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Beyond Participation: Deepening Leadership Development Through Professional Learning Communities in Ecuadorian Technical Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how professional learning communities (PLCs) foster leadership development among principals and vice principals in Ecuadorian technical schools, highlighting the interplay between practice and policy conditions. Using a longitudinal phenomenological design, two PLCs were followed over two academic years through interviews, field notes, meeting artifacts, and ministerial documents. Findings show three key shifts: leaders developed greater self-awareness, acted as conduits of knowledge transfer, and built cross-school partnerships. Yet unstable policy support, staff turnover, and administrative workloads constrained continuity. PLCs can serve as incubators of leadership identity and practice if supported by stable frameworks and protected reflection time.

Introduction

Over the past century, scholarship on educational leadership has expanded considerably, particularly in Anglo-Saxon and Western contexts. Research consistently shows that leadership plays a critical role in school development and improvement. International studies have highlighted how leadership influences school effectiveness, improvement processes, and organizational learning (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Leithwood, 2005). Within this field, a central debate concerns how educational leaders develop professionally. Earlier research highlighted the need for systematic preparation programs for school principals (Davis et al., 2005), while subsequent studies examined how leadership learning unfolds through professional experience and workplace contexts (Daniëls et al., 2019; D. V. Day et al., 2014). Other work has focused on the ways principals engage in professional development activities and how these experiences shape leadership practice (Koonce et al., 2019; Wright & da Costa, 2016).

Despite broad recognition of the importance of leadership development, concerns remain regarding both the content and delivery of professional training. Leadership development is unlikely to occur through isolated training programs alone, but rather through combinations of formal learning, coaching, and professional practice (Pont et al., 2008). However, many initiatives still lack contextual relevance and remain weakly connected to leaders' everyday professional challenges (Pont et al., 2008; Wright & da Costa, 2016). Consequently, scholars increasingly call for professional development approaches that are embedded in leaders' work contexts and professional experiences (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Liljenberg & Wrethander, 2023).

In Latin America, interest in educational leadership has grown in recent decades (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). The professionalization of school leadership has become an important policy concern (Weinstein et al., 2015). However, leadership preparation programs often remain largely theoretical and insufficiently connected to the practical challenges faced by school leaders (Weinstein & Hernández, 2016). Furthermore, empirical research examining the impact of professional development initiatives on educational leadership remains limited across the region (Flessa et al., 2018).

Over the past 15 years, educational reforms in Ecuador have increased policy attention to technical education as part of broader efforts to strengthen workforce skills and economic

development. Initiatives such as the Ten-Year Education Plan and subsequent policies promoting the technical baccalaureate sought to expand technical education and improve its alignment with labor market demands (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2007, 2015). These reforms have introduced new expectations for educational leaders, particularly in strengthening pedagogical support, and improving management practices within technical schools. Despite these policy efforts, little is known about how such reforms have influenced educational leadership or professional development in technical education contexts.

To address this gap, this study adopts a longitudinal perspective to explore how principals and vice-principals develop their leadership through engagement in PLCs. By examining both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, and considering the complementary roles of facilitators and internal coordinators, the study provides insights into how leadership development unfolds within collaborative professional spaces operating in a highly bureaucratic educational system. By examining both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, and considering the complementary roles of facilitators and internal coordinators, the study provides insights into how leadership development unfolds within collaborative professional spaces operating in a highly bureaucratic educational system.

State of Art and Theoretical Framework

To guide this study, firstly, we show several experiences concerning the professionalization of educational leaders in Latin America. Then, we introduce the key framework of this study, leadership development of educational leaders. Finally, we present the findings of empirical studies concerning PLCs for educational leaders.

Leadership Development Preparation in Latin American Countries

Recently, educational leadership and leadership development have become prominent concerns in developing countries, especially in the Latin American region, where educational leaders have emerged as central actors in the educational landscape (Rivas, 2015). This growing attention is closely linked to broader educational reforms and increasing accountability pressures within education systems, which have expanded the responsibilities of educational leaders. As a result, ensuring adequate preparation for these roles has become imperative, given the complex challenges leaders face (UNICEF, 2022). Yet most professional development in the region still emphasizes in-service training, with comparatively few opportunities for initial or induction-level preparation (Weinstein & Hernández Vejar, 2014).

Responding to these limitations, several Latin American countries have introduced initiatives to strengthen leadership preparation. Weinstein et al. (2015) highlight six major examples. Argentina and Brazil launched national programs aimed at strengthening school management, leadership performance, and democratic school practices. Chile introduced a master's degree in leadership and educational management for professionals seeking to advance their leadership skills. Colombia and Mexico developed training initiatives focused on strengthening leadership competencies and promoting school improvement, while the Dominican Republic implemented a program designed to enhance educational management. Collectively, these initiatives signal the region's growing policy attention to leadership professionalization.

Ecuador follows these regional trends, though only two initiatives have been identified to support the professionalization of educational leaders. First, in 2012, the Ministry of Education published a self-study manual titled *Pedagogical Management for School Leaders*, a 60-hour workshop designed to encourage reflection and peer learning among school authorities. Second, in 2018, the Ministry partnered with universities to offer a 150-hour preparatory course for aspiring principals, delivered in both face-to-face and virtual formats. This program sought to promote employment stability and facilitate career advancement for teachers.

Despite these efforts, the professionalization of educational leaders in Latin America continues to face persistent challenges. Providers often lack specialization in leadership, treating it as a secondary component of teacher training. Mechanisms for quality assurance and evaluation remain weak, with little capacity to assess program effectiveness. Moreover, the content of many programs is misaligned with leadership performance standards, relying heavily on theoretical models with limited connection to real-world practice

(Weinstein & Hernández, 2016). As a result, “there is very little evidence in the region regarding the effect of school principal preparation programs on their educational leadership” (Weinstein et al., 2018, p. 227).

