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Alberto's life story: transforming a disadvantaged school by appreciating the child's voice

Carmen Lucena Rodríguez , Alberto López, Jesús Domingo Segovia  and Cristina Cruz González 

Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of a principal who successfully leads a disadvantaged school in Spain. Through his life story, we investigate the personal and professional factors that have shaped his current professional identity, and we identify the main successful educational practices that the principal has implemented in order to achieve improvements in educational outcomes. Findings reveal a set of professional practices that have been invigorated from his leadership for the improvement of education. In short, he is committed to leading by appreciating the voice of the child and having respect for the children and it is this that forms part of the collective ideology of the school and is the most outstanding role of his professional identity.

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Background

Principals are considered to be essential figures in leadership development, as they are a key axis of influence in the school and in the development of strategies for educational improvement. It is well documented that when good and successful school leadership is exercised by the principal, this impacts on student outcomes and educational performance (Leithwood and Day 2008). But these practices are dependent on the specific requirements of each context (Bush 2017). Achieving successful leadership, particularly in highly challenging contexts, depends on responding to the problems identified within a given context (Gurr 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand how leadership is developed in particular complex cases, without claiming to provide universal answers, but to instead understand what is happening in that particular scenario.

Within this framework, a number of studies conducted at the international level have also pointed out that successful leadership is exercised when principals present a strong professional identity (Crow, Day, and Møller 2017). In this regard, there is existing literature that has analysed the concept of professional identity, providing a more in-depth understanding of the elements that influence its construction along with the factors that hinder the transition to school principal (Cruz-González, Lucena, and Domingo 2020). However, there is rather less work in the literature that analyses the

identity construction of principals for achieving successful educational practices, particularly in socially and demographically disadvantaged contexts.

Identity, understood as a concept, is difficult to define because it is not an objective reality. As Ritacco and Bolívar (2018) indicate, it is a discursive and mental construction that individuals use to express a certain way of seeing and feeling within themselves in relation to their environment. Professional identity is forged in a constant flow of socialisation and interrelationship influenced by contextual, personal, and cultural factors grounded in events that have occurred over time, at the core of which is the essence of the self. School principals must have a strong and consolidated inner core in order to achieve effective professional performance. Thus, some studies have revealed that to achieve successful leadership practices, consolidated professional identities are required (Scribner and Crow 2010).

Context plays a determining role in the personal and professional development of a principal when negotiating his/her identity. The Spanish educational professional context is characterised by the need for greater professionalisation of the leadership figure (Bolívar 2019). In Spain, principals are appointed for specific periods of time. During this process, principals experience identity transitions (teacher-principal-teacher), which leads to changes in their professional identity that influence the way in which they see and consider themselves both personally and professionally. Due to these peculiarities, we begin with the need to investigate how the identity of school principals is constructed, and what elements have influenced their negotiation and development in under-performing schools.

This study is part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) founded and coordinated by Professor Christopher Day. This project, now comprising 14 countries, focuses its efforts on researching effective school principals. The project presents three key lines of research (1) Successful school principals; (2) Principals in low-performing schools; and (3) Principals' identities. The present manuscript is developed within Strand 3, designed to investigate the identity of leaders, as part of the ISSPP project in Spain, with a particular emphasis on challenging contexts that have made gains in educational attainment. For this reason, this line of work on professional leadership identity is assumed in the present manuscript.

Specifically, this article analyses the life story of a principal considered to be an educational leader by the educational community and his professional team. The principal, named Alberto, is a pedagogical leader who acts under the umbrella of social justice and his pedagogical line focuses on children's rights. These aspects, which make him unique and particular, are established by the experiences he has lived throughout his life in the construction of his professional identity. Alberto is a principal in a school located in a challenging context, but despite the circumstances, he has managed through his leadership practices to transform the school and achieve high educational achievements. Therefore our purpose was, on the one hand, to investigate the influence of personal and professional factors in the construction of the leader's identity as principal, and on the other hand, to identify the main educational practices that the principal has implemented to achieve educational improvement in a challenging environment. With these objectives in mind, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the personal and professional factors that have influenced the construction of leadership identity for this principal?
- What are the principles from which he acts to improve and transform the school?

The authors hope that this research will be analysed as an inspiring profile of an effective principal who has faced the challenges of an education centre with great socio-economic difficulties and has transformed the school for the better by always appreciating the voice of the child.

Professional leadership identity with a commitment to children

A large body of international research points to a direct relationship between the existence of successful school leadership and educational quality in schools (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood and Jantzi 2008; Muijs and Harris 2006). In this scenario, the school principal is a key figure in energising leadership practices (Cruz-González, Lucena, and Domingo 2020). Several studies indicate a significant influence on school leadership by the principal and school educational outcomes (Ritacco and Bolívar 2018; Bush 2018; Connolly et al. 2018; Connolly et al. 2018; Ritacco and Bolívar 2018). In this sense, it is of great interest to focus on how school leaders construct their identity to achieve these successful practices (Day et al. 2010). Studies in the field of leadership and professional identity establish a series of key dimensions around these successful leadership practices: establishing joint educational visions and goals, improving teaching-learning conditions, redesigning and enriching the curriculum, improving teacher training and building intra-school relationships (Day and Sammons 2013; Leithwood and Louis 2012).

