

**Educational Leadership in Ecuador:
Professional Identity, Leadership
Practices and Professional Development**

Educational Leadership in Ecuador: Professional Identity, Leadership Practices and Professional Development

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Abstract

Educational leadership research has been developed predominantly in Anglo-Saxon and high-income contexts, leaving Latin American education systems comparatively underrepresented in the field. This dissertation addresses that theoretical and empirical gap by investigating how educational leadership is constructed, enacted, and developed in Ecuadorian technical schools. It focuses specifically on how principals and vice-principals construct their professional identities, enact leadership practices, and experience leadership learning and development through participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), examined here as collaborative spaces for professional development.

Guided by a constructivist–interpretivist stance, the dissertation adopts a qualitative, cumulative, and partly longitudinal design. It is structured around four empirical studies: the first examines leadership identity, the second explores leadership practices, the third investigates leadership learning and development through participation in PLCs, and the fourth analyses PLC functioning and leadership development over time through an observation-led multiple-case design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, day-long PLC observations, and systematic analysis of ministerial, institutional, and field-based documents.

The findings show that leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools is shaped by policy volatility, positional instability, and limited professional support. Leadership identity emerged as dynamic and often ambiguous, particularly under conditions marked by acting appointments, weak preparation pathways, and blurred role expectations. Leadership practices appeared as hybrid, combining instructional, transformational, and distributed moves in response to demanding organisational and pedagogical realities. PLCs functioned as meaningful spaces for collective sense-making, peer exchange, and professional learning, but their developmental potential depended on continuity, facilitation, and institutional support. Across the dissertation, leadership development is understood not as a linear accumulation of competencies, but as a recursive and contextually mediated process linking identity, practice, and collaborative learning.

The dissertation contributes a context-sensitive understanding of educational leadership and leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools, challenging the uncritical transfer of Anglo-Saxon models to Latin American settings. It argues that sustained and well-scaffolded PLCs can support leadership development even in constrained systems, while also showing that meaningful professionalisation requires broader and more coherent development pathways grounded in local realities.

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*Eres un hombre de ciencia y de fe. Conjuga estos aspectos de tal manera que
no permitas que la una te desnaturalice, y que la otra*

General introduction

This dissertation is the culmination of a seven-year inquiry—initiated in May 2018—into the nature and development of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools. Funded by ARES through the AI programme, under an agreement with UCE, and conducted at UCLouvain in partnership with VVOB, the project draws on sustained fieldwork and on the ongoing interaction between empirical research, policy, and the situated practice of educational leadership.

Although the empirical work was originally disseminated as four standalone articles, it is presented here as an integrated monograph. Reweaving the chapters into a single narrative allows the dissertation's central themes—leadership identity, leadership practices, and leadership learning and development through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)—to be traced coherently from problem statement to implications. In this sense, the dissertation should not be read as a collection of separate studies, but as a cumulative and partly longitudinal inquiry in which each chapter builds on the previous one while deepening the analytical understanding of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools.

Problem statement - situates Ecuador's technical-school sector, identifies gaps in leadership preparation, policy, and research, and frames the central theoretical and empirical problem addressed by the dissertation.

Conceptual framework - synthesizes scholarship on educational leadership, leadership identity, leadership practices, and leadership development, while positioning PLCs as collaborative and context-responsive spaces for professional learning.

Methodology - justifies a constructivist–interpretivist foundation and a qualitative, cumulative, and partly longitudinal design that combines phenomenological inquiry with an observation-led multiple-case approach; it also explains the research context, the researcher's positioning, the conditions of access to the field, the sampling rationale, the data collection strategies, and the alignment of the four empirical chapters.

Empirical chapters - four interconnected empirical chapters that constitute the analytical core of the dissertation. Chapter 4 examines leadership identity, showing how principals and vice-principals construct their professional identities within a changing and policy-regulated environment. Chapter 5 focuses on leadership practices, analysing how leadership is enacted in everyday school life under demanding institutional conditions. Chapter 6 explores leadership learning and development through PLCs, with particular attention to how educational leaders interpret their growth over time within collaborative spaces. Chapter 7 examines PLC functioning and leadership development over time, showing how these processes unfold through interaction, facilitation, workflow, and supportive conditions across two bounded cases.

General discussion - integrates the findings across the empirical chapters, interprets their theoretical significance, positions the dissertation within broader academic debates, reflects on its limitations, and proposes implications for future research, policy, and professional development.

Chapter 1

Problem statement

Problem statement

Educational leadership matters. International studies confirm the crucial role that educational leaders play in achieving quality education and student outcomes (C. Day & Sammons, 2016; Robinson, 2023). However, much of what is known about educational leadership and leadership development has been produced in Anglo-Saxon and high-income contexts, often through conceptual frameworks that do not fully capture the institutional, sociopolitical, and professional realities of Latin American education systems. This dissertation therefore addresses, first and foremost, a theoretical and empirical concern: the need to generate context-sensitive knowledge about how educational leadership is constructed, enacted, and developed in Ecuadorian technical schools. This concern is particularly relevant in a context where educational leaders work within a policy environment marked by reform, fragmentation, and limited professional preparation. In this sense, the dissertation also speaks to a practical and policy concern, by producing knowledge that may inform leadership development and support in Ecuadorian technical schools.

1. Challenges and progress in Latin American educational systems

In the Latin American context, both geographical and social boundaries must be considered when analysing the regional landscape. This approach is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the shared characteristics among the region's education systems. By doing so, it becomes possible to better grasp the concept of educational leadership and its current influence across Latin America. Carr (2014) characterizes the region as follows:

The Latin American region is complex and multifaceted, with a number of key blocs that have been traditionally identified in the following way: Mexico and Central America; the Caribbean (an Anglophone and Spanish-speaking area with several French-speaking island states as well); the Andean region (Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru); Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay); and Brazil, the unique linguistic and historical development and sheer size of which deserves a category of its own. (p. 2)

Within this regional grouping, various cultural and organisational features have enabled Latin American countries to augment their strengths, such as international trade accords, cultural consciousness, recognition of indigenous peoples, and others, while also addressing their weaknesses. However, Latin America presents a complex and uneven educational landscape—marked by political transformations and persistent inequalities—that complicates the notion of 'progress'. While democratic consolidation in the 21st century marked a shift from the authoritarian regimes of the past (Heyneman & Todoric-Bebic, 2000; Machado, 2001), it did not dismantle the deep-rooted social inequalities that continue to shape

educational outcomes. Instead, democratization brought into sharper focus the tensions between global economic demands and the unmet promises of social development.

Reimers (2000) identifies five key educational challenges stemming from social inequality. Firstly, there is a significant disparity in access to education between the poor and non-poor, with limited opportunities for impoverished individuals to complete all levels of education. Secondly, schooling for underprivileged individuals is of lower quality, with less trained teachers and inadequate managerial and logistical support. Thirdly, there are few opportunities for children to expand their social interactions, as there are unfavorable circumstances for fostering relationships with other social groups. Fourthly, parents are not adequately engaged in their children's education and do not actively support their cognitive development outside of school. Lastly, social equality is far from the idealized version, as there is no sense of accountability towards education as an agent of social change. These are not just operational concerns; they point to a fundamental disjunction between educational ideals and lived realities. Gajardo (2005) highlights this gap by pointing out the misalignment between school practices and social needs, raising questions about the capacity of educational reforms to address the actual demands of learners and communities. Moreover, the educational systems themselves often reinforce stratification. Heyneman and Todoric-Bebic (2000) argue that deeply embedded structural inequalities between public and private systems not only undermine public trust but may work against the goal of social cohesion.

Latin American countries have not been passive in the face of these dilemmas. Since the 1990s, governments have pursued diverse strategies to tackle inequality and improve quality. Affirmative action initiatives aimed to promote educational inclusion for marginalized groups by focusing on underprivileged schools, combining resources with pedagogical innovations, teacher training, improved school supervision, and local management support (Gajardo, 2005). Ponce Jarrín (2010) further asserts that in the 1990s, educational policies prioritized boosting academic performance through strategies like decentralization, transferring administrative and pedagogical responsibilities to local authorities. This approach showed positive results in countries like Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, especially in rural areas. Other measures included improving school infrastructure, distributing materials, and introducing teacher incentives, with Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico offering salary benefits for rural teachers. Many countries in the region, such as Chile, Honduras, Colombia, República Dominicana, El Salvador, Brazil, Argentina, México, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, developed evaluation systems to monitor student learning and inform policy. Additionally, conditional cash transfer programmes in Mexico, Brazil, and others addressed poverty and increased educational access, while Colombia and Chile implemented voucher programme to improve access to private education and academic outcomes.

Despite the implementation of affirmative action initiatives and educational policies aimed at enhancing the quality of education, a satisfactory public school system has yet to be established. Gajardo (2005) states that 'the improvement of learning is slow, especially for the poor; the improvement of the professional capacities of the teachers is still pending; and the results of some policies, although positive, are not enough to achieve quality, equity and

efficiency’ (p. 115). Moreover, many educational reforms of the previous decades may have done little to bridge existing disparities, and neoliberal economic policies have only exacerbated the gap between the richest and poorest in the region (Arnové, 2015). This raises a more fundamental issue: are such policies genuinely transformative, or are they merely compensatory mechanisms within an inequitable system?

2. Ecuador’s education policy from 2006 to 2021: Policy goals, teacher development, and leadership gaps

Ecuador’s education policy reforms reflect a bold attempt to reimagine the role of education in national development. Yet, despite their comprehensive scope and progressive rhetoric, these reforms also reveal significant tensions and inconsistencies, particularly around the continuity of vision, the translation of policy into practice, and the marginal treatment of educational leadership.

Ponce Jarrín (2010) underscores a crucial point, educational policy outcomes in Latin America are often inconsistent and shaped by national contexts. In Ecuador, there have been significant changes in the rules and regulations that govern Ecuadorian schools since early 2006. The government created a constitutional and legal framework to improve the education system at all levels. Harvey (2016) summarizes the progression of this matter.

From 2006 to 2015, Ecuador went through a large-scale education reform. The reform started in 2006 with a new education plan, the Ten-Year Education Plan (Plan Decenal de Educación [PDE]), which outlined eight specific policies aimed at improving education. Two years later, the 2008 Constitution passed, and a new national development plan, the National Plan for Good Living (Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir, henceforth Buen Vivir), shortly followed. Although not exclusively focused on education, both the Constitution and Buen Vivir gave education a central role. Then in 2011, a new legal framework for education, the Intercultural Education Act (Ley Organica de Educación Intercultural [LOEI]), was approved. (p. 7)

As previously noted, the Ten-Year Education Plan established key foundations for improving the quality of education in Ecuador. Particular attention should be paid to item (g), which states that the government will reappraise the teaching profession by improving initial teacher education, professional development, working conditions, and teachers’ quality of life (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador [MINEDUC], 2007). Similarly, the Constitución de la República del Ecuador (2008) addresses teachers’ professional development as follows:

The State shall guarantee, for the teaching staff, at all levels and modalities, job security, modernization, ongoing training, and teaching and academic improvement, as well as fair pay, in accordance with their professional development, performance and academic merits. The law shall regulate the teacher career stream and salary and promotion scale; it shall set up a national performance evaluation system and salary policies at all levels. Policies for teacher promotion, mobility, and rotation shall be established.¹ (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008, art. 349)

¹ The original Spanish version states: ‘Art. 349.- El Estado garantizará al personal docente, en todos los niveles y modalidades, estabilidad, actualización, formación continua y mejoramiento pedagógico y

Yet, if the policy vision was clear, the mechanisms of its implementation invite further scrutiny. While the legal frameworks promised to revalue the teaching profession and guarantee fair pay, training, and evaluation, the persistent question remains: How far have these policies been institutionalized and felt at the classroom level, especially in underserved areas? The Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir 2013–2017 offers a concrete vision for teacher development. Some of its key policies and policy guidelines are presented subsequently:

Objective 3 To improve people's quality of life

Policy 3.1 To promote the improvement of quality in providing service within the National System for Social Inclusion and Equity.

b. To regulate and evaluate the incorporation of qualified and specialized professionals, with the necessary pertinence in the national systems of education, health, daily care, protection and assistance to victims of violence, social rehabilitation and other services of the National Inclusion and Social Equity System.

c. To encourage the implementation of professional development processes, continuous training, evaluation, certification and re-categorization for education and health professionals and for professionals or technicians of daily care and services.

Objective 4 To build citizens' capacity and potential

Policy 4.5 To empower the role of teachers and other educational professionals as key actors in constructing the Good Living Plan.

a. To improve training teachers' processes and other education professionals in the framework of comprehensive, inclusive and intercultural education.

b. To promote the continuous updating of the academic knowledge of teachers, as well as to strengthen their pedagogical capacities for the integral development of the student in the framework of comprehensive, inclusive and intercultural education.² (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo [Senplades], 2013, pp. 144, 171)

The Buen Vivir policy framework offered ambitious goals, including improving quality of life and strengthening teacher agency in national transformation. Yet, these objectives also raise important dilemmas. For instance, what does empowering teachers as key actors look

académico; una remuneración justa, de acuerdo a la profesionalización, desempeño y méritos académicos. La ley regulará la carrera docente y el escalafón; establecerá un sistema nacional de evaluación del desempeño y la política salarial en todos los niveles. Se establecerán políticas de promoción, movilidad y alternancia docente'.

² The original Spanish version states: 'Objetivo 3 Mejorar la calidad de vida de la población. Política 3.1 Promover el mejoramiento de la calidad en la prestación de servicios del Sistema Nacional de Inclusión y Equidad Social. b. Regular y evaluar la incorporación de profesionales calificados y especializados, con la pertinencia necesaria en los sistemas nacionales de educación, salud, atención diaria, protección y atención a víctimas de violencia, rehabilitación social y demás servicios del Sistema Nacional de Inclusión y Equidad Social. c. Incentivar la implementación de procesos de desarrollo profesional, capacitación continua, evaluación, certificación y recategorización para los profesionales de la educación y de la salud, y para las y los profesionales o técnicos de la atención y servicios diarios. [...] Objetivo 4 Fortalecer las capacidades y potencialidades de la ciudadanía. Política 4.5 Potenciar el rol de docentes y otros profesionales de la educación como actores clave en la construcción del Buen Vivir. a. Mejorar los procesos de formación de docentes y otros profesionales de la educación, en el marco de una educación integral, inclusiva e intercultural. b. Promover la actualización continua de los conocimientos académicos de los docentes, así como fortalecer sus capacidades pedagógicas para el desarrollo integral del estudiante, en el marco de una educación integral, inclusiva e intercultural'.

like in practice? Can professional development programmes genuinely foster teacher agency when they are embedded in highly centralized policy structures?

This policy orientation was further reinforced through the LOEI, which established the legal framework for the Ecuadorian education system and reaffirmed education as a fundamental right guided by principles such as inclusion, interculturality, and quality. In this sense, LOEI contributed to consolidating a normative vision in which education was positioned not only as a social service, but also as a central mechanism for equity and national development.

Subsequently, the government in office during the 2017-2021 period followed a similar line of thought by framing education as a social priority within the national development agenda. The Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2017-2021 (Senplades, 2017) reflects this orientation as follows:

The strengthening of education as an integral system is a priority; in this sense, it is necessary to strengthen the intercultural bilingual education, teacher training and a new harmonious relationship between the actors of the higher education system and the initial, basic and high school education, in the same way, it is a public policy issue, the linking of technical education and the higher level in order to respond to the social demands as well as generate working opportunities during its lifetime; it is still a remaining issue the special education needs, as well as other social and economic factors that reduce the possibility of accessing the right to education. For this reason, education must be seen as a right during all stages of life.³ (p. 56)

This governmental scheme is structured around three overarching goals. The first seeks to ensure a dignified life and equality of opportunity for all individuals, while the second promotes intercultural and plurinational principles by emphasizing the value of diverse identities. Education is a central component of the state framework in both objectives. In this regard, two policies outlined in the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2017–2021 (Senplades, 2017) are particularly relevant:

- 1.6 To guarantee the right to health, education and integral comprehensive care during the life cycle, under criteria of accessibility, quality and territorial and cultural relevance.
- 2.5 To guarantee the preservation of traditional languages, multilingualism, as well as the intercultural education systems and the diversity of their knowledge.⁴ (pp. 58, 63)

³ The original Spanish version states: ‘El fortalecimiento de la educación entendida como un sistema integral resulta prioritario; en este sentido, es necesario el fortalecimiento de la educación intercultural bilingüe, la formación docente y una nueva articulación armónica entre los actores del sistema de educación superior y la educación inicial, básica y de bachillerato, de igual manera, es una temática de política pública la vinculación de la educación técnica con el nivel superior y la respuesta de estos dos niveles a la demanda de talento humano del nivel nacional y la generación de oportunidades para la ciudadanía a lo largo del ciclo de vida; sigue siendo un pendiente la respuesta eficiente a las demandas de una educación especializada dirigida a personas con discapacidad, así como otros factores sociales y económicos que reduzcan la posibilidad de acceder al derecho a la educación. Por este motivo, la educación debe ser vista como un derecho durante todas las etapas de la vida’.

⁴ The original Spanish version states: ‘1.6 Garantizar el derecho a la salud, la educación y al cuidado integral durante el ciclo de vida, bajo criterios de accesibilidad, calidad y pertinencia territorial y cultural [...] 2.5 Garantizar la preservación de las lenguas tradicionales, el multilingüismo y el sostenimiento de sistemas de educación intercultural y conocimiento de las diversidades’.

However, the shift in educational rhetoric and strategy under the 2017-2021 administration introduces further complexity. While the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2017-2021 maintained education as a state priority and emphasized interculturality, the support for teacher development became vaguer and less concrete.

Unlike the prior administration's direct investments in training, evaluation, and professionalisation, the newer plan adopted a broader social integration tone: raising concerns about whether the professional needs of teachers and educational leaders remain adequately addressed. This shift poses key questions: Is the political will to sustain long-term investment in teacher development weakening? And if so, what does this mean for the leadership capacities essential to enacting educational change, especially in a context with deep structural inequalities? Moreover, while the new plan rightly emphasizes inclusion (such as bilingual education and recognition of diverse cultural identities), it does not clearly articulate how these values will be operationalised in schools or how educational leaders will be supported to navigate this complexity. There's an evident tension between a policy discourse of equity and the lack of specific mechanisms to enable inclusive pedagogical leadership.

This concern has also been reflected in the work of international cooperation actors in Ecuador. In collaboration with MINEDUC, VVOB has approached educational improvement not only in terms of policy alignment, but also through efforts aimed at strengthening the professional capacity of teachers and educational leaders, improving school effectiveness, and supporting more human-centred educational environments. More broadly, its work has associated educational change with the strengthening of teachers and educational leaders as agents of change, with peer learning as a means of developing leadership capacity, and with school environments centred on community, dialogue, and convivencia (VVOB, 2010, 2015, and 2019).

At the same time, the existence of such initiatives does not resolve the broader tensions that continue to shape educational policy in Ecuador. Rather, it highlights the extent to which professional capacity-building and leadership support have often depended on evolving, complementary, and sometimes fragmented efforts across the system. Ecuador's education policy landscape thus reflects both an ambitious effort to reform and humanize education, and a pattern of fragmented implementation and shifting priorities. These tensions invite reflection on how leadership, both at the policy and school level, is imagined, supported, and enacted in an environment where goals are broad, but systemic capacity and coherence may be lacking.

3. Advancing local development through technical education in Latin America, with a focus on Ecuador

In Latin America, the promise of technical and vocational education as a catalyst for local development has been long recognised. However, structural challenges, ranging from

entrenched inequality to political instability, have historically constrained educational innovation (Sepúlveda, 2017; Wiñar, 1981). While numerous reform initiatives have sought to align education with economic demands, the outcomes remain uneven and often disconnected from broader questions of social justice and institutional capacity.

Recent scholarship (da Silva, 2022; Hanni, 2019) underscores how professional and vocational education has evolved across the region through structural reforms, decentralization, and the extension of training from secondary to post-secondary levels. Yet these developments also expose contradictions. The decentralization of technical education systems, often framed as a move towards local responsiveness, has at times led to fragmented governance and uneven quality. Moreover, political dynamics continue to heavily shape educational reforms (Wilson, 1996), raising questions about whether vocational education truly serves local development goals or becomes a tool for short-term political agendas.

In Ecuador, the evolution of technical education reflects a similar tension between reformist ambition and systemic constraint. Over the past six decades, a series of reforms have reshaped the institutional landscape. Tomaselli (2018) offers a view of this evolution. In 1957, the Plan of Organisation and Studies for Secondary Level Agricultural Education was issued. In 1979, with the support of UNESCO, a study was conducted to assess the state of technical education in Ecuador. In 1980, the Technical Education Department was created within the MINEDUC. This department was the basis for executing the Project for the Improvement and Expansion of Technical Education (PROMEET I - 1985 and PROMEET II - 1989). In 1983, the enactment of the Education Law laid the foundations for what would become the structure of the country's educational offerings for the next 28 years. Specializations for technical education were proposed, which included agricultural, industrial, and administration. In 2001, the General Normative Framework for High Schools was issued. Technical education was defined as one aimed at professional competence training. In 2002, the Technical Education Strengthening Project (PRETEC) was launched, aiming to update the educational offerings to align with the requirements of the productive sector and the territory's characteristics. In 2005, the Consolidation of the Technical Education Reform in Ecuador (RETEC) project aimed to strengthen the institutional structure of secondary technical education based on three main elements: improvement in staff qualifications, institutional strengthening, and the enhancement of the infrastructure of schools. Then, the 2008 Constitution and the 2011 LOEI set the most significant changes in education in general. The LOEI with the creation of a common core curriculum sought to equalize opportunities and strengthen the general education of technical high school students. It was expected that technical high school graduates would transition to higher education without any problems.

