Leadership in a democratic school:

A case study examining the perceptions and aspirations of an educational community[1]

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Bionotes

Abstract

In this case study, we aim to understand the leadership practices in a two-site rural school (schools in rural areas located on two or more sites) in the province of Valencia (Spain), by examining the perceptions and aspirations of the educational community. Results reveal two points of view in perceptions of leadership in the school: on one hand community members hold a classic, traditional view of leadership; on the other hand, they recognize that leadership is opening up to all the groups in the educational community, which inspires positive attitudes to taking part in leadership processes. The types of leaders identified in the school, educational community participation in decision making, and teamwork are some of the aspects that advance the development of a more distributed form of leadership. However, resistance to change by some families has hindered the community's aspirations to distributed leadership. There is therefore a need to revisit the way this concept and its characteristics are constructed, and to pool ideas to decide what direction the community wants to take in the future. Additionally, one way to advance the school's democratic, distributed leadership model is to continue working on the relationships between sections of the educational community through cooperative organization in the school.

Keywords: Leadership; democratic schools; justice; case study; educational community

Introduction

The question of social justice has been widely discussed in the educational literature (González, 2014; Murillo & Hernández, 2014), in part because the structural and relational nature of educational institutions continues to reproduce and legitimize practices and policies that segregate and exclude (Ainscow & West, 2008; Ryan, 2006).

Current educational research has responded to this question with calls for processes of transformation and change aimed to develop organizational and relational structures that come closer to a fairer educational model; that is, a more democratic (Apple & Beane, 1997) and inclusive (Ainscow & West, 2008) model capable of driving changes for the future to come.

This model involves building a shared culture in the educational community (EC) that in 'its vision of the school and its daily actions and behaviors, [reflects] its fight against inequalities and promotes school and social equity' (Murillo & Hernández, 2014, p. 15), and is governed by a set of intrinsic values of democracy and justice (Santos, 2003).

The democratic and inclusive school model incorporates values such as freedom, equality, solidarity, respect and tolerance, and dialogue. According to Gonzálvez, Traver and García (2011):

> These values combine to create what can be called *the moral heart* of a civic and deeply democratic ethics. […] This moral heart we call for constitutes the foundation of education for citizenship and underpins the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p. 187).

Such values construct what in democracy is known as social justice, making justice one of the essential principles in schools aiming to develop a democratic school project.

This scenario invites reflection on leadership, one of the structural and relational dimensions in schools pursuing such educational models, and considered to be an essential factor in developing the capacity for change and educational improvement towards social justice (Ainscow & West, 2008; Guarro, 2005; Sales, Moliner & Francisco, 2016; Tenuto & Gardiner, 2017). In what follows, we present a brief historical review of leadership and the educational movements associated with it to date.

The theories and approaches to leadership from organizational theory—trait theory, and the behavioral and contingency approaches—and their various research lines provided the basis for the first studies into a wide typology of educational leadership styles during the 1960s and 1970s. This initial research then gave rise to instructional leadership, a contribution from the literature on school effectiveness (Bolívar, 1997; Bolívar, 2010; Murillo, 2006).

These leadership types correspond to a traditional school model, typically individualist, having a hierarchical structure, and based on power relations. The alternative leadership models that emerged in response were more attuned with democratic and inclusive school models, as they sought to move away from the figure of a single leader and the traditional vertical school structure. In contrast, these models set out to develop a decentralized, shared leadership practice based on horizontal relationships that reject the established power structures in educational institutions.

These alternative leadership proposals include inclusive leadership (González, 2008; León, 2012; Ryan, 2006), democratic leadership (Guarro, 2005; Woods, 2004), sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008), leadership for learning (Bolívar, 2010), shared leadership (Bennet, Wise, Woods & Harvey, 2003), and distributed leadership (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001), and are

framed within educational models for change and improvement (Bolívar, 1997, Murillo, 2006).

Harris (2007) argues that although these alternative leadership models overlap conceptually because they all pursue the same end, they differ in the detail. It is here that scholars have revealed contradictions among some of their aspects (Woods & Gronn, 2009); for example, the term *shared leadership* can be used to describe the delegation of tasks and functions by individuals with power and authority in an organization. However, as Maureira, Moforte and González (2014, p. 143) argue, 'the delegation of the principal's tasks to others' continues to legitimize hierarchical power relationships in schools.