As authors of reference in the field of professional identity state, this identity is changing and multifaceted, and is therefore always under continuous construction and transformation (Dubar 2000). For this reason, in order to analyse the professional identity of a school leader, it is necessary to take this approach into account and establish research designs that explore this purpose of study from the perspective of narrativity (Ricoeur 1992). On the other hand, due to its polyhedral character, we must consider contextual, historical and social factors that have shaped the history of school leaders, trying to achieve a complete capture of their being and professional trajectory (Cruz-González, Lucena, and Domingo 2020).

This study focuses on schools with special difficulties. This is why the school leadership developed should be further oriented towards principles of equity and social justice (DeMatthews 2018; Özdemir 2017). Achieving equity in schools and promoting a more just society is becoming a current priority for the education system (Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008). This perspective of leadership for social justice could then be added to instructional leadership with an impact on improving results and doing so in challenging contexts (Mulford et al. 2008; Murillo and Hernandez-Castilla 2014).

The effective development of school leadership in challenge contexts involves a number of dimensions that require special attention: (1) a good leader must be sensitive to the diversity present in society and to the associated cultural and socio-economic inequalities, responding adequately to the challenges that arise from such inequalities; (2) he/she should progress in the construction of a community of professional practice

focused on good learning for all, by all, and among all; (3) he/she should adopt a professional practice of teaching and leadership guided by social commitment, involvement, and collaboration; (4) he/she must expand professional and social capital, strengthening networks of shared leadership and the instructional leadership of teachers; and (5) he/she should do so in a manner that is attentive to context, listening to students and seeking their authentic participation and involvement in learning (Portelli and McMahon 2004).

Successful school leadership, and one that is capable of responding adequately to the demands that arise in specific situations, depends on the ability to take advantage of the resources provided and to build a joint vision for the school (Bush 2018). In order for this vision to be extended to the entire community, the leader must instil confidence and encourage good communication practices among its members (Robinson 2019). It is therefore important to organise schools in order to generate a collective professional capacity both within schools and between school networks (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). The engine of change must be built on collaboration, mutual support, and trust in staff, or what Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) have called 'collaborative professionalism (when teaching together means learning from all)'. Otero (2019) adds that 'leadership in learning and improving education will depend on the capacity and ability of school leaders to connect everyone in the school community to learning' (344). Therefore, in line with the awareness-raising proposed by Freire (2001), there is a need for the principal to act under the premise of social commitment and to adopt a style of school leadership that is attuned to the voice of the community and the students themselves.

It is precisely this last dimension that deserves special attention in this case. On many occasions, the professionalism of teachers and, more evidently, that of educational leaders, is exercised in the face of student learning from a colonial and despotic perspective: for children, but without them. That is to say, as Tonucci (2015) or Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) report, the impact on learning and on the improvement of education is sought, but the voice of students is not taken into consideration.

In contrast, Alberto and the school he leads believe – as Dewey proposed (Bernstein 2011) – in the goodness of the child, their interest and capacity and the potential of their participation for the democratisation of education and their involvement in their learning processes (Fredricks 2014). This is why in this manuscript we demonstrate an approach in which the essence of change is born from the voice of the learner (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith 2014). There is a vast body of research that addresses the issue of leadership and improvement, but we believe that this is not the case when it comes to highlighting the learner's own agency in this aspect. We believe that in challenge contexts this is even more necessary. This is why this study seeks to highlight the value of traditionally 'forgotten' or 'silenced' groups of students (Fielding 2004; Rudduck and Flutter 2007).

Moving into this field of study, authors such as Robinson and Taylor (2007) and Smyth (2006) argue the importance of empowering students to move towards true educational inclusion. This educational approach could be linked to pedagogical positions such as those of Paul Freire or Dewey, who reaffirm the unquestionable value of a democratic education based on the pedagogy of transformation. From this point of view, the development of educational practices based on transformative and empowering pedagogies would favour the fight against a neo-conservative, mercantilist and dehumanising

neo-conservative era. Assuming this new framework implies a professional identity of leadership that has the capacity to influence and transform in a given context, which means that such ideals must be central to the professional performance of leaders (Bolívar 2019). That is, they must be focal points for establishing a shared vision that guides a set of curricular, organisational, strategic, and training dimensions that come to have an impact on the school's education policies, its school and professional culture, and on classroom practices. These areas have been identified by Ainscow (2017) as determining factors in the development of an inclusive school and for success for all and among all. In addition, some authors have analysed the components of leadership necessary for the critical-democratic engagement of students in their learning (Boberg and Bourgeois 2016).

A committed and resilient teaching identity is the basis of good professional practice (Day 2018). The construction of a professional identity for social justice also requires training that is particularly sensitive to this requirement. The works of Zeichner (2010) have made progress in this line of thought and are particularly relevant when speaking of the training of professional school leaders capable of both facing and acting to transform these educational, social, and professional realities.

Along with this, other personal, social, contextual and school-related factors are also key in the initial formation of a professional identity (Rivas 2010; Robertson 2017), along with those that are the most socially/student committed. The incidence of personal and professional milestones, of critical incidents, or of key people who cross paths in people's lives or in their professional experience also feature strongly in the processes of professional and identity development. Dubar (2000) noted the influence of different internal or external elements that represented moments of inflection, growth, or professional crisis.

Finally, given the size of the challenge, a professional identity of commitment requires support and the expansion of professional networks that face this challenge. In this sense, this perspective of commitment is more sustainable from the construction of a community of professional practice that is capable of expanding networks and increasing its social and professional capital. Thus, an interdependent scenario is taking shape, capable of increasing synergies of commitment and learning as a result of active participation, dialectic argumentation, professional collaboration, and mutual support.

