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Professional identity under construction: a study on educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools

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ABSTRACT

Recently, educational leadership has become of increasing interest to policy makers and researchers in non-Western and developing countries, particularly in the Latin American region. Often Western-inspired leadership models are applied in these contexts without consideration for the specific realities of each country. This paper focuses on the study of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools, a context characterized by numerous educational reforms and a shift from administrative to pedagogical leadership models. Grounded in leadership identity theory, this article explores the perceptions of school principals and vice-principals regarding their evolving roles as educational leaders. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six school authorities. Results highlight that principals' identity development is marked by dualities between being a leader and a teacher, as well as between administrative and pedagogical leadership. Moreover, the findings illustrate how these ambiguities must be interpreted in the context of Ecuadorian educational policies, the unique challenges faced by technical schools, and the career trajectories of educational leaders. The results of this study contribute to the establishment of a knowledge base for contextualized educational leadership research in Ecuador. The implications for the professional development of Ecuadorian school authorities, educational research, and policy are thoroughly discussed.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, educational leadership¹ has been widely and primarily studied in Anglo-Saxon, Western, and economically-developed countries (Oplatka, 2004). Numerous studies have shown the important impact that effective educational leaders have on student achievement, a school's working conditions, and school development (Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2010). After teacher practice in the classroom, educational leadership has been identified as the second most influential factor in explaining student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2008; Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Recently, educational leadership is also becoming of

increasing interest to policy makers, researchers, and practitioners in non-Western and developing countries, especially in the Latin American² region. Castillo and Hallinger (2018), for instance, based on a systematic literature review, identified a growing research interest regarding educational issues in general and leadership in particular in the Latin American region since the last 10 years.

Several authors have, nevertheless, raised concerns about the way educational leadership has been studied up till now in Latin America. First, a majority of the studies focus one-sidedly on policy analysis and comparative studies at the system level. Flessa et al. (2018), for instance, observed that educational leadership research has contributed a lot of attention to comparisons between countries with regard to educational policy or educational reforms such as ‘decentralization, school-based management, democratization of schools, school improvement reforms or school effectiveness’ (p. 186). Leadership research that gives voice to educational leaders with regard to their role in diverse Latin American contexts is still lacking (Flessa et al., 2018). Second, there is a lack of systematic empirical research and conceptual papers about the particularities of being an educational leader in the Latin American context or studies ‘that theorize about how leadership and management practices are shaped by the context of Latin American schools’ (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018, p. 219). Inspired by international tendencies, Latin American countries have implemented strategies to empower the leadership of educational leaders through the promotion of instructional, transformational, or distributed leadership models. Often these Western-inspired leadership models are applied in a non-contextualized way, which means without any consideration for a country’s particular political, cultural, and social context (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Weinstein et al., 2014). Consequently, several authors emphasize that there is the risk that those leadership theories and models do not fit and are not sufficiently instructive for understanding leadership behavior in non-Western countries (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Oplatka, 2019). Moreover, comparative research has emphasized the complexities related to this so-called policy borrowing (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Weinstein and Hernández (2016), for instance, have identified how the transference or blind adoption of Western educational leadership perspectives to developing countries has led to an exacerbation of tensions associated with autonomy and authority, as most educational systems in Latin America are highly centralized (see also Pineda-Báez et al., 2019). Oplatka (2019), therefore, advocates for the creation of a ‘field of study of educational management specifically oriented to Latin American educational contexts and criticizes the blind adoption of imported concepts and foreign theories’ (p. 196). Third, despite the increasing attention to educational leadership in Latin America, important differences can be identified between countries regarding their educational policies as well as their focus within educational leadership research (Borden, 2002; Flessa et al., 2018; Oplatka, 2019). Knowledge production regarding educational leadership has been developed in countries such as Chile and Mexico, but these two countries are not representative for other countries in Latin America (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). Since each educational system is framed within its own socio-cultural environment, several authors emphasize the need for conceptualizing and contextualizing educational leadership for the diverse Latin American situation (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Oplatka, 2004).

In this article, we will focus on the reality of educational leadership in Ecuador. Since the last decade and a half, there has been significant changes in the regulations that

govern Ecuadorian schools, and as such have impacted educational leadership. More specifically, the Ecuadorian government implemented reforms to increase the quality of initial teacher training programs, stimulate teacher professional development, improve teachers' working conditions, and contribute to leadership development (Plan Decenal de Educación del Ecuador; Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2007, p. 6). In the context of these policy reforms, a particular area that has received increased attention from the government, the private sector, and international donors (ONGs) is technical education.³ In Ecuador, technical education is perceived as an important component within the Ecuadorian policy to prepare students for their role in society, to increase the opportunity for having decent work, and to end poverty. To this end, school authorities at technical schools are expected to change their leadership behavior and become educational leaders⁴ (instead of only school managers) and enact a more participatory and pedagogical leadership approach in line with the current educational trends (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2015). With this study, we aim to describe and understand the development of technical school authorities' professional identity from administrative leaders to pedagogical leaders as well as to analyze the notion of 'educational leadership' for the reality of the Ecuadorian context. In Ecuador, systematic research and data on educational leadership has been hitherto non-existent (Flessa et al., 2018; except for; Fabara, 2013). While some administrative and overall performance data are available, research on educational leadership and school improvement is missing.⁵ The results of this study will as such contribute to building a knowledge base on contextualized educational leadership research in Ecuador.

State of the art and theoretical framework

We will start our theoretical section with an overview of the state of the art of educational leadership research in Latin American countries. This allows us to frame the political context and working conditions that characterize leadership practices in the context of Latin American schools. Next, in order to frame the particular reality of Ecuadorian educational leadership, we present the findings of empirical studies conducted in Ecuador concerning educational leaders and the particularities of their role. Finally, in order to understand how Ecuadorian educational leaders experience recent educational reforms which ask for more pedagogical leadership instead of merely administrative leadership practices, we present the notion of professional identity.

