aim of making the cultures belonging to the same school context feel part of the educational community. This task is not easy on many occasions, due to the large number of changes and challenges that must be faced from the school management, without forgetting that at the same time principals must report to the educational administration on aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation of schools (Campos, 2017).

In the culturally diverse context of Melilla, inclusive education (IE) should be promoted to increase social responsibility, improve understanding of diversity, and teach in a way that avoids stereotypes and helps eliminate discrimination (Ruiz-Montero et al., 2023). To this end, educational leaders need to receive IE initial and ongoing

training, as well as the skills needed to manage cultural diversity, which include empathy, active listening, respect, etc. All these skills are essential for managing educational contexts in which up to five different cultures coexist: Christian, Muslim, Hebrew, Hindu and Roma (Instituto de Cultura de Melilla, 2019).

It is important to highlight the main characteristics of Melilla and its relevance to the context of this study. The city is bordered by the northern region known as the Rif in Morocco, North Africa. It covers an area of around 12 km2 and has a population of approximately 86,261 inhabitants (INE, 2022). Its high population density is well above the Spanish and European Union average. A distinctive feature of the city is its linguistic and cultural diversity. Interculturality is one of the city's defining characteristics and is reflected in the harmonious coexistence and tolerance between cultures and ethnicities.

The geographical location of Melilla means that it receives large numbers of immigrants from Africa and Asia, who are seeking a better life in Spain and the rest of Europe. Due to this, the city has the highest concentration of young immigrants in public schools in Spain, in addition to being the city with the highest student/teacher ratio (Marmolejo & Montero-Alonso, 2009). Out of the total student body in Melilla, the percentage of foreign students is 13.2% compared to the Spanish average of 10.3% (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023).

Normore and Brooks (2014) state that the figure of the school leader is central to promoting social justice educational leadership. Hence, as the representatives of pupils, teachers, and community members whose educational experience is directly affected by social justice issues, educational leaders play a pivotal role in addressing and advocating values and ethics. The challenge of interculturality in

schools involves recognizing and respecting the personal and cultural legitimacy of all learners and, evidently, applying the principles of cooperation, solidarity and belief in learning throughout schooling (Leiva, 2012).

The management of cultural diversity and the importance of intercultural training in 21-century society has become one of the main challenges for European Union training institutions, especially in the context of initial and ongoing training for primary and secondary education teachers. The aim is to equip them with the knowledge they need to respond to changes in society and the specific needs of immigrant students. To this end, new theoretical frameworks and best practices must be incorporated to manage cultural diversity (OECD, 2021; United Nations, 2022; Del Olmo, López & Villarrubia, 2023). The UNESCO Report (2021) on the challenges of education in 2021, among other proposals for renewing education, highlights that schools should be protected educational sites because they promote "inclusion, equity and individual and collective well-being", and that they should be "places that bring diverse groups of people together and expose them to challenges and possibilities not available elsewhere". Moreover, it should be noted that some studies (Leiva, 2012; Soriano & Peñalva, 2010) highlight the need to open intercultural training to the entire educational community. The aim is to turn schools into community training spaces where education in intercultural competencies is an integral part of the learning framework.

In the culturally diverse context of Melilla, the Spanish Autonomous City located on the northwest coast of Africa, there is a thriving intercultural education movement. The aim of adopting intercultural education in schools is to improve understanding and respect for different cultures by enhancing and unifying collective development

and effort towards creating a wider, intercultural society based on mutual respect (López, 2013; Aguado et al., 2014; García-Carmona, 2014; García-Carmona et al., 2020). In this study, we aim to analyze the reality of Melilla in terms of training and implementation of interculturality by school leaders. This approach is in line with our understanding that by dealing with interculturality from a management level, educational environments can be transformed into spaces where students and educators can foster inclusion to make all cultures that use educational centers feel welcome. The idea is to use the authority or power given to leaders to manage intercultural schools to promote inclusivity and intercultural leadership practices (Ärlestig el at., 2016; Gómez-Hurtado, 2014; León et al., 2018; Ryan, 2016).

After reviewing the literature and comprehending the importance of intercultural training, in this qualitative study, we aim to assess the training and professional development of school leaders working in culturally diverse schools in Melilla. We also analyze the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes that influence the work of school leadership. To this end, we enlisted the participation of nine infant and primary schools and six secondary schools. The research questions that drive our study are: What initial and ongoing training do school leaders in Melilla receive? What knowledge, skills, and aptitudes should educational leaders receive in terms of intercultural education in the context of Melilla? What measures/strategies do they implement in their centers to promote the inclusion of UAMs (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors)? What role has the COVID-19 pandemic played in creating educational inequalities in institutions with diverse student populations?

Multiculturalism and interculturalism: two concepts in society that both converge and diverge

In his study, Kottak (2019) states that the phenomena of immigration and differential population growth seen in many countries has led to the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality becoming increasingly significant and that they are sometimes considered synonymous. Therefore, it is important to differentiate the terms based on their conceptualization.

Multiculturalism is understood as the coexistence of different cultures in the same space but without socially interacting with one another. Due to the lack of social contact between the different cultures, no cultural enrichment takes place (Bernabé-Villodre, 2012). Unlike multiculturalism, interculturality is based on interaction, reciprocity, and symmetry between cultures that leads to dialogue and communication (Tirzo, Gómez & Hernández, 2010) in which cultural differences are recognized and accepted (Alavez- Ruiz, 2014). In summary, multiculturalism only refers to the coexistence of different cultures in the same physical space but without mutual enrichment or exchange. In contrast, interculturality is defined as the establishment of cultural relationships and integration, which gives rise to reciprocal enrichment.