Method

This study tells the life story of a principal who exercises educational leadership in a challenge context. Through his narrative, we explore how a particular professional identity has developed, one that is focused on successful educational practices. To this end, this study analyses the factors that have influenced this identity construction and, finally, how all these events, milestones, and leitmotifs have been translated into the implementation of measures for the transformation of his school. To do this, a qualitative study was carried out through the life history approach (Goodson et al. 2017). From this methodological perspective, the aim was to give 'voice' to the participant by presenting the stories and experiences that have influenced who he is today and how he acts (Bolívar and Domingo 2019).

The life history method has been used in various research studies on leadership identity (Cruz, Pérez, and Domingo 2020; Kelchtermans and Piot 2013; Mpungose 2010; Sugrue 2004). But the present study also adopts a clear perspective of communicative and participatory research. The ‘authentic participation’ of informants in the sense of research and in the dialectical validation of results facilitates researcher-informant interaction processes and increases mutual trust and commitment to the authenticity, truthfulness and credibility of the study. The informant and researchers are (co-)authors of the work. This ensures their involvement and the real validity of their statements. With this, it is possible to show the process and sense of the professional identity of leadership, in this case from the description of the practices as they were actually experienced in the school.

Selection of the case study

The selection of the case was made using some of the criteria of the project in which this study is included (ISSPP). The criteria were the following:

- (1) The school principal is a successful leader.
- (2) Academic performance is higher than expected according to the socio-economic and cultural index of the school
- (3) The school is located in a socially and demographically disadvantaged context

These data are based on the results of the Andalusian Agency for Educational Evaluation (AGAEVE), the recognition of educational institutions and organisations, and the internal evaluations and those of the centres that take in students once they have finished their schooling in that educational centre.

Information collection process

The collection of information was carried out using (self) biographical and narrative research instruments. In-depth biographical interviews were conducted with the principal over the course of two school years. The interviews were accompanied by field observations and logbook entries throughout the research process (see Table 1).

Data analysis process

The study was conducted through a recurrent process of reflective deepening (Kelchtermans and Piot 2013) and dialectical validation until reaching information saturation and

Table 1. Information gathering process.

Investigation	Month	Interviews	Field observations
First school year of investigation: 2018–2019	March		✓
	April	Interview 1	✓
	May	Interview 2	✓
	June	Interview 3	✓
Second school year of investigation: 2019–2020	September	Interview 4	✓
	October	Interview 5	✓
	November	Interview 6	✓
	December		✓

collective consensus on the meanings, interpretations, and conclusions (Bolívar and Domingo 2019). The thematic analysis of information was largely developed by following the key guidelines of grounded theory. The themes and categories emerged from the data and narrative text, from the researcher’s observations, and from subsequent discussions of these materials that took place among interviewers and researchers. This analysis process was supported by the qualitative software Nvivo 12. The various stages of the analysis and information collection process are graphically presented below (Figure 1).

Researcher-participant relationship

In this study, there is an emphasis on the researcher-participant relationship. Alberto goes from being an object of research to becoming a participant and author of the study. This context of interaction implies that the researcher’s work is placed in a new framework of active listening, as an interlocutor who mediates the original story and helps to open paths of deepening and improvement; and opens a scenario of reflexivity, dialogue and debate that shifts the role of the researcher as analyser and interpreter, towards one of enquiry until gradually and dialectically reaching a consensus that catalyses new spaces of significant and relevant improvement.

Participant and researcher established an interactive dialogue in each of the visits to the centre, in order to jointly construct a shared life story. The researcher collected all the key moments, leitmotifs, and important circumstances in order to ‘establish the motives, contexts, and pillars that give meaning to the subsequent decision-making and starting point of professional actions, to understand a professional life and the biographical configuration of an identity’ (Bolívar and Domingo 2019, 110). All of this follows the ethical processes that are appropriate for qualitative research.

School and neighbourhood context

The educational centre analysed in this study is located in the town of Valderrubio, in the North West of Granada. Valderrubio is a small, purely agricultural town, the population

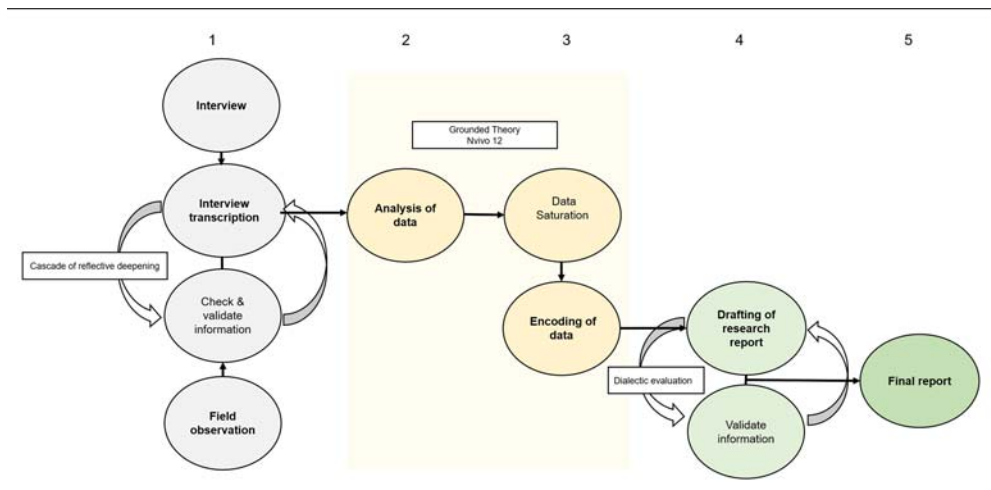


Figure 1. Flow chart of the information collection and analysis process.

has a low socio-economic level, with families in serious economic difficulty and a subsidiary standard of living.