However, neither the law nor its regulations have included specific provisions for technical education, thereby omitting the particular characteristics of this type of education. This gap has also been reflected in the work of international cooperation actors in Ecuador. In collaboration with MINEDUC, VVOB has framed technical education as a pathway through which students may either continue to higher education or enter productive life, while also linking it to broader concerns such as curriculum updating, entrepreneurship, teacher

professional development, and stronger connections between the educational and business sectors. More recently, technical education has also been presented as a mechanism for reducing educational access gaps and promoting the right to decent work through the development of technical competencies aligned with productive-sector needs and zonal development agendas (MINEDUC, 2020; VVOB, 2010). However, this policy orientation has coexisted with unresolved structural limitations. One of the most visible is the gap between labour market demand and the educational supply. While technical vocational education has traditionally been expected to respond to social and productive needs, the institutional conditions required to make this alignment effective have remained weak or inconsistent. Additionally, there is a lack of pre-service and in-service programmes for school authorities and teachers in technical schools, which require staff with a differentiated profile. School authorities of technical schools lack specific competencies and skills. Some teachers lack technical updates, while others have no training in areas such as Curricular Planning and Pedagogical Accompaniment. There are no established processes for the selection, hiring, mobility, development, promotion, and retirement of technical teachers. Most technical teachers are not appointed, which is associated with greater job instability and lower salaries (MINEDUC, 2021b).

The problems do not stop at governance or staffing. As Tomaselli (2018) notes, recent reforms have inadvertently produced a series of unintended consequences. First, infrastructure improvements often result in students attending technical schools based on proximity to their homes rather than personal preference or genuine interest in technical education. Second, the current curriculum includes fewer technical subjects and less field practice time, which affects the development of students' technical competencies. Third, schools offering both general baccalaureate (which promotes students' skills) and technical baccalaureate (which develops students' competencies) face significant management challenges due to the complexities of handling both programmes. Fourth, technical students often face disadvantages when taking standardised university entrance exams, as these exams are designed to measure scientific and humanistic knowledge rather than technical competencies.

While Ecuador's policy history reflects an enduring commitment to technical education, its implementation remains constrained by systemic fragmentation, ambiguous policy frameworks, and underdeveloped professional structures. These conditions make technical schools a particularly relevant context for this dissertation, since they concentrate many of the tensions that shape educational leadership in Ecuador: strong policy expectations, complex organisational demands, and limited access to specialised professional development for school authorities. In this sense, technical schools are not only a sector in need of policy attention, but also a strategic site for understanding how educational leadership is constructed, enacted, and developed in challenging and under-supported educational environments.

4. Educational leadership in Ecuador: A fragmented professional landscape

In the context of education policy reforms and aspirations for social progress, Ecuadorian educational leadership has undergone significant transformations. However, these changes have not always translated into coherent or effective practices. Educational leaders are expected to act as agents of educational improvement, yet they operate within systems that often limit their professional autonomy, offer inconsistent training, and undervalue their expertise. Particularly in the technical education sector, these challenges are magnified by unclear role expectations, fragmented policies, and structural tensions between pedagogical and administrative demands. This section explores how leadership selection processes, work responsibilities, professional development efforts, and current working conditions reflect a fragmented and at times contradictory professional landscape; one that calls for deeper scrutiny rather than surface-level reform.

4.1 Selection and appointment

In the Ecuadorian education system, specific requirements and eligibility criteria must be met in order to assume formally appointed school leadership positions, including those of principal and vice-principal. Candidates are required to have prior teaching experience and to hold at least Category D in the national teacher career structure. This structure comprises seven categories, ranging from G to A, with A representing the highest rank for teachers with permanent appointments. In addition, candidates must hold a postgraduate degree in education, preferably in educational management, and must have successfully completed an approved leadership preparation programme. Once these requirements have been met, candidates may enter the selection process, which consists of two phases: a merit-based evaluation assessing academic qualifications, teaching experience, professional development, research, and publications; and an opposition phase, which includes a standardised examination of theoretical and practical knowledge together with the development of an educational management project (MINEDUC, 2008).

Although this regulatory structure formalises selection and appointment procedures, previous research suggests that educational leadership in Ecuador has historically been shaped by a predominantly administrative orientation and remains only partially developed as a distinct field of professional and academic inquiry (Rodríguez Revelo 2017a). This is especially relevant for the present dissertation, since leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools cannot be understood solely in terms of formal appointment requirements, but must also be examined in relation to the broader conditions under which educational leaders enter, interpret, and enact their roles. In this sense, the selection and appointment process provides an important institutional backdrop for understanding leadership identity, leadership practices, and professional development in this context.

4.2 Leadership responsibilities

School authorities are required to adhere to the local agenda and guidelines set by MINEDUC. According to Weinstein et al. (2014), Ecuadorian educational leaders are responsible for several strategic functions, including creating organisational conditions, managing results, overseeing administrative and financial resources, fostering coexistence, leading pedagogical management, and promoting school-community engagement.

Principals and vice-principals are assigned 21 key responsibilities, primarily focused on supervising and regulating student evaluation processes while also guiding and planning teachers' work. However, instructional practices receive limited emphasis within these duties. Recognizing the need for improved oversight and support, in 2011, MINEDUC introduced educational quality standards designed to monitor, guide, and enhance the work of the school management team, school district authorities, and teaching staff, ultimately ensuring the quality of education. These quality standards evaluate school performance across four core dimensions: Administrative management, pedagogical management, school coexistence and participation, and school safety (MINEDUC, 2017b).

Although these guidelines reflect a comprehensive approach to school management, they often burden educational leaders with regulatory and bureaucratic tasks that divert attention from instructional leadership. The marginal emphasis on pedagogical guidance within their formal duties reflects a deeper tension: principals are held accountable for learning outcomes without being given the authority or capacity to meaningfully shape teaching practices. This structural contradiction limits their potential to act as transformative leaders.

4.3 Professional development pathways

Ecuador has implemented various public policies aimed at the professional development of educational leaders, each with different levels of implementation, articulation, participation, and continuity (Creamer, 2016). These efforts can be divided into two distinct stages.

The first stage began in 2008, when the MINEDUC released *The Development of Education: National Report of Ecuador*. This report presented statistical data on the state of education since 2001 and highlighted the need for professional development programmes for teachers, school managers, and administrative staff in areas such as human relations, motivation, and leadership. To address these shortcomings, the government proposed the creation of a national plan for professional development, aiming to increase opportunities for continuous training and career advancement.

The second stage, in 2010, marked a more structured approach to strengthening educational leadership. MINEDUC introduced the Test of Educational Leadership, designed to assess the minimum knowledge required for effective school management. The results of this evaluation guided several policy actions, including the development of the Comprehensive System for Educational and Professional Development (SÍPROFE). This initiative sought to enhance the performance of both teachers and educational leaders.

As part of SÍPROFE, in 2012, MINEDUC published and distributed self-study training materials for educational leaders. The first training book, *Pedagogical Management for Educational Leaders*, was structured as a 60-hour self-training workshop covering key educational topics such as curriculum standards, inclusive education, cooperative learning, professional development, educational supervision, and monitoring for continuous improvement. The training methodology emphasized experience-sharing among school authorities and problem-solving exercises.

Additionally, in 2012, MINEDUC introduced a second self-study training book, *Supporting and Monitoring Teachers in Their Classrooms*, a 48-hour programme aimed at teachers. This course covered constructivist learning principles, pedagogical leadership, classroom observation techniques, and the role of emotions in teaching and mentoring. The goal was to strengthen collaboration between educational leaders and teachers, fostering participatory practices in monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback. By emphasizing school principals as pedagogical leaders, this initiative sought to bridge the gap between leadership and classroom instruction.

In 2018, MINEDUC expanded its leadership training efforts by partnering with Ecuadorian universities to launch a 150-hour preparatory course for school principals, available in both on-site and virtual formats. This initiative was part of the professionalisation programme *Quiero Ser Directivo 4*, which aimed to promote employment stability for principals while facilitating career advancement and re-categorization opportunities for teachers aspiring to leadership positions.

For technical educational leaders, a more targeted initiative was introduced in 2006 with the launch of an online course titled *Comprehensive Management of Technical Schools*. This three-month programme was initially designed for 30 principals, who were then expected to serve as trainers for future cohorts, thereby extending professional development opportunities to technical school principals across the country (MINEDUC, 2008).

Despite these efforts, professional development initiatives remain fragmented, short-term, and often disconnected from the real challenges educational leaders face. Self-training materials and one-off courses cannot replace sustained, context-sensitive leadership development. Furthermore, the lack of systematic follow-up, coaching, or communities of practice weakens the impact of these programmes. For leaders in technical schools, the absence of ongoing, field-specific support contributes to an uneven capacity for managing both administrative and pedagogical tasks.

4.4 Working conditions and role instability

In Ecuador, the position of head teacher in the public education system is not widely perceived as an attractive career advancement opportunity. Weinstein et al. (2014) identify several factors contributing to this perception. First, head teachers are not exclusively dedicated to managerial functions; depending on the school type and student population, they may be required to teach between 4 and 8 hours per day, sometimes equivalent to a full teaching load. Second, compensation does not align with the role's demands, especially for

those without tenure. Finally, the lack of tenure—affecting an estimated 30% of principals—is a significant source of demotivation. Fabara Garzón (2015) highlights a related issue: a high prevalence of acting principals. In fact, one in every four leadership positions is filled by an acting principal, leaving many schools without a permanent, tenured leader. This concern was validated by MINEDUC in 2017, which reported that 6,224 acting school authorities—including principals, vice-principals, and inspectors—were in post, with 70% failing to meet the legal requirements for their positions (El Comercio, 2017).

To address this leadership gap, MINEDUC established merit-and-competition processes for leadership posts in the public education system. The LOEI (2012) provides the legal basis for this process by establishing that vacancies for school authority positions must be filled through public competitions, while subsequent ministerial regulations specified the procedures for obtaining eligibility and filling vacant leadership posts (MINEDUC, 2015a). By 2013, this policy was already being implemented in the new educational districts, and the Ministry reported that the directors of the 140 districts had been appointed through such competitions (MINEDUC, 2014, 2017a). However, as Rodríguez Revelo (2017b) notes, educational leadership in Ecuador has historically been shaped by a predominantly administrative orientation rather than by a fully consolidated professional field. In this sense, although formal recruitment mechanisms represented a significant advancement, the professionalisation of educational leadership still appeared to be an evolving and only partially consolidated policy domain.

4.5 Research gaps in educational leadership

Despite a decade marked by ambitious educational reforms and a growing emphasis on evidence-informed policy, educational research in Ecuador remains disproportionately weak, particularly in the field of educational leadership. Earlier work has pointed to the still incipient character of research on public educational policy in the country (Luna, 2009), while subsequent studies have noted the limited attention given to school management and its contribution to the positive transformation of schools (Rodríguez Revelo, 2017a). This persistent research gap has not only hindered the development of contextually relevant leadership models but has also weakened the knowledge base upon which leadership policies and practices are built.

Although it has acknowledged the importance of educational research, leadership remains marginalized within national research priorities. For instance, the 2018 National Agenda for Educational Research—a milestone initiative developed by MINEDUC and the National Direction of Educational Research—outlined six strategic research areas. These areas are: (a) professional development, with a primary focus on teachers' motivation and professional growth; (b) education and work, examining the alignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs; (c) school effectiveness, assessing the impact of teaching and learning strategies; (d) governance and school management, exploring leadership and decision-making processes in schools; (e) protection of rights, focusing on students' rights and well-being; (f) transversal approaches, integrating equity and inclusion in education. Yet, the area of 'governance and school management' was treated ambiguously, often collapsing

leadership into general administrative processes without clearly addressing the nuances of educational leadership as a professional practice.

Although this agenda represented an important step forward, educational leadership remained only partially visible within national research priorities. The 2018 Agenda de Investigación Educativa organised research around areas such as professional development and governance and school management, and it did include lines related to educational leaders, mentors, educational advisors, and educational auditors (MINEDUC, 2017b, 2018). However, the subsequent evaluation conducted in the Agenda de Investigación Educativa 2022–2026 showed that, among the 54 internal and mixed studies carried out between 2018 and 2021, only 9% focused on development professional, while most concentrated on school effectiveness (54%) and governance and school management (26%) (MINEDUC, 2022). Taken together, these documents suggest that, although leadership-related figures were formally included in the national research agenda, educational leadership itself remained a secondary and still weakly consolidated field of inquiry.

Acknowledging the need for a more comprehensive approach, MINEDUC introduced the 2022–2026 Educational Research Agenda, which expanded the research focus to eight areas: Innovation and school practices, Inclusive education, Education and work, Professional development, School management, Challenges for education in emergencies, Protection of rights, and Gender and education (MINEDUC, 2021a). However, this framing still risks subsuming leadership under technical and administrative concerns, failing to critically engage with the sociocultural and instructional dimensions of educational leadership.

This research gap raises a critical concern: how can Ecuador expect its educational leaders to implement transformative reforms and improve educational outcomes without first understanding their realities, identities, and professional needs? The silence around educational leadership research not only perpetuates fragmented policies and weak professional pathways but also undermines the sustainability of reforms by failing to support the very actors tasked with their implementation.

5. The theoretical and empirical problem of this dissertation

Although the practical challenges facing educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools are significant, this dissertation is not guided only by a policy concern related to inconsistencies in the preparation, selection, and support of educational leaders. It is equally driven by a theoretical and empirical ambition. While educational leaders are expected to respond to increasingly complex pedagogical, organisational, and administrative demands, the knowledge base available to understand and support their work in contexts such as Ecuador remains limited.

From a theoretical perspective, the field of educational leadership has produced influential frameworks that have significantly shaped the understanding of educational leadership, particularly in relation to instructional, transformational, and distributed

leadership (Hallinger, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020). These frameworks have made substantial contributions to the field and have helped explain how leadership can support school improvement, teacher development, and student learning. However, much of this knowledge has been developed in Anglo-Saxon and high-income contexts, often under institutional and professional conditions that differ considerably from those found in Latin American education systems. As a result, existing frameworks do not fully explain how educational leadership is constructed, enacted, and developed in contexts marked by policy discontinuities, professional ambiguities, limited institutional support, and socially unequal conditions. There is therefore a need not only to apply existing theories to new contexts, but also to build knowledge from those contexts in ways that can enrich and challenge the field itself.

From an empirical perspective, the field still lacks research on educational leadership in Ecuador, particularly in technical and vocational education settings. Although educational reform has increasingly emphasized the importance of educational leadership, relatively little attention has been paid to the experiences of principals and vice-principals as professional actors who interpret policy, negotiate responsibilities, and shape school life under specific institutional conditions. In this sense, leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools remains underexplored not only as a policy issue, but also as a scholarly object of inquiry. This lack of research limits the possibility of generating knowledge grounded in local realities and reduces the visibility of educational leaders' own perspectives, trajectories, and professional learning processes.

This dissertation responds, therefore, to a dual gap. On the one hand, it addresses the need for more contextualised theoretical frameworks capable of explaining educational leadership beyond dominant universalized models. On the other hand, it addresses the limited empirical research on educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools. By focusing on leadership identity, leadership practices, and leadership development through PLCs, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a more context-sensitive and empirically grounded understanding of educational leadership in Ecuador and Latin America.

In response to these theoretical and empirical gaps, this dissertation aims to describe and understand leadership development for educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools. More specifically, it seeks to generate contextually grounded knowledge about how educational leaders construct their professional identities, enact leadership practices, and experience leadership learning and development within their institutional and sociopolitical contexts.

The central purpose of this dissertation is not only to examine the realities faced by educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, but also to contribute to broader discussions in the field of educational leadership regarding how leadership should be conceptualised and studied in underrepresented contexts. In this way, the dissertation positions leadership not as a fixed or universal set of functions, but as a situated, relational, and evolving professional practice shaped by context.

To address this purpose, the dissertation is guided by the following overarching research question: **How can we describe and understand leadership development for educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools?** This question is explored through three interconnected dimensions: leadership identity, leadership practices, and leadership development. These dimensions are examined across four empirical chapters, each of which contributes to understanding leadership development from a particular angle.

Thus, this dissertation contributes in two main ways. First, it strengthens the empirical knowledge base on educational leadership in Ecuador by foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of educational leaders in technical schools. Second, it contributes to the theoretical discussion by advancing a more contextualised understanding of educational leadership and leadership development in Latin America. In doing so, it seeks to broaden the field's understanding of how leadership is shaped, learned, and developed in contexts that have historically been underrepresented in educational leadership research.

Chapter 2

Conceptual framework

Conceptual framework

This dissertation's conceptual framework is structured around three core dimensions of leadership research: educational leadership, leadership identity and leadership practices, and leadership development. At the foundation of this framework lies educational leadership theory, which brings together evolving conceptions and models, with a strong focus on distributive leadership. Second, the process of becoming an educational leader unfolds through identity construction and leadership practices, shaping how leaders interpret and enact their roles. Finally, leadership development is examined through the literature on professional learning and professional development. These dimensions are particularly relevant in Ecuadorian technical schools, where educational leaders must balance administrative responsibilities, pedagogical leadership, and workforce-oriented education.

1. Educational leadership: Evolving conceptions

The role of the school principal has undergone a significant transformation, initially facing challenges in establishing a distinct and well-defined position (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Lashway, 2003). This evolution closely paralleled the growth of public education and the structural changes in schools (Kafka, 2009). As schools expanded into larger institutions with multiple teachers, the need for a 'principal teacher' emerged. This role primarily involved executing administrative mandates, including managing school documentation, compiling reports, enforcing discipline, allocating class assignments, overseeing the school building's upkeep, and ensuring punctuality throughout the school day (Kafka, 2009).

Over time, however, the role of the principal evolved further, gaining greater status and position. For instance, principals began to take on more prominent supervisory responsibilities, which elevated their prestige and influence. They became accountable for evaluating teachers, making hiring decisions, and implementing educational policies, enhancing their role as key decision-makers (Kafka, 2009). Additionally, principals acquired a degree of independence and autonomy, enabling them to shape the direction of their schools and consolidate their authority in educational management. This expanded role also enhanced their impact within local communities, marking a significant transition from administrative managers to influential leaders in both schools and society (Lashway, 2003; Stringer & Hourani, 2016).

To meet these growing demands, principals had to actively engage with students, teachers, parents, as well as collaborate with local governments, policymakers, and business leaders. As a result, principals came to be recognised not only as instructional mentors and facility managers but also as bureaucrats and community leaders, reflecting the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of their role (Kafka, 2009; Lashway, 2003; Stringer & Hourani, 2016). Moreover, principals must now navigate intricate challenges in school environments, such as managing curriculum standards, meeting achievement benchmarks,

and implementing various policy directives, all of which can create complex and unpredictable demands. They also face the task of addressing the needs of a diverse student population, including variations in cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and learning abilities. In this context, they are tasked with ensuring that schools function effectively while responding to the continuous changes and challenges of the educational landscape (Bush, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021).

As the expectations placed on principals continued to expand, the conceptualisation of educational leadership also underwent a transformation. The shift from administration to management and, subsequently, to leadership, reflects the growing complexity of educational institutions and the need for strategic vision in school governance (Bush, 2011; Connolly et al., 2019). While management and leadership are closely related, they are distinct and not interchangeable (Foster, 1989; Kotter, 2008; Northouse, 2016). Management involves overseeing the school as an organisation through planning, organizing, and solving problems, ensuring operational efficiency. In contrast, leadership focuses on the leader's role in advancing school development by setting direction, aligning stakeholders, and motivating them to achieve shared goals (Bush, 2007; Connolly et al., 2019; Kotter, 2008). A balanced emphasis on management and leadership is essential, as both dimensions are necessary for schools to operate effectively and achieve their educational goals (Bush, 2007, 2011). This balance can be achieved when management and leadership establish alignment between the school's strategic objectives, everyday practices, core values, and vision (Bush, 2011).

1.1 Educational leadership: Evolving models

Educational leaders hold a unique position as middle managers within the educational hierarchy. While they occupy a high rank within the school structure, they are tasked with implementing directives from higher authorities. At the same time, they are expected to cultivate a school culture that reflects local contexts and addresses the needs of diverse stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, district authorities, and community members (Flessa, 2012; Kafka, 2009). This dual responsibility highlights the complexity of their roles and the need for diverse perspectives on management and leadership to address these challenges effectively (Bush, 2007; Lynch, 2012; Mulford, 2008; Northouse, 2016). To provide a framework for these perspectives, Bush (2011) identifies six management models and contrasts them with nine leadership models, illustrating the multifaceted nature of leadership in educational contexts.

The management models reflect diverse approaches to education. The formal model emphasizes structure, efficiency, and clear hierarchies. In contrast, the ambiguity model focuses on the unpredictability often seen in decision-making. The collegial model encourages collaboration and shared decision-making, while the political model highlights power struggles and negotiation. Additionally, the subjective model centres on personal experiences, while the cultural model prioritizes shared values and traditions.

The nine leadership models offer diverse frameworks for guiding schools. Managerial leadership prioritizes task completion and operational efficiency. Transactional leadership,

on the other hand, emphasizes performance-based rewards. Transformational leadership inspires change through vision and motivation. It aligns with moral leadership, which stresses values and the ethical purpose of education. Participative leadership and interpersonal leadership focus on collaboration and relationships but differ in emphasis: the former highlights shared decision-making, while the latter underscores trust and communication. Instructional leadership concentrates on teaching and learning, aiming to improve student outcomes. Meanwhile, post-modern leadership challenges traditional hierarchies, while contingency leadership adapts strategies to specific situations.