Interculturality is the concept that lays the foundation for a clear position in defense of universal human rights and equality rather than discrimination. Intercultural Education (IE) is not the same as multiculturalism (the passive coexistence of different cultural groups), given that it advocates the critical acceptance of cultural diversity through negotiation and dialogue, which considers the individual but also their place in the community, as a member of a collective (Molina, 2010). In this regard, the education system must adapt and transform

within a framework of communicative interaction to reflect diverse socio-cultural and economic realities (Molina, 2002).

García-Carmona et al. (2021) highlight that since 1980, IE has been the leading platform for dialogue on democracy and diversity. The authors state that IE has been adopted by the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the United Nations as a basis for interreligious initiatives and the internationalization of schools. Consequently, for many OECD countries, IE has become the main paradigm for cultural policy, development of teaching methods and curriculum design. IE is being hailed as an inclusive model that helps to reduce xenophobia and racism.

Leiva (2017) argues that school dropout and failure ratios are systemic drawbacks of the institutional-educational framework that targets the weakest and/or most marginalized, especially students with functional diversity, students from immigrant backgrounds, and minorities. In some studies, school leaders, in particular, are singled out as being responsible for failing to implement cultural or structural solutions to eliminate historical inequalities affecting marginalized groups (Burello et al., 2001; Dantley & Tillman, 2006).

Queupil et al. (2023) state that IE incorporates the idea that all students, regardless of differences, should have the same learning opportunities. Thus, interculturality in an educational setting presents an opportunity to rethink the role of schools and that of those who lead them.

In turn, Leithwood et al. (2020) argues that accumulated evidence shows that school leaders are instrumental in the transformational and development processes in their institutions, which becomes even more important in more complex contexts. This confirms that the functions

of school leaders directly impact the work targeted at interculturality in the entire educational community.

The role of educational leaders in multicultural contexts

Traditionally, the role of the school leader was seen as an authoritative figure in schools: head teacher, management team, or other similar positions created for educational institutions. However, this concept has evolved over the years as leadership has come to be understood in different terms. The position is now seen as one that should exercise influence over educational communities in a way that aims to improve student learning by developing the capacity of professional teams (Leithwood et al., 2006; Spillane, 2012). It is now widely accepted that leadership can be exercised by informal positions of authority and anyone who has an impact on the teaching and learning process (Spinalle, 2012).

Educational leadership emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning and the role of leaders in fostering collaboration as regards student learning (Hallinger & Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2020; Robinson 2013). As educational leaders, school principals become the culture builders of their education centers (Hallinger 2003). Specifically in the context of the object of this study, Melilla, the role of school leaders is seen as paramount, given that they are responsible for promoting the culture of their school by taking into account the cultural diversity of the city.

As a result, the work of school leaders has become progressively challenging and complex, as they are required to lead school improvements, manage a large number of competing requests, and meet the needs of various stakeholders including students, teachers and families (Park & Datnow, 2022). Added to this is the fact that in a

multicultural context such as Melilla, where as many as five different cultures coexist, school leaders must also meet the contrasting requirements that arise from cultural diversity.

The way in which school leaders conceptualize cultural diversity is important, as it has a significant impact on educational improvement, and school organization has a positive effect on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership, therefore, requires very specific and complex knowledge, skill sets, and aptitudes that are not acquired through the accumulation of experience alone (Silva, 2012). This is why it is important to implement practical training for school leaders prior to them occupying their post so that they can gain a deeper understanding of what they face before taking up their duties.

Consequently, Culturally Relevant Leadership (CRL) may be the best approach to take in order to influence school contexts and address the cultural requirements of the whole educational community. This approach, together with the educational community stakeholders themselves, aims to develop critical awareness to help identify and challenge the inequalities inherent in society at large (Arar et al., 2019; López, 2016).

Studies by Arar (2020) and Horsford et al. (2011) have identified four main components of CRL i: sociocultural awareness, inclusive education, policy mediation, and professional leadership. Taking this into account, this leadership model highlights the school leaders' role in building bridges between cultures and working in a more effective educational environment to increase equal opportunities for immigrant children. Ultimately, CRL presents diverse methodologies for teachers to address the unique learning requirements of minority students (Khalifa et al., 2016). This is especially important as regards

migration to Western societies, as immigration has a direct impact on schools and poses diverse challenges to education (Arar & Izhar, 2022).

Brooks et al., (2017) argue that this approach improves leadership for social justice within immigrant school contexts and develops student-centered practice frameworks. Therefore, it is important to understand the culturally relevant leadership trends of school leaders to prevent inequalities in educational settings with a high ratio of minority students with the aim of increasing their academic performance and ensuring equal opportunities in society in general.

Educational leadership in multicultural contexts during COVID-19

In December 2019, the world was unaware of what was about to happen. Every aspect of daily life was abruptly paralyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave rise to "undeniable chaos" that shook the field of education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

According to Harris and Jones (2020) in most countries, getting children back to school was an ongoing problem and a real challenge. Schools that reopened faced multiple complications: social distancing, intensive cleaning, and the meticulous organization of all movement around the school itself. School leaders had to deal with all of these situations, in addition to covering every need and contingency.