In the educational centre, teaching is given in the stages of Infant, Primary, and the first cycle of Secondary Education. A significant number of students are covered by a compensation scheme created by the school itself. It also has a significant number of students covered by the solidarity and food guarantees or *Solidaridad y Garantías Alimentarias* SYGA plan. This is a plan created by the Andalusian Government that puts into place a set of measures to provide coverage of basic needs and to tackle social exclusion. This school offers a school canteen service, with breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack, as well as a wide range of free extracurricular activities in the afternoons.

Despite the rural context surrounding the school and the difficulties it faces in compensating low-income families, this is a school that is excelling educationally. It is evaluated annually by the Andalusian Agency for Educational Evaluation (AGAEVE) and its results stand above the average of the Andalusian Autonomous Community and particularly those schools with similar contextual characteristics.

In recent years, since the arrival of this principal, this school has become a reference at national and international level. Since then, in a very short time, the principal has been recognised with prizes such as: the *EducaCiudad* prize, for the commitment of his centre to teaching and good educational practices; prizes for 'Solidaridad en las Letras' or winners of the provincial phase of the School Competition of 'La ONCE, People who think about people'. It is also an *APFRATO* friendly centre of the Francesco Tonucci pedagogical association. This is the only centre in Andalusia to receive a national award from the *RED de Aprendizaje y Servicios* (Learning and Services Network) as a centre promoting health and healthy habits (2015), recognised for its work in developing physical and mental health in the town. It has also been a centre promoting positive coexistence by the Andalusian Ministry of Education since 2014, promoting a model of coexistence based on emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships.

In short, it can be said that this school is fighting for a better future and is committed to the growth of its people in spite of the difficulties associated with a challenge context. In this case, the transformational and pedagogical leadership of the principal is key. He is promoting this entrepreneurial initiative and spreading it to the entire educational community. This is the main reason why the particular case of the principal Alberto and the school of Valderrubio is being studied.

Results

The following section shows the results obtained during our research process. It is important to note that it was vital to become natives of the principal's own professional context. In the first section, we analyse the figure of the director Alberto as a transformer and activist in his school, revealing the most important events in his life and how he believes these have shaped the construction of his identity. In the second section, we set out the values of the school and the philosophy that the director wants to adopt for his school as a whole. Finally, in Section three, we present the successful educational practices that Alberto has used in order to achieve this transformation both within and from the school.

The identity of Alberto as a principal: activist and transformer

Alberto describes himself as a restless, passionate, and untraditional human being, as well as a tireless reader. His actions are aimed at transforming and improving education. He is a principal who staunchly believes in public education and his main mission is to build a school for children to be happy. In addition to his role as a teacher, he is an advisor to educational centres, focusing on issues such as multiple intelligences and project work methods.

He considers that in order to do a good job as a principal, it is necessary to prioritise pedagogical duties over those that are purely administrative. He describes his belief in leadership and the way he wants others to understand it: 'I want the students in my school to jump in and understand that the network is me'. He affirms this by drawing on his first identity, his memories of school. Alberto describes, with sadness, how throughout his own academic career, the principals he has met have focused their work on administrative issues that are not very educational or humane. For this reason, he tries to endow his work as a central figure with characteristics of a devoted and educational nature.

In spite of being a principal, Alberto makes an effort to not neglect his teaching profile. For this reason, he is a principal who has managed to ensure that when both students and teachers alike have a problem, they consider him a support figure and turn to him. Not because he is the principal, but because he tries to be a figure that projects a sense of refuge and safety to the rest of the educational community. 'They come because they feel like giving me a hug, because they feel like crying, because they feel like giving me a picture with a heart and telling me that they love me very much'. Alberto also sees the family as a key element in his work, which is why the doors of his office are always open to everyone. For him, the atmosphere of respect and trust is the jewel of his school.

Alberto misses his teaching role, and he would like to spend more hours in the classroom with his students. Being in management means he spends more time in the office. As he puts it, his own students ask him why he is now the school's principal, and he is clear about that:

I want to fight for a better education and for Valderrubio, in 20 years from now, to have been transformed by the school. That's the dream I have, that's what I'm fighting for. It is easier for management to establish strategies aimed at achieving this change.

It is clear that the main reason why Alberto has decided to be a principal, to change and improve the school, having access to the whole community and, in this way, offer his educational focus that gives voice to the children.

In order to meet this leadership requirement and to achieve school improvements, Alberto has been living through different personal and professional events throughout his life, all of which have helped to shape the construction of his identity. These events have motivated him to finally become the transforming and pedagogical leader of today. For this reason, the following [Table 2](#) includes the most relevant events from his birth until the present day.

The sense of leadership: a joint vision of school by and for the child

Alberto's school has a clear ideal: that the children are happy. The school, as the principal says, should be a place of refuge, where each student feels respected for being who he/she

Table 2. Biogram of Alberto's life.