Educational leaders’ Leadership Development

This study draws on C. Day et al.’s (2013) leadership development framework, which conceptualizes leadership development as a longitudinal process operating across multiple, interacting levels. Leadership development involves recognizing patterns of change within individuals (intrapersonal), between individuals (interpersonal), and across wider collectives over time (C. Day et al., 2013). Within this perspective, leadership development is not reduced to a fixed set of competencies; rather, it is shaped through experience, learning, and relationships as leaders respond to evolving professional demands and organizational conditions (C. Day et al., 2009, 2013).

From an intrapersonal standpoint, leadership development is supported through experience, learning orientation, leadership skills development, and self-development (C. Day et al., 2013). Experience supports growth by broadening leaders’ understanding of school realities and strengthening professional judgment through ongoing interaction with diverse stakeholders (C. Day et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2000). Learning orientation refers to leaders’ self-initiated and purpose-driven engagement with complex tasks and challenges (Hirst et al., 2004; Zheng & Muir, 2015). It is strengthened when leaders work in contexts that enable reflection and support through mentoring and coaching (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Zhang & Brundrett, 2010), as well as professional networking (Lazenby et al., 2022). Leadership skill development includes progressively refined leadership capacities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation – alongside cognitive abilities related to creative thinking and complex problem-solving (C. Day, 2001; Mumford et al., 2000), which are important for navigating school-level challenges (Leithwood, 2007; Zaccaro et al., 2004). Finally, self-development is understood as a dynamic process rooted in continuous reflection and adaptation over time (Karp, 2013; Karp & Helgø, 2009).

Leadership development also emerges through interpersonal processes that connect individual agency with professional relationships and collective practice (C. Day et al., 2013). From this view, leadership develops through interaction within professional collectives, where learning is shaped by collaboration, peer support, and mutual influence (Hernandez et al., 2011; Roth, 2022; van Dijke, 2020). Such relational dynamics help explain how leadership development can be co-constructed through shared practice, trust-building, and collective problem-solving in professional settings (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996).

This framework is particularly suited to analyzing PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools because PLCs provide a professional context where intrapersonal and interpersonal processes intersect (C. Day et al., 2013). Within PLCs, leaders can strengthen reflection, learning orientation, and leadership skills while also engaging in collaboration and peer support (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Lazenby et al., 2022). By situating leadership growth within both individual and collective dynamics, the framework offers a lens to analyze how educational leaders construct leadership practices over time and how these are shaped – and sometimes constrained – by the policy and organizational conditions in which they operate.

PLCs for Educational Leaders

PLCs are collaborative groups of educators who engage in dialogue, shared inquiry, and collective reflection to improve professional practice and student learning (Hord, 2009; Stoll et al., 2006). PLCs are relevant for leadership development because they create structured opportunities for ongoing collective inquiry, peer feedback, and problem-solving around real school challenges – conditions that support learning beyond one-off training events (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2010). Research increasingly highlights PLCs as spaces for leadership learning, where educational leaders reflect on their roles and strengthen leadership practices through interaction with peers (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Wilson, 2016).

Through collaborative engagement, leaders acquire new practices and generate fresh insights within a constructivist learning framework (Hord & Roy, 2009). As Aas and Vavik (2015) explain, “The group provides a social learning environment with opportunities for contextual feedback from other leaders, which broadens the participants’ thinking about how leadership can be performed” (p. 262). Evidence also suggests that networked and sustained professional learning can be particularly valuable for educational

leaders when learning is continuous and supported by follow-up, appropriate facilitation, and protected time (Brown & Flood, 2020; Lazenby et al., 2022).

In this study, PLCs are understood as cross-school communities in which principals and vice-principals engage in collective reflection on leadership practice, exchange experiences, and explore strategies to address common challenges in technical schools, supported by facilitators and internal coordinators.

Methodology

Research Questions

The research question guiding this study is: To what extent do PLCs promote school authorities' leadership development at technical schools in Ecuador? Based on our theoretical framework, we formulated these sub-questions:

- (1) How do technical school authorities describe their experiences of participating in a PLC?
- (2) How do technical school authorities perceive the influence of PLC participation on their leadership development?
- (3) What conditions within PLCs do technical school authorities consider key to their leadership development?

Methodological Approach

The study focuses on understanding the individual and collective experiences of educational leaders in a professional development setting. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note, “the experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted” (p. 9). A phenomenological approach was therefore adopted to capture how principals and vice principals construct meaning around their developmental processes within PLCs. The longitudinal design allowed us to trace changes in leaders' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement over time, acknowledging that leadership development is an evolving process shaped by sustained participation (Saldaña, 2003).

Context of the Study and Participants

Since 2017, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), in partnership with VVOB-Ecuador, has promoted PLCs as a professional development strategy for school management teams in technical schools in Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas province. Following an introductory session in October 2017, seven PLCs were established, each limited to principals and vice principals. Meetings rotated across different urban and rural schools, allowing participants to observe varied contexts.

During the 2018–2019 school year, three PLC sessions were held, followed by four additional sessions in 2019–2020. For this study, we purposively selected two of the seven PLCs, as they offered access to school principals and vice principals engaged in ongoing PLC work on their leadership practices within technical schools. These two PLCs were selected as information-rich cases because they provided longitudinal access across two school years and included the key roles (participants, facilitators, and internal coordinators) central to PLC functioning and leadership development. As Bryman (2016) observes, qualitative sampling is typically guided by theoretical rather than statistical considerations.

The composition of participants reflects the structure of the PLC initiative and the roles formally involved in its functioning. The study involved six school authorities (two principals and four vice-principals) from the two selected PLCs, alongside two facilitators and three internal coordinators. Importantly, due to the policy context in Ecuador – where school authorities are frequently rotated or reassigned – only one principal participated in both years of data collection. The second principal was interviewed during the first year but did not continue in the second year because he no longer held the principal position.