These frameworks illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of managing and leading schools. Management focuses on creating stability and maintaining order, while leadership drives innovation and progress by initiating change (Northouse, 2016). Such frameworks have often limited their scope to individuals in formal leadership roles, such as school principals, emphasizing their traits and characteristics as key determinants of effective leadership (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). However, leadership is increasingly being recognised as a collective process rather than an individual responsibility (Contractor et al., 2012). In contrast to these leader-centred approaches, new collective definitions of leadership are emerging. Hoppe and Reinelt (2010) identify four types of collaborative leadership that extend beyond individual efforts: peer leadership networks, where individuals learn from one another to strengthen personal and professional relationships; organisational leadership, in which informal ties complement formal structures to enhance efficiency; field-policy leadership, which facilitates systemic change through strategic reorientation; and collective leadership, where people work together towards a shared vision. These perspectives challenge the traditional notion of leadership as a hierarchical role and emphasize the value of distributed decision-making and collaboration. Recently, the focus has increasingly shifted towards a distributed leadership model, highlighting the shared nature of group leadership. This model emphasizes the importance of horizontal and vertical interactions among members, where each individual's contribution is crucial to achieving collective goals (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

1.2 Distributed leadership: Beyond traditional hierarchical models

The distributed leadership model represents a nuanced approach to leadership, emphasizing the collective and collaborative nature of guiding schools. Rather than focusing solely on the traits and actions of formal leaders, such as school principals, distributed leadership highlights the role of shared responsibility and authority across all members of the organisation (Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2001). This model examines not only who distributes responsibility but also how effectively such distribution occurs within a school context (Timperley, 2005).

Distributed leadership differentiates between formal and informal leadership (Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2001). Formal leaders are appointed figures whose authority is defined by institutional rules and procedures. In contrast, informal leaders, while lacking formal authority within the hierarchical structure, exert influence through their skills and

contributions to the school (Lumby, 2013). This interplay between formal and informal roles fosters dynamic relationships, with informal leaders evolving from followers to significant influencers through empowerment and collaborative interaction (Bjugstad et al., 2006; Diamond, 2013). Consequently, distributed leadership extends beyond a single, charismatic leader to a framework in which leadership is ‘stretched over’, multiple individuals, embedded in the social and situational contexts of schools (Angelle, 2010; Spillane et al., 2001).

Central to distributed leadership is the notion of shared purpose (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2010). Elmore (2000) argues that its effectiveness lies in unifying the decisions and practices of educational leaders and teaching staff to achieve collective benefits for student learning. Such integration requires not only a collaborative culture but also strong formal leadership to facilitate the sharing of authority and responsibilities. This alignment ensures that stakeholders—both internal, such as students and staff, and external, like parents—support the distribution of power (Hatcher, 2005). Effective distributed leadership demands that formal leaders relinquish some control, empowering others to contribute meaningfully and fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration (Harris, 2004; Lumby, 2013).

The practical application of distributed leadership involves deliberate strategies by educational leaders to encourage teacher participation. Harris (2004) highlights methods such as involving teachers in decision-making, rotating leadership responsibilities, and supporting teacher-led initiatives. These strategies not only enhance the personal and professional growth of teaching staff but also create a culture of collaboration that drives school improvement. Research has shown that successful distributed leadership relies on foundational elements, including trust, positive relationships, and a shared commitment to leadership practices (Angelle, 2010).

Moreover, Elmore (2000) identifies five principles that underpin the efficacy of distributed leadership: improving instructional practices, fostering continuous learning, modeling expected behaviours, ensuring expertise through knowledge and training, and establishing reciprocal relationships. These principles underscore the importance of integrating individual and collective learning to advance organisational goals. Ultimately, the distributed leadership model not only promotes school improvement but also contributes to the broader achievement of educational outcomes, including enhanced student performance.

1.3 A multifaceted approach to educational leadership

The evolving debate on how to manage and lead schools underscores the relevance of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership as interconnected models that shape effective educational leadership (Mulford, 2008). Instructional leadership traditionally places the principal at the centre of pedagogical oversight, ensuring direct influence on teaching and learning (Almarshad, 2017). This model emphasizes the principal’s role in improving teaching and learning through the management of the instructional programme, the coordination of the curriculum, the supervision of instruction, and the development of the school learning climate (Daniëls et al., 2019). The principal’s direct involvement in

classroom instruction ensures a focus on student learning outcomes and the professional development of teachers (Amores Fernández & Ritacco Real, 2021). However, in larger schools, this hands-on involvement may be challenging to sustain alongside administrative responsibilities (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Meanwhile, transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's capacity to inspire, foster collaboration, and enhance institutional effectiveness through motivation and shared vision (Almarshad, 2017). As Daniëls et al. (2019) explain, 'transformational leaders cultivate an environment of trust, innovation, and empowerment, where teachers feel motivated to contribute beyond their prescribed roles' (p. 123). This leadership approach not only drives school-wide improvement but also supports teacher autonomy by enabling collaborative decision-making processes (Mulford, 2008). However, transformational leadership must be paired with concrete instructional strategies to ensure that motivation translates into improved learning outcomes (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Distributed leadership extends these principles by advocating for shared responsibilities among educators, where leadership is not confined to a single individual but is distributed across the school community (Almarshad, 2017; Amores Fernández & Ritacco Real, 2021). This model can enhance communication, mobilise diverse expertise, and foster collective ownership, thereby contributing to school improvement and more inclusive school environments (Nadeem, 2024; Tejeiro, 2024). Nevertheless, without clear structures, distributed leadership may lead to role ambiguity or inefficiencies in decision-making (Spillane, 2006).

While each leadership model offers unique strengths, their true potential is realized when they are integrated into a cohesive approach that fosters adaptability and responsiveness to educational challenges. Integrating these models into a holistic leadership framework allows educational leaders to blend instructional guidance, transformational motivation, and distributed collaboration to create a dynamic school environment (Daniëls et al., 2019; Li, 2024). Addressing a holistic framework not only enhances leadership capacity but also improves student achievement and teacher job satisfaction (Mulford, 2008). Schools with strong instructional and transformational leadership exhibit higher levels of student motivation and achievement, as leaders create environments that encourage high expectations, active participation, and inclusive learning opportunities (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Moreover, when educational leaders prioritize professional development, mentorship, and collaborative decision-making, teachers are more likely to feel valued and empowered, leading to greater commitment and instructional effectiveness (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Distributed leadership, for example, has been shown to enhance teacher collaboration and innovation, fostering a shared sense of responsibility for student success (Spillane, 2006).

Beyond the school itself, leadership plays a vital role in shaping relationships with families and the broader community. Effective educational leaders engage with parents, local organisations, and policymakers to create networks of support that enhance student learning and well-being (Epstein, 2011). Community-centred leadership fosters trust and

collaboration, ensuring that schools remain responsive to the diverse needs of their stakeholders (Bryk et al., 2010). By adopting an integrated leadership approach that balances instructional effectiveness, teacher development, and community engagement, schools can cultivate sustainable improvement and long-term educational success (Almarshad, 2017; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

2. Becoming an educational leader: New identities and new practices

Becoming an educational leader is a dynamic and evolving process that intertwines leadership identity and leadership practices. Leadership identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves as leaders, shaped by their experiences, beliefs, and professional interactions (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). It develops through self-reflection, social recognition, and the continuous negotiation of personal and professional roles (Karp & Helgø, 2009). At the same time, leadership practices represent the concrete actions leaders take to influence teaching, learning, and school culture (Leithwood 2005). These practices emerge from a leader's evolving identity and are continuously refined through experience, collaboration, and contextual challenges (Spillane, 2006). The interplay between identity and practices is essential, as a well-developed leadership identity provides the foundation for effective and adaptive leadership practices, while engaging in leadership practices reinforces and shapes identity (Robinson, 2011). Understanding this relationship is crucial in educational leadership, as it determines how leaders inspire, guide, and support their school communities.

2.1 Identity and leadership identity construction

A fundamental task for educational leaders is to actively develop and refine their professional identity, which underpins their ability to lead effectively (Murphy, 2013). As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, '...identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple...' (p. 1), highlighting their dynamic and evolving nature. This fluidity is central to the process of identity construction, which entails developing a coherent self-narrative, navigating tensions between personal and professional dimensions, and balancing the integration and fragmentation of multiple identity roles (Alvesson et al., 2008). These interconnected elements form the foundation for understanding identity and, by extension, leadership identity construction.

2.1.1 Self-narrative

A coherent self-narrative is a cornerstone of identity construction. This element is inherently multivoiced, requiring both self-awareness of one's capabilities—referred to as identity for self—and external validation from colleagues and stakeholders, known as identity for others (Bolívar, 2018). Karp and Helgø (2009) assert, 'Leaders emerge in the interaction between people as the act of recognising and being recognised, as well as the act of gaining the necessary trust, credibility, and respect to perform as a leader' (p. 880). This

dynamic underscores that leadership identity is shaped through social interactions that affirm and legitimize the sense of self (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Developing a leadership self-narrative requires reflection and continuous reconstruction of experiences, aspirations, and professional engagements (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Leaders construct their narratives by integrating past experiences with present roles and future aspirations, making sense of challenges and successes as part of an evolving professional identity (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Furthermore, self-narratives contribute to leaders' resilience by enabling them to derive meaning from their roles and adapt to organisational changes (D. V. Day & Harrison, 2007).

2.1.2 Personal and professional dimensions

Identity construction is a multifaceted process that bridges personal and professional dimensions. Personal factors, including self-image, self-esteem, personality, and individuation, shape how individuals perceive themselves (Karp & Helgø, 2009). Simultaneously, professional elements, such as workplace interactions and organisational dynamics, significantly influence identity development within professional contexts (Brown, 2015). Leadership identity does not exist in isolation but is constantly negotiated within a web of social, cultural, and institutional expectations (Sachs, 2001).

The interplay between personal and professional dimensions means that leadership identity is neither fixed nor purely intrinsic; rather, it is co-created through socialization and engagement in professional contexts (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Research suggests that effective leaders develop an authentic leadership identity by aligning personal values with professional responsibilities, fostering a sense of purpose and commitment (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This alignment is crucial in navigating challenges such as role ambiguity and external pressures, which can create tensions between personal beliefs and professional duties (Kelchtermans, 2009).

2.1.3 Multiplicity of identity roles

The multiplicity of identities associated with the various roles individuals fulfill adds another layer of complexity to identity construction. Evolving policies and structural adjustments provide opportunities for individuals to redefine their roles in response to changing circumstances (Mpungose, 2010). For educational leaders, this means navigating and harmonizing diverse roles within contexts shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors (Crow & Møller, 2017; Zembylas, 2010). They assume multiple roles, including managers, administrators, supervisors, instructional leaders, and policymakers (Kafka, 2009).

However, a significant challenge lies in managing the interplay between management and leadership identities, which often overlap and interact in complex ways. Carroll and Levy (2008) emphasize that this dynamic involves shifting between a default identity, such as that of a manager, and an emergent identity, like that of a leader. These identities coexist and influence self-perception, work practices, and organisational outcomes. Research indicates

that identity transition requires cognitive and emotional adaptability, as leaders must reconcile their past professional selves with new expectations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Transitioning from management to leadership requires a profound process of identity reconstruction. This includes redefining oneself through affirmation and dis-identification, distancing from traits that no longer align while embracing those that reflect an evolving sense of purpose (Ashforth et al., 2008). Additionally, educational leaders often experience identity tensions due to competing demands from different stakeholders, requiring them to develop strategies to balance these roles effectively (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Developing a flexible leadership identity enables them to integrate various perspectives and maintain a coherent professional vision (Komives et al., 2005).

2.2 Educational leadership practices

Effective leadership practices encompass a wide range of approaches to promote meaningful change and sustain organisational growth in educational settings. Educational leaders are responsible for fostering and effectively supporting school staff by emphasizing key aspects such as building strong relationships, enhancing interpersonal skills, promoting psychological commitment, encouraging open communication, empowering others, fostering teamwork, cultivating trust, and ensuring active participation (Branson et al., 2016). Kegan and Lahey (2002) emphasize that effective transformative leadership requires educational leaders to adapt and reconsider their practices. In this sense, leadership practices are best understood as situated and context-dependent, shaped by the specific social, discursive, and material conditions in which they occur (Wilkinson et al., 2010).

Successful leaders adapt and refine their leadership practices to meet the changing needs of their contexts (Mulford, 2008). Leadership practices are not enacted in isolation; rather, they are shaped by the institutional, sociocultural, political, and organizational conditions in which leaders work (Hallinger, 2018). Addae-Kyeremeh and Fox (2018) highlight three interconnected types of knowledge that directly inform leadership practices. The first type, 'knowledge for practice' refers to formal, research-based knowledge. This type of evidence supports leadership by providing insights into both micro-level innovations, such as strategies to enhance student performance, and system-wide improvements like large-scale reforms. The second, 'knowledge in practice' involves experiential learning gained through daily leadership work, including managing change, implementing improvement plans, fostering innovation, addressing challenges, and maintaining effective communication. The third, 'knowledge from others' practice' involves insights derived from observing and collaborating with colleagues within the same educational setting, drawing on classroom practices and broader school contexts. Together, these perspectives not only demonstrate how diverse forms of evidence shape and refine leadership practices but also underscore the importance of integrating these knowledge types to achieve impactful and transformative leadership. In this sense, educational leadership is grounded in deep contextual knowledge and harmonious relationships, both of which contribute to meaningful improvements within schools (Bush, 2007; Bush & Glover, 2014; Lynch, 2012).

To fully grasp the nature of leadership practices, it is essential to examine them within educational settings shaped by social and political factors (Wilkinson, 2015). Leadership practices have been delineated by various professional standards that guide their quality and effectiveness. For example, the *California Professional Standards for Education Leaders* identify six broad leadership standards: (1) development and implementation of a shared vision, (2) instructional leadership, (3) management and learning environment, (4) family and community engagement, (5) ethics and integrity, and (6) external context and policy (Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2014). Similarly, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) outlines ten professional standards. Such standards are: (1) Mission, vision, and core values, (2) ethics and professional norms, (3) equity and cultural responsiveness, (4) curriculum, instruction and assessment, (5) community of care and support for students, (6) professional capacity of school personnel, (7) professional community for teachers and staff, (8) meaningful engagement of families and community, (9) operations and management, and (10) school improvement. While these frameworks provide structured guidelines, their applicability varies across different educational contexts, and their effectiveness depends on how leaders implement them within their specific schools and communities (Hallinger, 2018).

In operationalising educational leadership, Waters et al. (2004) identify 66 leadership practices categorized into 21 leadership responsibilities, ranging from instructional oversight and curriculum management to fostering professional relationships and promoting innovation. However, while these responsibilities offer valuable insights, leadership practices must remain flexible to address evolving educational challenges (Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership effectiveness is further demonstrated through specific practices that shape how educational leaders inspire, guide, and support their schools and communities. Kouzes and Posner (2005) identify five key practices of effective leadership: (1) modeling the way, which involves leading by example and establishing shared values; (2) inspiring a shared vision, which aligns stakeholders towards common goals; (3) challenging the process, which fosters innovation and risk-taking; (4) enabling others to act, which promotes trust and collaboration; and (5) encouraging the heart, which recognises achievements and fosters motivation. These leadership practices contribute to fostering school environments that encourage collaboration, informed decision-making, and shared goals, ultimately enhancing school improvement and long-term success (Leech & Fulton, 2002; Leithwood 2005).

2.3 The interplay between leadership identity and leadership practices

The relationship between leadership identity and leadership practices is reciprocal and dynamic. Leadership identity provides the foundation for effective practices by shaping how individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities, while engaging in leadership practices reinforces and refines identity. This mutual influence means that leadership development is an iterative process, where identity formation and practical application continuously interact (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Educational leaders develop and enact leadership practices based on their evolving self-concept as leaders. For instance, leaders who view themselves as instructional mentors are more likely to engage in coaching and capacity-building activities within their schools (Robinson et al., 2009). Similarly, those who see themselves as change agents may adopt transformational leadership strategies, fostering innovation and school improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Moreover, identity influences how leaders respond to challenges. Educational leaders with a strong, well-defined identity exhibit greater resilience and adaptability, enabling them to navigate institutional constraints and organisational shifts more effectively (D. V. Day & Harrison, 2007). Conversely, weak or fragmented identities may lead to inconsistent leadership practices and difficulties in establishing credibility and influence (Gronn, 1999).

By understanding how leadership identity and leadership practices interact, educational leaders can refine their approaches to leadership development, ensuring that their actions align with their evolving professional self-concept. This understanding also underscores the importance of reflective practice and ongoing professional learning as essential components of leadership growth (Schön, 1983).

3. Professional development of educational leaders

The professional development of educational leaders is a crucial component of educational improvement and effectiveness, as many countries acknowledge that well-prepared leaders significantly impact school outcomes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). However, the structure, content, and implementation of professional development programmes vary considerably across different educational systems, influencing both leadership preparation and long-term effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020). Selection processes for educational leadership preparation also differ, with some systems allowing self-selection while others require pre-selection by government agencies, employers, or training institutions (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). Furthermore, the provision of leadership training is diverse, with programmes delivered by government entities, specialized leadership academies, professional organisations, educational networks, universities, colleges, and private providers (Bush, 2018). The content of these programmes ranges from regulatory compliance and administrative training to broader emphases on instructional leadership and school improvement (Huber, 2004). Similarly, the requirement for educational leaders to engage in professional development varies across countries—some mandate pre-service training as a prerequisite for leadership roles, while others adopt a more flexible, voluntary approach (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013).

3.1 Leadership preparation: pre-service training, induction, in-service training

The professional development of educational leaders is a crucial aspect of educational improvement, ensuring that leaders are equipped to navigate the complexities of their roles. Pont et al. (2008) categorize leadership professionalisation into three key stages: pre-service

training, which provides preparatory programmes for aspiring educational leaders before they assume their roles; induction programmes, which offer initial support and mentoring for newly appointed leaders; and in-service training, which ensures continuous professional development for experienced leaders to refine their skills and adapt to emerging challenges. While some countries implement all three stages, others focus on one or two, depending on national policies and institutional capacities (Bush, 2020).

To better understand leadership preparation, it is essential to distinguish between pre-service and in-service development. Pre-service leadership preparation involves a deliberate and structured process of acquiring leadership skills, requiring a proactive engagement from aspiring leaders (Cliffe et al., 2018; Lyons, 2016). Given the complex and multifaceted nature of educational leadership—encompassing administrative tasks, human resource and financial management, curriculum planning, and instructional leadership (Boylan, 2018; Ng & Szeto, 2016)—pre-service training must instill not only technical competencies but also a strategic vision for leadership. Early adoption of a leadership perspective is particularly beneficial, as it enables future principals to transition more effectively into their roles (Xu & Patmor, 2012).

Induction programmes play a pivotal role in supporting newly appointed educational leaders as they transition into their roles, providing essential guidance and mentorship during this critical period (Daresh & Male, 2000; Hobson & Sharp, 2005). These programmes typically include structured mentoring, peer networking, and targeted professional development, all designed to build leadership capacity and promote school improvement (Bush, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2022). Research suggests that well-designed induction and mentoring programmes can support novice principals' leadership effectiveness, facilitate their adjustment to the role, increase job satisfaction, and contribute to retention-oriented support systems (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014). A key component of effective induction programme is mentorship, where experienced educational leaders provide practical insights, fostering confidence and competence in novice leaders (Kutsyruba, 2020). Furthermore, induction programmes that integrate real-world problem-solving, reflective practice, and collaborative learning experiences better prepare educational leaders to address the challenges of their new roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

As educational leaders advance in their careers, in-service professional development takes on different forms based on their evolving needs (Villegas-Reimers, 2003) and contextual challenges (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Tamadoni et al., 2024). These challenges include social inequalities, limited school funding, negative public perceptions of educational leadership, and increased pressure to enhance student outcomes. One of the most pressing concerns for principals is the lack of adequate opportunities for continuous professional growth (Bayar, 2016; Wise, 2015). Building upon the literature review on in-service training by Daresh and LaPlant (1983), recent studies emphasize the importance of job-embedded learning opportunities, collaborative leadership practices, and ongoing coaching to strengthen instructional leadership and improve student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

3.2 Bridging tradition and innovation in educational leadership preparation

Based on the need to identify effective training and professional development strategies, Davis et al. (2005) emphasize three key dimensions of effective principal professionalisation: content, methods, and structure. First, the content must integrate leadership and management concepts, be research-based, and maintain curricular coherence to ensure practical application aligned with local educational standards. Second, effective methods should incorporate real-world leadership experiences, such as field-based internships, problem-based learning, cohort groups, and mentorship programmes. These approaches bridge theory and practice, providing professional reflection within an authentic school setting. Third, the structural dimension involves collaboration among educational stakeholders, where partnerships between government agencies, universities, professional organisations, and private entities foster innovation and sustainability in leadership preparation.

Beyond these dimensions, different models of in-service professional development have been proposed to address the evolving needs of educational leaders. Daresh and LaPlant (1983) outlined five key approaches: (1) traditional academic advancement, where educational leaders pursue advanced degrees in education or management; (2) short-term learning experiences, such as targeted workshops and seminars; (3) competency-based training programmes, often sponsored by professional associations to enhance leadership skills; (4) structured government-led training, where school districts offer professional development tailored to leadership needs; and (5) networking, where principals engage in self-directed collaboration to exchange knowledge and management strategies. While these five approaches remain foundational, contemporary research highlights the growing importance of sustained, collaborative learning models that incorporate technology and data-driven strategies.