Research on educational leadership in the context of Latin American countries

The Latin American context with regard to education is less homogeneous as often presented. Latin American countries are characterized by diverse educational policy frameworks and educational leadership policies (Ventura et al., 2009; Weinstein et al., 2018). Latin American educational leadership is the result of educational policies that advance at an unequal pace and in unequal ways throughout the educational systems (Tedesco & Tenti, 2002). This diversity is also visible in the diversity of research topics being studied with regard to educational leadership. For instance, Castillo and Hallinger (2018), Flessa et al. (2018), Murillo Torrecilla et al. (2018), and Weinstein et al. (2014) point out that Latin American countries have shown a diverse research interest in

educational leadership. They have divided countries from the region into three groups. The quantity and depth of investigation on specific topics are parameters that frame countries in one group or another. The first group of countries, are those that have shown significant efforts in research areas related to educational leaders' management practices and their professional training. For instance, with regard to Chili, researchers have conducted substantial studies related to principals' roles, leadership practices and training of educational leaders; within the reality of Mexican schools, focus has been on basic education teaching, principals' practices and their training needs; and within Brazil, researchers' emphasis has been on educational leadership and management practices (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Flessa et al., 2018). The second group has contributed to the educational leadership field with studies concerning educational leaders' role and function. For example, in Colombia, research has increasingly addressed the analysis of principals' training needs, their professional competences, and their role in changing contexts; researchers in the Dominican Republic have been studying management in relation to school effectiveness; in Argentina, there has been a focus on the description of the principal's role; in Costa Rica, research has addressed educational leaders' leadership styles; in Cuba, researchers have analyzed principals' role within its educational system; within Venezuela, focus has been on analyzing principals' leadership styles; and in Uruguay, researchers have conducted some research on leadership and their role in the school organization (Flessa et al., 2018; Murillo Torrecilla et al., 2018). Research studies in the third group of countries (most of the Caribbean and South American countries, including Ecuador) show an incipient or a total *lack of interest in the issue of principalship*. This situation is particularly worrying given the level of progress shown by other countries from the same region (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Flessa et al., 2018). The diversity between Latin American countries, has created important difficulties in understanding the concept of educational leadership, mainly within the particularities of the 'challenging social contexts' in which educational leaders perform their role (Ahumada et al., 2016). A context often characterized by socioeconomic inequalities. And in particular, a school context in which there is a lack of a positive climate for school coexistence, where educational leaders also deal with the increasing demands of their administrative and academic responsibilities (Aravena et al., 2020).

Despite its diversity, Weinstein and Hernández (2016) were able to identify seven dimensions that guide educational leaders' policies and are common in Latin America: 1) *Responsibilities and standards*: inside schools, little influence on teachers' professional development, but outside schools, strong demand for collaboration with other social sectors, 2) *Autonomy*: decision-making on internal school issues, but not on the management of human resources, 3) *Recruitment*: principals need to hold a degree in education and have to have teaching experience, 4) *Performance appraisal*: lack of defined performance standards to evaluate principals, 5) *Career and working conditions*: lack of opportunities for professional growth within the principalship, a position that is delimited by periods, and the salary is not always in concordance with principals' role, 6) *School leadership teams*: specifically constituted by school board members who are responsible for administration and disciplinary issues, but with limited decision-making regarding strategic decisions, 7) *Training and professional development*: lack of induction, lack of quality in training programs, and contents are not related to current leadership practices. In sum, leadership development within the Latin American context

is affected by the limited autonomy educational leaders have with regard to decision-making. They act in strict observance of legal norms and general provisions defined by higher school authorities, making them often more concerned about administrative issues rather than pedagogical ones (Oplatka, 2019). Treviño et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of rethinking the educational leader's role in the Latin American region. A role embodies the idea of a person who mainly takes charge of administrative aspects and demands of higher education authorities in current educational systems, which are centralized and bureaucratic educational structures (Tedesco & Tenti, 2002). Thus, within the region, 'principals are not seen as leaders, that they are not sufficiently trained, that they do not know, or understand the importance of their position, or that they have not received sufficient support to allow them to spearhead the change process in their schools' (Ventura et al., 2009, p. 331). Nor do they accept and recognize themselves as educational leaders (Borden, 2002).

The Ecuadorian educational leader: findings from previous empirical research

In Ecuador, empirical educational research – only recently increasing – teaches us two main issues concerning Ecuadorian educational leaders: how the educational landscape determines educational leaders' responsibilities and their particular role in the public educational system.

Concerning the educational landscape, Cevallos (2016) underlines three aspects of the Ecuadorian educational system influencing the reality of educational leaders. First, the Ecuadorian educational model has been identified and recognized as a regulated-bureaucratic system (a traditional model in Latin America) run by the central government. In other words, the functioning of educational institutions takes place within a system that groups schools under the same legislation and political control. He points out that such a system is based on power relations among government representatives (minister, district authorities, educational advisors, and educational auditors), school staff (teachers and principals), and other actors such as students, parents, and different organizations interested in educational issues. Second, since 2011, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) has implemented a new educational model called the National Model of Support and Monitoring of Educational Management. The same author mentions that this model focuses its efforts on two aspects: educational counseling, which provides technical assistance to schools in their quality improvement process, and educational audit, which evaluates institutions within the framework of innovation processes for their continuous improvement. Third, there is no process of institutional strengthening and capacity building because the MINEDUC does not grant schools autonomy to promote the professional development of their staff.

As regards educational leaders' characterization, existing research has described only the role of the school principal (and not that of the vice-principal). Diverse studies describe their role in terms of leadership, relations with teachers, and issues to overcome. With regard to their leadership, Balda and Guzmán (2015) state that principals are still considered the main actors in public schools whose leadership style (individual) prevails over other styles (particularly transformational). Fabara and Padilla (2007) found that, despite the lack of professional training for principals, there is a kind of leadership position (individual leadership) and a strong school commitment (feelings of belonging)

to lead a school. Moreover, Yong et al. (2017) show that the lack of strategic management planning by the principal becomes a barrier to solving administrative issues and accomplishing curricular activities. As regards the professional relations with teaching staff, de la Ece (2018) suggests there is a significant relationship between managerial leadership and teacher performance, mainly on these four dimensions: pedagogical skills, emotional self-regulation, job responsibility, and proactivity. Concerning the school issues that principals must face, Rodríguez (2017a) describes how school principals are seen as the most important persons inside the school who must deal with school staff and a lack of support from local district authorities. They must accomplish management issues regarding the functioning of the school, and at the same time, they have to deal with parents' complaints about students' academic and discipline problems. Rodríguez (2017b) states that principals' leadership has to be worked out to overcome several bureaucratic hurdles and that working as an acting principal implies executing the tasks to run a school without a fair financial remuneration. She adds that a first step toward appraising the leadership position in schools is to design an initial and continuous training program for principals' professional development as well as provide acting principals the opportunity to get a tenured position through a merit-based contest. Moreover, Armas (2017) states the need to focus efforts on principals' leadership to strengthen teachers' performance.

In sum, empirical research shows that Ecuadorian educational leaders perform their role within a hierarchical and bureaucratic system characterized by educational counseling and audit. Within such a system, existing research has shown the lack of support from the government which limits Ecuadorian educational leaders' potential to foster their pedagogical leadership because they are expected to solve administrative issues.