Two facilitators (educational advisors assigned to guide PLC sessions) and three internal coordinators (school authorities selected within the PLCs to convene sessions and, with facilitator

support, progressively assume facilitation responsibilities as they learned to perform this function) were included because these roles were central to organizing PLC work and shaping learning processes. Including both participant leaders and support roles strengthened triangulation of perspectives on PLC dynamics and leadership development. All participants provided written consent to take part in this research.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews complemented by documentary sources. Primary data consisted of 15 interviews conducted over two school years. In 2018–2019, interviews were conducted with two principals and four vice principals. In 2019–2020, a second round involved one principal, four vice principals, two facilitators, and three internal coordinators. As shown in Table 1, participation differed across the two academic years due to role rotation and the phased inclusion of support roles. Facilitators and internal coordinators were interviewed in the second year because their roles became more visible as the PLCs consolidated and because they could reflect on both implementation processes and participants' engagement over time. Asking open-ended questions encouraged the discussions, with additional questions arising naturally during the interviews relating to each respondent's narrative. More specifically, two rounds of interviews were undertaken with the educational leaders. In the initial round, the interview questions revolved around understanding how the educational leaders fulfilled their role and engaged in the PLCs. In the subsequent round, the interview questions aimed to track the educational leaders' involvement and corresponding learning process within the PLCs, as well as monitor the consolidation of the PLCs. As the PLCs progressed, interviews were also conducted with the PLC facilitators and internal coordinators. The themes of the interview questions sought to comprehend how supportive roles guide the learning processes within a PLC for educational leaders. In all cases, the interviews were conducted face-to-face with individual respondents for a minimum of 40 minutes and a maximum of 80 minutes, depending on participants' willingness to share personal and professional experiences. Interviews were held at each school where participants worked and recorded on a digital voice recorder. Voice files were labeled with a code number, then transcribed as Word documents for analysis.

Supplementary materials included personal documents (research journals, e-mails) and institutional documents (facilitator reports, policy, or procedure documents, such as laws or ministerial decrees, meeting minutes of the PLCs, attendance, or participation records, and training or professional development documents). Triangulating across these diverse sources provided a richer understanding of PLC dynamics and reduced reliance on single perspectives (Maxwell, 2013).

Data Analysis

The focal point of this study resides in understanding technical school authorities' leadership development. The primary data consisted of qualitative personal narratives obtained through interviews (Seidman, 2019). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Spanish, with

Table 1. PLCS interviewees.

					PLC sessions attended		
Interviews		Participants	School function	PLC role	1 st year	2 nd year	Total
I	II	Ciro	Acting vice-principal	Participant	3	3	6/7
I	II	Bernardo	Acting vice-principal	Participant	3	3	6/7
I	II	Daniel	Acting vice-principal	Participant	3	1	4/7
I	II	Fernanda	Acting vice-principal	Participant	1	4	5/7
I	–	Angel	Acting principal	Participant	3	–	3/7
I	II	Elena	Appointed principal	Participant-Internal coordinator	3	4	7/7
	II	Irma	Acting principal	Participant-Internal coordinator	3	4	7/7
	II	Jaime	Acting principal	Participant- Internal coordinator	3	4	7/7
	II	Gabriel	Educational advisor	Facilitator	3	4	7/7
	II	Helga	Educational advisor	Facilitator	3	4	7/7

Pseudonyms are used instead of participant's real names

Table information

(I) Interviewed during first year.

(II) Interviewed during second year.

careful editing to ensure the original words and terms of each participant were accurately preserved.

Data analysis utilized a two-cycle coding process (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle involved grouping data related to educational leaders' work and PLC dynamics, employing values coding to explore participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding PLCs as a professional development strategy. The second cycle focused on pattern coding, identifying recurring themes based on similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Hatch, 2002). These patterns included PLC definitions, educational leaders' learning experiences, leadership development within PLCs, and challenges faced.

Analysis also examined contextual conditions supporting PLC functionality, such as content, activities, and social relationships. To deepen understanding and enhance credibility through triangulation, thematic analysis was extended to additional data sources beyond interviews (Yin, 2011). These included ministerial documents, meeting agendas, facilitators' reports, field notes, and didactic materials like printed handouts and flipchart articles. Each supplementary document was evaluated using Scott's (1990) criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning to ensure relevance and rigor. Examining these materials provided contextual insights and helped reconstruct specific events within the PLCs (Flick, 2014). This integrative approach brought coherence and depth to the depiction of educational leaders' leadership development through their engagement with PLCs.

Results

Guided by C. Day et al. (2013), we interpret the findings through two complementary domains of leadership development: intrapersonal processes (e.g., leaders' reflection, learning orientation, skills development, and self-development) and interpersonal processes (e.g., collaboration, peer support, and relational influence within the PLC). The three results dimensions presented below show how PLC participation enabled – and at times constrained – these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes over time.

Building PLCs from Within: Actors, Actions, and Learning Dynamics

The implementation of PLCs unfolded through four interrelated stages, moving from alignment with policy directives to more practice-oriented engagement. This progression highlights how facilitators and coordinators guided educational leaders through a cycle of collective experiential learning.

From Policy to Practice: PLCs as Collaborative Learning Strategy

At the outset, educational leaders primarily understood PLCs as a government initiative framed by policy. Ciro noted that the term *learning community* was embedded in the Ecuadorian education law (LOEI, 2012), which emphasizes that education is a collective process involving students, teachers, and all educational actors. As the law defines:

Learning community. – Education sees society as an entity that learns and teaches, which is also based on the learning relations between teachers and students. Moreover, a learning community is considered as a space for social and intercultural dialogue and exchange of learning and knowledge (LOEI, 2012, p. 51).

This policy framing positioned PLCs as part of a broader vision of education as socially interconnected and collectively responsible. Building on this, educational leaders began to see PLCs not only as compliance with a mandate but as spaces for professional dialogue, critical reflection, and shared leadership. Bernardo described this: "... the PLCs are something innovative within our educational practice. They are just started, and I hope it will continue ...". His reflection illustrates an emerging shift from perceiving PLCs as policy-driven to valuing them as professional learning spaces. Similarly, Daniel characterized the PLCs as "... a group of school authorities whose main interest is to improve education at schools. We are committed to reaching the same objective and vision by sharing knowledge and experience within a context of friendship." Such accounts highlight the relational dimension of PLCs, where collaboration fostered both professional growth and interpersonal trust.