On the other hand, the focus of democratic leadership is to develop a dialogic approach to participation. According to Woods and Groon (2009), however, this depends on the model of democracy adopted: representative democracy is not the same as more radical forms of democracy because it continues to prop up a centralized power structure.

Finally, when some authors speak of distribution, they are referring to the creation of distributed networks, a radical concept that challenges hierarchical power structures and defends decentralization among their constituent nodes (Bennett, Wise, Wood & Harvey, 2003; Harris, 2007; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2005; Leithwood, 2009). However, other scholars have criticized the paucity of evidence to support the reliability of the radical distribution of leadership model (Lumby, 2019).

Notwithstanding the debate on the points of overlap and the tensions among them, our study focuses on distributed leadership because the research community now considers it to be one of the paradigms that best fits the characteristics of a democratic school, a key factor in school improvement, and it also integrates some of the characteristics of the abovementioned leadership models (Harris, 2007; Murillo, 2006; Sales, Moliner &

Francisco, 2016). For example, Woods and Gronn (2009) understand distributed leadership to include elements of democratic leadership, such as dialogue, consensus, participation, and the voice and empowerment of all groups in the EC, among others. These authors also identify elements of shared leadership such as shared decision making and distribution of tasks in distributed leadership. Also, Harris and Spillane (2008) point to the increasing number of studies demonstrating the positive influence of distributed leadership on organizational results and student learning. Similarly, Arar and Taysum (2019) hold that distributed leadership empowers teachers and students, and fosters the development of social values and behaviours that improve relationships among all members of the EC.

When we talk about distributed leadership, we are referring to constellations or networks of multiple leaderships, in which leadership activities are extended and shared between the members of an organization while they go about their day-to-day professional activities (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Longo, 2008). In other words, it is related to the distribution of power between the nodes making up the network, thus positively affecting its autonomy, and resulting in empowerment and recognition of the leadership capacity of any node in the group, as well as recognizing diversity in how leadership is exercised (Bolívar, 2000; Harris, 2007; Longo, 2008; Murillo, 2006). From a distributed perspective, leadership is understood to be more of a fluid than a stable phenomenon (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Therefore, management or position and leadership are not the same (Bolívar, 1997). This difference implies that within an organization, individuals can lead regardless of whether or not they hold formal positions, which, as Muijs and Harris (2006, p. 962) point out, ‘provides the opportunity for a more democratic and shared leadership style’. This does not mean that by holding formal positions within schools, management teams do not

play a fundamental role in the processes of change, nor fail to assume their leadership role. Sales (2012, p. 59) argues that 'management team leadership enables change to take off and mobilizes the educational community, as long as it is willing to share and distribute leadership among the groups and individuals in that community'.

One of the key elements of distributed leadership is the distribution of power, authority, and responsibilities by those holding formal positions in the school (Bolívar, 1997; Harris, 2007; Longo, 2008; Sales 2012). According to Muijs and Harris (2006), this entails redistributing power and realigning authority within the school. Such redistribution and realignment requires a democratic leadership style (Murillo, 2006) based on 'a dialogical approach to the discussion of the reality' (Sales, 2012, p. 59), which helps to challenge the pyramidal structures based on vertical relationships between the different groups in the EC, and thwarts the development of the individualized and personalized leadership style that legitimizes these structures (Bolívar, 2010).

Another key element in distributed leadership is collaborative work among members of the educational community, understood as a group of individuals sharing common interests and having common objectives (Dewey, 1995). Negotiation is a necessary part of achieving these shared interests. As Arar and Taysum (2019) argue, this involves "developing a participative culture [that] can structure empowerment patterns at school on a personal and collective social level" and favours active participation in decision making (Leithwood, 2009; Ryan, 2006). In turn, active participation requires trust, commitment, recognition, a sense of belonging, co-responsibility and communicative actions such as consensus, respect for dissent, and the ability to listen to a plurality of voices, among others (Dewey, 1995; Sales, 2012). Some studies have affirmed that these skills and/or competencies needed for collaboration are acquired through cooperative learning (Gonzálvez, Traver & García, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Pujolás, 2012;

Pujolás, 2008). Pujolás (2008, p. 39) argues that 'a structure of cooperative activity […] encourages reliance on one another, collaboration, mutual help', which in turn improves interpersonal relationships (Harris & Chapman, 2002).