The closure of educational centers in Spain began on March 11, 2020, and, in most cases, lasted until the end of the academic year, although there were some exceptions in which classrooms were partially reopened on June 2, 2020. The COVID-19 situation had a direct impact on teaching and learning processes in every school across the country. The closure of centers as of March 2020 led to the unanticipated creation of a distance learning system at every level and stage of the education system. This had a direct impact not only on teaching

methodologies, but also on classroom teaching programs and student assessment (Consejo Escolar del Estado, 2021). After the COVID-19 lockdown, a gradual return to school was implemented. In the case of Melilla, the return to school was staggered from September 9, 2020 as follows: infant, primary, first and second Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) were all distributed in two shifts, while third and fourth ESO was semi-presential.

Furthermore, the health crisis also triggered a series of problems among teachers, families, and students, such as stress, lack of coordination, disconnection of students from their learning process, students with unmet special educational needs, lack of resources and/or computer equipment, failings in online educational platforms, and lack of teacher competences, among others (López-Noguero et al., 2021). Researchers also highlight income level inequality, different levels of education, and household typologies as having an inequitable impact on material deficiencies such as computers in some households. This issue is decisive for immigrant families as it highlights social and territorial inequalities, as well as the impossibility for some students living in low-income and low-education households to access online learning models. Not all students have equal access to the resources they need, including computer equipment, and even if they do, access is not always exclusive but shared with siblings and/or parents who also need to perform their respective online activities. Moreover, not all students have the knowledge needed to use devices effectively, and not all can rely on digitally literate adults (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 crisis, the response provided by some school management teams through effective team management and by establishing processes was often ahead of the solutions proposed by the authorities, which highlighted their quick reaction to the situation

(Aznar, 2020). The organization and coordination of management teams is always important, and even more so in emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaboration and solidarity of the entire educational community is paramount and involves all its members, who must be made to feel that they are co-participants and protagonists in the entire process (Jiménez-Cruz, 2019; Leiva-Guerrero & Vásquez, 2019; Villa, 2019).

Methodology

Research design

In recent decades, the creation of new paradigms regarding teachers' beliefs and knowledge has shed light on the decisions made in planning, intervention, and evaluation processes, as well as the reasons behind teachers' reluctance to change (Núñez & López, 2023). The descriptive case study presented in this paper (Miles & Huberman, 1994) adheres to this framework by using a qualitative approach with the aim of determining school leaders' opinions in Melilla.

The study first analyzes the initial and ongoing IE training received by school leaders of infant, primary, and secondary schools in Melilla. We chose to work with infant, primary, and secondary schools given that they encompass the compulsory stages of education. Next, we analyzed the IE knowledge, skills, and aptitudes that school leaders must acquire in order to access leadership positions. Lastly, we explain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of the different cultures that coexist in Melilla's education centers.

This qualitative study uses the semi-structured interview method to collect data, which is characterized by its flexibility and open-ended nature. This method suits the purpose of the study, which is to gather

data on the perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitude of school leaders in order to explore the research questions in greater depth (Vargas, 2012).

Context

The Autonomous City of Melilla

Melilla was given autonomous city status under Spanish Organic Law 2/1995, of March 13. The city has a high school dropout rate, high unskilled unemployed, and a high percentage of the active population lacks training. This makes it very difficult for the population to access the new knowledge society and labor market (Orellana, 2022). The average school enrollment rate for 16-year-olds in the Spanish Autonomous Regions for the 2016-2017 academic year was 96%, compared to 86% in Melilla. The school enrollment rate for 18-year-olds in the city dropped to 63%, while the national average was over 79.5% (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2019).

Within Melilla's multicultural context, there is a thriving intercultural integration movement. For example, by adopting IE, schools aim to enhance understanding and respect for different cultures and, in turn, increase collective development and effort in order to create a wider, intercultural society based on mutual respect (Aguado et al., 2014; García-Carmona, 2014, 2015; García-Carmona et al., 2021).

Lastly, it should be noted that the Spanish state, through the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training in its capital, Madrid, is exclusively responsible for the regulation and management of Melilla's education system (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2019). This means that according to the Spanish education system's legislative guidelines, school leaders exercise relative autonomy over their own local schools. However, Melilla's geographical separation

from the Spanish mainland limits its bargaining power with the Spanish Ministry of Education located in Madrid (García-Carmona et al., 2021).

It should also be noted that the city of Melilla has twelve public education centers for infant and primary education and six institutions for ESO distributed in the city's six districts. Below is a map of the city with education centers by school district.