As PLCs evolved, the roles of facilitators and internal coordinators deepened the understanding of the PLCs' purpose. Gabriel, a facilitator, emphasized the mutual learning benefits, stating: "...

professional learning communities are a very important strategy for schools. School authorities learn to support each other. Moreover, as educational advisors, PLCs also allow us to address different topics to provide them with some support ...” His view emphasizes the reciprocal nature of PLC learning, strengthen leadership skills and advisory practices. Similarly, Irma, an internal coordinator, underscored the importance of PLCs in addressing national priorities in technical education: “One of our challenges is to strengthen the technical baccalaureate. All schools involved in the PLCs seek to encourage our young people to acquire technical skills ...” Her statement reinforces that PLCs serve not only as venues for leadership development but also for advancing broader educational goals.

This early stage highlights how policy frameworks shape the initial orientation of PLCs, while the gradual shift toward professional dialogue and collaboration reflects the beginning of interpersonal learning processes essential to leadership development.

From General Discussion to Practical Engagement: The Evolving Focus of PLCs

Interviews revealed a clear progression in the focus of PLC sessions over the two-year period. During the first year, educational leaders expressed mixed views on the relevance of the topics addressed. Daniel observed that much of the content was repetitive: “... most of the time, school authorities participate in conversations about some familiar and central themes ...” Similarly, Ciro advocated for a more context-specific approach: “... there is a further need to go into the specificity of the school context and its current needs ...” These reflections reveal a disconnect between the program’s formal design and the lived realities of educational leaders, echoing broader critiques that professional development initiatives often remain overly theoretical and detached from daily school challenges.

Reactions to PLC activities also varied. Elena described participation as “... a very enriching experience ...” while Bernardo found the activities “... very interesting. However, we do not put them into practice yet ...” By contrast, Daniel warned that “... PLC activities become a little monotonous with time if we do the same thing in each session. They get us bored and tend to tire us out ...” These divergent perspectives underscore the tension between theoretical learning and actionable practice.

As the PLCs matured, educational leaders increasingly valued content that was not only relevant but directly applicable to everyday challenges. Fernanda stressed this shift: “... it is useful, and we should keep working on specific issues. For instance, strategies and techniques to solve conflicts, diagnose, plan, improve learning, bring people together, and make people work ...” This focus on practical, context-sensitive leadership reinforces the view that leadership development is strengthened when it is grounded in real professional challenges.

In the second year of implementation, discussions shifted toward problem identification and solution-focused approaches. According to Elena: “... our interest is in developing pedagogical support to improve teachers’ performance and students’ learning.” Participants reported that sessions typically combined reflection on leadership practices with the sharing of management experiences. As Bernardo explained: “... during the meetings we have discussed about our leadership practices ... then we talk about school issues, and then we say what is happening in each one of the schools and what we can do to change this or that situation.” Through these discussions, educational leaders developed and adopted specific, contextually grounded strategies that emphasized relational, reflective leadership approaches to persistent school challenges.

A notable example of a practical strategy implemented was the use of restorative circles to address disciplinary conflicts among students and resistance to change among teachers. Elena highlighted their impact: “... restorative circles have become an important strategy to solve disciplinary conflicts among students ... it invites teachers to reflect on their educational practices. Moreover, it has positively influenced social relations within classrooms.”

Overall, the trajectory from general discussion to applied problem-solving demonstrates how PLCs can move beyond compliance with policy mandates to become authentic communities of practice. In doing so, they nurture not only practical leadership skills but also the interpersonal competencies and professional identities of educational leaders.

Guiding Learning Together: The Dual Roles of Facilitators and Internal Coordinators

Two key actors supported the functioning of the PLCs: educational advisors acting as facilitators and school authorities serving as internal coordinators. Their roles, while complementary, evolved gradually and revealed both opportunities and constraints in sustaining leadership development.

At the beginning of the PLC work, there was a misconception about the duties of the educational advisors, often associating them with technical support on curricular planning. Elena recalled: "... the educational advisor has guided us in the elaboration of several curricular documents. We have received much support from them." Similarly, Ciro emphasized that such guidance aligned with official duties assigned by the MINEDUC: "... PLC facilitators must fulfill their role as educational advisors. They must guide school principals and vice-principals in the elaboration of curricular documents. Many of them do not have enough knowledge about planning ..." This confusion reflected the overlap between the formal duties of educational advisors, outlined in Ecuadorian educational law – "conducting periodic visits" and "guiding training and professional development activities" (LOEI, 2012, p. 237) – and the newer role of PLC facilitator. The ambiguity highlights the need for clearer role definitions if capacity-building initiatives are to be effective.

Within the PLC framework, facilitators primarily managed logistical coordination, including distributing agendas and materials and setting protocols for participation before each meeting. However, their involvement was generally confined to the formal sessions, with minimal follow-up between meetings. Daniel reflected: "... we work in the meeting. Then we do not talk about it until the next meeting. There is no follow-up, no process. We can see if there has been dissemination only when we return to the next meeting." This absence of formative follow-up undermines the continuity essential for sustained leadership development. Nevertheless, educational leaders appreciated the facilitators' expertise and dedication. Elena noted: "The facilitators have shown a lot of capacity and broad knowledge. They have always tried to satisfy the needs and questions of the members of the community." This contrast between structural constraints and facilitators' professional strengths reveals a missed opportunity: although human capital existed to support ongoing leadership growth, it was not strategically harnessed.

In addition to facilitators, some educational leaders assumed the role of internal coordinators, typically selected by peer nomination due to their broad understanding of the educational field. Fernanda described their core responsibilities as convening meetings, fostering engagement, and providing peer leadership. Bernardo remarked: "... it is a little bit difficult for the coordinator to give us some kind of support because the school responsibilities do not leave us much room ..." As a result, coordinators frequently restricted themselves to logistical tasks, such as arranging materials, rather than providing sustained pedagogical or leadership support. Elena explained: "... I coordinate activities of an organizational nature, such as the provision of certain materials and resources before the meetings ..." This partial engagement illustrates a common challenge in distributed leadership models: while empowerment of practitioners is intended, structural barriers such as time limitations can significantly impede meaningful leadership.