Bearing in mind the aforementioned characteristics, the democratic potential of distributed leadership makes it a key factor in the process of building democratic and inclusive schools, grounded in 'an immediate, direct experience, something in which we take part vitally and at first hand' (Dewey, 1995) to achieve social justice.

The primary school in which we carried out this case study is currently immersed in the process of transformation into a democratic, inclusive school. The research problem in this study is, therefore, to describe the EC's perceptions of the school's leadership, and how the community's notion of the leadership it aspires to can be improved to build a more inclusive and democratic school.

Case study

We used the intrinsic case study (Stake, 1998) research method, which is designed to provide a detailed description and analysis of a single school (Bisquerra, 2009) and thereby further our understanding of it (Stake, 1998). The study was structured in five phases, following León and Montero (2002): selecting and defining the case, formulating the questions, locating information sources, analyzing and interpreting the data, and writing up the report.

Context

The study was carried out in a rural primary school (CRA) in the province of Valencia (Spain). This public school is located on two sites in two adjacent localities, each with its own unique characteristics, although for administrative purposes they are considered as a single unit.

The school contacted a research group at one of the universities in the Valencian Community region because its EC had expressed interest in a project to become an inclusive and democratic school. The research group and the school therefore began working together to develop school transformation projects related to this educational model. The focus of the first project was to examine processes of democratic participation involving the EC. The second project, the subject of the present study, analyzed the factors influencing the development of democratic educational practices, one of which was leadership.

Working together with the research group facilitated access to the fieldwork stage; together with the characteristics of the transformation process in which the school was immersed, this close contact was a decisive factor in selecting this school for the case study.

The school's EC comprises students, families, teachers and members of the local council, all of whom are involved in the transformation project. It is therefore of interest to examine the school's leadership through the voices and opinions expressed by its constituent groups.

An essential factor in the case study was the involvement of all participants throughout the entire research process. The study is grounded in the assumptions of participatory research, an imperative that demands coherence between the methodological approach and the researchers' position, and the school model that characterizes this case.

Research design

We proposed two questions to respond to the research problem:

I. What perception do the education community agents have of leadership?

II. What type of leadership do the education community agents aspire to, and what obstacles do they encounter?

The information production techniques we used are framed within a qualitative research approach (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010) and are described below.

First, we held discussion groups (Bisquerra, 2009; Gil, 1993). For this purpose, we prepared a list of open-ended questions organized in two blocks, a) perception, and b) aspiration, each consisting of sub-blocks of questions ranging from general to specific. The discussion groups were homogenous (Gil, 1993) in order to ensure the most horizontal relationship possible between the participants, and to guarantee that all voices would be heard, especially those of the students. We conducted three discussion groups: families, teaching staff, and students. Each group was made up of six or seven people from both school sites so that the opinions from the two localities would be represented.

Interviews were then conducted (Bisquerra, 2009). First, two semi-structured individual interviews were made (Bisquerra, 2009) with the other EC agents—councilors from the two localities—to complete the information gathered in the previous stage. These interviews were based on ten scripted open-ended questions. At the end of the study, we conducted an individual focused semi-structured interview with a member of the school management team. This interview followed a scripted open-ended question format designed to obtain more specific information on the topic, and to collect information that may not have come to light or that required clarification (Ballesteros, 2014; Bisquerra, 2009). The questions for the focused interview were divided into four blocks: training, democratic school, work functions and leadership; the content analysis of these blocks gave rise to four main categories: perception, participation, collaborative culture and aspiration.

Finally, we contrasted the information gathered through the interviews with an analysis of an official internal document (Del Rincón, Latorre, Arnal & Sans, 1995 in Bisquerra, 2009), the school management project (*projecte de direcció de centre*), and through participant observation (Bisquerra, 2009) in an open school board or coordinating committee session.

The instruments used were coded as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Instrument codes

[Insert Table 1 here]

The data analysis was conducted using a combination of deductive and inductive logic (Bisquerra, 2009), which yielded theoretical and emerging categories.

Following the organization and transcription of the information produced in the data collection phase, the information was then reduced (Stake, 1998). This reduction phase had two levels: categorization of the selected information (Bisquerra, 2009), and coding of the categories (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010).