Getting insight into the reality of Ecuadorian educational leaders through the concept of leadership identity construction

To understand how Ecuadorian school authorities experience their role in a changing educational policy environment, we focus on the concept of identity and leadership identity construction. In particular, we use Burke and Stets (2009) definition of identity, which is conceived as 'a set of meanings that define who one is as an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as unique person' (p. 3). Several authors have emphasized the complex and evolving nature of the identity concept. Identity is not something static (Dubar, 2002) but is continuously being reconstructed, and as such, it is in a state of 'continuous motion' (Moller, 2012). So, the development of an identity becomes something intrinsic to the inner self but in reciprocal recognition with others within a social context (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Or, in the words of Geijssels and Meijers (2005), identity is the result of a unique and diverse dynamic within 'the ever-changing configuration of interpretations that individuals attach to themselves, as related to the activities that they participate in' (p. 423). Then, emerging with a new professional identity implies that 'Leaders create their identities as their individual and personal way to leadership' (Karp & Helgø, 2009, p. 891). This in turn implies the adoption of new leadership roles (Ibarra et al., 2010); as well as the development of leadership-related knowledge, skills, and abilities (Day et al.,

2008). Based on such a conceptual framework, research shows that identity construction emerges through individual and contextual factors (G. M. Crow & Møller, 2017; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Day, 2018).

Individual factors which distinguish one educational leader from the other, contribute to building a single leadership identity. Following Cruz-González et al. (2020) we distinguish personal beliefs and previous work experience as factors that shape educational leaders' development of their professional leadership identity. To be specific, Alvesson et al. (2008), for instance, mentioned the influence of personal beliefs, such as values, which promote identity construction. Beliefs are also seen as a factor that influences leadership behavior and orients educational leaders' vision (Cherry & Spiegel, 2006). As regards work experience, it creates a new sense of purpose and meaning in everyday situations by promoting opportunities for personal and professional growth (Blustein, 2019), redefining roles and, as such, identity (Johnson, 2017; Linn et al., 2007; Mpungose, 2010). Other studies reported that experience promotes professional development in three particular areas: partnerships, preparation, and professional learning (Bloomfield, 2009; White et al., 2010), which are areas that nurture a professional identity as well. Thus, 'Nothing confirms values, beliefs, and identity more consistently than experience' (Gibson, 2016, p. 35). Research has emphasized the importance of helping educational leaders through their transition process from their current identity (often as a teacher) to their future leadership identity and associated roles (Greer et al., 2015; Stevenson, 2006). Stets and Burke (2000), for instance emphasize that 'having a particular role identity means acting to fulfil the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility' (p. 226). This transition process is not without challenges either, since it can result in internal conflicts (see for instance Grodzki, 2011).

Contextual factors such as school internal and external contexts in which educational leaders exercise their role also influence the way how they build their leadership identity (see G. Crow et al., 2017). In such contexts, the dynamic relations with others (Karp & Helgø, 2009) within a continuous social interaction (Courtney & McGinity, 2020; Priest & Middleton, 2016) contribute to leadership identity. More in particular, internal contexts are related to the school environment, for instance, school size, facilities, and students' backgrounds (Engels et al., 2008). External contexts are related to the interaction and partnership with different educational and non-educational actors (Engels et al., 2008; Kilgore et al., 2003). When educational leaders meet and connect with people from other organizations, in addition, to building professional relationships, they also construct their identities (G. M. Crow & Møller, 2017; Karp & Helgø, 2009). Therefore, 'this process is also dynamic, meaning that multiple interconnected "spirals" of leadership development may be happening within and across levels of self-concept as individuals enact multiple roles in various contexts' (Priest & Middleton, 2016, p. 44).

Methodology

Research questions

The general question guiding this study is: How do Ecuadorian school authorities at technical schools perceive themselves in terms of educational leaders? Inspired by our theoretical framework, we formulated the following sub-questions:

- (1) How do technical school authorities construct their professional identity as educational leaders?
- (2) What individual factors explain the development of technical school authorities' identity as educational leaders?
- (3) What contextual factors explain the development of technical school authorities' identity as educational leaders?

Methodological approach

In order to describe and explain how Ecuadorian technical school authorities develop a new professional identity as educational leaders in a changing educational policy environment, we opted for a qualitative-interpretative methodology. A qualitative approach enabled us to study the 'views and values as well as acts and facts' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 525), providing us with an in-depth understanding of how they construct a new identity as educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools. More specifically, we opted for a phenomenological approach, which enabled us to explore school authorities' lived experiences with being an educational leader in a changing educational context (Creswell, 2007). Based on school authorities' narratives, we aimed to unfold their experiences with regard to the development of a professional identity from being administrative leaders to becoming pedagogical leaders.

Context of the study and participants

In Ecuador, several efforts have been made to improve the quality of technical education (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2015). One particular area that has received attention, was the further professionalization of the school staff in both technical and pedagogical areas. For instance, since 2017, an ONG (details omitted for blind version) with the support of MINEDUC has implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a professional development strategy to strengthen and support management teams (including principals and vice-principals) at several technical schools in this province of the coast region (details omitted for blind version). These PLCs focus on improving student learning and well-being through the development of more pedagogical and distributed leadership styles; and for this, collaborative inquiry is used as a methodological strategy to structure the work within the PLCs. For this study, we have purposefully selected participants from these PLCs (two out of seven PLCs) because this enabled us to get access to the experiences of school principals and vice-principals (see Table 1) who were involved in a reflection process on their changing role as educational leader in Ecuadorian technical schools. As Bryman (2016) states, 'In qualitative research, the orientation to sampling is more likely to be guided by a preference for theoretical sampling' (p. 203). In other words, this selection of

Table 1. Overview of the participants.

Participants	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Angel	M	50	- Master in educational projects - Agricultural engineer	Acting school principal	28	4	Sociology	1160
Bernardo	M	58	Bachelor degree in literature	Acting school vice principal	30	3	Language and literature	3700
Ciro	M	47	- Master in educational management and leadership - Bachelor degree in education	Acting school vice principal	20	1	Biology	900
Daniel	M	37	- Master in computing - Bachelor degree in computing	Acting school vice principal	12	1	Accounting projects	800
Elena	F	59	- Master in school management and curriculum - Bachelor in school management - Bachelor degree in social sciences - Bachelor degree in education	Appointed school principal	26	1	Philosophy	3381
Fernanda	F	53	- Master in education - Bachelor degree in accounting	Acting school vice principal	28	2	Accounting	1163

(1) Gender.

(2) Age.

(3) Educational background.

(4) Role.

(5) Teaching experience (years).

(6) Time working in this position at school (years).

(7) Current subject that the/she teaches at school.

(8) Number of students enrolled at school.

participants enabled us to study how school authorities, in a changing context, went through a change in their professional identity (or not), and the factors contributing to this.