Both roles – PLC facilitators and internal coordinators – evolved gradually. Initially, educational advisors participated in training sessions organized by an international NGO. Gabriel recalled: "... I received some training about data analysis, support strategies, and pedagogical feedback. Moreover, I received some training about a particular strategy called the theory of change ..." Advisors then observed PLC sessions before taking on leadership themselves. As Gabriel explained: "After observing the functioning of two or three meetings, it is time to do things by myself." This transition also transformed their practice. Helga reflected: "... in the PLCs, I learned that nobody should tell them what to do. I learned to ask questions to lead to reflection. Leading a group of leaders to reflect on their practice allows them to realize what they should do or not." Such comments illustrate a move from directive advising toward a facilitative, coaching-oriented style that prioritizes empowerment and reflection.

Internal coordinators also described their involvement as formative. Many were initially reluctant to assume new responsibilities but were motivated by their commitment to improving technical education. Jaime explained: "Nowadays, I am coordinating this because I want to lend a hand and, at the same time, work together with my colleagues ..." Internal coordinators engaged in ongoing small meetings with facilitators for guidance. Irma stated: "... through small talks, the facilitators share with us some guidelines that we have to know. For instance, how to conduct sessions and transmit knowledge ..." Jaime added: "... together with the PLC facilitator, we are setting the objectives before the PLC sessions and working on issues

concerning attendance and participation . . .” Over time, internal coordinators were increasingly recognized as emerging leaders within the PLCs: “The PLC internal coordinator will be responsible for guiding all the processes within the PLCs . . .” (Gabriel).

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate a leader emergence process, where both external facilitators and internal coordinators gradually assumed more complex responsibilities. Yet, the effectiveness of their contributions was shaped by structural constraints – limited follow-up by facilitators and competing workloads for coordinators – that hindered the PLCs’ potential to fully support transformative leadership development.

Experiential Learning at PLCs: Between Obligation and Ownership

Attendance at PLC meetings was not initially voluntary. Local school authorities mandated participation, as Fernanda explained: “. . . the school district obliged school principals and vice-principals to attend such meetings.” Yet some leaders chose to engage out of genuine interest in professional growth. Daniel recalled: “. . . as I am playing the role of school authority, the school principal invited me to attend the PLCs meetings. I decided to attend such meetings to improve my learning on management issues . . .” These contrasting accounts reveal a tension between obligation and ownership. While some participants approached PLCs as a requirement, others viewed them as opportunities for self-initiated development. Engagement levels varied widely: “Some participants are committed to PLC work, other participants need extra support, and other ones are not involved at all . . .” (Fernanda). Elena noted that some colleagues even withdrew: “. . . many school authorities have quit PLCs meetings because such meetings need committed work. Some people do not attend PLCs because they do not do their tasks, so they do not come back anymore.” In contrast, others embraced the process. As Elena reflected: “. . . in any school position, I have always tried to do my best. I know this professional training will help me have a more assertive approach at school . . .” These differences underscore that leadership development depends heavily on learning orientation and intrinsic motivation.

During the learning process, several challenges related to the PLC session dynamics emerged:

- (1) **Unclear goals:** Many leaders were initially uncertain about the value these communities might add to their professional development. The lack of clear guidelines contributed to confusion about the PLCs’ purpose. Bernardo recalled: “. . . the first two PLC meetings were a bit tense because we knew very little about the PLCs. We had no idea about what we were getting this time.”
- (2) **Time consuming processes:** Some procedures were perceived as excessively time-consuming. Daniel remarked: “. . . reflecting on our practice, we have reached some conclusions and findings after working the whole day. So, maybe we can do it faster without so much process . . .”
- (3) **Limited dynamism:** Sessions were sometimes insufficiently dynamic, limiting broad participation in practical learning activities. Bernardo suggested: “. . . PLCs should be more active. For instance, school authorities should do some practice at PLCs then transmit what we have learnt to each school . . .”
- (4) **Lack of feedback:** A pervasive absence of performance monitoring undermined confidence in progress. Fernanda expressed: “. . . there is no following-up process. We do not know if we are doing it right or where we are doing it wrong. We do not know where our mistake is . . .”
- (5) **Workload pressures:** Heavy administrative responsibilities limited engagement. Angel stated: “Professional training is an important issue, but we lose time at PLCs. School authorities do not have enough time to attend and work on this because our time is absorbed by other activities . . .”

These challenges illustrate that experiential learning demands more than mere attendance; it requires well-defined objectives, streamlined session structures, interactive practices, ongoing feedback, and sufficient time for reflection and application.

Despite initial difficulties, the PLC learning process gradually embraced inquiry, experience sharing, and collaboration. Facilitators emphasized using a reflective approach to stimulate deeper consideration of leadership practices. Helga explained: “In the PLCs, you have to ask questions so that they continue reflecting and the answers come out of them.” This approach enabled leaders to engage more meaningfully with improvement processes at their schools. Elena remarked: “. . . the methodology used by the PLC is very

different from the one we learned at university. It allows me to achieve more improvements . . . and involve people in the commitment to change education.”

Sharing experiences became central to PLC learning. Fernanda noted: “. . . all the colleagues have lived important experiences in their environment. Sharing them allows us to have a broader vision of school issues.” Experienced leaders often mentored less experienced peers. Daniel observed: “. . . the colleagues who have had the most experience in management positions have been the ones who have contributed to less experienced ones . . .” In turn, collaborative practices strengthened collective agency. Ciro emphasized: “. . . one of the greatest strengths of the PLCs work is the work it has fostered in the team aspect, in collaborative work, either by management teams or in a group among all the participants.”

Overall, the findings illustrate a gradual transition from obligatory participation and structural barriers to more reflective and collaborative practices. Through inquiry, shared experiences, and teamwork, PLCs nurtured both interpersonal learning and the collective construction of professional identity.