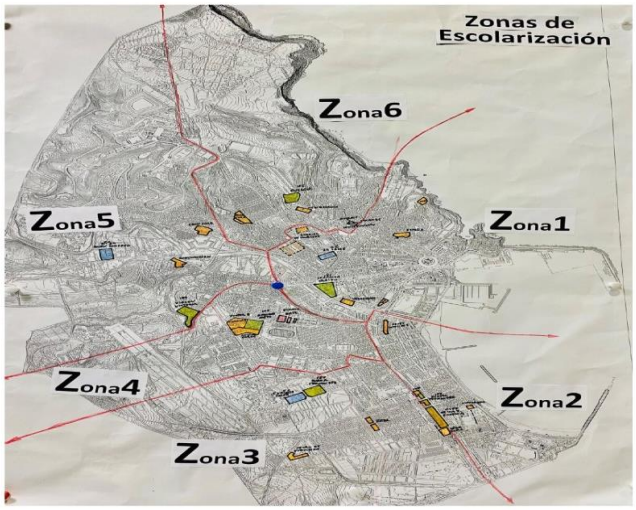

Figure 1. School districts in the Autonomous City of Melilla

Source: Enrique Soler school website (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wdFS40Gg5PfrrRuBPxtNGN70wEDz05LV/view?pli=1)

Melilla, an opportunity for UAMs

This research focuses on UAMs with the aim of determining what measures and/or specific strategies are performed in Melilla's

education centers to promote their inclusion. Hence, the term and the characteristics that define it are explained below.

The term UAM (Unaccompanied [Foreign] Minor) refers to all those persons under 18 years of age, who migrate unaccompanied by an adult in unlawful circumstances. Their motivation for migrating could be influenced by situations of abuse, abandonment, poverty, family conflicts, and social/family or media influence regarding Europe. They migrate from a geographical area with high levels of poverty, unemployment, etc. to somewhere they believe is a land of opportunities (De Miguel & Herrero, 2012; Fuentes, 2014; González, 2004).

Due to its location in northwest Africa on the border with Morocco, which promotes a variety of exchanges with its neighbor, Melilla is considered a "frontier city". This phenomenon has led to UAMs seeing Melilla as the gateway to achieving their dreams (Abderrahman et al., 2018). The most current data on the number of UAMs residing in the city is from 2019. According to Melilla's Official Bulletin (BOME number 5633, 2019), over 900 minors were received in reception centers that only have capacity for 260 places at most. Before 1997, there was practically no evidence of the existence of UAMs in Melilla. However, in 2014, 283 UAMs were received, and from that year onwards there has been a disproportionate increase until reaching the figure of 1,895 in 2018.

According to Abderahman et al., (2023), 96% of UAMs were born in Morocco and 4% in other African countries (Angola, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali). This data is in accordance with other studies, such as Conde Gallego (2022), López Belmonte et al., (2018) and Vicente Lorca (2022). UAMs come from both urban and rural regions (Jiménez, 2011). Those from urban environments

emigrate on their own initiative and rely on peer networks. Those from rural backgrounds are motivated by their family, who cover their costs (Martínez et al., 2009). The average age of UMAs is 14-15 years and they profess Islam (López Belmonte et al., 2018; Vicente Lorca, 2022).

Another of the significant characteristics of UAMs is their level of maturity, which is higher than their corresponding chronological age. Their clear objective is to become documented and work as soon as possible and they do not contemplate returning to their country of birth. The majority speak Arabic and Central Atlas Tamazight, they maintain regular contact with their families of origin and repeatedly reject or abandon residential care projects (Mohamed-Abderrahman et al., 2018).

Currently, UAMs in Melilla are hosted in reception centers and residential facilities managed by service companies and NGOs, whose work is supervised by the Melilla General Directorate of Families and Minors. The centers and facilities are: Fuerte Purísima, Gota de Leche, and Divina Infantita.

UMAs present high percentages of school and academic failure, which is primarily due to their lack of knowledge of the Spanish language, few social relationships, and the curriculum gap, which is aggravated by late schooling (López Belmonte et al., 2019). Another factor responsible for their academic results is that while the majority of those hosted in Gota de Leche are taught in schools and share the classroom with their peers from Melilla, very few UMAs from Fuerte Purísima find themselves in the same situation. The majority hosted in Fuerte Purísima are enrolled in training courses intended only for them, where they mix with other UAMs. It has been observed that in basic education (primary and ESO) 64% are enrolled from Gota de Leche and 26% from Fuerte Purísima. In contrast, 20% from Gota de Leche and

57% from Fuerte Purísima are enrolled in training courses and workshops such as hairdressing, masonry, hospitality, linguistic immersion, etc. (Abderahman et al.,2023).

Participants

As is typical of qualitative research designs, the participant sample selection was performed using a purposive sampling method (Tójar, 2006). Specifically, we used stratified purposeful sampling which highlights characteristics of particular sub-populations of interest and facilitates comparisons between them. Stratified sampling divides the sample into populations or categories according to the similarities or differences which they exhibit in a study (Friday & Leah, 2024). In this case, the sample comprises fifteen school leaders divided into six school districts, there is a total of 18 school leaders in the city.

Melilla has six school districts for the education of infant, primary, and secondary education. To ensure that every area was represented in the study, we included at least one educational leader per district. We selected nine infant and primary school leaders and six secondary school leaders.

In line with García-Carmona et al. (2021), a major distinguishing feature of Melilla's schools is their cultural diversity. The majority of the UAMs from the fifteen schools that participated in the study were Muslim from Berber and Tamazight language backgrounds, comprising 60 to 90% of the student population. The case of the school in District 6 is of particular interest given that 98% of the student body are Muslims/Berber and the school's teachers have the highest number of years of experience.

Table 1 summarizes key informant data.

Table 1.

Basic data on infant, primary, and secondary school leaders in Melilla participating in the study.