Date	Description	Milestones, key people, themes or leitmotivs	Personal and professional impact
1978	Birth and childhood before school age.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Born only two years following the end of a dictatorial system in Spain (1939–1975). Moved from Barcelona to Andalusia after his birth. His grandmother takes care of his education during his early years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquires values of respect and solidarity attributed to his family. Passion for reading and stories, inherited from his grandmother.
1982	Entering school: school experience during his childhood and adolescence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational path regulated by the General Education Law (1970) and the Organic Law of General Organisation of the Spanish Educational System (LOGSE) of 1990. His experience was negative; the school did not adapt to the needs of each student. Authoritarian education system adopted by both teachers and principals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquires values and a critical awareness of inequalities. Suffers from low self-esteem due to negative school experience. He did not fit into a traditional school. These experiences would make him reflect years later and lead him to become a teacher and principal who believed in the potential of others.
1996	Becomes disenchanted with his law career.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> His family was primarily dedicated to the practising law, and, following the family tradition, he embarked on the same career. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High family and social pressure. His law studies did not fulfil him like the rest of his family.
1996	Voluntary work in non-formal education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First professional experience: association to help the Romany population and 5 women without resources to graduate from college. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to identify his vocation, that is, to help others but from an educational perspective. Development of professional values based on social justice.
1998	Beginning of his career in education. Continues voluntary social work in non-formal education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meets a teacher who believes in his potential. Meets Francesco Tolucci. He continues to work during the summers in associations (Spain, Central America, South America, and Morocco). He becomes a member of the teacher training department. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considers that social work volunteering is the engine of his life. This strengthens his foundations of a leadership style based on social justice. Experiences in the teacher training department enrich him both personally and professionally. Today he continues to train teachers. Frato becomes his educational godfather and is part of his life. Consolidates an educational and professional pillar; 'educating with respect for children'.
2002	Passes the national teaching exams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First real contact with his profession His first job is in a deprived context with 300 inhabitants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tough but important experience; discovers the value of working in challenging contexts and catering to diverse groups of learners. In this role he discovers a new world full of opportunities in education.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Date	Description	Milestones, key people, themes or leitmotifs	Personal and professional impact
2003	Gains experience in various educational centres.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moves around several educational centres. • One educational centre stands out from all of these due to its innovative pedagogical approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthens his pedagogical approach based on respect for the child.
2008	Moves to the school in Valderrubio.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He begins his career as a tutor in 3rd grade. • He is faced with a traditional school. • He works on projects within his classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refuses to replicate the figure of a traditional teacher. • Acquires values of educational commitment and school innovation. • Acquires the drive and initiative to access a school leadership position to achieve educational improvement through the educational ideals built from his previous experiences.
2016	Becomes the principal of the Valderrubio school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational context in need of improvement. • He applies for the role of principal and his appointment is approved by all the members of the centre. • He begins the phase of his career as a principal. • Changes the working teams and establishes practices for educational improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His leadership is based on all of his past beliefs and professional values, that is, leadership based on the potential of others, respect for students, project methods, and social justice. • The role of principal affords him the opportunity to change the school beyond the students in the classroom.
2020	Principal leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He opens the school to the community • Cooperative and collaborative work: family-school-community • The 'children's council' is created • The school is awarded for its innovative experience • He enrolls in professional learning communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal and professional growth • Sense of accomplishment by implementing your line of work

is – a place where they take care to ensure that each child has his/her own identity as a person. He wants students to go to school with joy, to enter a space where they can learn while being relaxed, and to have the opportunity to learn both emotionally and academically. At Valderrubio, it is clear that these conditions are present, with dynamic classes, classes with noise (of activity rather than disturbance), corridors with movement, and happy and dynamic students, and it is here where we can see how the principal has fought to bring the school to life. The starting point is a line of work based on respect for children, because the voice of the students is taken into account from the very first day that they enter the school.

One thing I always do is learn the name of every single student in the school. Since they come in at three, I go to their class so that we can get to know each other. Calling a child by his/her name makes him/her feel valued and identified.

Alberto has lived through professional and personal experiences that have made him consider his line of work. He explains how in his student years he had a teacher who changed his life. He (Alberto) was a young man who had never been told what he was worth and that he could do whatever he wanted if he so wished. But it was in college that a teacher instilled this idea in him. From then on, he started reading different books to those of his classmates, going beyond the class notes. He read all kinds of books about different types of educational models, and about methodological approaches. As he himself says, on his bedside table there is always a book of essays on education. One day this teacher invited the teacher and illustrator Francesco Tonucci, (with the pseudonym Frato) to the faculty and introduced him to Alberto.

I met Frato, because he introduced me to him one day in college. I was amazed, because I totally identified with his line of work, with the vision he has of an educational institution. For him the school has to be totally horizontal, where the voice of the children cannot be ignored. That same day, at breakfast with him, he said something that will stay with me forever. I asked him: Francesco, what are you really, what do you do? To which he replied: 'I am a *niñólogo*'.¹ He bowled me over. From that moment on, I fell in love with him pedagogically, and today he is part of my life. I consider him to be my educational godfather.

For Alberto, meeting Francesco Tonucci had a real impact on strengthening his educational philosophy, a philosophy that can be summarised as the care and respect for children, respecting the times and the rebelliousness of childhood.

What is the rush for children to learn to read? What rush is there for children to learn to divide and multiply? And then we forget to make them people. Children are going to learn content, but they learn it when they are mature enough to do so. The most important thing is to play, because to play is to educate, and from there, you have changed education.