Leadership Unfolded: Outcomes, Role Dynamics, and Aspirations in PLCs

The engagement of educational leaders in PLCs generated meaningful insights into their leadership development and future aspirations. These outcomes are best understood through the lens of intra- and interpersonal development, highlighting evolving self-awareness, relational dynamics, and context-responsive leadership actions over time.

Awareness, Advocacy, Alliance: Three Pillars of Leadership Change in PLCs

As PLCs matured, participants described tangible shifts in their leadership practices and mind-sets, shaped by intra- and interpersonal processes. Three pillars – awareness, advocacy, and alliance – emerged as central to these transformations.

First, educational leaders reported greater self-awareness, particularly regarding how they related to colleagues within their schools. This new understanding reshaped their perceptions of professional dynamics, especially with management teams. Elena reflected on her transformation: “I used to be an authoritarian person when I addressed other school authorities . . . Now, I know I can rely on others because all of us are part of an educational community.” She also emphasized improved rapport with teaching staff: “I have learned to reduce tensions with the teaching staff by creating further opportunities to raise confidence and support between the management team and the teaching staff.” This shift illustrates ongoing self-development, grounded in reflection and social interaction, where continuous feedback within professional communities drives behavioral change.

Second, knowledge gained through PLC participation was actively disseminated within schools. Management teams conveyed insights from PLC meetings to other school authorities and teaching staff, encouraging collective engagement with school development efforts. Bernardo described this process: “. . . we transmit the information to the academic vice-principal and the inspector. They are in charge of sharing it with the teaching staff in the different meetings.” In some cases, management teams shared knowledge directly with teachers. Ciro explained: “. . . knowledge has been spread with the teaching staff in the area and committee meetings. They have been oriented in educational leadership and pedagogical support . . .” Elena further illustrated how this transfer supported problem-solving: “Once we finish the PLC training, we share what we learned. We say, we are in this process, and we are going to apply these techniques together with you to identify the problem.” This transfer of learning demonstrates the advocacy role leaders assumed, whereby knowledge is adapted and enacted collaboratively rather than passively absorbed.

Third, individual growth was complemented by an increased focus on inter-school partnerships. Irma noted: “We used to have a narrow vision. We did our work internally, but we did not come into contact with other schools. The PLC has provided us with a new perspective on schoolwork.” Such collaboration inspired leaders to spearhead change initiatives by identifying shared needs and potential solutions. Fernanda stated: “. . . when we started to talk about the need, we began to think about how to solve it. So this has allowed us to promote some strategies to lead school change . . .” She highlighted the power of collective action:

Our PLC launched an education initiative to enhance technical education. We were the leaders of the process when schools of other PLCs joined us. So that seemed to me to be a good thing. They are tuning in to what we

need, moving forward together because we cannot do it alone. So to me, that is a learning community, finding support from other schools ...

This testimony underscores inter-school networking as a form of distributed leadership, where shared goals and mutual support foster system-wide improvement.

Collectively, these three pillars demonstrate how PLC participation nurtured both intrapersonal development (greater self-awareness), interpersonal growth (collaborative knowledge-sharing), and system-level leadership (alliances across schools). Beyond documenting current practices, these outcomes point to leaders' aspirations for a more connected and collaborative professional culture in Ecuadorian technical schools.

Supporting, Convening, Leading: How Different PLC Actors Co-Construct Their Development

Throughout the PLC process, interpersonal interactions proved crucial in shaping how different actors – facilitators, internal coordinators, and school authorities – constructed their own leadership development. These dynamics generated distinct forms of action that collectively contributed to the strengthening of leadership development.

PLCs notably enhanced educational advisors' skills in providing support and guidance. Adopting a new facilitative approach, advisors addressed school concerns reflectively rather than directive, encouraging educational leaders to critically examine their roles. Gabriel reflected: "... I started to conceive educational counseling from another point of view ... making school authorities think about their role as school managers within their schools ..." Rather than prescribing solutions, facilitators fostered reflection and inquiry, reflecting a facilitative approach in which growth is supported through dialogue, questioning, and empowerment.

Internal coordinators developed their leadership through empowerment and the influence of supportive peers. Irma highlighted this transformation: "... it has taught me to be a leader and encourage school staff to move forward ... as an internal coordinator within the PLC, I have learned to make decisions, work in teams, take the lead, and relate with others." Empowered by leadership principles, internal coordinators motivated their peers to align PLC activities with governmental educational quality standards. Jaime noted: "... I have learned to associate quality standards with the projects we do here ... we can work like this because our colleagues are committed to the PLC." These experiences reveal how self-concept formation – confidence, responsibility, and relational skills – emerges in socially supportive contexts.

For school principals and vice-principals, participation in PLCs deepened both their management skills and their understanding of teaching practice. Ciro, an experienced leader, noted: "... by being involved at PLCs, we strengthened our school management skills ..." In contrast, Daniel, a novice authority, emphasized how his management experience reshaped his perspective on teaching: "... after working with other school authorities, I will be working as a teacher again. It will be different because, with the management experience, I have a broader knowledge of what a teacher must do." Beyond individual insights, leaders also sought to extend collaborative practices within their schools. Bernardo explained: "... the PLC tries to involve as many people as possible in the work we do... within the school, we try to do the same by involving all the teachers in the work we do ..." These accounts illustrate the reciprocal relationship between experience and reflection in leadership learning, where evolving roles generate new insights and strengthen professional identity.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how different actors co-constructed leadership within the PLCs. Facilitators developed reflective support skills, internal coordinators cultivated confidence and team-based leadership, and school authorities expanded their perspectives on both management and teaching. These intertwined trajectories highlight the importance of shared responsibility, mutual influence, and reciprocal recognition in sustaining leadership development across multiple roles.

Educational Leaders' Future Expectations for PLCs

Educational leaders expressed a clear willingness to remain engaged in PLCs, viewing them as valuable spaces for reflection and professional growth. As Bernardo explained: "... it would be a good idea to keep the PLCs because we are improving as school authorities, and we are doing something for our schools ..."