Contemporary approaches emphasize the importance of continuous, evidence-based professional learning tailored to the specific needs of educational leaders. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argue that high-quality professional development is collaborative, job-embedded, and sustained over time, creating opportunities for deep engagement with practice and instructional improvement. Such approaches include collaborative learning, coaching, feedback, and other forms of ongoing support aimed at strengthening leadership and improving student outcomes. In addition, the growing importance of technology and data-informed decision-making has reinforced the need for professional development that prepares leaders to work with increasingly complex forms of evidence and organizational change. These developments underscore the need to align traditional professional development models with contemporary, research-informed approaches that are responsive to context and practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hallinger, 2018).

3.3 Strengthening educational leadership through collaborative networks and PLCs

Leadership development is essential not only for enhancing administrative efficiency but also for improving teaching and learning within schools (Bush, 2007; Pont et al., 2008). It is deeply connected to the ability to drive meaningful change, as leadership inherently involves initiating and managing transformation (Kegan & Lahey, 2002). Since leadership evolves in response to the developmental level of those enacting it, effective educational leaders must continuously refine their perspectives while engaging peers to sustain progress (D. V. Day & Harrison, 2007; D. V. Day et al., 2009; Mulford, 2008).

Leadership development is inherently linked to broader interactions and relationships (Boylan, 2018). Leadership networks may emerge spontaneously in response to pressing professional challenges or be intentionally designed to foster collaboration and support (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010). By engaging in these networks, educational leaders enhance their confidence and effectiveness through meaningful peer exchanges and contextual feedback, reinforcing the intrinsic connection between leadership and self-development (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Humada-Ludeke, 2013; Kegan & Lahey, 2002). These networks function as systems of social relationships, built on shared professional interests, responsibilities, and experiences that encourage collaboration (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010). Moreover, collaborative leadership networks cultivate a shared sense of purpose among members, fostering a feeling of belonging to a larger community beyond their individual roles (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010). This sense of connection is essential for educational leaders, as it helps mitigate feelings of isolation (Lazenby et al., 2022) while enabling them to navigate professional challenges in an ever-evolving educational landscape (Bolam et al., 2005). Given their critical role in professional growth, these networks can serve as the foundation for peer communities that emphasize shared ideals, meaningful relationships, and a culture of continuous school improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Peer leadership networks consist of individuals with equal status, creating a leadership structure that evolves to support collaboration and shared decision-making (Leithwood & Azah, 2016). These networks play a crucial role in the successful implementation of PLCs, which require time to reshape school culture (Wilson, 2016) and redefine educational leadership practices (Hairon, 2020). While PLCs have traditionally been associated with teachers and their instructional development, recent research highlights their growing importance for educational leaders. PLCs for educational leaders provide structured, collaborative environments where principals and other school administrators can engage in continuous professional learning, share best practices, and reflect on leadership strategies to adapt to evolving educational needs (Stoll et al., 2006; Timperley et al., 2007). These leadership-oriented PLCs move beyond teacher instruction and focus on leadership effectiveness, school improvement, and strategic decision-making (Hord, 2009).

Research on professional learning communities suggests that when educational leaders actively participate in collaborative professional learning, they help foster the collaborative culture expected across the school and support broader processes of continuous improvement

(DeMatthews, 2014; Dinsdale, 2017). This underscores the dual benefit of leadership PLCs—not only do they contribute to the leaders’ professional growth, but they also influence the broader school community by setting an example for collaborative learning. Effective PLCs for educational leaders prioritize reflective practice, mentorship, and peer feedback. They enable educational leaders to analyse real-world challenges, develop strategic problem-solving skills, and adapt to the evolving demands of educational leadership (Humada-Ludeke, 2013). Timperley (2011) emphasizes that ‘leadership learning is most effective when it is inquiry-based, ongoing, and embedded in the authentic contexts of school leadership’ (p. 28). This suggests that leadership PLCs should be designed as dynamic spaces where leaders engage in action research, self-reflection, and evidence-based decision-making. Another key aspect of leadership PLCs is their contribution to policy implementation and organisational change. Research on educational leadership suggests that leaders benefit from collaborative professional learning and from engaging with peers around shared problems of practice, which can strengthen their ability to respond to reform and improvement demands (Robinson et al., 2009). This aligns with Leithwood et al. (2020), who argue that leadership capacity is strengthened through processes that build shared understanding, teacher capacity, and instructional improvement.

Furthermore, digital PLCs, or virtual communities of practice, have emerged as valuable resources for geographically dispersed educational leaders. With advancements in technology, school principals can participate in online professional networks that facilitate collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, professional networking, and problem-solving (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). These digital learning communities can expand leaders’ access to expertise beyond their immediate local contexts and broaden their opportunities for professional learning. In this sense, technology is reshaping leadership development by making collaborative learning more accessible, flexible, and scalable (Leithwood & Azah, 2016).

Ultimately, PLCs for educational leaders serve as a transformative mechanism for professionalisation, empowering educational leaders with the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to drive educational improvement (Hord, 2009; Stoll et al., 2006). By fostering a culture of collaboration, reflection, and evidence-based practice, leadership PLCs contribute significantly to the development of adaptive and visionary educational leaders.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Methodology

This chapter explains how the dissertation was conceived and executed, providing a transparent and coherent foundation for its claims about leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools. Beyond documenting the procedures used in each empirical chapter, it argues that the dissertation constitutes a coherent and cumulative methodological design in its own right. Rather than presenting four isolated studies, the dissertation follows a layered and stepwise logic in which each chapter builds on the previous one while progressively shifting the analytical focus from leadership identity, to leadership practices, to leadership learning, and finally to leadership development through PLCs. This design made it possible to engage progressively with a complex and sensitive research context, combining depth, continuity, and variation across the four studies. In this sense, the methodological contribution of the dissertation lies not only in the use of qualitative methods, but also in the way these methods were sequenced, connected, and sustained over time.

To make this design explicit, the chapter is organised into five sections. It begins by grounding the inquiry in a constructivist–interpretivist epistemology, through which leadership is understood as a socially negotiated and context-bound phenomenon. It then presents the dissertation questions and situates them within the Ecuadorian educational context, including the rationale for selecting Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas and technical schools, as well as the institutional and methodological conditions through which access to the field was secured. The chapter subsequently outlines the methodological design of the dissertation, with particular attention to its cumulative logic, sampling rationale, participant selection, and theoretical sampling across the four studies. This is followed by a presentation of the main data-generation strategies—semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis—and of how they contributed to triangulation across the dissertation. Finally, the chapter presents the four empirical chapters in sequence and shows how they are aligned within the cumulative research design.

1. Epistemological position

This dissertation is grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist epistemological position, which asserts that knowledge is not discovered as objective truth but rather constructed and interpreted through human interaction within specific sociocultural and historical contexts (Schwandt, 1994; Van der Walt, 2020). Next, each strand is presented individually, then synthesized, before concluding with a reflexive statement on the researcher’s positionality.

1.1 Interpretivist epistemology

Interpretivism assumes that social reality is understood through the meanings that actors attach to their experiences. As Schwandt (1994) writes, ‘Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting’ (p. 118). Within this paradigm,

educational leadership is not treated as a fixed entity but as a complex, meaning-laden phenomenon, shaped through human experiences and institutional interactions. More specifically, this dissertation focuses on how educational leadership is constructed and interpreted through leadership identities, leadership practices, and leadership development in context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; González Monteagudo, 2003).

This epistemological stance assumes that knowledge is co-produced by the researcher and participants through dialogue and interpretation. Accordingly, the aim is to explore how these dimensions of educational leadership are understood and experienced by educational leaders within the specific context of Ecuadorian technical schools. Interpretivist inquiry involves working inductively, prioritizing participants' voices and perspectives, and recognizing the situatedness of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018; Van der Walt, 2020).

1.2 Constructivist epistemology

Constructivism complements interpretivism by emphasising that reality itself is co-constructed. The constructivist lens underscores that knowledge is formed through continuous negotiation, shaped by the interactions between individuals and their environment (Ramos, 2015; Valenciano Canet, 2022).

Constructivism recognises multiple realities, each contingent upon cultural, historical, and personal frames of reference. From this perspective, educational leadership practices are not universal but emerge contextually through the lived experiences of school actors. As such, meaning is not found but constructed through interpretive engagement with participants' narratives, actions, and situated practices (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1998).

1.3 Combined constructivist–interpretivist position

Because they share a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, constructivism and interpretivism are best treated as 'two sides of the same coin' (Van der Walt, 2020, p. 59). Together, constructivism and interpretivism provide a coherent epistemological foundation that values contextual understanding, co-construction of meaning, and reflexivity. This pairing supports the inquiry into how leadership identities and practices are shaped by both personal trajectories and institutional structures within a rapidly evolving educational landscape. Table 1 summarizes how the integrated stance guides this dissertation.

Table 1. Constructivist-Interpretivist lens guiding this dissertation

Dimension	Constructivism	Interpretivism	Implication for this dissertation
Ontology	Multiple, co-constructed realities	Reality understood via situated meanings	Leadership ‘realities’ in Ecuadorian technical schools are context-bound
Epistemology	Knowledge negotiated in interaction	Knowledge gained through empathetic interpretation	Researcher and participants co-produce situated understandings
Methodology	Dialogic, reflexive, context-sensitive	Inductive, holistic, hermeneutic	Qualitative methods (interviews, observations, document analysis)

As an interpretivist-constructivist researcher, I approach this dissertation with the assumption that leadership development is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and context-dependent process, shaped by interactions, beliefs, and institutional realities. Thus, my identity—as an academic with training in educational leadership, but not a practitioner in technical schools—required a reflexive stance throughout the research. I remained attentive to how my assumptions, interpretations, and positionality shaped data collection and analysis. Following Schwandt (1994), I recognised that the researcher is not a neutral observer but a co-constructor of knowledge. My methodological choices aimed to amplify participants’ voices, while maintaining a critical sensitivity to power asymmetries in the research relationship (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Valenciano Canet, 2022). Although access to the field was at times difficult to secure, this challenge was primarily administrative and related to coordination with the organisers of the PLC initiative rather than to mistrust from educational leaders themselves. Once access was granted, educational leaders generally accepted my presence from the outset. This distinction reinforced the need to reflect not only on interpersonal relations in the field, but also on how institutional gatekeeping and formal authorization shaped the research process. This epistemological positioning—simultaneously interpretivist and constructivist—allowed for a rich, layered exploration of leadership as it is enacted, narrated, and transformed in context.

2. Research questions and context of the dissertation

This section presents the research questions that guide the dissertation and situates them within the educational and institutional context in which the study was conducted. It first outlines the overarching and chapter-specific questions, and then explains the rationale for the selection of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas and technical schools as the research setting. Finally, it introduces the PLC initiative as the empirical setting of the study and clarifies the institutional and methodological conditions through which access to the field was secured.

2.1 Research questions guiding the dissertation

This dissertation is guided by a central question: **How can we describe and understand leadership development for educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools?** This overarching inquiry frames four empirical chapters that examine key dimensions of educational leadership, including leadership identity, leadership practices, and the role of PLCs in leadership learning and professional development.

Each chapter is shaped by a specific research question:

Chapter 4: *How do Ecuadorian school authorities at technical schools perceive themselves in terms of educational leaders?*

Chapter 5: *What leadership practices characterize Ecuadorian school authorities as educational leaders in technical schools?*

Chapter 6: *How do PLCs shape educational leaders' leadership learning and development in Ecuadorian technical schools?*

Chapter 7: *How do PLCs promote educational leaders' leadership development at technical schools in Ecuador?*

Together, these empirical studies provide a comprehensive analysis of leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools. Their progression reflects the cumulative logic of the dissertation, moving from leadership identity to leadership practices, and then to leadership learning and development through collaborative professional structures. In this sense, the four studies do not address disconnected themes, but rather interconnected dimensions of the same phenomenon.

2.2 Research context and empirical setting

To address these questions empirically, it was necessary to identify a setting in which leadership development could be examined in a sustained and context-sensitive way. Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas was selected because it was the first province in which a structured PLC initiative for principals and vice-principals in technical schools was implemented through the collaboration between MINEDUC and VVOB. This offered a concrete opportunity to study educational leadership not only as a policy expectation, but also as an ongoing professional process unfolding within an organised development strategy. At the same time, the PLC initiative brought together educational leaders from urban and rural technical schools, making it possible to examine leadership across diverse institutional realities within the same provincial setting. In this sense, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas was selected not only for reasons of access, but also because it provided an analytically relevant site in which leadership identity, leadership practices, and leadership learning and development could be studied in relation to a common professional development initiative.

The focus on technical schools was equally deliberate. In Ecuador, technical schools occupy a policy-relevant yet under-researched place within the education system. They are expected to contribute to local development and labour-market preparation, while at the same

time facing important structural challenges such as curricular rigidity, tensions between technical and general baccalaureate programmes, weak alignment with productive-sector demands, and limited professional development opportunities for school authorities and teachers. For these reasons, technical schools provided a particularly relevant context for examining how educational leadership is constructed, enacted, and developed under conditions of limited professionalisation and policy constraint.

Within this broader context, PLCs constituted a key empirical setting through which the dissertation explored leadership learning and development, while also providing contextual insight into the leadership identities and practices of educational leaders in technical schools. This empirical setting did not emerge in isolation, but within a broader institutional trajectory of cooperation around technical education in Ecuador. Previous VVOB–MINEDUC cooperation in technical education had already positioned technical and vocational education as a field requiring stronger teacher preparation, continuous professional development, and closer articulation between education and productive sectors. In this sense, the PLC initiative can be situated within wider institutional efforts to strengthen professional capacity in technical education through diagnosis, continuing professional development, advisory support, and learning communities (Vanwildemeersch et al., 2016; VVOB, 2010). Since 2017, collaboration between MINEDUC and VVOB has promoted the implementation of PLCs as a professional development strategy for principals and vice-principals in technical schools. The purpose of this initiative was to strengthen leadership capacity by fostering reflective practice, collaborative learning, and school improvement through structured peer exchange.

A structured team of facilitators supported this initiative, bringing together international, national, and local actors. The VVOB educational advisor acted as overall coordinator, while a national educational advisor from MINEDUC’s central office contributed expertise at the policy level. In addition, four local educational advisors working within the Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas school district were responsible for guiding educational leaders at the PLC level. Their role was not limited to organisational support. Facilitators helped structure the sessions, introduced and scaffolded the collaborative inquiry process, guided discussion and reflection, and supported participants in identifying school-based issues for collective analysis. This facilitation structure was important not only for the practical organisation of the PLCs, but also for understanding how leadership development was scaffolded during the implementation process.

The implementation of PLCs followed a phased approach:

- Year 1: The VVOB representative and the MINEDUC educational advisor led PLC meetings while local educational advisors were trained to facilitate future sessions.
- Year 2: Local educational advisors assumed leadership of the PLC meetings, with internal coordinators taking a more active role in organizing sessions and planning activities.
- Long-term goal: Eventually, the ambition was for educational leaders to lead PLC meetings independently, ensuring their sustainability as self-supporting professional networks.

Initially introduced through an informative session on technical education, the initiative led to the creation of seven leadership-focused PLCs composed exclusively of principals and vice-principals from technical schools. During the 2018–2019 school year, the PLCs held three fieldwork sessions. During the 2019–2020 school year, four additional sessions were organised as part of the second phase of the project. Meetings took place approximately every three months and were held at participating urban and rural technical schools, with the venue rotating across sites so that management teams could encounter different institutional contexts. Sessions generally followed a full-day format and usually lasted from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., although their effective duration varied according to educational leaders' availability, the location of the host school, the nature of the planned activities, and the timing of school district authorisation for official leave.

Participation was expected from principals and vice-principals belonging to the PLC initiative, but attendance depended in practice on workload, school responsibilities, travel conditions, and the possibility of obtaining administrative permission to leave school duties. This meant that participation was institutionally encouraged yet unevenly sustained, a condition that later became analytically relevant in understanding both the functioning of the PLCs and the tension between obligation and ownership described in the empirical chapters. The themes addressed in the PLCs were not entirely fixed from the outset. After the initial session on the status of technical education, the communities progressively concentrated their work on issues related to leadership and human-resource development, while later sessions increasingly incorporated participants' school experiences, practical concerns, and shared problems as the basis for collective inquiry.

At the time of the research, three of the seven PLCs were initially planned for observation. However, due to logistical challenges and communication constraints with those responsible for the PLC training process, only two could be successfully observed. To preserve confidentiality, these two PLCs are referred to throughout the dissertation by the pseudonyms **Alpha** and **Beta**. Table 2 presents an overview of the composition of the two observed PLCs across the two school years.

Table 2. Overview of Alpha and Beta PLCs across two school years

School year	PLC	Participating schools	Educational leaders	National facilitators	Local facilitators
2018 - 2019	Alpha	8	11	2	1
	Beta	7	15	1	3
2019 - 2020	Alpha	7	10	1	1
	Beta	7	10	1	1

In this sense, the PLC initiative provided a structured yet flexible professional setting through which educational leaders could develop leadership competencies, exchange insights, and engage in continuous professional learning within a supportive community. At

the same time, the organisation and continuity of these spaces depended on a broader set of institutional arrangements, which made access to the field a central methodological issue for the dissertation.

2.3 Access to the field: Institutional mediation and methodological implications

Álvarez (2011) and Di Virgilio et al. (2007) show that access to the field in qualitative research is not merely a logistical or administrative step, but a methodological process involving negotiation, relational positioning, and the progressive construction of trust. In Latin American methodological scholarship, field access is understood as a situated and ongoing process shaped by institutional mediation, gatekeepers, and the researcher's capacity to sustain legitimacy in the field. In educational settings in particular, access does not end with formal authorisation; rather, it must be continuously negotiated through participation, communication, and recognition within the institutional context (Álvarez, 2011). This was especially relevant in the present study, where access to PLC spaces depended on intermediary actors, institutional permissions, and shifting communication dynamics, all of which had methodological implications for the scope, continuity, and depth of the fieldwork.

These methodological considerations became particularly salient because access to the PLCs was mediated by institutional actors and evolving communication dynamics. Conducting research in Ecuadorian public schools, and more specifically within a policy-regulated initiative such as the PLCs for educational leaders in technical schools, required formal authorisation, institutional mediation, and sustained relational work. Access was therefore neither immediate nor methodologically neutral; rather, it shaped the possibilities for entry, continuity, and interaction within the field.

Entry into the field was made possible through the collaboration between VVOB and MINEDUC. Within this configuration, VVOB played a strategic mediating role. As an organisation actively involved in the improvement of technical education in Ecuador and in the implementation of PLCs for educational leaders in technical schools, VVOB provided an institutional point of entry into a field that was otherwise strongly regulated by administrative procedures and hierarchical coordination. In this sense, VVOB functioned as an institutional bridge between the research project and the actors responsible for the initiative. This mediation did not replace the formal procedures required by the Ecuadorian education system, but it facilitated access to the field, the identification of relevant actors, and a better understanding of the organisational logic through which the PLCs were being implemented.

Access to public schools in Ecuador depended, first, on administrative authorization from the Ministry of Education and, second, on coordination with those responsible for organising the PLC initiative. These procedures required the submission of research documentation, institutional review, and subsequent communication with local actors in order to align the research process with the schedule and functioning of the PLCs. In practice, this meant that access depended not only on the academic quality of the research project, but also on the existence of institutional trust and collaborative arrangements capable of making the

fieldwork feasible. As a result, access in this dissertation should be understood as institutionally mediated and relationally sustained. This had direct methodological consequences for the design of the study, since it influenced the rhythm of data generation, the continuity of observations, the identification of accessible PLC settings, and the kind of relational trust that could be built with participants over time.

This institutional mediation had important practical implications. Access to PLC meetings, internal reports, and key informants required continuous communication with organisers, facilitators, and local coordinators. Because PLC activities were embedded in administrative routines and subject to changing local conditions, maintaining uninterrupted access proved more complex than initial field entry. In particular, timely information about meetings was not always easily available, and the possibility of observing PLC sessions depended on coordination among central-level actors linked to the initiative, district-level facilitators and authorities, and school-level participants. This became especially relevant in Chapter 7, where prolonged observation of PLC functioning required not only permission to enter the field but also the ability to remain informed about the continuity of the initiative over time.

The partnership with VVOB also had ethical implications that required careful reflexive attention. On the one hand, this collaboration enabled access to a field that may otherwise have remained difficult to enter. On the other hand, because VVOB was both a strategic partner and an actor involved in the PLC initiative itself, it was necessary to maintain a clear distinction between the aims of the research and the aims of programme implementation. For this reason, participants were informed that the dissertation did not constitute an evaluation of their professional performance nor of the PLC initiative as such, but an independent academic study focused on understanding educational leadership and leadership development in context. Informed consent, confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and the explicit communication of the non-evaluative character of the study were therefore essential to its ethical conduct.

More broadly, the process of entering and sustaining access to the field offers an important methodological insight for research conducted in constrained contexts such as Ecuador. Partnerships such as the one established with VVOB should not be understood only as facilitating arrangements, but as methodological conditions that shape the very possibility of carrying out qualitative inquiry. In contexts marked by bureaucratic regulation, hierarchical decision-making, and uneven traditions of school-based research, institutional collaboration becomes part of the epistemic and practical infrastructure of the study. For this reason, access to the field in this dissertation is treated not simply as a logistical matter, but as a methodological dimension that influenced the scope, continuity, and relational dynamics of the research process.