Participant	District	University Education	Level of Education	% Cultures present in schools
P1	4	Psychopedagogical teacher	Infant and primary	70% Muslim (Berber) 29% Christian 1% Roma
P2	5	Teacher	Infant and primary	90% Muslim (Berbers) 9% Christian 1% Roma
P3	4	Teacher	Infant and primary	60% Muslim (Berber) 40% Christian
P4	1	Psychopedagogical teacher	Infant and primary	85% Muslim (Berber) 14% Christian 1% Roma
P5	6	Teacher	Infant and primary	95% Muslim (Berber) 4% Christian 1% Roma
P6	5	Teacher	Infant and primary	95% Muslim (Berber) 4% Christian 1% Roma
P7	3	Teacher	Infant and primary	80% Muslim (Berber) 19% Christian 1% Roma
P8	3	Educational psychologist	Infant and primary	80% Muslims (Berbers) 9% Christians 1% Roma
P9	2	Teacher	Infant and primary	70% Muslim (Berber) 29% Christian 1% Roma
P10	4	Hispanic Philology	Secondary and baccalaureate	70% Muslim (Berber) 29% Christian 1% Roma
P11	3	Bachelor's Degree	Secondary and baccalaureate	70% Muslim (Berber) 29% Christian 1% Roma
P12	1	English Philology CAP*	Secondary and baccalaureate	85% Muslim (Berber) 14% Christian

P13	2	Hispanic Philology	Secondary and baccalaureate	1% Roma 75% Muslims (Berbers) 24% Christians
P14	6	Teacher	Secondary and baccalaureate	1% Roma 98% Muslim (Berber) 1% Christian
P15	5	Bachelor's Degree	Secondary and baccalaureate	1% Roma 90% Muslim (Berber) 9% Christian
				1% Roma

* *Certificado Aptitud Pedagógica* (Qualified Teaching Certificate)

The first nine participants in Table 1 are infant and primary school leaders and the remaining six secondary school leaders. All the city's districts are represented in the second column. The third column shows the school leaders' level of training. It is clear that in infant and primary educational centers the training points to a degree in teacher education (former diploma) and in some cases in psychopedagogy (former diploma) while all but one of the secondary education school leaders hold bachelor's degrees. The last column shows which culture the student population belongs to.

Data analysis

This qualitative study uses a classic content analysis method (Bardin, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Content analysis is a suitable method for analyzing trends in communication content, such as the narratives in the study (Strauss & Corbin 1990). We chose to work with this method because of its flexibility, which enables us to explore topics in depth while making quantifiable comparisons comprising various stages of categorization, text distribution, and content analysis.

The first step of the analysis was to identify the dissimilar categories which arose from the meta-category (the overarching category), *the IE*

training, skills, and aptitudes of school leaders. To address the research questions, we identified four subcategories: 1) IE initial and ongoing training in leadership; 2) IE knowledge, skills, and aptitudes needed in leadership positions; 3) Measures and strategies implemented in schools to promote the inclusion of UAMs, and 4) Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of the different cultures that coexist in Melilla's schools.

The second stage of the analysis was organized around the following question: What training on interculturality do educational leaders receive and how do they promote inclusion in their schools in the face of adversities such as COVID-19? The third stage entailed the analysis of the answers to the questions in each category.

Table 2.

Relationship between the analysis categories and the interview questions

Analysis categories	Interview questions
Intercultural education in leadership. Initial and ongoing training	Is your initial training adequate for a leadership position? Have you participated in an initial intercultural management training program?
Intercultural education knowledge, skills, and aptitudes needed in leadership positions	What knowledge, skills, and aptitudes as regards intercultural education do you consider are needed in order to access a leadership position, especially in the context of Melilla?

Measures and strategies in schools to promote the inclusion of UAMs	What measures or strategies are in place in your school to promote the inclusion of UAMs? What difficulties have you encountered?
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of different cultures in schools	How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the inclusion of the different cultures in your school? Do you think the situation has aggravated the inequality gap between the families that use your school?

Once the initial stage of the analysis was complete – determining the categories and subcategories – we used NVivo qualitative data analysis software v.12: searches and visualizations. This enabled us to transform the data into graphic language (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to highlight correlations in the data and determine their frequency, in other words, quantifying coding variants (Mayring 2000; Gbrich 2007). This was to determine trends and patterns, the structures and discourses of the communications.

The methodological strategy used in this study was the deductive approach, where the actions performed to fulfill the objectives are based on background information and solid theoretical knowledge (Dávila, 2006). This was made possible through the analysis of the narrative material using a cyclical process centered around three fundamental stages: data discovery, coding, and relativization (Flick, 2014). The categorization and subsequent coding were performed with the consensus of four experts in qualitative research. This was undertaken in line with the criteria of coherence, relevance, clarity, and

significance. Therefore, it guarantees the credibility of the analysis process (Holloway and Todres 2003).

Prior to the study, permission was requested from the Melilla Faculty of Education and Sport Science Research Commission and Provincial Directorate to contact the education centers. Once consent was obtained, an appointment was made with the school leaders of the infant, primary and secondary education centers to conduct the in-depth interviews based on the objectives set out in the study. The interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face in the participating education centers. Audio recordings were used to record the data and informed consent was obtained from the interviewees for the subsequent transcription. The average duration per interview was 60 minutes. All interviews were professionally transcribed and no personal information was registered.