Two computer programs were used in this analysis: Atlas.ti to categorize the information, and CmapTools to organize and visualize the relationships between the response categories.

Finally, triangulation was applied to test the validity and reliability of the categories (Bisquerra, 2009). This was performed in two ways: by sources and by levels (Cisterna, 2005). We also followed other methods to validate the categories, including participant verification and persistent observation (Guba, 1989).

Research ethics

The consent of all the participants was required to conduct the case study. First, negotiations and dialogues took place to inform participants about the study objectives,

respect for confidentiality, and the anonymity of their contributions. Their informed consent was then obtained, and they were advised of the need to reach a consensus on all the points outlined in the informed consent document; they were also informed that they should reach agreement in the feedback sessions held to review the information gathered through the various study techniques (Bisquerra, 2009).

Results

In this section we present the results obtained in accordance with the research questions. First we analyze the participants' perceptions of leadership in the school and the leadership characteristics they identified. We then examine the type of leadership they aspired to and the obstacles hindering these aspirations. We also provide visual support in the form of a conceptual map to facilitate understanding of the narrative.

Our analysis of the school management project document, written by the management team, revealed a definition of the school as 'a community with its own identity that is embracing the educational community' (DA). This definition reflects the team's aim to implement a philosophy for the school and educational principles based on democracy, cooperation and participation. The document also describes how the school is seeking out spaces for democratic collaboration and participation between all groups in the EC, as well as those outside the community. The main objective is for the EC to 'set the course to follow and design the future of the CRA' (DA).

I. *What perception do the education community agents have of leadership?*

Figure 1. Conceptual map by categories of EC's perceptions of leadership

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 presents the categories of responses relating to the EC's perceptions of leadership. The first of these categories, **definition of leadership**, clearly reveals a general opinion across the whole EC that leadership is associated with the concept of

leader. However, discrepancies emerge in their definitions of this concept. The students, together with some teachers and one local councilor, consider leadership to be the person who represents, leads and makes decisions independently, without taking into account other people's opinions:

> 'it's someone who's above the rest' (SDGB1)
>
> 'who takes decisions on their own and decides which direction to take' (SDGB6)
>
> 'that is, they don't take into account the opinions of others in any way' (SDGB3)

The other participants, including the families, the teachers and the other local councilor, understood leadership as the person who guides, motivates, reaches agreements and makes proposals, as reflected in the following statement:

> 'I see leadership as a person who motivates, guides, makes proposals and tries to reach consensus with people' (TDG5)

It is worth noting that the teachers recognize that the meaning of 'leader' in the school is different to other contexts. One teacher attributes this difference to the prejudice people have, in general, regarding this concept:

> 'I think this is applying the prejudice surrounding the word *leader*. Differentiating between the leader outside the school as something we don't like, and here it's something we do like… I think you're applying that prejudice to what you misunderstand by the term leader' (TDG3)

This way of understanding leadership allowed us to identify various **types of leaders** in the CRA, grouped in three blocks.

Regarding the first of these blocks, <u>the position they occupy</u>, the majority of the participants identify members of the management team (principal, secretary, and head of studies) as leaders in the school, although the principal is singled out as holding all legal responsibility:

> ‘More than just one person, there’s a group, the management team, that is the visible head, and that team sets the direction a little’ (FDG3)

> ‘According to the law, the principal is responsible. For everything, responsible for everything’ (TDG5)

> ‘I have to be up there because ultimately, I’m legally responsible. Although decisions are taken collectively, I’m responsible, whatever happens’ (FIP)

Also in the same block, both the students and the families identified other types of leaders outside the school: the regional government education department, and the principal’s superiors, respectively.