3. Methodological design

The methodological design of this dissertation is qualitative, cumulative, and partly longitudinal. It is cumulative in the sense that knowledge is built progressively across four

interconnected empirical chapters, and partly longitudinal because some of these chapters examine leadership processes over time. Rather than treating leadership as a single object that could be captured through one method or one moment in time, the dissertation follows a layered design in which each empirical chapter addresses a different dimension of the same phenomenon, consistent with qualitative approaches that seek depth, contextual sensitivity, and methodological flexibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on leadership identity and leadership practices through a phenomenological logic centred on educational leaders' lived experiences. Chapter 6 extends this design longitudinally in order to examine leadership learning and development through sustained engagement in PLCs over time. Chapter 7 then shifts the unit of analysis from individual experience to the PLCs themselves, using an observation-led multiple-case design to examine how leadership development unfolded within two bounded cases. Taken together, this design made it possible to connect narrated experience, observed interaction, and documentary evidence within a coherent analytical progression.

3.1 Sampling rationale and participant selection across studies

This section explains how participant and case selection were aligned with the analytical focus of each empirical chapter. Across the four studies, sampling combined continuity and variation in order to identify information-rich participants, cases, and supplementary sources capable of illuminating different dimensions of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools. In this sense, selection was guided not by representativeness, but by analytical relevance in relation to the evolving research questions.

3.2 Phenomenological inquiry: Chapters 4, 5, and 6

For Chapters 4–6, participant selection followed a phenomenological logic, privileging educational leaders whose lived experiences could illuminate the phenomena under study. In line with qualitative sampling principles, participants were selected for their theoretical relevance rather than for representativeness (Bryman, 2016). In Chapters 4 and 5, the focus was placed on school principals and vice-principals, whose professional trajectories and leadership roles provided in-depth insight into leadership identity and leadership practices in Ecuadorian technical schools. In Chapter 6, the sample was extended to PLC facilitators and internal coordinators in order to deepen understanding of leadership learning and development from different role positions within the same professional setting. Documentary sources were also incorporated in Chapters 4 and 5 to contextualise participants' accounts and to situate their experiences within the broader policy and institutional environment. Detailed participant characteristics relevant to each inquiry are presented in the corresponding empirical chapters. Table 3 summarises the sampling logic across Chapters 4, 5, and 6 by showing the primary participants, supplementary sources, and their analytical contribution to the dissertation.

Table 3. Sampling overview across chapters 4, 5, and 6

Chapter	Primary participants	Supplementary sources	Analytical contribution
(4) Leadership identity	6 principals and vice-principals	Ministerial documents, Field notes	A homogeneous participant group allowed for in-depth intra-role variation, while documentary sources provided the policy context needed to interpret identity claims
(5) Leadership practices	The same 6 principals and vice-principals	Ministerial documents, Field notes	Continuity in participants maintained the experiential focus while enabling triangulation of leadership practices against formal policy mandates
(6) Leadership learning	The same 6 principals and vice-principals	2 PLC facilitators 3 internal coordinators Reports and documentary sources	Additional role-based perspectives enriched the intersubjective understanding of leadership learning and enabled comparison between leaders' accounts and the views of supporting actors

Across all three chapters, the combination of role-based interviews with documentary sources strengthened credibility by reducing single-respondent bias and enabling constant comparison across data sources (Miles et al., 2014). Peer debriefing, external audits, and document checks, detailed in the corresponding methods sections, further supported the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3 Observation-led multiple-case design: Chapter 7

Chapter 7 examines how PLC functioning shaped leadership development over time. Accordingly, participant and case selection followed the logic of an observation-led multiple-case design in which the primary unit of analysis was no longer the lived experience of individual leaders, but the collective functioning of two PLCs as bounded cases. Data collection therefore centred on prolonged naturalistic observations, complemented by selective excerpts from participants who were directly involved in the observed sessions.

Within this design, the most relevant informants were the actors who actually participated in and shaped each PLC session, even when they differed from the six focal leaders from the earlier phenomenological chapters. Once the analytical focus moved from personal meaning to collective process, it became necessary to include participants whose presence could clarify how the PLCs operated in practice. This decision was also aligned with the purpose of Chapter 7, which was not to revisit identity trajectories already explored in previous chapters, but to understand how PLC processes fostered leadership development over time. In this sense, the selection of active participants within the two observed PLCs made it possible to generate information-rich evidence on facilitation, participant dynamics, workflow, and the conditions shaping collective learning and development.

Observations constituted the primary source of evidence in this chapter because they made it possible to examine behaviour, interaction, and professional exchange in situ (Bryman, 2012). Participant excerpts therefore functioned mainly as contextualising illustrations that clarified what was observed, rather than as the central data source, as they had in the phenomenological studies. The combination of prolonged observations with selective participant excerpts, agendas, reports, and field notes also strengthened credibility through methodological triangulation, allowing emerging interpretations to be cross-checked across different sources and helping to construct a more comprehensive account of PLC functioning and leadership development over time (Yin, 2011).

3.4 Theoretical sampling and analytical saturation

In this dissertation, theoretical sampling is understood as the selection of participants, cases, and supplementary sources on the basis of their analytical relevance to the evolving research questions rather than their statistical representativeness. Across the four empirical chapters, this principle guided the identification of information-rich participants and situations capable of illuminating central dimensions of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools.

Theoretical sampling also informed decisions about sufficiency of data. Rather than aiming for numerical saturation in a statistical sense, the dissertation sought analytical saturation, that is, the point at which additional data no longer substantially altered the emerging interpretation of the phenomenon. This was assessed through repetition of patterns across interviews, observations, and documents, and through the progressive refinement of categories during coding and cross-case comparison. In this sense, saturation was treated as a matter of conceptual depth and explanatory sufficiency in relation to the research questions.

4. Data collection: Interviews, observations, and document analysis

Data collection in this dissertation combined semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis in order to develop a rich and contextualised understanding of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools, particularly in relation to leadership identity, leadership practices, leadership learning, and leadership development. These methods were not used in isolation, but as complementary sources of evidence capable of illuminating different dimensions of the same phenomenon. The data corpus included interviews with school principals, vice-principals, facilitators, and internal coordinators; observations of PLC meetings; and the analysis of both personal documents, such as research journals and emails, and institutional documents, such as facilitator reports, laws and ministerial decrees, meeting minutes, attendance and participation records, and training or professional development materials. Taken together, these sources strengthened the dissertation through triangulation and supported a more comprehensive understanding of educational leadership within PLCs and school contexts. Each empirical chapter details the specific configuration of these methods according to its research focus. Several of the

documentary and policy sources examined in this dissertation were originally published in Spanish. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish-language sources are the author's own.

4.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the personal and professional experiences of educational leaders participating in PLCs. This qualitative strategy enabled an in-depth examination of how participants understood and narrated their leadership identities, enacted their leadership practices, and experienced leadership learning and development over time. As Seidman (2019) highlights, interviews provide a powerful means of understanding educational and social issues through the lived experiences of those directly involved.

The interview process followed a two-stage structure. In the first stage, interview questions focused on how educational leaders enacted their roles and engaged in PLCs. In the second stage, follow-up questions explored their evolving participation, learning processes, and the consolidation of PLCs over time. As the PLCs progressed, additional interviews were conducted with facilitators and internal coordinators in order to examine how these supporting roles shaped leadership learning and development within the PLCs. The interview process is illustrated in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at participants' respective schools and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, depending on participants' availability and willingness to elaborate on their experiences. All interviews were digitally recorded, anonymised through coded identifiers, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Across the dissertation, interviews were conducted with school principals, vice-principals, facilitators, and internal coordinators, depending on the analytical focus of each empirical chapter. In this sense, interviews constituted a central source of evidence for accessing narrated experience, and their analytical value was strengthened through triangulation with observations and documentary materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.2 Observations

Observations were conducted during PLC meetings in order to capture interaction patterns, participation dynamics, and the functioning of these communities in real time. As a data-generation strategy, observation provided a complementary perspective to interview-based accounts by making it possible to examine leadership practices, collective learning processes, and the development of PLCs in their natural setting. As Patton (2015) notes, observational inquiry requires more than passive presence; it also depends on active engagement, relationship-building, and the gradual development of trust in the field.

The observation process followed a structured three-phase logic. First, descriptive observations offered a broad overview of the PLC setting and its main actors. Second, focused observations concentrated on interactions and practices relevant to the research questions. Third, selective observations targeted leadership behaviours, participation dynamics, and group processes that became analytically significant over time (Flick, 2014a).

A total of five PLC sessions were observed across two academic years. Each session lasted between five and a half and seven hours, including informal exchanges during breaks and lunch periods. Because the researcher entered the field as an outsider, initial observations were marked by participants' awareness of being observed, which may have influenced behaviour. Over time, however, prolonged engagement and rapport-building helped to reduce these observer effects and allowed for more natural interactions, thereby strengthening the credibility of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The full observation process of both PLCs is presented in Appendices B and C. Across the dissertation, observations were especially important for examining how leadership development unfolded through collective interaction, and for complementing participants' narrated accounts with situated evidence of practice.

4.3 Document analysis

Document analysis served as an additional method to supplement and contextualise the data obtained through interviews and observations. This involved the systematic review of both personal and institutional documents in order to provide a broader policy-oriented, organisational, and procedural perspective on educational leadership and PLC functioning. Personal documents included research journals and emails, while institutional documents included facilitator reports, laws and ministerial decrees, meeting minutes, attendance and participation records, and training or professional development materials.

As Yin (2011) argues, the use of multiple data sources allows the researcher to cross-check interpretations and enhance the credibility of the inquiry. In this dissertation, documentary evidence was used not only to corroborate participants' accounts, but also to situate them within the institutional, procedural, and policy contexts in which educational leaders worked. The selection of documents was guided by their relevance to the dissertation's research questions, ensuring that the materials analysed were directly connected to leadership identity, leadership practices, leadership learning, and leadership development.

A thematic coding approach was used to identify recurring themes in the documentary material and to align these with the patterns emerging from interviews and observations (Bowen, 2009). Ministerial guidelines and policy documents provided insight into the formal expectations placed on educational leaders, while facilitator reports, meeting records, attendance documents, training materials, and field notes offered a more situated perspective on how leadership practices and professional learning unfolded in practice. In this way, document analysis contributed to the robustness of the findings, enriched the contextual interpretation of the data, and reduced reliance on any single source of evidence.

5. Reporting empirical chapters

Presenting the empirical chapters in the sequence Chapter 4 → Chapter 5 → Chapter 6 → Chapter 7 reflects the cumulative logic of the dissertation. Rather than presenting four isolated studies, the dissertation organises them as analytically aligned components of the

same inquiry. Beginning with the phenomenological exploration of professional identity, the sequence grounds the inquiry in educational leaders' lived realities, then moves to leadership practices as these are enacted in everyday school life, and subsequently extends the analysis to leadership learning and development through PLCs over time. The final chapter broadens the focus from individual experience to the collective functioning of PLCs, thereby showing how case-based insights can inform a wider understanding of leadership development in context. This alignment made it possible to study educational leadership not as a fragmented set of topics, but as a multidimensional phenomenon approached through connected methodological lenses. Table 4 provides a schematic overview of the cumulative research design by showing how the four empirical chapters are aligned in terms of time frame, analytical focus, methodological approach, data sources, and analytical strategy.

Table 4. Schematic overview of the empirical chapters and the cumulative research design

Feature	Chapter 4	Chapter 5	Chapter 6	Chapter 7
Time frame	2018–2019	2018–2019	2018–2020	2018–2020
Core theme	Professional identity	Leadership practices	Leadership learning and development within PLCs	PLC functioning and leadership development over time
Approach	Phenomenology	Phenomenology	Longitudinal phenomenology	Multiple-case, observation-led design
Unit of analysis	Individual leaders	Individual leaders (same participants as Chapter 4)	Educational leaders' experiences over time within two PLCs	Two PLCs as bounded cases
Main data sources	In-depth interviews, ministerial documents, field notes	In-depth interviews, ministerial documents, field notes	Repeated interviews, reports, agendas, and documentary sources	Observations, documentary sources, and participants contributions recorded in fieldnotes
Analytical strategy	Inductive coding and cross-case comparison	Inductive coding and thematic analysis	First- and second-cycle coding across time	Within-case and cross-case analysis
Narrative contribution	Foregrounds the interpretive dimension of identity construction	Examines leadership practices in institutional context	Adds temporal depth to leadership learning and development	Extends the analysis to collective and organisational processes
Key output	Identity typology	Practice framework	Narrative account of leadership learning and development	Cross-case account of PLC trajectories and enabling conditions

5.1 Chapter 4. Professional identity under construction: A study on educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools

Chapter 4 examines how Ecuadorian technical school authorities perceive and construct their professional identity as educational leaders in a changing educational policy environment. More specifically, it explores how school authorities understand themselves in leadership terms, and which personal and contextual factors shape that identity-construction process. The chapter is guided by three 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? and (3) What contextual factors explain the development of technical school authorities' identity as educational leaders?

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a qualitative-interpretative design with a phenomenological orientation in order to explore the lived experiences of school authorities as they transition from administrative to more pedagogical leadership roles. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six school principals and vice-principals involved in PLCs aimed at strengthening pedagogical leadership. Data analysis followed an inductive coding process that moved from initial coding to thematic grouping and cross-case comparison. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the analysis was supported by peer debriefing, external audit, and documentary contextualisation. Within the cumulative design of the dissertation, Chapter 4 opens the empirical sequence by foregrounding the human and interpretive dimension of leadership through the study of identity.

5.2 Chapter 5. Educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools: A qualitative analysis of policy impact on leadership practices

Chapter 5 examines how educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools enact their leadership practices in a policy-regulated and contextually demanding environment. Building on the identity-focused analysis of Chapter 4, it shifts attention to leadership in action by analysing the practices through which school authorities set directions, develop people, and redesign the organisation. The chapter is guided by two sub-questions: (1) How do educational leaders enact their leadership practices in technical schools? and (2) What are the conditions that explain educational leaders' practices in technical schools?

Like Chapter 4, this chapter follows a qualitative-interpretative methodology with a phenomenological approach centred on participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the same six school principals and vice-principals, complemented by ministerial documents and field notes. Data were analysed through an inductive coding process that identified themes, causal explanations, relational dynamics, and theoretical constructs. The credibility of the findings was supported through peer debriefing, external audit, and document analysis. Within the overall dissertation,

Chapter 5 extends the analysis from who educational leaders understand themselves to be, to what they actually do as leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools.

5.3 Chapter 6. Beyond participation: Deepening leadership learning through PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools

Chapter 6 examines how educational leaders experience and interpret leadership learning and development through their participation in PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools. The chapter shifts the focus from leadership identity and practices to the processes through which educational leaders learn, change, and make sense of their professional growth within collaborative settings. It is guided by three sub-questions: (1) How do technical school authorities describe their experiences of participating in PLCs? (2) How do technical school authorities interpret the influence of PLC participation on their leadership learning and development? and (3) What conditions within PLCs do technical school authorities identify as enabling or constraining their leadership learning?

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a longitudinal phenomenological approach in order to capture participants' experiences over time. The focus is placed on participants from the two PLCs, Alpha and Beta, so as to examine leadership learning and development through sustained engagement. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with school authorities, facilitators, and internal coordinators across two academic years, complemented by documents, reports, and meeting agendas. Data analysis drew on first- and second-cycle coding in order to identify patterns related to leadership learning, development, and PLC dynamics over time. In the cumulative design of the dissertation, Chapter 6 deepens the inquiry by moving into the temporal and developmental dimension of leadership learning within collaborative professional spaces.

5.4 Chapter 7. Opening the black box of PLCs: A multiple-case study of PLC functioning and leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools

Chapter 7 examines how PLC functioning fosters leadership development among educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools. Unlike the previous chapters, which focus primarily on participants' narrated experiences, this chapter shifts the unit of analysis to the PLCs themselves as bounded cases. It therefore seeks to understand how leadership development unfolds through collective interaction, facilitation, workflow, and supportive conditions over time. The chapter is guided by three sub-questions: (1) How do PLCs evolve over time through processes of shared vision, collective inquiry, and collaborative practice in Ecuadorian technical schools? (2) Which supportive conditions and leadership dynamics shape the functioning and development of PLCs over time? and (3) What leadership practices and collective learning dynamics emerge within PLCs as they function and evolve over time?

To address these questions, the chapter adopts a multiple-case, observation-led design. Two PLCs, Alpha and Beta, were examined as bounded cases over two school years. Data were collected through observations across five PLC sessions and through document analysis, with selective participant excerpts used to contextualise observed processes. Because observations constituted the primary source of evidence, the analysis began with descriptive coding of field notes and observation records, followed by thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in PLC functioning and leadership development. These patterns were first analysed within each PLC and then compared across cases through cross-case analysis. Within the cumulative research design of the dissertation, Chapter 7 opens the organisational and collective dimension of PLC-based leadership development by showing how developmental processes are shaped not only by individual experience, but also by the functioning of the professional community itself.

Chapter 4

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

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 was 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 contextualised educational leadership research in Ecuador.

Reference

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

Over the last 20 years, educational leadership⁵ 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 American⁶ 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ Latin America is a region quite complex to define and frame (Bodenheimer, 2024; Júnior, 2008; Moya, 2010). Therefore, in this study, we use Hallinger's (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).

models are applied in a non-contextualised way, which means without any consideration for a country's particular political, cultural, and social context (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Weinstein, Hernández, et al., 2015). 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 behaviour 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 conceptualising and contextualizing educational leadership for the diverse Latin American situation (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017a; 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 programmes, stimulate teacher professional development, improve teachers' working conditions, and contribute to leadership development (MINEDUC, 2007). 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 education⁷.

⁷ 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 standardised examinations to enter the university because they are designed to measure scientific and humanistic knowledge over other competencies.

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 behaviour and become educational leaders⁸ (instead of only school managers) and enact a more participatory and pedagogical leadership approach in line with the current educational trends (MINEDUC, 2015b). 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 analyse 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 Garzón, 2013). While some administrative and overall performance data are available, research on educational leadership and school improvement is missing⁹. The results of this study will as such contribute to building a knowledge base on contextualised educational leadership research in Ecuador.

1. 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ In this sense, there is a lack of interest in analysing 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 Revelo, 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 centre 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 analysing other professional figures, such as principals, mentors, advisers and educational auditors.

1.1 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 Fanfani, 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 Chile, 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 analysed principals' role within its educational system; within Venezuela, focus has been on analysing principals' leadership styles; and in Uruguay, researchers have conducted some research on leadership and their role in the school organisation (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 programmes, 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 Fanfani, 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 recognise themselves as educational leaders (Borden, 2002).

1.2 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 recognised 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 organisations interested in educational issues. Second, since 2011, the 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 counselling, 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 Macías and Guzmán Ramírez (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 Revelo (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 Revelo (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 towards appraising the leadership position in schools is to design an initial and continuous training programme for principals' professional development as well as provide acting principals the opportunity to get a tenured position through a merit-based competition. 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 counselling 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.

1.3 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, 2010) but is continuously being reconstructed, and as such, it is in a state of 'continuous motion' (Møller, 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 Geijsel 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, 2010); as well as the development of leadership-related knowledge, skills, and abilities (C. Day et al., 2007). Based on such a conceptual framework, research shows that identity construction emerges through individual and contextual factors (Crow & Møller, 2017; Cruz-González et al., 2019; C. Day, 2018).

1.3.1 Individual factors

Which distinguishes one educational leader from the other, contributes to building a single leadership identity. Following Cruz-González et al. (2021) 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 behaviour 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).

1.3.2 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 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 organisations, in addition, to building professional relationships, they also construct their identities (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).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

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

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

2.2 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.

2.3 Context of the study and participants

In Ecuador, several efforts have been made to improve the quality of technical education (MINEDUC, 2015b). One particular area that has received attention was the further professionalisation of the school staff in both technical and pedagogical areas. For instance, since 2017, VVOB 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 the province of Santo Domingo de Los Tsáchilas. 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 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.

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

Legend. (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 taught at school, (8) Number of students enrolled at school

2.4 Data collection

Data collection methods included interviews and document analysis. The primary data source was 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 communities¹⁰. 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 contextualise 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.

2.5 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

¹⁰ 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.

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, 2010), we followed three particular research strategies, peer debriefing, external audit, and examining documents. By peer debriefing, senior researchers as co-authors 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, 2010). 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 contextualise 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.

3. Results

This section presents the findings in relation to the three research questions guiding the chapter. Firstly, it examines how Ecuadorian school authorities' process of identity development unfolds, either naturally or through the resolution of tensions associated with adopting a new role. Secondly, it explores how the development of a pedagogical leadership identity is shaped and, at times, hindered by several contextual factors. Thirdly, it analyses how, despite these contextual challenges, several personal factors enabled the development of leadership identity. Together, these findings show how professional identity is negotiated in the context of Ecuadorian technical schools.

3.1 School authorities' adoption of educational leadership

When analysing 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.

3.1.1 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 towards 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 organise' (Fernanda). However, they experience being stuck in between and strongly identify themselves with their teacher's 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 makes 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.

3.1.2 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, towards 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 towards 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, Giro 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 in 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.

3.2 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.

3.2.1 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 formalised 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 Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, 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 reveals that the described particularities of official appointments contradict established Ecuadorian educational policy. It states that several requirements and eligibility criteria must be fulfilled to act as a school principal or vice-principal¹¹. The educational framework offers the opportunity to get a permanent position as a school authority within the

¹¹ 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 programme. If the candidate fulfils 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 standardised test and the development of a project on school management.

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 organisation involves participating in a merit-based competition 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 competition 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.

3.2.2 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 analysing 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-organised 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 him 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 professionalisation, 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.

3.2.3 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 labour 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 behaviours towards 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 the province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas: 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.

3.3 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.

3.3.1 *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'.

3.3.2 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 organisational, 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 organisation 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. Professionalisation provides them with knowledge and skills to fulfill their role within schools and empowers them as leaders.

3.3.3 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 with 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 organisational 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 contributes 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.