Findings

In order to respond to the research analysis categories, the results are divided into four sections: a) IE initial and ongoing training for school leaders. b) IE knowledge, skills, and aptitudes needed to become a school leader c) Measures and strategies implemented in education centers to promote the inclusion of UMAs d) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of different cultures in schools.

IE initial and ongoing training for school leaders

First, it is important to highlight that school leaders are the principal agents of change in promoting improvements in academic performance and success (Weinstein & Muñoz, 2019). In this regard, the authority or power that are given to manage intercultural schools could be used to promote inclusivity and intercultural leadership

practices (Ärlestig et al., 2016; Gómez-Hurtado, 2014; León et al., 2018; Ryan, 2016).

With regard to the initial IE training that school leaders receive, most of the interviewers highlighted that they had not received any specific training. However, there is an annual course offered by trade unions that deals with interculturality and forms part of state civil servant exams. A minority of the interviewers stated that they had received some specific training prior to starting their job or even in-service in the form of seminars or workshops. As to whether they consider their initial IE training to be adequate for their position, most participants said that they did not. However, the majority also stated that although they had not received adequate initial training for their position, they had acquired everything they needed to perform their duties to the best of their ability through experience. They unanimously stated that their daily experience in their centers means that they are trained in multiculturalism and interculturalism, highlighting the singularity of living in Melilla, which is characterized by cultural diversity. In this respect, some informants highlighted that:

> *No, no training as such, but rather daily experience (E2).*
>
> *The best training is the day-to-day training I get in my center (E11).*
>
> *No, no training, but I've worked a lot in multicultural environments. So yes, I have had many first-hand multicultural experiences with the type of multiculturalism that is present in Melilla (E3).*

In reference to ongoing IE training courses, the majority highlighted that they had not received any specific training, although some school leaders stated that they themselves had been trainers and speakers in talks, seminars, etc., on intercultural matters due to their work experience. When asked, most of the participants stated that they

believed they had not received sufficient formal training on the subject. However, they again highlighted that their day-to-day work means that they are trained in everything they need in order to perform their duties correctly, taking into account the diversity of their schools.

> *Whatever I wanted, because it's not compulsory, you know that civil servants can't be forced to take courses (E8).*
>
> *None. But I've given 4-5 [courses]. I mean, I haven't done any, but I've been called on several occasions to give a talk or workshop (E14).*
>
> *I haven't done any as such, but I've been reading things related to it (E12).*

IE Knowledge, skills, and aptitudes needed to become a school leader

The importance of leadership practices aimed at managing cultural diversity cannot be understated as they have a significant impact on school improvement, and school organization has a positive effect on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Therefore, school leaders require very specific and complex knowledge, skill sets, and aptitudes to perform their role successfully (Silva, 2012).

The second section of results, which addresses the IE knowledge, skills, and aptitudes required to apply for school management positions in Melilla yielded the following findings. In terms of knowledge, the informants highlighted the importance of understanding the history of Melilla, the cultures that coexist in the city, the different neighborhoods, etc., as well as the importance of having notions of pedagogy, and acquiring training on interculturality and knowledge of leadership. In terms of skills, they highlighted listening and communication skills. And in relation to aptitudes, they

highlighted empathy, emotional intelligence, persuasion, problem solving, respect, patience, and leadership. They also highlighted the importance of families in schools and how they should be empathetic towards them, as each family has different circumstances. Furthermore, taking into account that Melilla is multicultural, special attention is paid to the families in schools in order to design more democratic and inclusive intercultural methods:

> *Well, the first thing is to know the history of Melilla, the different neighborhoods, the idiosyncrasies of the different cultures of the inhabitants. Then skills, I think it's about feelings, a little like putting yourself in someone else's shoes. As for skills, above all, having the desire to understand them, get to know and comprehend them (E4).*

> *First, to understand the intercultural reality of Melilla, to really know it, to see the situation and base your work on it. To be an open person, a global person, capable of managing cultural differences, who has patience and above all a lot of empathy (E13).*

Measures and strategies implemented in education centers to promote the inclusion of UMAs

It is important to highlight that this study focuses on UAMs with the aim of determining what specific measures and/or strategies are implemented by Melilla education centers to promote their inclusion. In the third section of results, which refers to the measures and strategies performed in education centers for the inclusion of UAMs, most of the participants stated that they were not currently working with groups of UAMs in their centers. However, they stated that they had worked with UAMs in the past and there is currently only one education center that still works with UAMs. The measures and strategies performed consist of a reception plan to collect and analyze

the needs of individual UAMs, which then leads to a work plan in which UAMs are worked with individually for two or three hours a day, and the rest of the time they study in the classroom with their classmates. In the individual sessions, the work focuses primarily on linguistic immersion and the socio-cultural environment. Another measure adopted by some schools is to work with the families involved in the school to raise awareness and sensitize them about IE and its benefits. This is due to the fact that sometimes families are reluctant to allow UAMs to attend schools.