Regarding the second block, personal characteristics, the teachers and the management team explained that some individuals on the teaching staff are leaders because they are more active and ambitious, have a clear vision and attitude, and are more willing to take risks when making proposals or leading projects:

> ‘there are also people who have more of a leader’s profile, if you know what I mean. People who are more active, whose brains never stop, and sometimes you get swept along by their enthusiasm’ (TDG5)

> ‘or they are more ambitious, or they are simply much faster in the sense of how they see things, which may be because they aren’t afraid of doing certain activities’ (TDG1)

They also described how these people are usually the same individuals who take on numerous responsibilities and try to share and accompany others by offering mutual help:

> ‘People who you can share with and learn from. Who I can learn from and who guide me and walk by my side while I learn’ (TDG5)

However, one of the participants claimed that some teachers find it difficult to lead because they go ahead with their own proposals without pausing for joint reflection:

> ‘although he’s a leader and he pushes on ahead, he keeps driving on, he has trouble waiting for the others to catch up, which is what a leader has to do, push forward and slow down so those who have fallen behind can catch up’ (FIP)

Most of the participants’ responses in the third block, making proposals, reflected the idea that teachers are the school’s leaders because they are constantly suggesting new activities and projects, which they share and decide on with the EC. However, the students considered that everyone is a leader in the school because they can all propose activities in and for the school:

> ‘we’re all equals, we’re all leaders’ (SDGB5)
>
> ‘we can suggest things too’ (SDGQ5)
>
> ‘and give our opinions’ (SDGQ1)
>
> ‘in the assemblies, we aren’t the only ones making proposals; the families also do, and if they don’t, the neighbors do too’ (SDGB1)
>
> ‘this is an open-door school’ (SDGB5)

Another response category is that of the **CRA leadership characteristics**, among which most of the participants highlighted participation and teamwork.

They reported that participation takes place among all groups in the EC and revolves around collective decision making. However, it also involves other actions, such as requesting and giving opinions, making proposals and organizing activities, classes and workshops. They confirmed that shared decision making is based on dialogue, consensus and, according to the teachers and management team, on respect for dissenting views:

> ‘it is very much based on consultation and the participation of diverse groups of people […] Everything is discussed, assessed by everyone and decided upon. No steps are taken without… well, at least no important steps, not routine things, without consultation’ (ITCB)

> ‘you have to listen to everyone, even if they hold opposite opinions they must at least have the opportunity to speak’ (FIP)

Despite these comments, they confirm that when decisions have to be made quickly, they are put to the vote without previous consensus.

All of these actions are carried out in different structures, the most important of which are the school board or coordinating committee, the mixed committees, assemblies, workshops, classes and events held to mark the end of the school year (DA). The teachers pointed out that each of these structures is used for a specific purpose or action. For example, any decision to be made is discussed in consultation with the coordinating committee. This body is understood to be the main space for discussion and decision making in the school, in which all agents of the EC and even external agents participate (DA). They also claimed that these spaces offer everyone the chance to participate.

Notwithstanding, we observed that in one school board and coordinating committee session, some proposals were made by the members of the management team and many of the decisions had already been taken (PO). Furthermore, the students did not participate in the session (PO).

When we asked about the students’ participation, we were told their absence was unusual and that they generally took part; however, others affirmed that it had always been difficult to hear the students’ opinions. In this way it emerged that class and delegate assemblies had recently been implemented as a strategy to ensure that the students’ voices would be heard in the coordinating committee.

The participants also emphasized that participation in the school is related to commitment and mutual trust. The students explained that trust is essential for participation in the school, since it is what allows connections to be made between people:

> ‘if we didn’t trust each other, it wouldn’t work as well, we wouldn’t connect’ (SDGB6)

With regard to teamwork, the distinction was made between projects carried out in the education community and those undertaken by the teachers. The majority of the participants recognized that teamwork among different levels of the EC takes place in the mixed committees, the assemblies, in organizing workshops and in developing some classes:

> ‘They have the chance to participate at any time, to come into the classrooms, attend the assemblies, participate in the projects, join the committees …’ (TDG4)

However, many of the teachers thought there was still a long way to go before families truly participate in the school:

> ‘all the families are still unaware that the project also belongs to them, they participate […] because we pull them along’ (FIP).

For this reason, the teachers saw the teaching staff as driving the school and as the agent of change; among themselves they work very closely as a team, based on the distribution of roles and tasks. They also pointed out that this distribution ensures shared responsibility among all the teachers, who are involved with and committed to taking their school project forward:

> ‘I feel that here we are a group of people who have to work together in a team and, yes, I like it when I suggest an activity and my colleagues help me and give me support’ (TDG1).

This leads them to perceive the school leadership as neither a pyramid structure, nor a hierarchical power structure:

> ‘here we used to have a principal who effectively said that this was a pyramid, that they called the shots and the rest obeyed and this, unfortunately, is what happens in many schools […] But a participatory model is much more powerful than a pyramid or instructive model’ (TDG5).