4. Discussion and conclusion

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 (Zheng & Muir, 2015; Ritacco Real & Bolívar Botía, 2018).

Thirdly, our research also contributes to a contextualised 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 contextualised 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.

5. 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 contextualised 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 behaviours. However, by studying the reality of permanent educational leaders, the full scope of authority contributed to understanding the organisational 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 preparation and continuous professional development, this study can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at Ecuadorian educational policy with an emphasis on school authorities' preparation and professional development.

Chapter 5

Educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools: A qualitative analysis of policy impact on leadership practices

Educational leadership has garnered significant attention in Western research over the past two decades. However, in Latin America, it has only recently become a focus of study. Much of the existing research applies leadership concepts without adequately considering the unique political, cultural, and social contexts of individual countries. Ecuador, in particular, has undergone numerous educational reforms in the past fifteen years, significantly altering its educational landscape and leadership practices. This study investigates the leadership practices of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, specifically focusing on setting directions, developing people, and re-culturing schools. Through interviews and document analysis, the study reveals that educational leaders aim to redesign school organisations in a collaborative way by integrating efforts from students, parents, and teachers to achieve collective goals. They also navigate administrative duties while fostering a supportive environment for teachers and students. The study identifies factors influencing these practices, such as educational reforms and leadership responsibilities, and addresses challenges like strained professional relations and resistance from experienced teachers. These findings underscore the importance of a collaborative and distributive leadership approach tailored to Ecuador's unique social and educational context.

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Educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools: A qualitative analysis of policy impact on leadership practices

Over the past two decades, educational leadership has been extensively studied in Western contexts, with researchers examining the role of educational leaders and their influence on school improvement (Bolívar, 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008). Studies have also investigated the relationship between leadership and students' academic achievements (C. Day et al., 2016; Elmore, 2000; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Robinson, 2007a; Witziers et al., 2003), as well as the broader impact of leadership practices on the school community (Begley, 2001; Fowler & Jouganatos, 2020).

In contrast, research on educational leadership in Latin America has emerged more recently (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Flessa & Weinstein, 2018; Flessa et al., 2018; Oplatka, 2019; Weinstein, Hernández, et al., 2015). As the field develops, scholars have explored a diverse range of topics, including the roles of instructional and transformational leadership (Borden, 2011; Castillo-Ortiz, 2005; Fromm et al., 2017; Pérez, 2012; Rodríguez Cruz, 2015), leadership development (Galdames & Gonzalez, 2016; Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2015; Vaillant, 2011), and leadership responses within challenging school contexts (Ahumada et al., 2016; Santizo Rodall & Ortega Salazar, 2018; Tapia-Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2014). Additionally, research has examined educational policy frameworks and reforms in the region (Flessa et al., 2018; Weinstein & Hernández, 2016).

Despite the growing focus on educational leadership in Latin America, much of the research has applied Western leadership models without contextualizing them within the region's distinct political, cultural, and social realities (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Weinstein, Hernández, et al., 2015). Leadership theories are often transferred uncritically, portraying Latin American countries as homogeneous entities while overlooking significant national and local variations (Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2002). Consequently, scholars have called for more localized and contextually grounded studies on leadership practices to develop theoretical frameworks that better reflect the region's unique characteristics (Aguinis et al., 2020; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996).

The present study responds to that call through an analysis of educational leadership in Ecuador, where comprehensive reforms over the past fifteen years have fundamentally reshaped the educational system's regulatory framework. These structural changes have directly transformed the practice of leadership within schools across the country. The research delves into the leadership experiences and perceptions of educational leaders in Ecuador's technical schools, employing a qualitative methodology to illuminate the intricate dynamics between institutional challenges and the authentic realities of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools.

The paper focuses on key dimensions of leadership practices, such as setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organisation. These categories were selected as they align with leadership frameworks that emphasize adaptability and capacity-building in challenging contexts (Leithwood et al., 2008). Understanding how these dimensions appear in Ecuadorian technical schools provides insights into how educational leaders navigate institutional constraints while fostering school improvement.

1. State of the art and theoretical framework

This section begins with a comprehensive review of contemporary educational leadership scholarship across Latin America. Subsequently, empirical evidence regarding Ecuadorian educational policy and leadership frameworks sheds light on the contextual realities faced by educational leaders in Latin American schools, with a particular focus on Ecuador. The final section introduces our conceptual lens by outlining an analytical framework of leadership practices. This framework offers a nuanced perspective to study how educational leaders in Ecuador interpret, negotiate, and enact their professional roles within complex institutional and socio-political contexts.

1.1 Educational leadership in the Latin American context

Educational leadership literature remains dominated by scholars from Anglo-Saxon countries. Due to globalization, many nations have adopted Western leadership models and educational frameworks—often through the process of *policy borrowing*, whereby countries incorporate policies and practices originally developed in vastly different socio-cultural contexts (Ellili-Cherif et al., 2012; Phillips & Ochs, 2003). However, applying these frameworks to Latin America, Africa, or Asia without contextual adaptation raises concerns about their effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2009).

Since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Latin American countries have undergone significant political and economic transformations. The privatization and decentralization policies of the 1980s led to numerous school reforms aimed at improving efficiency (Arnové et al., 2013; Edwards, 1998). By the 1990s, reforms centred on four key areas: management, quality and equity, teacher training, and financing (Gajardo, 1999). However, these initiatives often suffered from poor implementation and limited long-term impact (UNESCO Office Santiago and Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2013).

Entering the 2000s, new policy agendas sought to address educational and social inequalities through compensatory programmes, teacher professionalisation efforts, and curricular reforms designed to enhance learning quality (Rivas, 2015). Despite these efforts, the region remains characterized by centralized governance, reinforcing regulatory, financial, and incentive policies at the national level (Pineda-Báez et al., 2019; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). This centralized approach has left educational leaders with limited autonomy in decision-making, as they must adhere strictly to national policies and administrative regulations (Oplatka, 2019). Consequently,

educational leadership in Latin America tends to be heavily bureaucratic, with leaders primarily responsible for administrative compliance rather than pedagogical innovation (Treviño et al., 2010). While constraints on autonomy persist, research identifies three core dimensions of leadership that remain relevant in the Latin American context: establishing a shared vision, fostering organisational structures, and promoting positive school environments (Treviño et al., 2010). Nonetheless, as Santizo Rodall and Ortega Salazar (2018) highlight, managing schools effectively requires leaders to engage in coordinated and delegated actions that extend beyond strict bureaucratic mandates. Leadership practices in the region are thus shaped by a combination of performance standards, institutional responsibilities, and national policy frameworks, all of which evolve at an uneven pace across different countries (Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2002; Vaillant, 2011; Weinstein, Cuellar, et al., 2015).

1.2 Educational policy and leadership in Ecuador: Empirical insights

Ecuador, like many Latin American countries, has incorporated various global educational models into its national framework. However, the exclusion of local stakeholders from decision-making has resulted in an inconsistent and ever-changing educational system (Garnica & Quezada, 2023). These stakeholders include public and private sector actors (Villarreal Erazo, 2021), as well as marginalized groups such as Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities (Rodríguez Cruz, 2015; Samaniego & Arellano, 2016).

Historically, Ecuador's educational policies have aimed to address social inequities and improve state education. Prior to 2000, initiatives focused on expanding early childhood education, promoting universal primary and secondary education, reducing illiteracy, ensuring gender equity, and improving overall education quality (Araújo & Bramwell, 2015). By the early 2000s, the country transitioned towards a deregulated, decentralized model, granting local governments greater control over resource allocation and curriculum design (Cevallos, 2016). However, in subsequent years, Ecuador saw a shift back towards centralized policymaking, driven by efforts to legitimize broader social demands (Echavarría & Orosz, 2021).

Between 2006 and 2015, Ecuador's *Ten-Year Educational Plan* outlined eight key policies, including the universalization of early childhood and basic education, improvements in school infrastructure, and enhanced teacher training programmes (MINEDUC, 2007). However, after 2017, political instability led to a decline in educational investment (Garnica & Quezada, 2023). According to Cevallos (2016), two primary characteristics define Ecuador's educational system amid these frequent reforms. First, the system remains highly bureaucratic, with strict centralized control over policy enforcement. This model fosters hierarchical power dynamics between government representatives (e.g., ministry officials, district authorities, educational advisors) and school-level actors (e.g., principals, teachers, parents). Second, since 2011, the *National Model of Support and Monitoring of Educational Management* has introduced educational counseling and auditing mechanisms, focusing primarily on institutional compliance rather than leadership development (Cevallos, 2016).

The absence of public policies supporting educational leadership remains a key issue (Fabara Garzón, 2015). There are no institutionalized programmes for initial or continuous leadership training (Fabara Garzón, 2013; Rodríguez Revelo, 2017b). Consequently, Rodríguez Revelo (2017b) argues that Ecuadorian educational leadership must be reconceptualised to navigate both bureaucratic constraints and on-the-ground challenges. Leaders must manage complex staff interactions, address the demands of local district authorities, and respond to parental concerns, all within a rigidly structured system that offers little room for innovation (Rodríguez Revelo, 2017a). Despite these obstacles, research suggests that educational leaders often demonstrate a strong personal commitment to their schools, fostering informal leadership practices even in the absence of formal training (Fabara & Padilla, 2007).

1.3 Conceptualising educational leadership through leadership practices

Defining educational leadership remains a complex endeavor, as leadership itself is context-dependent and shaped by diverse socio-educational realities (Amores Fernández & Ritacco Real, 2021; Cheng, 2010; Hannon, 2007; Vaillant, 2011). Due to this complexity, leadership models vary significantly, including instructional, managerial, transformational, moral, and distributed leadership, among others (Bush & Glover, 2014). In this sense, the ‘awareness of alternative approaches is essential to provide a set of tools from which discerning leaders can choose when facing problems and dealing with day-to-day issues’ (Bush, 2007, p. 393).

A particularly useful perspective for analysing leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools is Leithwood’s (2005) leadership practices framework, which provides a structured approach to understanding leadership behaviours within schools. Unlike broader leadership theories that often emphasize abstract principles, this model categorizes leadership practices into three key dimensions: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organisation. *Setting direction* involves defining a school’s vision and goals while fostering high expectations for performance. *Developing people* focuses on enhancing professional capacity through intellectual engagement, mentoring, and personal support, ensuring that educators and staff are well-equipped to fulfill their roles effectively. *Redesigning the organisation* emphasizes collaborative decision-making, school improvement initiatives, and the establishment of stronger connections with the broader educational community. By adopting this framework, educational leadership can be examined through a structured and context-sensitive lens, particularly in environments where bureaucratic constraints and a lack of formal leadership training present significant challenges. Leithwood’s (2005) approach is especially relevant given that educational leaders’ practices are shaped not only by institutional regulations but also by local policy frameworks and student demographics.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This paper examines the perspectives of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools to gain a contextualised understanding of educational leadership and leadership practices, contributing to the development of an indigenous Ecuadorian perspective. The central question guiding this research is: What leadership practices characterize Ecuadorian school authorities as educational leaders in technical schools? Based on the analytical framework guiding this chapter, we formulated the following sub-questions.

- How do educational leaders enact their leadership practices in technical schools?
- What are the conditions that explain educational leaders' practices in technical schools?

2.2 Methodological approach

The study sought to explore the essence of school authorities' leadership experiences instead of focusing on institutional process development. Based on this aim, we selected phenomenology rather than other qualitative approaches like case studies or narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach allows us to capture school authorities' lived experiences within their authentic educational environments. Moustakas (1994) affirms that 'the understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge' (p. 14). Through this framework, we reconstructed participants' descriptions of their leadership practices and developed a contextualised understanding of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools.

2.3 Context of the study and participants

Ecuador has implemented several educational reforms aimed at enhancing school staff professionalisation in both technical and pedagogical areas (MINEDUC, 2015b). This VVOB has partnered with the Ecuadorian MINEDUC since 2015 to bolster professional development programmes for educational leaders. A significant initiative launched in 2017 involved establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in technical schools throughout Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas province, a region previously identified as facing critical gaps in educational leadership and institutional management (MINEDUC, 2020). The identified inadequacies have constrained the establishment of sustainable professional development practices. This reality necessitates the urgent implementation of structured capacity-building programmes for school leadership personnel. For this study, we employed purposeful sampling to select participants from two among six PLCs, securing access to reflections from school principals and vice-principals regarding their educational leadership roles in technical schools (see Table 1). This sampling method, commonly used in qualitative research, ensures participants possess characteristics relevant to research objectives (Bryman, 2016). The selection facilitated examination of leadership practices enactment by school authorities within technical education frameworks.

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

Legend. (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 taught at school, (8) Number of students enrolled at school

2.4 Data collection

The research team briefed all participants about the study's purpose, ethical considerations, and withdrawal rights before initiating data collection. Researchers secured informed consent from each participant prior to interview sessions. The methodological approach incorporated semi-structured interviews, and field notes as primary data sources. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their capacity to explore participants' lived experiences thoroughly, enabling a nuanced understanding of educational leadership practices (Seidman, 2019). During the 2018-2019 academic year, researchers conducted six in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These conversations employed open-ended questions to stimulate discussion, with additional prompts emerging naturally to investigate developing themes. Interview protocols consisted of three sections: (1) professional trajectories and leadership entry paths, (2) leadership role identification and enactment, and (3) professional development experiences within PLCs. This study concentrated on the first two sections. Interviews ranged from 40 to 80 minutes in duration and took place at participants' schools. Researchers created verbatim transcriptions from digital voice recordings for subsequent analysis.

2.5 Data analysis

Researchers performed verbatim transcription of all interviews in Spanish, followed by editorial refinements to ensure clarity and accuracy. The study applied a rigorous inductive and iterative coding methodology to analyse collected data (Miles et al., 2014). The initial

analytical phase utilized descriptive and in vivo coding techniques to capture participants' exact terminology and identify core thematic elements. The coding sequence progressed through three structured phases. (1) Open coding: Researchers identified initial themes by assigning descriptive labels to meaningful text segments. (2) Axial coding: The research team established relationships between codes, refining categories and subcategories. (3) Selective coding: Analysts synthesized key themes to develop a cohesive narrative.

To support cross-case analysis, researchers compiled all codes and meaningful segments in an Excel spreadsheet. This methodological approach facilitated identification of four overarching pattern codes: (1) categories or themes, (2) causes/explanations, (3) relationships among individuals, and (4) theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). The systematic coding strategy enhanced analytical transparency and enabled nuanced comparison of participants' leadership perceptions.

The research team implemented multiple validation strategies to ensure credibility (Mertens, 2010). Peer debriefing sessions involved senior researchers who provided feedback to refine data interpretation and mitigate researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An independent researcher conducted an external audit to assess the coherence and rigor of findings (Creswell, 2007). Document analysis corroborated key insights and reinforced contextual validity (Bryman, 2016). The combined application of peer debriefing, external auditing, and document analysis strengthened research reliability and trustworthiness.

To preserve narrative authenticity, the researchers translated quotations into English only after completing data analysis and interpretation. As Feldermann and Hiebl (2020) assert, 'Translation can only be an approximation of the meaning from the source language in the target language' (p. 235). The research team devoted careful attention to maintaining the integrity of participants' intended meanings throughout the translation process.

3. Results

This section presents the findings in relation to the research questions guiding the chapter. It is organised around the three leadership practice dimensions identified in the analytical framework: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organisation. It then examines the conditions that help explain and constrain these practices in Ecuadorian technical schools. Together, these findings show how educational leadership is enacted within a policy-regulated and contextually demanding environment.

3.1 Leadership practices of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools

The subsequent analysis illuminates the multifaceted nature of leadership practices in Ecuadorian technical schools, encompassing a rich interplay of strategic, interpersonal, and organisational dimensions. Leadership approaches concerning direction-setting concentrate on cultivating shared institutional visions, facilitating goal attainment, and elevating performance expectations across the educational community. The developmental dimension

extends beyond conventional professional training to create holistic environments where personal growth and professional advancement flourish simultaneously. Organisational redesign manifests through collaborative endeavors that transform institutional structures, enhance operational processes, and adapt systems to emerging educational demands. Within this comprehensive framework, educational leaders exhibit a constellation of competencies: adaptability in dynamic contexts, cultural sensitivity amid diverse stakeholder groups, and engaged participation across the spectrum of administrative responsibilities and human-centred interventions. Consequently, educational leadership in technical schools emerges as a complex praxis characterized by unwavering commitment to nurturing cohesive, supportive, and responsive scholastic communities that authentically resonate with the distinctive needs, aspirations, and potentialities of their members.

3.1.1 Setting directions: Building collective school vision

The interview data revealed that educational administrators actively shape the institutional vision by fostering a shared understanding of school objectives and promoting collaborative engagement among staff. A key aspect of setting directions involves articulating a clear vision, establishing school-wide goals, and raising expectations to enhance institutional effectiveness. Elena emphasized the importance of inclusive leadership in this regard:

I do not manage the school processes alone. I always like to involve other school members because they are the ones who execute them. I like that they know the objectives and the goals we want to achieve. In this way, they become empowered by the school work.

This participatory approach underlines the role of educational leaders in ensuring that all stakeholders align with institutional aspirations. To achieve this, educational leaders strategically build interdepartmental collaboration involving key actors such as the vice principal, supervisory bodies, and the Student Counselling Department (DECE). These alliances not only enhance pedagogical strategies but also improve the overall school environment, including students' psychosocial well-being. Ciro elaborated on these interconnected leadership efforts: 'As a vice-principal, I have worked with the DECE department to provide advice and support to students facing academic and social challenges. With the inspection office, I have addressed organisational and planning issues to ensure the school runs efficiently'.

Moreover, educational leaders reinforce high expectations by fostering a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that school members remain engaged with the institutional mission. Bernardo highlighted how setting ambitious yet attainable goals strengthen teachers' commitment: '...I am meeting with teachers to reflect about the importance of working together to solve common problems that we have in the school...'

By integrating these leadership practices, educational leaders establish a cohesive direction that aligns institutional goals with collaborative engagement, ultimately fostering a culture of accountability and shared responsibility.

3.1.2 Developing people: Preparing teachers for future leadership role

The analysis of interview data reveals that educational leaders in technical schools deliberately nurture leadership capabilities among teaching staff through multiple approaches: promoting critical self-reflection, supporting professional advancement, and enabling knowledge dissemination about institutional management. Such position emphasizes the imperative to enhance teachers' professional competencies, thus ensuring their readiness to assume leadership positions when circumstances require.

A salient leadership practice identified through this investigation involves motivating teachers to participate in reflective discourse regarding their professional obligations and spheres of influence. Bernardo exemplified this methodological approach: 'I have promoted communication with teachers. I have always reminded them of the need to fulfill duties and responsibilities at school...'. The cultivation of a reflective and collaborative environment enables educational leaders to establish environments where teachers conceptualise leadership as an intrinsic component of their professional evolution rather than merely an isolated teaching function. Angel's comment reflects this practice: 'I put myself in the student's shoes, and somehow, I understand the situation that many don't understand. I say teachers they should make an effort to put themselves in the students' shoes'. This approach enhances the provision of intellectual stimulation alongside a compelling vision for prospective leadership opportunities.

An additional pivotal dimension of leadership development involves bolstering teachers' confidence to surmount professional uncertainties while inspiring them to adopt proactive stances towards institutional enhancement. Fernanda offered an illustrative case demonstrating how strategic leadership support can effectively counterbalance educators' disillusionment:

The inspector told me that he feels disappointed with the performance of the school staff. I told him teachers do not notice an improvement in the school work but guiding school processes is a must for school authorities. I invited him not to give up and continue doing his best at school.

This statement accentuates the role of educational leaders in modeling perseverance and resilience, which are essential for future leadership candidates. By promoting a mindset of continuous improvement rather than immediate success, educational administrators reinforce the idea that leadership requires sustained commitment.

Moreover, mentoring and knowledge-sharing emerge as fundamental leadership practices in preparing teachers for administrative responsibilities. Bernardo described how experienced leaders introduce their colleagues to leadership responsibilities:

I told some of my colleagues that they could take this position at some point. So, it is better to know something about what this office does. I think that it is necessary to share knowledge with fellow teachers.

By engaging teachers in conversations about school management, educational leaders lay the groundwork for sustainable leadership succession. When analysing the data through the

lens of the leadership practices framework, it becomes evident that educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools transcend merely supporting teachers in their current capacities. They deliberately prepare them for potential leadership positions through strategic interventions.

3.1.3 Redesigning the organisation: Collaborative work for school improvement

Empirical evidence from administrative narratives indicates that educational leaders orchestrate transformative institutional initiatives by cultivating synergistic collaboration among students, parents, and teachers. These strategic endeavors encompass architectural enhancements, instructional methodological innovations, and augmented stakeholder engagement from the scholastic community. Bernardo articulated his methodology for mobilizing communal resources towards facility modernization:

During my tenure as vice-principal, I have sought to improve different laboratories in the school. For instance, students specializing in electronics have been responsible for installing cameras in some school areas. The correct functioning of the system has been monitored by technical teachers. To accomplish this goal, parents have been our principal economic benefactors. By doing this, we drive for innovation and improvement within the school.

Furthermore, Elena accentuated the paramount significance of inculcating a collective ethos of accountability regarding school improvement:

It is satisfying to see that people are changing their attitude towards quality improvement and teamwork, all of us coming together to improve conditions rather than waiting for government intervention. Teachers are used to working with TICs. It is great to see how they have introduced technology into the educational process. The infrastructure is also improving according to the efforts we are making. Parents are committed to continuing to support it.

This analytical discourse illuminates the centrality of infrastructural development and technological integration within technical schools as an indispensable dimension of leadership-catalyzed organisational innovation.