His statement underscores how sustained participation in PLCs fosters continuous leadership growth and contributes to broader school transformation over time.

Some leaders acknowledged that their perspectives had shifted significantly over time. Whereas initial reactions included skepticism and even a desire for PLCs to end, participants gradually grew more confident and motivated to continue. Elena recalled: "... at the beginning, we said: I hope this ends soon. Now, it is the other way around ... we have gained confidence in our work at the PLCs ...". Such reflections point to a transformative self-development process, where engagement in supportive peer networks reshaped attitudes toward leadership learning.

At the same time, participants stressed the need for greater autonomy in how PLCs are organized. Many felt that sessions were too closely framed by Ministry of Education structures and should allow more opportunities for school authorities to self-manage. As Ciro argued: "... there are several things we must do in a PLC, but we have also had proposals. It is important to provide school authorities with more space to self-manage." This emphasis on autonomy highlights the importance of agency in leadership development, where professional learning becomes more meaningful when leaders can shape it to reflect local realities.

PLCs also emerged as a source of motivation to share leadership more broadly within schools. Fernanda emphasized the importance of distributing responsibilities: "... this encourages educational leaders to distribute the work with other school staff and support each other ...". Similarly, Irma highlighted the collective dimension of educational leadership: "... it seems to me that one of the most important things is that we should not do everything on our own. Instead, we should share the work with those who are willing to be part of school development ...". These expectations reflect a shift toward distributive leadership, where authority is no longer concentrated in one individual but is shared among members of the educational community.

Finally, participants emphasized the need for enhanced support for novice school authorities. Jaime explained: "... there are novice school authorities ... so, I try to give them the knowledge I have learned within the PLCs to help them build their own experiences ...". This mentoring orientation aligns with collaborative learning models and highlights the effectiveness of coaching and peer support in fostering leadership development.

Overall, educational leaders' expectations for PLCs reveal a commitment to sustaining them as long-term platforms for professional growth and school improvement. Their reflections demonstrate intrapersonal change (greater confidence, openness, and motivation), interpersonal development (sharing responsibilities, mentoring novices, and strengthening collaboration), and system-level aspirations (seeking greater autonomy and ownership of the PLC process). Together, these perspectives highlight how participants envision PLCs not just as temporary initiatives but as collective mechanisms for embedding lasting educational change in Ecuadorian technical schools.

Obstacles to Sustainable PLCs: Institutional Fragmentation and Contextual Resistance

The challenges encountered during PLC implementation were neither isolated nor uniform. Instead, they arose from two interconnected domains: systemic constraints rooted in the regulatory framework and contextual obstacles within schools. On the systemic side, bureaucratic fragmentation, frequent staff turnover, and weak institutional scaffolding limited continuity. On the contextual side, administrative overload, resistance from teachers, and low family engagement constrained the practical enactment of knowledge and leadership practices promoted in PLCs.

Institutional Barriers: How Bureaucracy Undermines Continuity

Educational leaders consistently highlighted the absence of clear regulations and structures from the MINEDUC as a key impediment to sustaining PLC work. Participants pointed to a lack of specialized personnel responsible for coordinating technical education, with Jaime noting: "The Ministry of Education does not have the staff to coordinate technical education. They assign any person to deal with those issues." This absence of institutional scaffolding weakened the coherence and legitimacy of PLC initiatives.

Instability within school districts compounded the problem. Irma described the impact of staff turnover: "Not long ago, there was a change in staff in the school district. Another person took over the office but he had no idea of anything. There were some discussions about administrative issues as well as the PLCs'".

organization.” Similarly, bureaucratic delays in authorization disrupted participation. As Bernardo explained: “... the lack of organization in the school district makes the management teams think twice about attending a PLC meeting. If we do not receive on-time authorization from them, we cannot leave schools because we can be sanctioned ...” These accounts reveal a fragile institutional scaffolding, where weak coordination undermines continuity and thwarts long-term leadership development goals.

Frequent rotation of principals also disrupted the stability needed for sustained leadership development. Gabriel noted: “... school districts are responsible for appointing school authorities to run schools for four years. A situation that is not always accomplished ... when there is a call for a PLC meeting, some participants say I am no longer a school authority ...” Fernanda added: “... there is a rotation of school staff in sensitive positions such as the principal office, which makes it difficult for school authorities to continue working on PLCs ...” Such instability broke the continuity essential for long-term professional growth.

Beyond structural issues, participants identified a more profound cultural barrier: a weak professional identity among educational leaders. Elena reflected on this internal dissonance: “... we do not see ourselves as school authorities. We still tend to focus on the teacher’s point of view. Certainly, that is our weakness ...” This gap between policy-defined roles and leaders’ self-concepts reflects the fragile professionalization of educational leadership in Ecuador, undermining leadership development.

Contextual Barriers to PLC Implementation: Overload, Resistance, and Community Disengagement

Three interrelated contextual hurdles further constrained leadership development within PLCs.

First, overwhelming administrative workloads left little room for reflection or practical application of new learning. Angel acknowledged: “I have not shared what I have learned at the PLCs. The lack of time and the responsibilities given to us by local school authorities make it difficult to apply the PLC knowledge within my school.”

Second, teacher fatigue and occasional active resistance stifled collaborative innovation. Fernanda described this: “... intellectual, physical, mental, and psychological exhaustion that does not allow them to move forward.” Such conditions limited receptivity to innovation and undermined the collective work needed for change.

Third, weak school – community partnerships. Despite evidence of the value of family engagement in education, leaders reported persistent difficulties in mobilizing parental participation. Ciro lamented: “The main challenge is to reach out to the community. Sometimes, they show some resistance to being involved in new processes.” Without broader support, PLC-driven initiatives risked remaining isolated within school walls.