When you look around the schoolyard there are children playing chess, basketball, soccer, hopscotch, there are children reading, dressing up, playing with a skipping rope or painting on a blackboard. As the principal says, they are doing what they want to do. For him it is one of the most important hours of the day and it should last longer. During the break, conflicts occur, which for Alberto are like 'a treasure', in which the most important learning can take place. You can release and remove a barrier from a child in emotional ways. Alberto tries to share with his team the idea that all learning situations must be exploited, that every moment in the classroom, in the playground, is a time for children to learn.

Another of the great commitments of this school is to take the characteristics of each child as a starting point. The principal wants students to identify their potential from the moment they enter the school, in the classroom. He wants to ensure that each one of them is aware that whilst they can be good in certain aspects, in others they cannot perform at their best. Each student in their classroom draws some paper wings to which they hang some labels that indicate a virtue. These wings are shown to all the students in the school.

Alberto goes on to explain that the same teachers have different skills, and that part of the leader's job is to know how to give the teachers duties in subjects in which they feel confident, so that they can perform to the maximum. Alberto's leadership is committed

to making the most of the potential of his students and teachers, in order to guarantee that people are motivated and want to come to the school.

Here come the children to do their homework. They're very clear about it. I have been called by mothers because their child with a fever wants to come and do his homework. The students are committed to their jobs. Similarly, most teachers are here because they want to be. There are teachers who walk 60 km to school when they could be two minutes away from home on foot, but they prefer to commit to a school that meets their needs.

Successful educational practices developed by Alberto to achieve educational improvement

This section describes the educational leadership practices that have been implemented in order to transform a school in a challenge context. Alberto implemented five strategies aimed at promoting the success of children, their peers, and ultimately the improvement of their school:

(1) Training the work team: learning communities and respect for vocations

For Alberto the most important thing is to form a team at the school that will be compatible with his way of working. However, the situation in Spain is complex because the principal does not choose his staff, the teacher passes the national examinations and is assigned a school. In recent years, there has also been a procedure known as '*concurso de traslados* or transfer application' which means that every year teachers can change schools that will fit better with the demands of their family life. In the informant's opinion, whilst this opportunity to change schools is positive on a personal level, this is not the case at the school level. It is, in fact, very harmful for both the teaching teams and the students. Alberto goes on to criticise this on the grounds that it translates into an instable work force that makes it impossible to maintain a way of working, and is, ultimately, a hindrance to his leadership project.

In this unstable situation, teachers appear who are very dear to Alberto, who fit in with the working policy he wants to promote and with his educational philosophy. He decides to meet with them and think of a strategy so that he can at least maintain a stable faculty for four years. The only administrative possibility they have is that the school decides to become a learning community (Flecha 2008). They take advantage of this project and train for two months. From there, they present a project (required by the call to become a learning community that can be assessed by the Junta de Andalucía), which is finally approved.

That was the only way in which we could arm ourselves so that the staff we had could stay with us and maintain a way of working overtime. Now the staff is amazing. They have a line of work that begins with respect for children.

For the principal, forming his own team has allowed him to fit together the pieces of the puzzle based on the potential of his teachers. In this way, each teacher teaches in his or her own vocational area (a new and unique aspect of the Spanish education system). The teaching team therefore feels motivated, secure, and creative when working with the students.

Now I have two teachers who impart knowledge of the media in all primary schools, another who teaches the artistic students at all stages, and one who teaches digital culture to the 6th grade. People, when they work in the area they love, perform much more. Because when working with the subjects you enjoy, you make your students enjoy them too.

(2) Self-education and training

Self-training is another strategy adopted by the principal to enhance teacher training. When Alberto began his management role, he decided that self-training activities should be carried out so that everyone could learn from everyone.

For example, I am a specialist in project work, another teacher in service-learning, another teacher is a machine in manipulative mathematics. So, what can we do? Share and discuss, learn together, and that is our basis. We shape ourselves.

In addition, the school's teachers have external training sessions, often at the request of the teachers themselves, which are attended by practically 100% of the staff: 'We do selective training, we advocate the workgroup model, we need a subject and we work on that'.

(3) Creation of the children's council

At Valderrubio School all the important decisions that are taken are made collectively and all opinions are equally important. For Alberto, respect for children has to go to the extreme. That is why he has created a Council for Children at the school. This consists of providing children with economic resources so that they can decide independently what they want to spend the money on. In this assembly, the children of the school participate exclusively, and they run debates to reach democratic agreements. The last monetary item allocated to them was for the construction of a fountain in the school yard. They decided that they would like to have a fountain to relax and make their playground more beautiful.

For the principal, the children are now at a point where they have to reveal themselves, because their rights are being violated.

Let me use a very simple example. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that students have the right to express their views on the decisions that are made about them. Any educational institution that does not have a children's council is an illegal centre, and in Spain they abound, because in no case is that opinion taken into account. Wherever there is a child, there must be a council where the child is heard.

(4) Change of methodology: Project work

When Alberto arrived at Valderrubio school as a teacher, he wanted to work with a methodology that would be attractive to the students, he wanted to make the child a participant in his/her own learning. With considerable effort, he introduced into his classroom the method of project work, but he wanted to reach all the students of the school. Having reached the management position, Alberto trained his team in this methodology so that it could be implemented as a definitive method in the school. Today, he and his

team have managed to ensure that, in a school of 300 students, everyone works on the same projects at the same time, and that educationally they ‘speak the same language’. For the principal, education does not depend so much on objectives as on evaluation criteria, in other words, making it explicit how far one wants the child to go and how one wants him or her to get there. Working on projects is a very complex process in which the interests of the students have to be matched with what needs to be taught, and for this, the teachers need to be fully on board with this philosophy.