Data collection

Data collection methods included interviews and document analysis. The primary data source were semi-structured interviews which, as first-hand information, are considered as ‘a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues’ (Seidman, 2019, p. 13). Interviews were conducted with six participants that felt comfortable being part of the PLC (within the two observed PLCs) and were willing to participate in the interview. All participants gave voluntary written informed consent for participation in this study. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted during the school year 2018–2019. Asking open-ended questions encouraged a real discussion, with additional questions arising naturally during the interviews relating to each participant’s narrative. The interview protocol was structured based on our theoretical framework and divided into three sections (for which the two first sections, were used for this paper). The first section focused on school authorities’ professional educational career and particularly their experience of becoming school (vice)principals. The second section focused on what it means to be educational leaders, how they identify themselves, how they enact their leadership role, and the factors determining their work as leaders. And the third part sought to comprehend their professional development framed within their participation in the professional learning communities.⁶ All the interviews were conducted face-to-face for a minimum of 40 minutes and a maximum

of 80 minutes. Interviews were held at each school where participants work. It is important to note that as a researcher and external agent in school principals' daily life, it takes time to build a trusting relationship in order to make sure that school authorities answer in an 'honest' way, and not socially desirable. So, to avoid the possible biases stemming from the researcher on the site, or the biases from the effect of the site on the researcher during the construction of this trusting relationship, we have followed some suggestions established by Miles et al. (2014), for instance: being clear about the presence of the researcher, attracting as little attention as possible, being discreet, not being intrusive, including participants with a different profile, and discussing research issues with more experienced researchers. Finally, we collected supplementary sources such as ministerial documents, informal conversations, and field notes to enrich and contextualize the interpretation of the data. As stated by Yin (2011), the use of multiple sources of data enables us to confirm or correct the veracity of the data.

Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Spanish. Pseudonyms were used instead of participant's real names. To bring structure and meaning to the collected data, we applied an inductive and iterative coding process. First, we started with reading and coding each interview, by assigning keywords and notes to meaningful segments of texts (a priori and in vivo coding), resulting after an iterative process in a final coding scheme that we re-applied to each interview transcript. Next, all the codes and the meaningful segments were grouped in an excel spreadsheet to explore bigger patterns which were framed within four pattern codes: (1) categories or themes, (2) causes/ explanations, (3) relationships among people, and (4) theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). This segmentation facilitated the process of cross-case analysis: it enabled us to identify commonalities and differences between the individual stories. The cross-case analysis revealed topics such as philosophy of education, self-study and further academic preparation, and former experience as school authority were brought into discussion and reflection as factors that build a professional identity of educational leaders. We employed the technique of constant comparative analysis (Miles et al., 2014) during both the within- and cross-case analyses, as we constantly crosschecked preliminary interpretations against the other data. To increase the credibility of the results (Mertens, 2009), we followed three particular research strategies, peer debriefing, external audit, and examining documents. By peer debriefing, senior researchers as coauthors provided feedback in those areas that needed a more detailed analysis (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, they helped to reduce the cultural bias of the researcher's context (Mertens, 2009). Another senior researcher played the role of external audit. This senior's researcher lack of deep involvement in the research contributed to refining the value of the data and its interpretation (Creswell, 2007). Examining official documents enabled us to contextualize participants' reality (Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2011). To evaluate their quality, they were subjected to Scott's four criteria (authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning) for assessing their quality (see Scott, 2014). Those three strategies together also provided structural corroboration of the findings (Eisner, 2017). For this article, all the quotations in the results section have been translated into English. Even though 'Translation can only be an approximation of the meaning from the source

language in the target language’ (Feldermann & Hiebl, 2020, p. 235), keeping the essence of the message of the mother tongue has been the main concern.

Results

The results will be structured following the three research questions. Firstly, we will describe how Ecuadorian school authorities’ process of identity development happens naturally or by resolving tensions that go along with adopting a new role. Secondly, the development of a pedagogical leadership identity of school authorities is mainly hindered by several contextual factors. Thirdly, we will describe how despite these contextual challenges, several personal factors enabled the development of a leadership identity.

School authorities’ adoption of educational leadership

When analyzing the interviews conducted with technical school authorities, we have observed two different positionings in which the transition from being a teacher to becoming an educational leader played out differently. Moreover, we have identified the coexistence between administrative leadership and pedagogical leadership.

Two positionings: leader identity and hybrid identity

Ecuadorian technical school authorities make the ‘transition’ from a teacher identity to a leadership identity in different ways.

The first group of school authorities clearly perceived themselves as educational leaders (Bernardo, Ciro, Daniel, and Elena). Those authorities have developed a strong professional identity as educational leaders, which is visible in the distinction they make between their current leadership role and their previous teacher role. They do no longer see themselves as teachers, but position themselves in terms of educational leaders’ offering both administrative and pedagogical support to teachers. During the interviews, they shared their feelings of ownership and pride concerning their development toward being an educational leader, and they emphasized the key role they have to fulfill in the process of school improvement (both in terms of administrative and pedagogical issues). With regard to this, Elena stated: ‘I want to empower teachers with a better and more efficient understanding of the school goals, by involving them in the educational processes and by working together as a team.’ This was also expressed by Ciro in the following quotation: ‘Supporting my colleagues is what I like the most . . . To me, it is important to do school processes under the legal framework to guide them.’ They see themselves as change agents who stimulate teachers’ constructive participation within schools. Daniel described this as follow: ‘to be able to help colleagues and to feel that what the school authority does benefits them. What most motivates one is that the teachers value what one does.’ What characterizes this group, is that they already started developing a leadership identity when being a teacher. During their teaching career, those school authorities showed an interest in having a deeper understanding of what it means to be a school authority and their particular duties and responsibilities in the process of school improvement. For instance, Bernardo explained: ‘when I started working as a private school teacher, I used to be eager to know a lot about school management issues, so I used to talk frequently with the school vice-principal.’ Consequently, the

changing demands of schools and the expectations that school authorities attached to themselves as related to the activities that they participated in were key to transforming their professional identity. In other words, this first group has developed a clear leadership identity, in which both administrative and pedagogical tasks are perceived in an integrated way.

A second group were technical school authorities with a hybrid identity (Angel and Fernanda). Those principals oscillated between two roles: they see themselves as a teacher-leader and at the same time have developed a leadership identity (with a focus on administrative leadership). This hybrid identity, first, is manifested in the commitment to the teaching field as a classroom teacher: ‘even though teaching has not been a particular interest, I found my vocation in teaching, so I am always a teacher first’ (Fernanda). When leaders with a hybrid identity used to perform the role of teachers, it situated them only within the immediate sphere of didactics in the classroom. Our two participants explained how they used to focus their efforts on teaching responsibilities without showing interest in other school requirements or other school roles. Therefore, they feel more confident in the teacher role rather than being a school authority. This is viewed in Angel’s comment: ‘I should have never been working as a school principal because I could have gotten better results as a teacher.’ On the other hand, the acquisition of the leader identity is evidenced in their aspiration to work in management positions: ‘considering my professional experience in the educational field, I wanted to become a school authority’ (Fernanda). Showing that they have acquired the skills needed to run a school: ‘I have the conviction that I can change things that I can do things to improve the school that I do have the capacity to innovate, to plan, to organize’ (Fernanda). However, they experience being stuck in between, and strongly identify themselves with their teacher role. This shifting between the teacher identity and a rather administrative leadership identity is the result of their professional background, in which they have enacted administrative roles and teaching tasks before, but without developing a fully professional identity as a pedagogical leader. Commented on it, Fernanda said: ‘even though I have been part of the management team for so many years, I always feel the teaching duty.’ For these two participants, growing pressures and tensions to meet a diversity of demands affect the acquisition of the leadership identity. In this view, Angel argued: ‘After four years of exercising a management role, the chair of the principal must be occupied by someone who has a greater vision and better management knowledge than me, someone who can perform this function better.’ In particular, dealing with a difficult teaching staff make it hard to enact a pedagogical leadership style. Angel said:

Working with human resources is extremely complicated because we have a very different points of view. It is difficult for us to adapt to the new times that demand more preparation and other roles. Today, we have more demands, so people are always protesting.