Finally, regarding the last category, **labeling the CRA leadership**, few individuals had the confidence to put a name to the school's leadership based on the characteristics they described.

The family discussion group identified it as shared and democratic. Shared leadership refers to a way of leading that takes into account the opinion of all members of the EC, and their participation in didactic proposals suggested by the teachers or the management team:

> 'the leadership in this school is different from others, I think that it's more shared out, the community is taken into account more'(FDG1)

> 'when opinions are asked for, they are taken much more into consideration. And in practical actions too, parents are given a lot of trust and they let you do things' (FDG2).

On the other hand, they explained democratic leadership as being based on consensus and the teachers' enthusiasm, and that the teaching staff is very committed to and involved in the ongoing school project:

> 'I would define it as democratic because there is a great deal of consensus' (FDG3).

The teacher and management team groups also agreed that leadership was shared. By shared leadership, they understood a type of leadership in which all individuals in the EC can lead and therefore feel ownership of the project:

> 'the leadership that I understand for this school model is a shared leadership, where there is leadership in all directions […] so that everyone can feel they own the project' (TDG5).

However, neither the students nor the local councilors identified a label for the leadership in the school.

II. *What type of leadership do the education community agents aspire to?*

Figure 2. Conceptual map of the EC's aspiration categories for leadership

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 presents the response categories for the second research question. When we asked the participants about their aspirations for leadership, we received a wide variety of responses. Some people expressed their contentment with the leadership that they perceive and therefore would not change it; others stated that they would like to see modifications to some aspects or detected barriers in the current leadership.

Those who would prefer to **leave the leadership as they currently see it** put forward a variety of arguments. On the one hand, one group of students explained that they want the leadership to continue as it is because they perceived that all members of the EC can participate in organizing activities and in decision making. They argued that this form of leadership gives all the agents a chance to be a leader in the school, as mentioned previously. According to one student, this means that members of the EC are valued more highly by others in the community.

> 'This kind of leadership is good because we can all make decisions and we can all participate' (SDGB2)
>
> 'You're valued more by the others' (SDGB5)

On the other hand, one group of families pointed out that the leadership they perceive enables students to be more autonomous and critical. It also encourages parents to feel more responsible for their children's education.

> 'The children's autonomy is much more apparent' (FDG2)
>
> 'They have a more critical spirit from a very young age, they are better able to defend their arguments and they are much more attentive to many aspects of life' (FDG1)
>
> 'As a parent, you feel more responsible for the education of your child' (FDG2)

However, we observed a variety of motivations in the group that aspires **to improve the leadership they currently perceive**. The majority of these participants refer to a series

of obstacles that hinders its development. The most frequently mentioned hurdle was resistance to change by some families. They explained that a small number of families do not defend the school's transformation project and that this negatively affects the leadership that, as a school, they aspire to develop. One member of the management team explained it as follows:

> 'there are two sets of people that do defend the project, those from here and those from other places, and then there is another set, approximately a third, of families from here that don't want it, and aren't convinced' (FIP)

Most of the participants attributed this attitude of resistance to a lack of knowledge about the school project. Some of the participating families and local council members viewed this lack of knowledge as a source of distrust and fear of the new, which results in an unwillingness to participate. They also suggested that rejection by these families may be due to their more traditional understanding of what education is and the implication that parents should stay outside the school gates. The teachers and the management team added that this resistance may also be heightened by a lack of commitment, involvement, and responsibility in the school, or by a failure to understand democracy as a participatory process. And although the students believed that it is also due to a lack of commitment, one student argued that some families cannot participate because of lack of time.

The teachers and the management team also referred to other obstacles, such as problems of communication between EC members. These problems cause conflict between individuals and lead to difficulties in finding, managing and coordinating times and spaces for shared reflection, as a consequence of the differences between the districts where the two school sites are located:

> 'sometimes communication doesn't arrive properly' (TDG5)

> ‘communicating with and coordinating so many people between two school sites is extremely complicated’ (TDG4 and TDG5)

> ‘there are differences between the two school sites, the environments in each town are different’ (FIP)

Finally, this last group pointed out that they are immersed in an ongoing learning process about what it means to be leaders in a democratic school. Although leadership in the school is not as shared out as it might seem, they are keen to continue taking the project forward. One of the teachers stated:

> ‘by influencing, repeating and speaking, we may be transforming a little […], we are agents of transformation and we have the power to transform society, but it is hard, very hard’ (TDG5)

Discussion and conclusions

During this study, we have attempted to respond to the two research questions proposed at the start of the article. This section discusses and draws conclusions on each of them in turn.