> *No, we don't. Years ago, we did have children from Syria. It was like a kind of classroom, where we worked with them individually and in groups. We took them in and worked with them individually for two or three hours a day to give them more personalized training and in other sessions in the classroom with the other children (E5).*

> *The ones we have come from CETI. In previous years, we've had a large number of students due to the border issue. This year we have very few. When they arrive, they are given special attention to help them integrate into the classroom and in the classroom, the work that the tutor does with them is also important (E6).*

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of different cultures in schools

According to UNESCO (2023), the first impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the digital divide, which especially affected primary and secondary school students. The socioeconomic situation of students and their families was an exacerbating factor. The fourth category of analysis aims to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Melilla's education centers and the inclusion of different cultures in schools. The participants indicated that the impact of

COVID-19 had less to do with cultural differences and more to do with "social status". This means that families with more economic resources were able to cope better with the changes that were taking place in schools, given that they had access to devices (mobile phones, computers, etc.) to perform activities and connect with teachers from home during the lockdown. However, it was more complicated to work with families with lower purchasing power, who sometimes only had one device for three or four children and/or did not have a computer. The support provided by the authorities in Melilla, including the loan of tablets and computers, was widely reported. However, in many cases, families did not have an Internet connection to be able to participate in the different training activities. The authorities also provided internet cards. However, those families with a low level of basic computer skills found it very difficult to access the internet, despite the fact that the resources were provided.

> *Well, with respect to cultures, it hasn't had any repercussions. In any case, the greatest impact was in terms of social status and availability of resources and who had more training in families, not at a professional level, but in the family environment, where there were resources and basic knowledge to be able to manage the online issue and all the devices and all that, but it was not a cultural conditioning factor (E1).*

> *Well, there was no difference between them. The pandemic affected everyone equally, what it has affected has nothing to do with interculturality or anything like that, but with families' economy (E7).*

> *Well, here the students we have are 100% Muslim, I mean, perhaps here it's exasperated by the fact that it's a center on the outskirts of the city, so I think that for the education of these children, the center*

> *needs to be here. The pandemic has caused damage, it has caused the children to fall further behind than they should have (E15).*

In relation to whether the inequality gap between the families that use the education centers had increased, the participants stated that it had. This highlights the fact that inequalities already existed and continued to exist during the pandemic but became more evident due to the crisis. Above all, they highlighted the acquisition of computer resources, as low-income families could not afford what was required of them by education centers. In more heterogeneous schools, participants also indicate that the inequality gap between families in the educational community has become more evident:

> *It couldn't be any other way, as usual the most disadvantaged family always suffers the most. The less well-off classes have noticed it more because the support they have is taken away and mom and dad do''t know how to help them. There's a clear gap (E9).*

> *No... I think we have a very heterogeneous student body, there are all sorts of pupils in the school. The Melilla Acoge association and another one that is also here collaborating with us, they came weekly, collected the materials that we gave them and then brought us the children's homework (E10).*

Once the process of reducing, categorizing, and coding had been performed, as well as the transformation of the data, the following word cloud was obtained, which reflects the most frequently repeated words from the interviews:

Figure 1. Word cloud extracted from NVivo software.

Source: The authors.

Figure 2 highlights the most repeated and therefore most important words for the respondents in the study. The concepts that appeared most frequently in the discourse of the key informants include intercultural, educational, and training. These three aspects were repeated throughout the data collection process to describe the educational reality experienced in Melilla's education centers. In short, the results highlight the importance of intercultural training for educational leaders in order to respond to the specific needs of the educational community, especially in the context of Melilla. They also highlight the presence of cultural diversity in schools as a defining feature of the city's educational landscape. The data reveals the concern and importance given to the subject of the study by the participants. In summary, as already highlighted (Leiva, 2012; Peñalva & Soriano, 2010), the importance of IE training for school leaders and cultural diversity in schools is paramount.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the practices implemented by school leaders to promote interculturality in the context of Melilla:

a city characterized by its vast cultural diversity with five major cultures coexisting together (Christian, Muslim, Hebrew, Hindu, and Roma (Campos, 2017). The analysis of the literature review and the in-depth interviews conducted for this study revealed that most schools in Melilla have a high student population comprising mostly ethnic-religious Muslim minorities (Moroccan/Berber), while educational centers are managed by a Christian minority (Spanish).

In the following section, the objectives of the study are discussed, recommendations made, and some limitations highlighted.

First, IE initial and ongoing training for Melilla's school leaders was analyzed. This enabled us to determine how cultural diversity is managed and why intercultural training for 21st-century society has become one of the main challenges for European Union training institutions (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015; Piekut & Valentine, 2017). Despite the fact that the study context comprises different cultures, the participants highlighted the lack practical and useful IE training courses for their field of education. They also stated that the management preparation course lacks sufficient content relating to interculturality. The results show, as Vázquez, Liesa, and Bernal (2016) also argue that training courses are currently mere formalities through which there is no real improvement in the professional development of school leaders. Among other reasons, this is due to the fact that they are far removed from the contextual reality. Therefore, training programs need to motivate participants to subsequently implement their newly acquired skills in their schools (Jerdborg, 2022). Furthermore, they highlight the importance of implementing the aforementioned training programs not only for top school management, but for all intermediate leaders (heads of study, teachers, etc.), which would facilitate management work and increase the

involvement of the educational community (Peñalva & Soriano, 2010; Leiva, 2012). Other recommendations suggested were to hold workshops with families, teachers, and members of the educational community to learn more about cultural diversity and create a better school climate; an important aspect in improving academic success and the social integration of UAMs and their families.

Second, in relation to the IE knowledge, skills, and aptitudes required to qualify for school leadership positions, the study also provides important findings. The work of school leaders has become increasingly challenging and complex, as they are expected to lead school improvement, handle a multitude of competing requests, and address the needs of diverse stakeholders (Park & Datnow, 2022). In order for school leaders to do all of the above, as reflected in the findings of this study, they need to have knowledge, skills, and aptitudes orientated towards the constituencies they work with in the school community.