A constant interchange between administrative and pedagogical leadership

Not only did school authorities went through a transition process from being a teacher to becoming an educational leader, within their leadership identity they also went through a two-way transition process. They gradually developed (and this in different ways for the two categories of school authorities), a leadership identity that goes beyond an administrative focus, toward including as well a particular pedagogical leadership style with

a focus on mediation. In other words, their identity was clearly informed by administrative and pedagogical tasks. The particularities of their role and school context determined the adoption of one position or another. They felt duty-bound to perform specific roles such as administrators (a traditional leadership model) and mediators (a much more flexible leadership approach).

The approach of being an administrator mainly implies that educational leaders must be concerned about the material conditions of school buildings and infrastructure. Commenting on it, Elena pointed out that principals must make sure that school facilities have functional environments: 'I must be concerned about school facilities by providing teachers, parents, and students a clean, safe, and functional environment for learning through proper facilities maintenance.' The administrative focus was visible in the two groups of leaders that we have identified earlier. Angel's comment corroborated this by saying: 'I must be really careful with the processes of managing goods . . . I constantly have to write reports.'

On the other hand, with regard to their pedagogical leadership identity, they all emphasized the mediating role they are supposed to fulfill within their school and with the outside community. Getting involved as an educational leader demand generating positive support by taking concrete actions. Thus, transitioning toward an identity as a pedagogical leader required that they adopted a more supportive role as a conflict resolution agent. As mediators, they were responsible for creating and maintaining long-term relationships of trust by minimizing conflicts and enhancing opportunities for synergy within the school. In this view, Elena argued: 'both the school principal and the school vice-principal can play a mediator role between students and teachers. School authorities must provide confidence to students to let them know that they can help them to solve their school problems.' Moreover, outside the school, fostering an environment of consensus-building with other school actors was often a priority for them. In their mediating role, they sought to contribute to social integration on local levels. In this view, Daniel commented: 'a person who exercises the role of school authority must accomplish different roles, for instance, he must be a mediator between the local school district and teachers, parents and students in case of disagreements.'

Even though our participants described themselves in terms of being administrators and mediators, they have a clear idea with regard to how their role as educational leaders should evolve (pedagogical mainly). All of them stressed the importance of being actively involved in the process of continuous school improvement: 'An educational leader must show a personal predisposition and longing for change within the school as well as be involved directly in the changing processes, whether the changes are significant or not' (Bernardo). They also stressed the need for pursuing school objectives in relation to the benefits from collaborative work among members of the school community: 'a school authority must be a leader who works with people by sharing common goals with them' (Ciro). Moreover, they were committed to being a source of inspiration, encouragement, support, and assistance to the school community. In this view, Ciro stated: 'a school authority must know certain aspects of educational processes. For instance, supporting teachers, supporting students, mentoring, and learning support.' They emphasized the importance of focusing on students' well-being. Fernanda argued: 'In the end, in all this enormous work, the only thing that matters are the children and the young people. If they have a good education, they will have a better future.' However, even though they have

gained new skills and experiences, the demands of the role of school authority and personal expectations have strained the development of their identity. It can be seen with regard to our second group (with a hybrid identity), reflecting the broader interest of being fully immersed and integrated only into the teaching field. In this regard, Angel said: 'I would like to conduct class observations as well as analyse the reasons why students have low scores, but mainly, I would like to be more focused on the acquisition of knowledge by students for their daily life.' The pressure of playing different roles made visible their identity duality. Their ambition was to become a teacher; however, in school practice, they were forced to perform in administrative positions and then learn to take a pedagogical leadership stance.

The construction of educational leaders' identity: contextual factors to overcome

Data analysis showed us that school authorities have to overcome different contextual challenges which might hinder the development of their identity as pedagogical leaders. In particular, a complex job context for educational leaders in Ecuador, with almost no professional development opportunities, and the challenging reality of technical schools. These contextual challenges contribute to the fact that school authorities are mainly focused on administrative tasks and have less time and space to develop a more pedagogical leadership identity.

Precarious work: job context of educational leaders

The analysis of the interviews shows us that the working conditions (such as the recruitment and selection process and rotation system) for school authorities are not supportive of developing a pedagogical leadership identity. A first difficulty, is related to the way school authorities are recruited, selected, and appointed from acting to an appointed position. An appointed school authority is a teacher who has got a tenured position, and an acting school authority is a teacher who does not have a permanent position within the school management team. There is no standard and formalized process to appoint teachers as acting school authorities. Becoming appointed as school authority can be the decision of the MINEDUC or local school district, can be based on a strict selection procedure or on the decision of the local school team. Angel, for instance, explained how a teacher can be appointed as a vice-principal, and then this vice-principal can be promoted to the principalship by following the same procedure, nomination, and selection within the school. The local school district is responsible for this process:

At this school, the Ministry of Education demanded a slate of three candidates to perform the role of the school vice-principal, I participated, and then I was selected to perform such a role. After three years, the local school district demanded a slate of three candidates to perform the role of the school principal, I was included in the list, and this time they appointed me as the school principal.

The next excerpt illustrates the process of how following the hierarchical order within schools, an acting vice principal can be promoted to principal, and a teacher who occupies a leading position in the school board can be promoted to vice-principal, all of this by authorization of the local school district. Ciro

referred to such process: 'After the resignation of the school principal, the local school district promoted the school vice-principal to the principalship, and I, as a member of the school board, was promoted to acting school vice-principal.' Likewise, there is the possibility of being appointed as a school authority by a direct selection made by the management team. So, they conceive the support of a teacher with particular professional skills as an advantage in school work. This can be illustrated by the following quote: 'Once there was a reform process in the school, the school principal proposed a shift in school authorities. He considered my professional expertise and skills in the technology field as an advantage to support school improvement since the vice-principal office' (Daniel). However, in most schools, the common procedure to appoint an acting school authority is through an internal selection process within the general assembly of teachers. They consider the most experienced teacher (in management issues) as the ideal person to perform the school authority role. This evidenced in what Bernardo said: 'during the selection process for management positions, teachers appreciated the professional experience more than the academic qualifications. Thus, my former experience as a school authority was a deciding factor for being appointed as the school vice-principal at this school.' In all such processes, the reciprocal recognition from others becomes a determining factor to engage in self-reflection on skills and weaknesses contributing to their identity development as potential leaders.