3.2 Conditions enhancing or hindering educational leadership practices

An in-depth analysis of the findings reveals that educational leaders' practices are significantly shaped by external and internal conditions, particularly the impact of educational policy and school dynamics. These conditions either facilitate or constrain their ability to set directions, develop people, and redesign the organisation.

3.2.1 Educational policy: Aligning leadership practices with regulatory frameworks

Educational leaders' leadership practices develop within the regulatory framework of school reforms, which establish the policies and guidelines that shape institutional decision-

making. One significant policy change involved the merging of small schools into larger ones to improve educational quality and infrastructure. While this reform aimed to strengthen school management, it also introduced new leadership challenges, often increasing administrative burdens and limiting leaders' focus on instructional improvement. Angel reflected on these changes:

In the past, the finance department was responsible for controlling the assets within the school. After the educational reform, this department closed its doors then the school principal became the custodian of everything. Nowadays, the school principal is practically a money collector.

Despite these challenges, educational leaders actively seek to align institutional goals with policy requirements while preserving a degree of leadership agency. Regarding administrative and pedagogical management, Daniel emphasized the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility: 'I told teachers that although all of us have distinct roles, we must collaborate to achieve a shared educational goal: to offer warmth and quality education within the school'. Within technical schools, coexistence and school safety demand a leadership approach centred on trust and engagement. As Elena explained: 'We must provide confidence to students to let them know that we can help them solve their school problems with teachers'.

In the context of technical schools, data analysis revealed distinct roles for principals and vice-principals. Principals are primarily responsible for comprehensive administrative and managerial duties, including budgeting, policy implementation, and strategic leadership. Their role is crucial in overseeing the overall operation of the school and ensuring alignment with long-term goals. School principals adopted an administrative stance. The administration of financial and technical resources became a priority for managing and maintaining school facilities. Regarding this, Elena said:

I have to ensure that the teaching staff, students, and parents are in an adequate environment...I have to ensure that the recreation areas are also suitable and in good condition for the children, for example, that their games are not dangerous and do not threaten their integrity...I must find a way to manage financial and technical resources to rebuild some school infrastructure.

Conversely, vice-principals focus on academic and pedagogical matters. They manage curriculum development, support teaching practices, and address student academic needs on a daily basis. Daniel stated: 'I advise teachers concerning rules and educational laws- I guide them about agreements issued by the school district and support them in school activities'.

The policy framework governing principals and vice-principals' fosters leadership practices designed to build a collaborative school culture that responds to institutional needs. While principals oversee strategic planning and administrative operations, vice-principals focus on instructional leadership and student engagement. By structuring leadership roles in this way, educational policies promote a division of responsibilities, ensuring that leadership practices simultaneously support institutional objectives, staff development, and student success.

3.2.2 Relations with peers and teachers: Overcoming challenges to sustain leadership

Educational leaders routinely confront obstacles in cultivating collaborative synergy with administrative colleagues and instructional staff. Certain educational leaders perceive accountability deficiencies among their counterparts. Fernanda elucidated her professional experience:

The school principal does not monitor the administrative, academic, and organisational tasks assigned to teaching staff. She asked me to present a complete statistical report regarding students' performance. However, she does not review it, nor does she suggest an improvement plan.

Such resistance hinders educational leaders from fostering strong community ties, creating a less supportive and collaborative school environment. Moreover, experienced teachers often resist instructional innovations, showing reluctance to collaborate or enhance their teaching practices. Elena noted:

Some teachers do not want to update their teaching skills in line with current school needs. Their years in the teaching career and the fact that they got a permanent appointment give them a sense of power and job stability.

This oppositional stance potentially emanates from inadequate professional development opportunities, incentive deficiencies, or skepticism regarding imposed leadership paradigm shifts. Educational leaders must navigate these interpersonal complexities while sustaining constructive professional relationships. Angel contemplated this dilemma: 'I try to help students as much as possible to solve their problems. Most of the time, teachers do not agree with me because they say I am justifying what is not allowed in the law'.

While navigating professional tensions with staff, educational leaders remain deeply committed to fostering student success. They also showed interest in students' learning, empowering them to acquire meaningful knowledge and skills to reach their potential in high school and beyond. Bernardo stated: 'I tell students that I am interested in their learning. I give them advice about doing their best within the school'. These empirical findings underscore the necessity for leadership approaches that equilibrate authority with collaborative engagement, ensuring leadership practices concurrently support school objectives, professional staff development, and students' outcomes.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This section discusses the main findings on leadership practices in Ecuadorian technical schools, highlighting both their collaborative strengths and the limitations imposed by hierarchical structures. It examines how distributed leadership is fostered, the challenges of limited teacher involvement, and the implications for institutional effectiveness. The section also situates these results within relevant leadership theories, draws key conclusions, and outlines recommendations for policy and future research.

4.1 Leadership practices and their limitations

Based on the results of this study, educational leaders—specifically principals and vice-principals—cultivate a collaborative leadership paradigm characterized by the nurturing of dynamic interpersonal relationships and the establishment of a constructive institutional milieu. These administrators actively engage with key stakeholders—students, faculty, and parents—integrating and empowering them as integral components of a cohesive educational community. This inclusive approach reflects a form of distributed leadership, where responsibilities are shared through open dialogues with teaching staff, participatory decision-making processes, and the collective formulation of school goals. Teachers are encouraged to take on leadership roles within pedagogical initiatives, while students and parents are consulted in areas such as school improvement plans and the development of institutional norms.

They provide comprehensive pastoral support to students, addressing academic underperformance while fostering self-efficacy and pride in individual capabilities. With teaching staff, they maintain transparent channels of communication, promoting their active involvement in planning and instructional innovation. Furthermore, the educational leaders offer assistance with institutional challenges and advocate for collaborative pedagogical approaches. Parental involvement is similarly encouraged, particularly regarding financial contributions towards institutional enhancement initiatives and discussions on community-building strategies.

Notwithstanding the implementation of these leadership practices, our analysis uncovers substantial lacunae that compromise their efficacy. The entrenched hierarchical structure pervasive in Ecuadorian schools remains a critical determinant of organisational dynamics. Within this structure, principals predominantly perceive the vice-principal's office as their primary collaborator in conceptualising and promoting a collective vision of institutional advancement. Vice-principals subsequently extend this influence by establishing partnerships with other administrative entities, such as the inspection office and the Department of Student Counselling (DECE). While teaching personnel constitute essential stakeholders, their incorporation into decision-making processes remains notably circumscribed.

A particularly significant deficiency lies in the insufficient participation of educators in institution-wide decisions. This exclusionary practice not only adversely impacts the institutional climate but also constrains the implementation of innovative pedagogical methodologies. As Treviño et al. (2010) posit, when educators do not perceive themselves as integral components of leadership structures, they demonstrate diminished propensity to align their instructional practices with institutional objectives. This systemic issue demands the adoption of leadership paradigms that promote distributed decision-making processes and actively incorporate teachers in policy implementation initiatives.

4.2 Theoretical implications and leadership models

Our findings suggest that, despite operating within a highly structured system, educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools perceive themselves as having contributed to substantive changes at the institutional level. This observation aligns with Waters et al.'s (2004) balanced leadership framework, which conceptualises leadership as a structured transformative process emerging from localized contexts. Our investigation corroborates the notion that school administrators function as catalysts for change, nurturing bottom-up improvements while constructing collective leadership architectures. These insights also correspond with Fletcher and Käufer's (2003) conceptualisation of distributed leadership, wherein leadership manifests across multiple organisational strata rather than being concentrated within formal hierarchical positions.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to differentiate between distributed leadership and transformational leadership, two theoretical paradigms frequently examined in Latin American educational scholarship (Murillo & Martínez Garrido, 2015; Vaillant, 2011). While transformational leadership accentuates inspiration and a unified vision, distributed leadership facilitates collaborative governance, particularly within bureaucratic environments characteristic of Ecuadorian technical schools. Our research reveals that although school administrators endeavor to cultivate collaboration, structural limitations impede the full realization of distributed leadership practices. This underscores the necessity for policy frameworks that promote enhanced autonomy and collaborative engagement throughout all echelons of the institutional hierarchy.

4.3 Conclusion

This investigation sheds light on the leadership dynamics within Ecuadorian technical schools, revealing complex interactions between hierarchical constraints, collaborative approaches, and distributed decision-making processes. Although educational leaders demonstrate notable adaptability and innovation within existing institutional frameworks, their efficacy frequently encounters limitations due to bureaucratic structures and the insufficient inclusion of teaching staff in critical decision-making forums.

Our analysis underscores the necessity of cultivating a more participatory leadership paradigm wherein decision authority extends beyond administrative personnel to encompass educators and other essential stakeholders. Future policy formulations should endeavor to amplify leadership autonomy, establish institutional mechanisms that facilitate genuine collaboration, and ensure substantive teacher engagement in school governance structures.

Through addressing these systemic challenges, educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools can evolve towards a more inclusive and efficacious model. This transformation would ultimately yield benefits for students, teaching professionals, and the broader educational community. Subsequent research initiatives should examine practical strategies for implementing collaborative leadership frameworks in comparable educational environments. Such investigations would help ensure that leadership practices align with the dynamic requirements of technical education throughout Latin America.

5. Limitations and future research

While this study offers valuable insights into educational leadership practices within Ecuadorian technical schools, certain limitations regarding its transferability should be acknowledged. Given that the study was conducted with only six participants from a specific region in Ecuador, the findings might not be readily applicable to other educational contexts. Instead, they provide a detailed understanding of leadership dynamics within this particular setting. These insights may resonate with similar environments rather than serve as broadly generalizable conclusions. An additional limitation pertains to the methodological approach used in this study, which relied predominantly on interviews. Despite yielding rich perspectives from participants, this approach lacked direct observational data of leadership practices in situ. Furthermore, restricted access to educational settings significantly constrained our data collection protocols. This constraint ultimately led to an overreliance on interview-based information rather than a more robust methodological triangulation.

To address these constraints, subsequent investigations should encompass a more expansive participant pool to validate our conclusions. Future research must incorporate observational techniques to capture authentic leadership dynamics and their institutional impact. The adoption of diverse methodological strategies, such as mixed-method approaches that combine interviews with observations and documentary analysis, represents an essential next step. Methodological triangulation, as advocated by Yin (2016), would enable researchers to examine leadership practices with greater depth and nuance while enhancing the validity and reliability of their findings. This integrated approach would facilitate a more thorough understanding of the complex interplay between leadership paradigms and institutional contexts within Ecuador's technical education sector.

Chapter 6

Beyond participation: Deepening leadership learning through PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools

This study examines how participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) supports leadership learning among principals and vice-principals in Ecuadorian technical schools. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive, and longitudinal design informed by phenomenological principles, the research followed two PLCs over two academic years. Data was generated through fifteen semi-structured interviews with school authorities, PLC facilitators, and internal coordinators, and triangulated with field notes, meeting artefacts, and ministerial documents. Findings indicate that sustained engagement in PLCs was associated with three interrelated shifts in leadership learning. First, educational leaders reported increased self-awareness, describing a movement from predominantly managerial routines towards more relational and instructional leadership orientations. Second, educational leaders increasingly acted as conduits of learning, transferring insights from PLC participation to local management teams and teaching staff in their respective schools, thereby extending leadership learning beyond PLC meetings. Third, cross-school relationships developed among educational leaders across participating schools, fostering collective agency and a shared commitment to school improvement. However, these learning processes were constrained by systemic conditions, including unstable policy support, frequent leadership turnover, and heavy administrative workloads, which limited sustained follow-through. The study concludes that PLCs can function as meaningful spaces for leadership learning in policy-regulated and under-resourced contexts when supported by stable institutional arrangements and protected time for reflection.

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Beyond participation: Deepening leadership learning through PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools

Over the past century, there has been a dramatic increase in the literature concerning educational leadership, which has been widely researched and documented in Anglo-Saxon and Western countries. A broad body of scholarship has consistently highlighted the central role of educational leadership in school development and improvement (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Leithwood, 2005; Spillane, 2004). Within this field, one enduring and influential line of inquiry concerns the professional development of educational leaders and the ways in which leadership learning is supported through formal and informal arrangements (Daniëls et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2005; D. V. Day et al., 2014; Koonce et al., 2019; Wright & da Costa, 2016).

Despite broad agreement regarding the importance of leadership development, scholars have long questioned the content, design, and effectiveness of leadership preparation and development programmes. Early critiques emphasized the need to strengthen educational leaders' practical skills (Elmore, 2000; Hale & Moorman, 2003) and to rethink the structure of traditional training models (Hausman et al., 2000). Over time, research has converged on the view that leadership development cannot be achieved through isolated programmes alone, but rather requires sustained opportunities for learning, coaching, reflection, and practice embedded in everyday professional contexts (Pont et al., 2008). However, despite this recognition, leadership development initiatives often remain weakly connected to the practical realities of educational leadership and insufficiently responsive to local organisational and policy conditions (Cosner et al., 2018; Liljenberg & Wrethander, 2023).

From a policy perspective, this disconnect raises important concerns regarding how leadership development is designed, regulated, and enacted within education systems. Leadership development policies frequently promote standardised training models that prioritize formal instruction over situated learning, resulting in limited contextual relevance and reduced impact on leadership practices (Pont et al., 2008; Wright & da Costa, 2016). Consequently, there is growing international consensus on the need for leadership development approaches that are more closely aligned with local school contexts, professional needs, and system-level policy environments (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Salazar, 2007).

In the context of Latin America, there is evidence of a notable increase in the literature concerning educational leadership (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). Moreover, research has shown that educational leaders' professionalisation is seen as an area of growing interest (Weinstein, Cuellar, et al., 2015). However, the reality of educational leaders' professional development training is not so distant from actions taken in developing countries. Weinstein and Hernández Vejar (2014) argue that 'in most cases, programmes have an academic and

theoretical approach to leadership and have little relationship with the actual practices that principals develop in their schools and with education challenges that they face daily' (p. 256). As a result, significant gaps remain in empirical knowledge concerning how leadership development initiatives are enacted, experienced, and negotiated by educational leaders within specific national and institutional contexts (Flessa et al., 2018).

This chapter presents the third empirical study of the dissertation. While the previous studies focused on leadership identity and leadership practices, this chapter shifts attention to leadership learning within PLCs, thereby extending the dissertation's examination of educational leadership in context. Specifically, it examines leadership development among educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, a sector that has undergone substantial policy-driven reform over the past fifteen years. National reforms have reshaped governance arrangements, accountability mechanisms, and professional expectations, placing renewed emphasis on technical education as a strategic priority for economic and social development. While these reforms have altered the regulatory framework within which schools operate, little is known about how they have influenced leadership development processes at the school level or how educational leaders experience and respond to these changes in their daily practice.

Building on prior research on professional development through PLCs, this study adopts a complementary and practice-oriented focus to explore how leadership development unfolds over time through sustained engagement in PLCs. Rather than examining PLCs solely as organisational structures or professional development mechanisms, the article foregrounds educational leaders' learning processes, leadership practices, and sense-making within policy-regulated environments. By attending to both intra- and interpersonal dimensions of leadership development and by considering the roles of facilitators and internal coordinators within PLCs, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how leadership evolves within collaborative yet bureaucratically structured educational systems.

1. State of the art and conceptual lens

This section is organised into two parts. First, it reviews the state of the art on the professionalisation of educational leaders in Latin America, with particular attention to leadership preparation initiatives and their limitations. Second, it presents the conceptual lens guiding the study, which brings together two interconnected dimensions: leadership development, understood as leadership learning, and PLCs as spaces for collaborative and situated learning. Together, these dimensions provide the analytical basis for examining how educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools experience leadership learning over time.

1.1 State of the art: Educational leaders' professionalisation in Latin America

In recent years, educational leadership and leadership preparation have become increasingly prominent concerns in Latin America, where educational leaders are increasingly recognised as key actors in school improvement and system reform (Rivas,

2015; Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). As a result, leadership preparation and professional development have emerged as prominent policy concerns, driven by the need to equip educational leaders with the competencies required to address complex organisational, instructional, and social challenges (Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Unfortunately, the primary emphasis of training programmes in Latin American countries lies in in-service training, with comparatively limited opportunities for structured initial preparation or induction into leadership roles (Weinstein, Cuellar, et al., 2015). Even though in-service training programmes are offered by private institutions, public institutions, or public-private partnerships (Weinstein et al., 2014; Weinstein, Hernández et al., 2015), the professionalisation of educational leaders faces various challenges. Firstly, providers often lack specialization in educational leadership, treating it as a secondary aspect of teacher training. Secondly, ensuring quality training for educational leaders is hindered by the insufficient capability to assess or monitor ongoing training programmes. Additionally, the content of training programmes often does not align with performance standards or practical leadership frameworks, focusing more on theoretical approaches rather than addressing real-world education challenges (Weinstein & Hernández, 2016).

Responding to these challenges, several Latin American countries have introduced national or large-scale initiatives to strengthen leadership preparation. Weinstein, Cuellar, et al. (2015) highlight six major examples across the region. In Argentina, a national programme introduced in 2012 sought to strengthen educational leadership by focusing on management, school culture, and improvement projects. Brazil implemented a leadership initiative in 2013 centred on principals' roles in managing teaching and learning processes, democratic relationships, and equitable learning. Chile offered a master's programme in leadership and educational management in 2011, targeting professionals seeking to enhance their leadership and management skills. Colombia developed a programme in 2010 centred on transformational leadership practices to enhance educational leaders' skills. Mexico initiated a training programme in 2007 to develop educational leaders' competencies, based on the premise that public schools promote social transformation. Additionally, in the Dominican Republic, a training programme aimed at improving educational management was established in 2012.

These initiatives reflect an increasing policy-level recognition of the importance of educational leadership. However, they also reveal a dominant emphasis on formal training models characterized by standardised content, short-term delivery, and limited integration with leaders' situated practices. As such, while these programmes contribute to leadership preparation at the system level, they provide limited insight into how educational leaders learn, interpret, and develop leadership practices within their specific institutional contexts.

Particularly in Ecuador, two initiatives were identified concerning the professionalisation of educational leaders. In 2012, the MINEDUC published and distributed a self-study training book for educational leaders titled *Pedagogical Management for School Leaders*. The book was developed as a 60-hour self-training workshop that centred on various educational themes. The workshop's methodology was primarily based on the sharing of

experiences by school authorities and the resolution of proposed exercises. Then, in 2018, the MINEDUC collaborated with various Ecuadorian universities to offer a preparatory course for school principals. This course was available in both physical and virtual formats and had a duration of 150 hours. This programme primarily focused on promoting the principals' employment stability, as well as facilitating the advancement of teachers' careers and their involvement in future promotion processes within the education system.

Despite these efforts, empirical evidence regarding the impact of leadership preparation initiatives in Ecuador and across the region remains limited. As Weinstein et al. (2018) note, 'there is very little evidence in the region regarding the effect of school principal preparation program on their educational leadership' (p. 227). This persistent gap highlights the need to move beyond policy descriptions and formal training models towards research that examines leadership development as a learning process embedded in leaders' everyday professional experiences.

1.2 Conceptual lens

This study draws on leadership development and PLCs as its conceptual lens.

1.2.1 Leadership development as leadership learning

The first dimension of the conceptual lens concerns leadership development. Drawing on C. Day et al. (2010), this study approaches leadership development as a longitudinal process of change occurring across multiple levels and shaped through intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics. In line with the aims and interview-based design of this study, leadership development is approached here primarily as leadership learning that is, how educational leaders interpret, negotiate, and refine their leadership practices through experience, interaction, and reflection within their organisational and policy contexts.

At the intrapersonal level, leadership learning refers to changes in how leaders understand themselves, their roles, and their work over time. In this study, intrapersonal learning is examined through three interrelated and empirically accessible elements.

First, sense-making and learning orientation shape how educational leaders engage with PLCs and derive meaning from participation. Leaders' learning orientation can be self-initiated, inclusive, and guided by a larger purpose (Zheng & Muir, 2015), but it also evolves through their interpretation of what PLC participation entails, including motivations, expectations, and perceived relevance. Leaders learn through confronting challenges, engaging in complex tasks, and reflecting on their responsibilities in context (Allen & Hartman, 2008; Hirst et al., 2004).

Second, experience-based learning highlights how leadership learning develops through accumulated professional experiences and interactions. Field experience supports professional growth (Dunn et al., 2000), as leaders deliberately engage with others and reassess their role and responsibilities (Mpungose, 2010). Through recurrent leadership challenges, leaders expand their perspective and develop practical understanding that

supports coping and decision-making in complex school environments (D. V. Day et al., 2009; Fiedler, 1994).

Third, self-development and self-awareness refer to the reflective processes through which leaders reshape their professional self-understanding. Self-development is continuously formed and reformed within social contexts (Karp & Helgø, 2009) through feedback, reflection, and evaluation of assumptions, values, and relational patterns (Karp, 2013). In this sense, leadership learning includes changes in self-perception and relational stance that may influence how leaders approach collaboration, conflict, and responsibility.

At the interpersonal level, leadership learning is shaped by social interactions and collective processes that enable leaders to co-construct meaning and refine practice. Leadership development is not conceived as an individual endeavor but as a dynamic relationship oriented towards collective performance (Roth, 2022). In this study, interpersonal learning is understood through social mechanisms that connect individual beliefs and opportunities with group interactions, generating collective outcomes over time (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996). Leadership learning emerges through reciprocal influence, recognition, and negotiated participation within professional communities (Hernandez et al., 2011; van Dijke, 2020).