Participants suggested that addressing these barriers calls for systemic adjustments: redistributing leadership responsibilities to free principals for reflective practice; integrating well-being supports into PLC agendas to mitigate exhaustion; and designing intentional, community-centered activities to build strong partnerships. Without such comprehensive efforts, PLCs risk remaining aspirational rather than becoming catalysts for sustained school improvement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sheds light on two interrelated dimensions of educational leaders’ professionalization in Ecuadorian technical schools: the constraining influence of bureaucratic structures and the enabling potential of collaborative learning through PLCs. In a context where principalship is highly hierarchical and centralized, systemic barriers at macro, meso, and micro levels severely restrict opportunities for sustained leadership growth. Yet, by reorienting professional development around collective experiential learning, PLCs emerge as a promising avenue for overcoming some of these obstacles – if their design and implementation fully address leaders’ contextual needs.

Educational Leaders Navigate Bureaucratic Cascades

The findings reveal that Ecuador’s educational leadership operates within a rigid, bureaucratic hierarchy anchored in government policies and school-level controls, complicating leaders’ ability

to fulfill their roles effectively. This aligns with García-Martínez et al. (2018), who describe administrative and regulatory challenges shaping principalship in public education. Professionalization efforts must therefore address these systemic constraints by establishing organizational structures that support continuous learning and foster a culture of motivation among leaders (Salazar, 2007).

Rather than fundamentally reshaping the system (Humada-Ludeke, 2013), PLCs in this context function primarily to reconfigure professional dynamics within prevailing bureaucratic frameworks (Dochy et al., 2011). At the macro level, the absence of coherent public policies and the persistent rotation of principals undermine leaders' sense of belonging and willingness to engage in professional development. This finding resonates with Elmore's (2000) argument that sustainable improvement requires structural reform of educational systems as much as leadership initiatives. At the meso level, disconnection between the Ministry of Education and local school authorities further weakens support. Although the legal framework authorizes PLCs, leaders reported insufficient facilitation for their participation. This gap illustrates what Brauckmann et al. (2023) identify as the fragile link between supportive conditions and leaders' willingness to pursue continuous growth. At the micro level, many educational leaders perceive PLCs as merely conventional training sessions rather than transformative learning environments, while heavy school responsibilities further constrain their active participation. This mirrors findings by Salazar (2007), who noted that leaders frequently prefer brief, practical workshops over sustained mentoring or network-building due to time limitations.

Together, these cascades reveal how bureaucratic fragmentation systematically constrains leadership development, relegating PLCs to temporary interventions rather than embedded professional growth strategies.

Collaborative Learning as a Counterbalance

Educational leaders' professional needs positioned PLCs as a viable alternative for development in technical schools. Brauckmann et al. (2023) stress the importance of aligning professionalization with leaders' contextual realities, a point our findings reinforce. In contrast to the bureaucratic cascades described earlier, where fragmented regulations and workload pressures constrained leadership growth, PLCs offered leaders a collaborative space that enabled reflection, mutual support, and agency. Within PLCs, the practice of sharing experiences and engaging in collaborative reflection fostered a constructivist approach to learning, where interaction itself became a key mechanism for leadership growth. As Crow et al. (2017) argue, principals' lived experiences of learning shape how they reinterpret their roles and recognize one another as peers who can be trusted and relied upon. In our study, these interactions not only reshaped leaders' understanding of school management practices but also stimulated a growing interest in inter-school partnerships, marking a shift from isolated practice to community-based improvement.

Leadership development within PLCs manifests through two complementary pathways. First, distributive leadership was enacted as educational advisors and experienced (vice) principals worked together to foster accountability and empowerment. As Elmore (2000) emphasizes, distributed leadership rests on the premise that large-scale improvement requires the collaborative engagement of individuals with diverse expertise who acknowledge and value the knowledge and skills attached to different roles – a dynamic clearly reflected in our study's context. Importantly, this form of leadership was not only structural but also relational: it emerged through interpersonal exchanges, peer recognition, and the sharing of responsibility within PLCs, underscoring how collaboration itself becomes a mechanism for leadership development.

Second, pedagogical leadership was reinforced as technical educational leaders sought to engage management teams and teaching staff in a shared commitment to school development. As Androniceanu et al. (2015) argue, adopting a pedagogical focus requires educational leaders to inspire staff toward a common goal of improved teaching and learning. In our study, this orientation emerged as leaders began translating insights from PLC discussions into concrete strategies for classroom support and teacher collaboration. Crucially, pedagogical leadership in this context was also relational: it was cultivated through trust-building, open dialogue, and the collective exploration of teaching practices within PLCs. These interpersonal dynamics not only expanded leaders' influence but also embedded professional growth in the day-to-day fabric of school life.

Together, these two forms of leadership – distributive and pedagogical – operated in a mutually reinforcing way: distributive leadership broadened participation and accountability across roles, while pedagogical leadership ensured that this collaboration was directed toward the core mission of teaching and learning, thereby strengthening the foundations of leadership development in technical schools.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our findings point to several actionable strategies for strengthening PLCs as vehicles of leadership development. First, ministries and districts should establish stable coordinating units – with dedicated personnel and clear mandates – to support PLC continuity, minimize rotation-related disruptions, and streamline authorizations. Second, school schedules must be restructured to protect reflective time, ensuring leaders can engage with PLC content without being overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Third, PLC designs should incorporate ongoing support mechanisms such as peer coaching and digital communities of practice to reinforce learning beyond face-to-face sessions. Finally, intentional community outreach – from engaging families to bridging with local technical industries – can amplify PLC impact and situate leadership development within a broader ecosystem of support. Taken together, these measures would not only address the immediate constraints identified in this study but also contribute to the long-term institutionalization of PLCs as a cornerstone of leadership professionalization in Ecuador.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study lies in the scarcity of prior research on educational leadership in Ecuador, particularly within technical schools, which limited the availability of a robust theoretical foundation. Nonetheless, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational leaders navigate leadership development and the challenges they face.

Future research is imperative to build on these findings. Studies on leadership networks could further illuminate how collaborative structures sustain professional growth within the public school system. Moreover, research on educational leaders' professional development needs would raise awareness among policymakers and help design more responsive training initiatives. Comparative and longitudinal studies – examining different school types, regions, and time spans – would also strengthen understanding of how PLCs and other initiatives contribute to the professionalization of educational leadership in Latin America.

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