Data analysis furthermore showed us that as a result of the recruitment and selection procedure, exercising a new role as a school authority is often perceived as a compulsory service since they often did not have a clear intention to become a school authority. Bernardo, for instance, emphasized that teachers are not asked if they want to work as school authorities. The school district obliges them to accept the position of acting school authorities. The analysis also showed us that often professionals without the appropriate knowledge, background, and experience are considered to occupy such positions. Concerning this, Daniel stated: 'most of us do not have the professional training to act as school authorities.' On his part, Angel also referred to acting school authorities' lack of competencies and qualifications to run a school: 'I have been working as a school vice-principal for three years. I have performed this role without having the professional profile required.'

Second, once acting school authorities are appointed to run a public school, they work continuously under a rotation schema. Local school districts do not maintain stability and support to acting school authorities. Participants have the feeling that the rotation of school authorities is done without detailed consideration. This, in turn, does not ensure a continuous workflow within the public educational system, nor does it make it possible to optimize human resources. Fernanda asserted: 'There is too much work to do but with no sense. Next year, we are going to move jobs.' From the interviews, we can infer that working under these conditions is cloaked in a sense of apparent normality. In this regard, Ciro said that in this province (details omitted for blind version), most principals and vice-principals currently work as acting school authorities. On his part, Angel stated that 70% or 80% of school authorities do not have a permanent position. He added that school authorities work not as appointed school authorities but as acting ones with an overload of work.

Data analysis shows us that the above particularities of how school authorities are appointed contradict what has been established by Ecuadorian educational policy. It states that several requirements and eligibility criteria must be fulfilled to act as a school principal or vice-principal.⁷ The educational framework offers the opportunity to get a permanent position as a school authority within the public education system; however, applying for it demands being involved in a complex process. Ciro referred to such an issue: ‘the process to get a permanent appointment as a school authority generally takes too much time. It is due to the bureaucratic system.’ The organization involves participating in a merit-based contest that makes it stressful and time-consuming to get a permanent position at school. This is viewed in Fernanda’s narrative:

After working 28 years in the educational field, I do not understand why the process to get a permanent appointment is so bureaucratic and inefficient. In my case, I have been involved in continuous selection processes without any favorable results even though I have the academic qualifications and professional experience.

After facing so many difficulties to become a school principal, it does not imply that it is possible to make a career in the principalship. The following narrative depicts such a complex reality. The contrast between long-term participation in a merit-based contest and short-term work as a school authority:

Getting a permanent position as a school principal took me more than five years, but I will perform such a role only for four years, then I will return to the school, where initially I got a permanent appointment as a teacher. (Elena)

Because of the particular recruitment and selection process, and the lack of a clear and supportive procedure, school authorities focus their efforts on administrative issues (for which no particular training is needed) and, hence, develop an identity as administrators instead of knowing how to deal with more pedagogical issues in the school.

Lack of professional development (pre- and in-service)

The analysis of the interviews shows that the lack of professional development at various levels of initial and continuing training was another key factor in the development of school authorities’ professional identity. First, in teacher formation at the undergraduate level, no attention is paid to developing leadership capacities or shared leadership practices. As a result, during the initial years in the teaching profession, teachers strongly identify themselves with their classroom responsibilities, without paying attention to the bigger school picture. Elena described this issue by saying: ‘Since the beginning of my career in the educational field, I have pursued to fulfil only the teacher role.’ Also Daniel described this as follows: ‘since we are only teachers, we are only involved in teaching, and we have never prepared for working in management positions.’ Due to this lack of attention to leadership competencies during teacher training, school authorities strongly identify themselves as being teachers, resulting in school authorities struggling with developing a leadership identity.

Moreover, when school authorities (acting and appointed) start working in leadership positions, induction is not offered by school management teams, school districts, or the MINEDUC. None of them involved school authorities in an orientation process that explains the particularities of running a school. This was viewed in Angel’s comment: ‘I

did not receive any training course since the beginning of my career as a school principal.' Due to this lack of induction, school authorities learned to deal with the particularities of the new role by themselves. For instance, as a vice-principal, Daniel did not receive any kind of induction course from the school management team. He learned to solve school problems and take decisions as a school authority day by day. Bernardo faced the same situation. He did not receive any training course once he became the vice-principal in his school. He understood his new role by analyzing educational documents such as laws and rules. However, a training course is mandatory for those who want to be promoted to a permanent position as a school authority. This online course offered by the MINEDUC teaches topics regarding educational legislation and management of the school. Concerning this, Elena described how such a training course helps candidates to understand school authorities' roles in both administrative and pedagogical levels. Initial and continuous training are not integrated to support school authorities' role and give meaning to a leadership identity they must show within the particular contexts of technical schools.

Finally, the interviews show that technical school authorities' continuous professional development is rarely considered within the agenda of MINEDUC. According to the participants, the courses offered by MINEDUC are given online and are not always well-organized nor respond to school authorities' needs and expectations. For instance, Daniel participated in training courses for teachers who belong to the public education system. Such courses were about human relations, the development of critical thinking, computing, and digital tools in the classrooms (100 hours). But, he considers that the development of critical thinking course has been the most relevant because he learned how to deal with parents, students, and teachers. Moreover, concepts from educational law enabled to better understand and frame his leadership practices. Ciro also mentioned that he participated in training courses for teachers. He took a curricular innovation online course (100 hours), which promoted his professional development. In this context of professionalization, school management has been a neglected area. Central and local government institutions are not offering support to management teams at technical schools. The following comment is indicative: 'The lack of professional development training for school authorities shows in-depth the great weakness of the educational system' (Angel). Not considering the professional needs of the school authorities could lead to tensions and conflict concerning the development of their identity as leaders.

Reality of technical schools

During the interviews, the school authorities emphasized the challenging reality of Ecuadorian technical education. Technical schools are faced with weak institutional frameworks (no policy that addresses technical education needs) and a lack of human and material resources in order to meet students' needs. For instance, technical schools are facing pressing social problems (i.e. teen pregnancy, drugs, violence) that demand urgent attention. Angel said: 'What takes up most of my time are the issues of students who are involved in alleged drug use and physical violence.' Moreover, within technical schools, there is a high drop-out rate and skills mismatch between what the local labor market seeks and what school curriculum offers. Angel referred to this: 'Today, the curriculum of technical education is theoretical. We know nothing about agricultural or agro-industrial issues. In this sense, the MINEDUC has

to seriously reflect if it wants these students to be involved in the productive world.’ As a result, a high number of students are experiencing a difficult school-to-work transition. Another challenging issue that technical school authorities face is the lack of support policies that promote good working environments in schools. In particular, when students show oppositional and defiant behaviors toward teachers and other authority figures. Bernardo said: ‘The laws are too flexible in many aspects. Teachers have lost authority, so young people are taking advantage of this. In the classroom, the roles of teacher and student have reversed.’ Angel described some other institutional complexities of technical schools in this province of the coast region (details omitted for blind version): First of all, a small number of technical schools (2 or 3 out of 20) have adequate school facilities. Second, there are not enough teachers with the professional profile required to work at these schools. Third, school authorities fill up constantly school forms and spend most of their time making financial reports which must be handled in the school district. Fourth, technical schools offer technical baccalaureate and general baccalaureate. But technical baccalaureate is perceived as a challenging option, so students opt for the one in which they do not have to participate in fieldwork. Such issues explain why educational leaders have to enact a more administrative role and as such have less time to be active at the pedagogical level.