For a traditional teacher, it is a challenging and complete change, and you can revolutionise a centre with this methodology. I see that there is a lack of strong commitment to this methodology in the majority of centres because this requires a lot of work on the part of each one, and they are simply not willing to take it on.

All the projects carried out in the school operate in a globalised way in all educational areas and act under the same umbrella: to fulfil the 17 objectives set by the UN for the year 2030. In the two school years over which we conducted our study, various projects were carried out, chief among them being the *Water Explorer* project (international challenges related to sustainable water consumption) and the *Neuro-activate* project. This latter two-year project aims to make Valderrubio a city that activates your brain cells. It is a school project in which the Institute of Neurology of Granada and other neurologists of Seville are involved.

The project involves the whole community. Our main focus is Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, and we want to do preventive work on the initiative of the school. We will modify parks, so that they have recreational activities, which at the same time train the mind. We will work on pedestrian crossings, public buildings — everything we can to keep the neurons active.

(5) Opening the school to society

For Alberto the school should be open to society. There must be a symbiosis between the school community and the civil community. It is society as a whole that educates children. For him it is very important that all members of the community collaborate and participate.

The families, the town council, the Guadalinfo centre, and the geriatric centre all actively collaborate with us. What is important to us is that our school is open to the people and the people to our school. That we all promote the education of our children.

In this sense, the principal has taken into consideration organisational aspects and cultural dynamics in order to effectively open up the school to society. In the same way, he does not simply allow them to enter the school, but instead promotes real interrelations and a joint working cooperation.

(6) Addressing the challenges of school and administration

There are a number of barriers that prevent the principal from advancing in his project of an effective school, but he, as far as possible, lessens the impact of these by taking on the challenges. In Alberto’s eyes, personal resources are also very limited. The administration sends counsellors to the school on only a few days of the week.

This vital figure in the school does not have enough time to attend to all the students, which makes it necessary for the principal and the management team to assume this function on many occasions. Moreover, the educational administration provides very limited material resources.

They provide the centres with economic resources, but as Alberto states: ‘for very specific items. The centre is given very little autonomy and few resources’. He adds:

I always talk about respect for children and the dignity of children ... but the spaces we have are not dignified. When I arrived, the school library was a storage room. We carried out a series of reforms and collaborative work between teachers, students and families. The result is now a wonderful library, which is now our emblem, made from everyone’s efforts.

Alberto says they have learned to ‘survive’, and to seek resources by other means: We sign up for all the competitions we see to win money that can go to the school, and, ultimately, to the students.

Fortunately, in innovation and inclusion, resources are not everything. Without attitude and collaboration they are not possible, nor is the leader’s commitment enough if there is no team behind, no professional collaboration and no organisational structures to ensure this improvement. Professionalism, commitment and knowing how to manage the possible social capital (of the community) and professional capital (of the teachers) have been good allies in this improvement process.

Getting to this point has not been easy, it has been a controversial and complex process of development over time. There have been moments of crisis and professional and institutional barriers (fear of change, routines, more traditional professionalism, micro-political games of resistance ...) have had to be faced and – as far as possible – overcome. Their tools have been dialogue, resilience and perseverance, together with the arrival of new colleagues with curricular leadership skills and the possibility of building organisational conditions more conducive to innovation and collaborative work. This driving force, united in a pedagogical project closely linked to the community, has been building a collaborative network around a community education network that has united synergies and all of this has had repercussions in terms of educational improvement and better educational results.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this research was to analyse, on the one hand, the personal and professional factors that have shaped the construction of the identity of a successful leader in a challenging context, and on the other hand, to identify the main educational practices used to transform education in a highly challenging context. A case study was used to build on the narratives of a unique life story, constructed from a dialogical participant-researcher interaction. In order to address these research objectives, the results were structured around three sections, the first two of which speak of the leadership profile of Alberto, the principal under investigation, in addition to the vision and values that underpin the school where he works. And section three focuses on identifying successful educational practices that respond to the second research objective.

In this section, we discuss the results obtained in our study in relation to other relevant research. In addition, we identify implications of the results for professional practice and

the development of future lines of inquiry. It should be borne in mind that since this is a single case study carried out in a specific context, these data are not generalisable or comparable. However, as pointed out by Mullen and Patrick (2000), in this particular case and context the results suggest that this school and the leadership exercised by its principal can be a promising element of reflection for other schools that struggle with achieving educational equality. In short, this work presents an inspiring profile of an effective principal who has addressed the problems of a school in a challenging context and has transformed it on the basis of respect for children.

In order to achieve this particular model of professional practice as an effective instructional and transformational leader, there is a complete underlying identity at play. This particular life trajectory influences the construction of an identity committed to children. In line with other studies, this case shows the influence of childhood and school memories that form the basis of an individual's first professional identity (Rivas 2010) and subsequent adult identity (Robertson 2017). Alberto relates how events from his childhood have substantially influenced him in the construction of his current professional identity, from his family's move to another city, to his bad experiences with teachers and principals during his childhood and adolescence.

The political and social context in which the individual finds themselves can also have an impact on the channelling of their personal and professional career (Mpungose 2010). Thus, for example, Alberto began his studies in law, mainly because of the influence of his family and the context that surrounded him. Finally, and a few years later, in search of personal and professional fulfilment, he embarked on his educational career.