Responses to the first question, What perception do education community agents have of leadership? were heterogeneous in all the categories and their relationships, with some similarities and some differences.

First, we found a close relationship between the first two categories: definition of leadership and types of leaders in the CRA.

On the one hand, all the participants from the different groups in the EC defined leadership by associating it with leader type. At the same time, the majority of these people identified leaders as the individuals or groups holding a formal position within the school: the management team. They therefore understand leadership as a fixed phenomenon (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood, 2009), based on the relationship

between the individuals who occupy a formal position in the school and the other agents in the EC (Bolívar, 2010).

On the other hand, when participants defined what a leader means to them, some associated it with an authoritarian, personal leadership style, whereas others related it to a democratic leadership style (Murillo, 2006).

Some of the participants, especially the teachers and students, had begun to perceive the presence of other types of leaders in the school, apart from the management team. These people are perceived as leaders because of their personal characteristics and their initiative to make proposals; they are mainly teachers and, to a lesser degree, other members of the community: students, families, neighbors, etc.

The way the EC defines leadership derives in part from a bureaucratic and individualistic view of leadership. Antonio Bolívar (1997, p. 27) stated that 'from a bureaucratic perspective, or from the experience of hierarchical relationships, leadership tends to be equated with holding specific formal positions in the organization, or with the authority exercised from an official position'.

The literature calls for an expansion of this notion, since current educational demands require new, much more flexible ways of leading, in which leadership exists at all levels, not only in those individuals holding formal positions (Bolívar, 1997; Bolívar, 2010; Bolívar, 2011; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Linda Lambert argues that 'we can view leadership as a verb, rather than a noun, by considering the processes, activities, and relationships in which people engage, rather than as the individual in a specific role' (Lambert, 1998). Based on this idea, Bolívar (2000, p 62) contends that *leadership* is not identified with *leader*; on the contrary, a leader who operates in the traditional way may actually prevent leadership, and argues

that leadership therefore consists of the reciprocal learning processes that enable participants to form a community with shared, common proposals and visions.

Some studies affirm that in educational organizations, management teams are 'a fundamental key to open the doors for change' (Sales, 2012, p. 59), since for diverse reasons they are the 'elements of the system that we associate with the direct exercise of power' (Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2010). But this research also insists on the importance of management teams following a democratic leadership style, which can bring about a distribution of power and collaboration in the EC (Bolívar, 1997; Krichesky & Murillo, 2011; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Murillo, 2006; Sales, 2012; Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2010).

The fact that some members of the EC perceive other, more collaborative ways of exercising leadership in the school suggests that the school is gradually contributing to the development of a more democratic and distributed leadership style. This is especially true among the teachers, since they recognize 'that there are multiple leaders (Spillane et al., 2004) and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organisations (Harris, 2007)' (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31).

Second, regarding the category of leadership characteristics in the school, we found the development of strategies that encourage participation and teamwork.

We discovered that the EC's participation in the school is grounded in the development of democratic practices—making shared decisions, organization, etc. (Santos, 2003)—in different participation structures, informal ones such as committees, assemblies, open days and training sessions as well as formal structures like the school board (Jiménez & Pozuelos, 2001). All these spaces implement democratic communicative actions such as consensus and respect for dissenting views (Dewey, 1995).

According to the theory, these actions are fundamental conditions for developing a distributed leadership approach in which teamwork takes place among individuals who actively participate in the school; in other words, teamwork is not limited to the activities performed by teachers and the management team (Jiménez & Pozuelos, 2001; Krichesky & Murillo, 2011; Molina, 2005; Muijs & Harris, 2006). On this point, Gimeno (2000, p. 120 in Jiménez & Pozuelos, 2001) explains that 'professionals and other agents share the responsibility to educate within a model for which society is responsible'.