The construction of educational leaders’ identity: the contribution of personal factors

Despite the challenging context in which Ecuadorian school authorities function, and the lack of professional development opportunities, our results show how specific personal factors contributed to building leadership identity. Such factors are professional beliefs and values, interest in professional training, and previous work experience.

Philosophy of education

Interviews showed that educational leaders embraced a system of beliefs that is determined by their continued interest in improving education, enhancing the educational experience for youngsters, and solving school needs. Educational leaders are in tune with what has been established by Ecuadorian educational law by showing strict adherence to principles and practices of good governance. The following quotation illustrates this: ‘educational leaders’ objective is to lead the pedagogical processes within the school. They are subject to the MINEDUC intention, which is training human beings able to face and solve daily problems’ (Elena). They see the implementation and practical application of educational laws in the classrooms as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of schools. The following narrative depicts this: ‘the educational objectives framed within the Ecuadorian constitution and the MINEDUC legal framework are focused on improving and transforming education, which directly seeks to improve the quality of life of children and teenagers’ (Fernanda). Within this framework, they reflected on the importance of joining efforts through collaborative work for reaching educational goals. The following comment is indicative: ‘although teachers and school authorities perform different roles, I am convinced that both need to support each other to reach the same educational objective: to offer students warmth and quality education.’ Personal beliefs and the

commitment to educational processes construct school authorities' leadership identity. But also give them a strategic vision regarding capacity-building consistent with school needs. For instance, they stated that an educational leader should set a vision and determination to achieve school improvements. Daniel referred to this: 'it is important to develop some proposals that contribute to solving school problems. So, I would like to learn how to develop educational projects that can be shared with the school districts or the MINEDUC.' Moreover, they consider an educational leader to have communication skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal relationship skills, especially concerning team building. Ciro referred to this: 'I would like to strengthen two key aspects of my role: my communicative skills, and my leadership qualities, to be able to involve all the teaching staff in the school work.'

Self-study and further academic preparation

Data analysis showed us that when the government does not provide professional development training, school authorities feel the necessity to do it by themselves. Once they started running a school, the lack of knowledge of organizational, administrative, and other matters obliged them to enroll in training courses regarding school management. The following quotation illustrates this interest:

I took an induction training course for teachers and school authorities and a training course for school management. At that moment, I understood the different levels of organization of a school, the importance of school processes, and the relevance of the curricular plans at macro, meso, and micro levels ... (Daniel)

Moreover, leadership preparation is the main concern when school authorities see themselves as educational leaders. Elena talked about this: 'I took a course on community leadership' Fernanda also commented on that: 'I took a professional development training course on educational leadership.' Likewise, they have sought to increase their credentials so they have done further studies on school management to complement their bachelor's studies in education. For instance, Elena opted to pursue postgraduate studies that complement her profile. In this view, she argued: 'I did further studies in pedagogy, school curriculum, and school management.' On her part, Fernanda carried out postgraduate studies to gain a deeper knowledge of school management. This is viewed in her comment: 'as education has been my passion, I have been interested in increasing my knowledge in education and management issues.' Constructing a professional identity implies making sense of themselves as educational leaders by taking actions that accompany their particular role as technical school authorities. Professionalization provides them with knowledge and skills to fulfill their role within schools and empowers them as leaders.

Learning by doing: former experience as educational authorities

Based on the interviews, we have learned that, during their educational career, school authorities perform different positions (principal, vice-principal, inspector, and area coordinator) that help them to gain enough work experience to understand the school authority role. In their multiple school positions, educational leaders stage a multiplicity of assumed, demanded, or wished roles that provide them the experience necessary to run a school. This is evidenced in the following quotes. Bernardo talked about this

multiplicity of roles: 'I had got some experience in different roles as an educational authority. I have been inspector, acting principal, nowadays, a vice-principal with a permanent position.' On her part, Elena argued that understanding the role of a school authority was the result of the experience acquired for years: 'I had played the principal role for three years and the vice-principal role for four years.' Commenting on it, Fernanda added: 'The experience acquired day by day provides school authorities the insights necessary to have a deeper and more complete level of understanding about how to run a school at different organizational levels' Also, Daniel referred to this: 'working as a school authority has been a rewarding experience because, in this way, I have gained an in-depth understanding of the role of the educational leader role.' Moreover, interviews showed us that sharing professional experiences contribute to the work of school authorities at technical schools. This is noted in Daniel's comment: 'I have found some support from my colleagues' experience. I have taken into account the ideas, recommendations, and points of view of the whole teaching staff. Some of them are helping and guiding me in the performance of my role.' Concerning this issue, Angel said: 'I was able to perform my role through the support from some colleagues who mainly have helped me in the elaboration of some curricular documents..' The construction of a professional identity results from understanding the world around them through the performance of duties and responsibilities related to their role as technical school authorities. Moreover, at technical schools, the construction of a professional identity as an educational leader is a continuous negotiation experience based on a sense of empathy and mutual understanding.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we looked at how educational leaders in technical schools develop a leadership identity, in a context where reforms increasingly emphasize pedagogical leadership alongside administrative leadership. Our study has revealed the following three points:

Consistent with other studies, we see that in centralized systems, with a lack of clear leadership recruitment and training, educational leaders tend to develop an administrative vision of leadership rather than a pedagogical one. Previous studies show that hierarchical structures lead educational leaders to obey their superiors blindly, which leads them to focus only on administrative functions, diverting their attention away from pedagogical leadership responsibilities (Oplatka, 2019; Vaillant, 2015). In the Ecuadorian context, the pressure of centralized control demands that educational leaders act diligently and watchfully in observing educational laws. This pressure makes educational leaders adopt an administrative stance (de la Ece, 2018; García-Arauz, 2016; Yong et al., 2017). Our results emphasize this issue, particularly in technical schools, where strict compliance with administrative protocols results in educational leaders prioritizing administrative leadership.