Professional identity is not independent of personal identity. On the contrary, it is part of a more global identity of commitment. Alberto, since he began his educational career to become a teacher and finally a principal, has combined this with voluntary work (non-profit) in associations that work with children and adults at social risk: women at a socio-cultural disadvantage, Roma children, children and adults from underdeveloped countries, among others. Such experiences forge a high degree of commitment to social justice, which, in the future will translate into the exercise of leadership for social justice.

Authors such as Carpenter Bradley et al. (2017) argue that there is a need for a social justice identity in school leadership. Therefore, to alleviate inequalities, Alberto believes in individualised education (focused on the specific needs of each student) that is globalised (based on action-oriented learning methods and practices within a global whole). He advocates the project method and explains the benefit of starting from the students' interests and issues that emanate from everyday life, turning them into managers of their own learning. With this, he points out that his transformational leadership has a clear instructional aspect and that it identifies him, moreover, as an effective leader. In general, the successful educational practices developed by Alberto to achieve educational improvement are in line with the dimensions of successful leadership outlined within the ISSPP project (Gurr 2015).

This leadership, with a high degree of personal integrity, sensitivity and adjustment to one's own context, is in line with the work of Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford (2010), who states that successful leadership is put into place when the principal starts with the needs of the student body based on a given school context. This is Alberto's professional involvement engine. Giving children a voice is Alberto's purpose. This vision of education is

also in line with the study published by Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) in which great emphasis is placed on giving students a voice as a means of empowering the student and fostering their maximum potential. The informant has shown how there is an ongoing struggle for respect for children, in line with Tonucci (2015), arguing the need to be sensitive to children's needs and strictly comply with their rights (1989). This methodological and philosophical approach has permeated through Alberto's identity by the experiences of the past. For him, the negative experience he had with principals during his school years made him reflect on the principal he wanted to be. That is, a devoted principal, committed to the educational community, who carries out his work through dialogue, respect, and trust, all of which are characteristics that, according to Bolman and Deal (2008) are typical of an effective principal.

In addition, and in accordance with the findings of other research, this case reveals a commitment to consensus decision-making, which is attributed to shared leadership (Harris and Jones 2019). Moreover, compatible with the proposals of Dempster (2019) with regard to disadvantaged communities, or the more general proposals of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), in this case we can see how in their professional development as school leaders, their action to build a community of professional practice is particularly relevant, increasing their social and professional capital, fostering actions of a communal nature and expanding networks of influences and opportunities through professional and social interactions both within the school and between the school and the community.

In line with the work of Bottoms and Fry (2009), the principal may experience a number of obstacles to developing his leadership and achieving school transformation, such as lack of support from the administration. For Alberto, one of the most notable problems was the difficulty of forming a stable teaching team, along with the struggle to ensure that all members of the teaching staff follow the same educational philosophy. In addition, for Alberto, the administration does not provide enough material and personal resources to have adequate schools that cover all the needs of the students, so he himself has had to take on the challenge of overcoming these limitations. In line with this, Bolman and Deal (2008), consider that a successful leader looks for the right people to occupy the right positions, as well as being capable of solving conflicts within the political framework.

In conclusion, we believe that the Valderrubio school can become a model for schools that are struggling to achieve success. The principal and his team have achieved good academic outcomes, thanks to pedagogical and distributed leadership, in spite of the socio-economic and demographic difficulties that surround the school. For Alberto, the greatest success lies in the fact that the children grow up happy and recognise their own potential, all of which has been achieved by adapting the methodology to the environment, addressing the real needs of the students, as well as creating a favourable school environment. A commitment has been made to strengthen relations in the centre and to include the people within them. The school is a source of pride, but for the principal, the most important thing is to think that all children deserve the best education, provided by the best teachers. That is why the administration is being asked to help meet the school's needs and to continue researching on the issue of successful leaders. Leading by appreciating the voice of the child, and respecting children whilst also harnessing their full potential, should become the most important purpose of educational institutions.

Note

1. Broadly speaking, *niñólogo* could be regarded as someone who is a student of child behaviour (a childologist).

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Notes on contributors

Carmen Lucena Rodríguez is teacher and researcher at the University of Granada (FPU17/01873). Her main line of research focuses on the construction of professional identity and educational leadership. She is a member of FORCE research group and RILME Research Network.

Alberto López is the protagonist of this life story. He is elementary school and music teacher. Master in Multiple and Didactic Intelligences of Innovation. Specialist in artistic education, interculturality and alternative methodologies. He is the principal of an educational centre in Spain. He is board of directors of the Francesco Tonucci Pedagogical Association. Also, Alberto is member of the advisory board of the primary school magazines *Aula de Innovación educativa*. He is collaborator of the University of Granada, the International Postgraduate School and the research group: Research, Innovation and Evaluation in Education Pedagogical advisor of intercultural projects in different countries of the world (Honduras and Spain).

Jesús Domingo Segovia is Doctor in Philosophy and Educational Sciences and University Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Granada (Spain). He is specialised in (auto)biographical-narrative methodology and the areas of curricular, professional, institutional and family counselling, curricular innovation and development, attention to diversity and processes of educational and social vulnerability. He is member of FORCE research group and RILME Research Network.

Cristina Cruz González is teacher and researcher at the University of Granada (FPU16/04621). Her main line of research focuses on the construction of professional identity and educational leadership. She is a member of FORCE research group and RILME Research Network.

ORCID

Carmen Lucena Rodríguez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4451-337X>

Jesús Domingo Segovia  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8319-5127>

Cristina Cruz González  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2019-6245>

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