In the context of Melilla, Muslim families with restricted resources face cultural, class, and even racial inequality. In context with a long history of immigration, it is argued that schools play a key and unique role in the education and cultural socialization of ethno-racial, lower-class minority students (García-Carmona et al., 2021). Thus, we can confirm that the results of the study are consistent with the idea that school leaders have an impact on school improvement and academic success. This statement is concurrent with other reviews and research on the subject, including studies by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, (2020), Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016), Hallinger (2018), and Jerdborg, (2022), among others.

The importance of knowledge in school management should be highlighted, although the imperative need to develop and promote

skills in relation to interculturality is more notable. As the interviewees state, the main skill most in demand is empathy. It is evident that when working in a diverse context and more so in the school context, social skills such as: empathy, active listening, tolerance, and so on are essential aspects of educational leaders. Therefore, it is necessary to implement activities which promote these types of skills which can be implemented within educational centers or shared external spaces with other professionals.

Third, the measures and strategies implemented in the city to promote the inclusion of UAMs were addressed, who are fleeing very difficult situations and see Europe as the land of opportunities, (De Miguel & Herrero, 2012; Fuentes,2014; González, 2004). The results show that the majority of UAMs do not attend ordinary education centers but are primarily hosted in the La Purísima reception center (Floristán, 2022). Owing to this, only a small number of the participants in this study have worked with UAMs in their centers. In the case of the education centers that have worked with UAMs, they use a reception plan, the same one referred to in BOME number 5633. The plan involves responding to each individual child in relation to their educational, social, etc. needs. It should be noted that UAMs are considered a group at risk of social exclusion, therefore, not only inclusion work must be done with them, but also work relating to knowledge of the language, social norms, and alike. In addition, the community at large should also be included in the programs implemented. It is important for educational leaders to understand that this group needs to integrate into social contexts where the whole community is present with the idea of promoting their integration through social relationships without generating exclusion that separates them from society (López Belmonte et al., 2019). One of the limitations or shortcomings

presented in Melilla, and generalized in the rest of Spain, is the lack of knowledge and skills needed to interact with UAMs. Breaking prejudices such as "they are going to rob me" and "they are dangerous" must be worked on from all levels, especially in the educational context. The integration of UAMs into society is not only the responsibility of school leaders but also that of the rest of the community, who need to have an open, flexible and, above all, empathetic outlook.

And lastly, we look at the results of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which suddenly paralyzed all aspects of daily life by creating "undeniable chaos" that shook the field of education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). It should be noted that according to UNESCO, 1.6 billion learners worldwide were affected by school closures. The physical closure of schools has impacted 94% of the world's student population (United Nations, 2020). Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) define school leaders as key frontline workers, as they also face social issues and communicate with families to provide them with information.

By analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of the different cultures in education centers, the study revealed that there were notable inequalities that are determined by the socioeconomic level (low, medium, or high) of the families from the different communities. As previously confirmed in various studies (Bonal & González, 2021; Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Van & Parolin, 2020), the digital divide increased in more deprived situations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The results confirm that schools situated in low socioeconomic conditions have restricted technological resources to create a suitable online educational solution. However, it must be said that the authorities in Melilla provided technological resources to

cover the needs of education centers, including tablets and computers for those families who lacked the means to perform activities and participate in online classes. Unfortunately, not all students were able to take advantage of these resources as a high percentage went to Morocco (to cities located on the other side of the border).

In summary, the situation that arose due to COVID-19 ought to be seen as an opportunity to implement alternatives and design new strategies to involve the entire educational community in IE. By doing so, it would be easier to reach each member of the educational community, and provide minorities, who occupy a significant proportion of education centers, with the attention and answers they need. This requires a holistic approach that enables interculturality to be taught in a cross-cultural way using diversity as a source of enrichment and learning. In addition, the needs detected in families in relation to their low training in technology should be addressed by implementing workshops to train them in the use of mobile and other devices in order to access online educational environments. This would help UAMs to access more resources and improve learning.

Limitations and Future lines of Research

The results of this study highlight one of the main limitations of the research, which is the complexity of the managerial position in terms of the number of challenges that society presents, and educational centers must respond to (Weinstein et al., 2019). School leaders are immersed in so many bureaucratic procedures, school management, etc. that sometimes they feel overwhelmed without being able to achieve all their goals.

Second, due to the nature of systematic literature reviews, we found inherent limitations. Restricting the search to a time interval, a type of publication, or a specific database might have resulted in not having taken into account other studies of interest and relevance to our object of study.

Third, it is important to highlight the difficulty in conducting interviews with some school leaders due to their heavy work schedules. However, although this further lengthened the process, in the end the participation of key informants from all school districts was achieved, so that all areas of the city are represented in this research.

To give continuity to the investigation, we propose the following future lines of:

- In order to obtain a more global vision of the educational community, integrate family perceptions.

- Replicate the study in a different context outside Spain but with similar characteristics for comparison.

Funding

This study was funded by the City Council of the Autonomous City of Melilla, Spain via the program: Scholarships for Scientific Research on Interculturality in the Autonomous City of Melilla from the Regional Office for Education, Culture, Festivals, and Equality.

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