Additionally, our study confirms the importance of contextual factors, and more specifically clear policy frameworks and leadership training (pre- and in-service). Our analysis shows that educational leaders struggle with developing a leadership identity. Especially in a policy context where they are often acting rather than appointed and under a continuous rotation scheme, we see educational leaders struggling with the

process of self-identification and recognition by others as a school authority. Without clear frameworks and training, educational leaders remain stuck in their teacher identity. Despite the absence of supportive contextual factors, we see that educational leaders are very motivated to be engaged in individual factors that promote their personal and professional development. This, in turn, improves their capacity to exercise educational leadership within technical schools. These factors include social engagement with children's and teenagers' education, self-directed study on management topics, and the experience acquired in different positions as a school authority. These findings align with the ideas of Mestizo (2016) and Pineda-Báez et al. (2019), who emphasize the significance of academic studies and personal experiences in shaping the identity of educational leaders. But this appears not to be sufficient. The development of a (pedagogical) leadership identity presupposes the interplay of contextual and personal factors, or in other words, one cannot fully compensate for the other. These results align with other research since leader identity development is a complex process involving various aspects rather than a single-dimensional occurrence (Real & Botía, 2018; Zheng & Muir, 2015).

Thirdly, our research also contributes to a contextualized understanding of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools. Instead of perceiving administrative and pedagogical leadership styles as contradictory models, our results show that in the context of technical schools, both dimensions of leadership are important. The reality of technical schools in Ecuador and the challenges they face require educational leaders to be both managers and pedagogical leaders. This finding corroborates the idea of Notman (2017), who suggested that leadership development identity is the result of educational leaders' capacity to take action to adapt and understand their current context. In particular, a context-adapted vision of leadership, and what is specific to technical schools, shows that a contextualized approach can be meaningful. In other words, instead of concluding that Ecuadorian educational leaders are insufficient pedagogical leaders, it is important to look at how they shape pedagogical leadership. For instance, by trying to be more empathetic and getting a better insight into student issues to understand their needs. This finding is consistent with the studies of Harris and Chapman (2002), who found that challenging contexts demand a variety of leadership approaches that must be based on social and moral duty. Moreover, our data show that pedagogical leadership happens through addressing social problems (gender, violence) with the involvement of the school community. Thus, educational leaders adhere to the leadership concept of being people-oriented, which is a must in the challenging context of technical schools. In this sense, this finding is consistent with the findings of Murakami et al. (2016), who showed that social engagement is a leadership characteristic of educational leaders who work with socially disadvantaged students. It is reasonable to infer that assuming the role of an administrative leader followed by a dedication to evolving into a pedagogical leader results in a more profound and enhanced comprehension of technical schools.

Limitations and future research

This study has two main limitations. First, the lack of previous research studies on educational leadership at Ecuadorian schools did not provide a more comprehensive reference to that concept and its particular features. Consequently, there is potential for

this study to be reproduced in alternative school environments to delve into educational leadership with a focus on the factors that promote and constrain the development of school authorities' leadership identity. This would add to the knowledge base of contextualized research on educational leadership in Ecuador and the Latin America region. Second, the focus of the study was to obtain first-hand information from school authorities on their leading roles. Our participants mainly had temporary positions, which may have influenced their ability to provide insights into certain aspects of their educational leadership, such as beliefs and behaviors. However, by studying the reality of permanent educational leaders, the full scope of authority contributed to understanding the organizational dynamics, challenges, and opportunities in leadership identity development. Further studies should extend the first-hand information by examining the voices of other members of the school community, which could be useful to get accurate and reliable data as regards educational leadership within technical schools.

As a final thought, as principals and vice-principals disclosed that Ecuadorian school authorities require initial and continuous training, this study can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at Ecuadorian educational policy with an emphasis on school authorities' training and professional development.

Notes

1. Bush (2011) states that 'One of the confusing aspects of theory in educational leadership and management is the use of different terms to explain similar phenomena' (p. 28). Thus, this study conceives the term educational leadership to address both administrative and pedagogical leadership as a holistic way to refer to school authorities' leadership.
2. Latin America is a region quite complex to define and frame (Bodenheimer, 2021; Júnior, 2008; Moya, 2010). Therefore, in this study, we use Hallinger (2020) definition of this region: 'Latin America extended from the Caribbean islands and Mexico in the North to Chile in the South. Although each of these three regions is admittedly heterogeneous in terms of religion, culture, and language, they represent widely accepted geographic regions of the world' (p. 212).
3. According to Tomaselli (2018), since 60 years ago, technical education in Ecuador has arisen within constant regulatory reforms that have determined its institutional framework. Within this context, nowadays, five challenging issues deserve special attention, for instance: 1) due to a geographic correspondence between students' homes and schools, students attend technical schools only for the proximity to their area of residence, but not based on their personal preferences or conviction to opt for a technical career, 2) due to the fact that the curriculum is defined by the central government, technical schools do not achieve flexibility concerning their particular needs, 3) the current curricular design determines fewer technical subjects and less field practice time which affects the development of students' technical competencies, 4) schools that offer general baccalaureate (promotes students' skills) and technical baccalaureate (develops students' competencies) face several issues concerning their school management, they have to deal with the complexities of both baccalaureates, and 5) due to technical students having a different kind of school education, they have to overcome some disadvantages when taking standardized examinations to enter the university because they are designed to measure scientific and humanistic knowledge over other competencies.
4. Scientific literature has shown us that 'school leader' and 'head teacher' refer mainly to school principals. So in this study, we use the term 'educational leader' to refer to both the school principal and the vice-principal because most of our participants are school vice-

principals. Moreover, with this terminology, we want to give significance and importance to the figure of the vice-principal as an educational leader.

5. In this sense, there is a lack of interest in analyzing aspects that have been relevant during the last years, for instance, Luna (2009) states that 'there is incipient research into public educational policies' (p. 198), and consequently 'there is little research on school management and its impact on the positive transformation of schools' (Rodríguez, 2017a, p. 81). However, more recently Ecuadorian government opened the possibility for investing efforts in educational research. The MINEDUC together with the National Direction of Educational Research has delineated the 2018 National Agenda for Educational Research, which is divided into six specific research areas: professional development, education and work, school effectiveness (teaching – learning), governance and school management, protection of rights and transversal approaches. On the subject of professional development, the major concern lies in teachers' role as the center of the pedagogical process, paying special attention to their motivation and needs for their professional development, but nevertheless, it seems that there is also an interest in analyzing other professional figures, such as principals, mentors, advisers and educational auditors.
6. This study is part of a larger study on technical school authorities' leadership development through professional learning communities in Ecuador. The current paper focuses on the results of the first two sections.
7. A potential candidate must have former teaching experience (at least category D of the Ecuadorian teaching scale), hold a postgraduate qualification in education (preferably in areas related to the management of schools), and have approved the principals' training program. If the candidate fulfills all the requirements, he is allowed to participate in the next stage, the selection process. On one side, a public competition based on merits checks the documentation: the academic degree, teaching experience, training courses, research, and publications. On the other hand, an opposition phase evaluates his empirical and theoretical knowledge through a standardized test and the development of a project on school management.

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