These strategies, in turn, enable much more horizontal relations to develop among the EC groups by encouraging cooperative skills such as trust, commitment and shared responsibility (Gonzálvez & cols., 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Pujolás, 2008; Pujolás, 2012; Traver & Rodríguez, 2011). Such cooperation necessarily involves the decentralization of power and authority among all parties (Bolívar, 2010, Murillo, 2006).

However, this collaboration network is once again affected when the concept of distributed leadership is conflated with the mere delegation of tasks and functions by the management team. Thus, the fact that the initiatives 'proliferate from top to bottom' (Muijs & Harris, 2006, p. 10) indicates that power remains in the hands of the formal positions in the organization and that the EC groups fail to fully recognize their capacity for leadership.

The leadership culture within the management team and the teaching staff, therefore, cannot yet be described as distributed. For this to occur, a cultural change should be instigated, in which the professional groups in the EC begin to distribute their leadership and extrapolate it to the other groups. In other words, a process of transformation must be set in motion in order to open the way for distribution of leadership across all levels.

The literature shows that if the management team and the teachers do not open their doors, the school will not move towards this necessary transformation. Thus, as Traver, Sales and Moliner (2010) claim, the power structure and the professionalization of the institution are the first two hurdles to overcome to achieve change.

One way to make progress in this direction is to continue working on the relationships between the different groups in the EC through cooperative organization in the school. For instance, cooperative learning among students is an established structural element in the cultural transformation of this school; this cooperation could then spread to other groups in the EC, so as to continue moving towards a democratic and inclusive leadership model (Gonzálvez & cols., 2011; Pujolás, 2008).

Regarding the final category, leadership labels, participants expressed the leadership they perceived in a variety of ways, which generated conflicts in the EC on what is understood by leadership.

Many studies have highlighted the conceptual confusion over the term leadership at a theoretical level (Bolden, 2011; Harris, 2007; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006). We therefore invite all the EC groups to review their definitions and characteristics, and jointly construct the mark of leadership that best matches the democratic and inclusive school model they want to achieve (Arar & Taysum, 2019). To this end, they must use negotiation to decide which of the following three perspectives applies to them: delegation of tasks and functions, dialogic approach, or distributed network.

Turning to the second research question, What type of leadership do the education community agents aspire to? we also found considerable heterogeneity among the responses.

A small group of people from various EC groups wanted to leave the leadership as it stands, since it offers them the opportunity to be more autonomous, to share responsibilities, and to recognize each other's leadership capacities. It can therefore be said that, in some way, the current leadership style helps to develop a distributed leadership (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Longo, 2008; Molina, 2005).

However, the majority of the participants aspired to go further by attempting to overcome the barriers that they believe affect the perceived leadership. One notable barrier is the resistance to change by some families, as a result of unawareness, distrust, lack of commitment and having a more traditional understanding of education. These motivations are closely related to those reported in the literature. According to Ginés Martínez (2003), the lack of participation of some families in the school may be a result of:

> an overly individual conception of their participatory role in the school, leading them to confine their relationship with the school, in the best of cases, to their children's problems [...] due to a lack of awareness of what it means to be and belong to a school community (p. 41).

In this sense, the communication barriers they detect might also be a cause of conflict, which in turn discourages certain families from participating. Perhaps these personal barriers in communication are fruit of a failure to listen by both parties and a lack of the negotiation between them, caused by an individualist and personalized view of leadership. Such obstacles hinder the development of a leadership distributed through all levels of the EC. Teixidó (1999) argues that:

> In the everyday functioning of schools, situations are frequently detected where communication between individuals is lacking or deficient [...], caused by personal factors that are often associated with distinct hierarchical levels, and with the exercising of specific roles (p.23).

Analyzing the EC's perceptions of the leadership in the school gives us a clearer picture of the kind of leadership exercised in it and, therefore, helps us to reflect on whether it allows the EC to progress towards the model of a school that all its members want to build together.

The EC's objective to continue advancing towards a mark of distributed leadership in its school project strengthens and connects community members in their endeavour to live and work together, respect and tolerate diversity (Arar & Taysum, 2019), which reflects its aspiration to democratize the structure of the school. This aspiration underlies the research project of which this article forms part, and as such, the present study makes a modest contribution to how schools can develop organizational and relational structures that come closer to a more just educational model, a model based on the inclusive and democratic school.

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