Within PLCs, interpersonal learning is evident in three interrelated processes. First, collective sense-making and knowledge circulation occur as leaders engage in professional dialogue, share experiences, and translate learning into school-level interactions. Second, role dynamics and distributed coordination shape learning opportunities through the ways facilitators and internal coordinators guide participation, structure reflection, and support (or fail to support) continuity between sessions. Third, agency under policy constraints captures how leadership learning is negotiated within policy-regulated environments where participation requirements, formal role expectations, workload conditions, and bureaucratic arrangements can either enable or undermine sustained learning over time.

Together, these intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions clarify how leadership learning is understood in this study and provide the basis for examining leaders' reported learning processes over time. While leadership development research also addresses competencies, personality traits, and effectiveness, this study focuses specifically on practice-related meanings that are empirically accessible through two rounds of interviews.

1.2.2 PLCs as spaces for leadership learning

PLCs have been widely examined in the educational leadership literature as organisational arrangements that support collaborative learning, professional dialogue, and continuous development. In contrast to individual and programme-based approaches to leadership preparation, PLCs foreground learning as a social and situated process, where educational leaders engage collectively in reflection, inquiry, and the negotiation of practice (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord & Roy, 2013).

From a constructivist perspective, PLCs create learning environments in which educational leaders generate meaning through interaction with peers, drawing on shared

experiences and contextual feedback (Aas & Vavik, 2015). Rather than transmitting predefined solutions, PLCs offer opportunities for leaders to compare leadership approaches, challenge assumptions, and broaden their understanding of how leadership can be enacted in diverse school contexts. Such learning processes depend not only on participation but also on how PLCs are structured, facilitated, and sustained over time (Lazenby et al., 2022).

Research highlights several conditions that shape leadership learning within PLCs, including the relevance of discussion topics, opportunities for active engagement, continuity across sessions, and the presence of facilitative roles that support dialogue and reflection (Brown & Flood, 2019; Lazenby et al., 2022). When these conditions are weak or unevenly implemented, PLCs risk becoming episodic meetings rather than sustained learning spaces. Conversely, when PLCs enable collective inquiry and shared responsibility, they can support leadership learning oriented towards instructional improvement and distributed forms of leadership practice (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Hord, 2009; Humada-Ludeke, 2013).

Importantly, PLCs do not operate in isolation from broader policy and organisational contexts. In many education systems, PLCs are introduced as part of reform agendas and are shaped by regulatory frameworks, role expectations, and accountability pressures. These policy conditions can both enable and constrain leadership learning by influencing participation, autonomy, and follow-up. Understanding PLCs as policy-embedded learning spaces therefore requires attention to how educational leaders experience, interpret, and negotiate PLC participation within bureaucratic and institutional structures.

In this study, PLCs are conceptualised as social learning spaces through which educational leaders engage in leadership learning over time. Rather than assuming PLCs as inherently effective development mechanisms, the analysis examines how leadership learning unfolds in practice, how roles and interactions shape learning opportunities, and how institutional and contextual constraints influence the sustainability and perceived value of PLCs in Ecuadorian technical schools.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

The guiding question of this chapter is: How do PLCs shape educational leaders' leadership learning and development in Ecuadorian technical schools? Based on our theoretical framework, we formulated these sub-questions:

- How do technical school authorities describe their experiences of participating in a PLCs?
- How do technical school authorities interpret the influence of PLC participation on their leadership learning and development (both in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal learning)?
- What conditions within PLCs do technical school authorities identify as enabling or constraining their leadership learning?

2.2 Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and longitudinal research (from 2018 to 2020) approach to examine educational leaders' leadership learning through participation in PLCs. The aim is not to evaluate PLC effectiveness, but to understand how educational leaders make sense of their experiences, how their interpretations evolve over time, and how leadership learning is shaped through interaction within policy-regulated professional contexts of technical education.

Drawing on qualitative interpretive traditions, the study recognises that experience is inseparable from meaning-making. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue, experience involves not only what individuals do, but also how they interpret and give meaning to what they experience. Accordingly, this research focuses on educational leaders' accounts of participation in PLCs, paying particular attention to changes in perceptions, engagement, and leadership learning over time.

The longitudinal design enabled the exploration of evolving leadership learning processes across two rounds of interviews. This approach is well suited to examining developmental trajectories, as it allows attention to shift in involvement, commitment, and interpretation as PLCs unfolded. Consistent with Saldaña's (2003) perspective on longitudinal qualitative analysis, changes in participants' cognitive, relational, and practice-oriented understandings were examined in order to capture nuanced patterns of leadership learning across time.

By foregrounding educational leaders' perspectives, this methodological approach aligns with the study's theoretical focus on leadership learning as a process of sense-making embedded in social interaction and institutional conditions, rather than as the outcome of a predefined training intervention.

2.3 Context of the study and participants

Since 2017, a public-private partnership between the MINEDUC and VVOB has promoted PLCs as a professional development strategy for school management teams in technical schools. This initiative was implemented in the province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Ecuador, as part of broader efforts to strengthen leadership capacity and management practices in technical education.

PLCs were introduced in October 2017 during an informational session jointly organised by MINEDUC and VVOB on the status of technical education. Following this session, seven PLCs were established, with participation restricted to school principals and vice-principals. PLC meetings were held in both urban and rural technical schools, with meeting venues rotating across participating schools to enable management teams to observe and discuss diverse institutional contexts. During the 2018–2019 school year, PLCs conducted three formal sessions, followed by an additional four sessions during the 2019–2020 school year, forming a sustained professional learning initiative over two academic years.

PLCs in this context should be understood as emerging, policy-initiated professional learning spaces, rather than as fully institutionalized organisational routines within schools.

Their implementation was shaped by regulatory arrangements, role expectations, and administrative conditions defined by the education system. As such, PLC participation was influenced by both policy mandates and local school dynamics, creating varied conditions for engagement and leadership learning.

For the purposes of this study, participants were purposefully selected from two of the seven PLCs. This selection was guided by analytical considerations related to sustained participation and the opportunity to examine leadership learning processes over time. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the sampling strategy sought to capture information-rich cases that could illuminate how educational leaders experienced and interpreted PLC participation within technical schools (Bryman, 2016).

The primary participants included school principals and vice-principals from the selected PLCs who were actively involved during the study period. In addition, the perspectives of two PLC facilitators (i.e. educational advisors assigned by the school district) and three internal coordinators (i.e. educational leaders who assumed peer coordination roles within the PLCs) were included to contextualise and triangulate school authorities' accounts. These perspectives provided insight into the organisational, relational, and policy-related conditions shaping PLC implementation and leadership learning, without shifting the analytical focus away from educational leaders' experiences.

2.4 Data collection

Data collection primarily relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews, complemented by a review of documentary sources to support contextualization and triangulation. Documentary materials included institutional documents such as ministerial regulations, PLC agendas and minutes, facilitators' reports, attendance records, and professional development materials, as well as personal documents shared by participants (e.g., research journals and emails). The use of multiple data sources allowed the study to capitalize on their respective strengths and to capture different dimensions of leadership learning within PLCs (Maxwell, 2012). While interviews constituted the main analytic data, documentary sources were used to contextualise participants' accounts and to support interpretive consistency.

Interview data were collected over two consecutive school years, enabling a longitudinal perspective on educational leaders' leadership learning. During the 2018–2019 school year, interviews were conducted with two school principals and four vice-principals. In the 2019–2020 school year, interviews were carried out with one school principal and four vice-principals, as well as with two PLC facilitators and three internal coordinators (see Table 1). This sequencing allowed for examination of continuity and change in leadership learning experiences over time, while also incorporating the perspectives of actors occupying supportive and coordinating roles within the PLCs.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted with educational leaders. In the first round, interview questions focused on participants' professional roles, initial engagement with PLCs, and early interpretations of their participation. The second round of interviews aimed to trace changes in involvement, learning processes, and perceived leadership development

as PLCs evolved, including participants' reflections on the consolidation and challenges of PLC work. Interviews with PLC facilitators and internal coordinators focused on their roles in guiding, supporting, and structuring leadership learning within the PLCs.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face with individual participants and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, depending on participants' availability and willingness to share professional experiences. Interviews took place at participants' schools and were conducted in Spanish. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder. Audio files were anonymized using code numbers and transcribed verbatim into Word documents for analysis.

Table 1. PLCs interviewees

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

Legend. (I) Interviewed during first year, (II) Interviewed during second year
Pseudonyms are used instead of participant's real names

2.5 Data analysis

The analytical focus of this study lies in understanding educational leaders' leadership learning processes as they unfolded through participation in PLCs. In line with an interpretive qualitative approach, interview data were treated as accounts through which participants narrated and made sense of their professional experiences (Seidman, 2019). Analysis therefore focused on how educational leaders interpreted their engagement in PLCs, how meanings evolved over time, and how learning was shaped through interaction and context.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Spanish. Transcripts were carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and to preserve participants' original wording and expressions. Data analysis followed an iterative coding process involving first-cycle and second-cycle coding, as outlined by Miles et al. (2014) and Saldaña (2021).

During the first cycle of coding, values coding was employed to explore educational leaders' values, attitudes, and beliefs related to their participation in PLCs. This coding approach was particularly suited to the study's theoretical focus on leadership learning as a process of sense-making, as it allowed attention to how participants interpreted PLCs, articulated motivations, and expressed orientations towards leadership learning within a policy-regulated professional development context. Initial codes captured participants' perceptions of PLCs, their engagement with learning activities, and their interpretations of leadership roles and responsibilities.

In the second cycle of coding, patterned coding was used to identify relationships and recurring configurations across the data, including similarities, differences, sequences, and contrasts over time (Hatch, 2002). Through this process, codes were refined and grouped into analytically oriented categories that reflected leadership learning processes rather than descriptive topics. These categories included, for example, educational leaders' interpretations of PLCs as learning spaces, experiences of leadership learning through interaction and reflection, perceived changes in leadership practice, and challenges encountered during PLC participation. A further layer of analysis focused on identifying conditions shaping leadership learning, such as the relevance of content, the design of activities, and the quality of social relations within PLCs. These conditions were identified inductively through the coding process and examined in relation to participants' learning trajectories.

To support interpretive rigor, interview analysis was complemented by a thematic analysis of supplementary data sources. Consistent with Yin's (2011) view that qualitative inquiry benefits from multiple sources of evidence, documentary materials were analysed to contextualise and triangulate interview accounts rather than to generate parallel findings. These materials included ministerial documents, PLC agendas and minutes, facilitators' reports, field notes, and didactic resources used during PLC sessions (e.g., printed materials and flipchart papers). In evaluating these sources, Scott's (1990) criteria (i.e. authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning) were applied to assess their relevance and analytical value.

The integration of interview and documentary data enabled the reconstruction of key events and learning processes within PLCs and supported a coherent interpretation of how leadership learning unfolded over time (Flick, 2014a). Through this analytic approach, the study sought to develop an in-depth and contextualised understanding of educational leaders' leadership learning within emerging, policy-initiated PLCs.

2.6 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with national regulations governing research in public educational institutions in Ecuador. Formal authorization to access schools, PLC sessions, and related documents was obtained from the MINEDUC. Formal approval from a centralized ethics committee was not required for this type of educational research. All participants received written and oral information about the study and provided informed

consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information.

3. Results

The results of this study are organised into three interrelated dimensions. First, they examine how educational leaders experienced participation in PLCs and how leadership learning began to emerge within these collaborative spaces. Second, they explore how educational leaders interpreted the influence of PLC participation on their leadership learning and development over time. Third, they analyse the institutional and contextual conditions that enabled or constrained these processes in Ecuadorian technical schools

3.1 Building PLCs from within: Actors, actions, and learning dynamics

This section examines how PLCs were progressively built through the interaction of multiple actors and how interpersonal leadership learning emerged through collective experiential engagement. The findings are presented as four analytically connected stages, tracing the process from policy framing to practice-oriented engagement and showing how key PLC conditions shaped leadership learning in context.

3.1.1 From policy to practice: PLCs as collaborative learning strategy

At the initial stage of implementation, educational leaders described PLCs primarily in terms of their policy origins. Participants commonly framed PLCs as a governmental, collaborative, and cohesive strategy that seeks to enhance the performance of the management teams. As Ciro explained, the notion of ‘Learning community’ is explicitly defined within the Ecuadorian educational law, which states the importance of the learning relations not only between students and teachers but also among all educational actors:

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. (Reglamento General a la Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural, 2012, Art. 309)

This policy definition situated PLCs within a broader vision of education as a socially interconnected and collective process, shaping how educational leaders initially interpreted their participation. At this early stage, PLCs were largely understood as a formal policy initiative rather than as an established professional learning practice.

As participation continued, educational leaders’ interpretations began to evolve. Participants increasingly described PLCs as spaces for professional dialogue, critical reflection, and shared leadership. Bernardo noted that PLCs enabled educational leaders to compare management approaches, consider diverse perspectives, and collectively explore responses to challenges specific to technical schools. He emphasized peer interactions

through PLCs as something valuable and desirable over time: ‘...the PLCs are something innovative within our educational practice. They are just started, and I hope it will continue...’. This evolving perception underscores a shift from compliance with a formal mandate to genuine engagement in an emerging community of practice.

The concept of collective involvement emerged strongly through social mediated interactions that fostered both professional learning and interpersonal connection. Daniel described 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’. These participants’ accounts highlight how interpersonal leadership learning began to take shape through shared goals, relational trust, and collaborative sense-making.

As PLCs progressed, the perspectives of other actors, particularly facilitators and internal coordinators, added nuance to how the objectives and scope of PLCs were understood. Gabriel, a facilitator, highlighted the value of PLCs for both educational leaders and those in support roles: ‘...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 perspective reinforces the reciprocal nature of learning within PLCs, emphasizing the dual development of leadership skills and advisory capacity.

Similarly, Irma, an internal coordinator, stressed the contextual relevance of the PLCs within 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 illustrates how PLCs functioned as spaces where leadership learning intersected with national educational priorities, allowing school authorities to collectively interpret and respond to policy goals within their local contexts.

3.1.2 From general discussion to practical engagement: The evolving focus of PLCs

Interview data revealed a clear progression in how the focus of PLC sessions evolved over the two-year period. Educational leaders described a gradual shift from broad, generalized discussions towards more practice-oriented and context-sensitive engagement, reflecting changes in how PLCs were experienced as spaces for leadership learning.

During the first year of implementation, educational leaders expressed mixed views regarding the relevance of the topics addressed in PLC sessions. Daniel noted that much of the information was broadly disseminated and already familiar: ‘...most of the time, school authorities participate in conversations about some familiar and central themes...’. Similarly, Ciro argued for a shift towards more context-specific content: ‘...there is a further need to go into the specificity of the school context and its current needs...’. These comments reveal a gap between the formal design of professional development and the real, situated needs of educational leaders. This disconnect mirrors the broader critique that many training

initiatives are overly theoretical and fail to address the complex challenges of educational leadership in local contexts.

Educational leaders also expressed divergent perspectives on the activities conducted during PLC sessions. While some participants experienced the activities as meaningful learning opportunities, others questioned their practical applicability. Elena described her participation positively: ‘...participating in the activities of the learning community is a very enriching experience...’. In contrast, Bernardo acknowledged their interest but highlighted limited transfer to practice: ‘...the PLC activities are very interesting. However, we do not put them into practice yet...’. Daniel further reflected on the repetitive nature of some activities: ‘...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 mixed reactions reflect a common tension in professional development initiatives: the challenge of translating discussion-based learning into sustained changes in leadership practice.

As the PLCs evolved, educational leaders began to highlight the value of content that was not only relevant but also applicable to real-world challenges. Fernanda emphasized the value of practical tools and techniques that supported problem-solving and collective action: ‘...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 growing emphasis on applicability indicates a shift in how leadership learning was conceived: away from abstract discussion and towards engagement with authentic professional problems.

As a result, changes in learning priorities were gradually reflected not only in the topics addressed, but also in the way PLC sessions were structured. By the second year of implementation, educational leaders reported that PLC sessions had become more explicitly focused on identifying and addressing concrete school-based issues. Elena explained: ‘...our interest is in developing pedagogical support to improve teachers' performance and students' learning’. Data analysis suggested a recurring structure in PLC sessions. First, the facilitators proposed to reflect on school authorities' performance as educational leaders. Second, participants shared experiences from their own schools and collectively explored possible responses. Bernardo described this as follows: ‘...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 interactions, leadership learning increasingly took the form of collective inquiry and problem-solving grounded in participants' professional realities.

As part of this reflective and practice-oriented shift, educational leaders identified specific strategies that emerged from PLC discussions and were subsequently applied in schools. One such strategy was the use of restorative circles to address behavioural issues among students and resistance to change among teachers. Regarding this, Elena described: ‘...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 the social relations within the classrooms’. The adoption of this approach

illustrates how leadership learning within PLCs moved beyond discussion to the enactment of relational and context-responsive practices, supporting the development of interpersonal leadership competencies aligned with authentic leadership principles.

3.1.3 Guiding learning together: The dual roles of facilitators and internal coordinators

Within the PLCs, leadership learning was shaped not only by participating school authorities but also by two key supporting actors: PLC facilitators and internal coordinators. These roles were conceived as complementary and supportive, yet their responsibilities were not always clearly distinguished in practice, particularly during the early stages of PLC implementation.

PLC facilitators were educational advisors working at the school district level. At the beginning of the PLC work, educational leaders often interpreted the facilitators' role through the lens of the advisors' formal responsibilities within the education system. As a result, there was some ambiguity regarding whether facilitators were expected to guide leadership learning processes or to provide technical support related to curricular and administrative tasks. Elena, for instance, associated the facilitator's role with curricular guidance: '...the educational advisor has guided us in the elaboration of several curricular documents. We have received much support from them'. In the same vein, Ciro pointed out that training on curricular issues is relevant and meaningful learning experiences for educational leaders. He added that by providing this kind of support, educational advisors were fulfilling their 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...'. The misinterpretation of the duties of PLC facilitators responded to the educational advisor's role, which is framed in Ecuadorian educational law. Two points of the educational law explain the duties of an educational advisor: 'Conduct periodic visits that allow for constant counselling to the educational establishments in its jurisdiction' and 'Guiding training and professional development activities' (Reglamento General a la LOEI, 2012, art. 309). This convergence of expectations illustrates how policy-defined roles shaped initial understandings of facilitation within PLCs.

In practice, facilitators were primarily responsible for logistical coordination prior to each meeting. This included sharing the agenda, distributing supporting materials, and providing guidelines or protocols for participation. However, their involvement was generally limited to formal sessions, with little to no follow-up or sustained engagement between meetings. Daniel described: '...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'. From a leadership learning perspective, this lack of continuity constrained opportunities for ongoing reflection, feedback, and reinforcement; key elements of sustained professional learning. Despite these structural limitations, school authorities valued the facilitators' expertise and commitment. Elena reflected: 'Well, we have been quite lucky. 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 facilitators' professional capacity and the structural limitations of their role points to a missed opportunity to more fully support leadership learning over time.

Alongside facilitators, some educational leaders assumed the role of internal coordinators within the PLCs. These positions were typically assigned through peer recognition, based on individuals' professional experience and understanding of the educational context. According to Fernanda, internal coordinators were responsible for convening meetings, fostering participation, and providing leadership to other members. However, fulfilling this role proved challenging due to competing administrative demands. As Bernardo pointed out: '...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...'. This tension between leadership expectations and daily administrative workload limited the coordinators' ability to provide sustained support. Nonetheless, they remained engaged in key organisational and logistical aspects of the PLCs. Elena explained: '...I coordinate activities of an organisational nature, such as the provision of certain materials and resources before the meetings...'. This partial enactment of leadership reflects a recurring challenge in distributed leadership arrangements, where structural constraints can hinder the full exercise of leadership roles.

In both roles, the transition to becoming a PLC facilitator and an internal coordinator unfolded gradually. For instance, initially, educational advisors were involved in training sessions organised by VVOB. Gabriel talked about the training they received from the private sector: '...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...'. Then educational advisors were invited to observe the PLC meetings, and at the same time, support staff of PLC facilitators. Helga said: '...I could accompany and observe the work within professional learning communities several times'. Once the group dynamics were understood they started to lead sessions. Gabriel said: 'After observing the functioning of two or three meetings, it is time to do things by myself'. This progressive transition into leadership positions demonstrates how educational advisors valued gaining a fresh perspective for supporting educational leaders. Helga described this as follows:

I used to share my comments or suggestions with school authorities, but after being involved in the PLCs, I learned that nobody should tell them what to do. In the PLCs, 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.

This indicates a change towards more authentic leadership and coaching that facilitates growth, highlighting the importance of empowerment and reflection rather than simply prescribing solutions.

In parallel, internal coordinators pointed out that it had also been a formative experience for them. For instance, it was clear that school authorities had no intention of becoming internal coordinators within the PLCs. Most of them were not willing to adopt a new role even though they had a professional background. However, the interest in improving technical education motivated them to accept this responsibility. Jaime mentioned:

‘Nowadays, I am coordinating this because I want to lend a hand and, at the same time, work together with my colleagues...’. This progression reflected a shift towards facilitative and reflective leadership practices. Irma said: ‘...through small talks, the facilitators share with us some guidelines that we have to know. For instance, how to conduct sessions and transmit knowledge...’. As this regard, Jaime added: ‘...together with the PLC facilitator, we are setting the objectives before the PLC sessions and working on issues concerning attendance and participation...’. As a natural transition process, internal coordinators were seen as the ones who will lead the PLCs and guide their peers: ‘The PLC internal coordinator will be responsible for guiding all the processes within the PLCs...’ (Gabriel). This gradual assumption of responsibility exemplifies leader emergence, whereby leadership develops through recognition, relational influence, and situated learning within professional communities.

3.1.4 Experiential learning at PLCs: Between obligation and ownership

Educational leaders’ engagement in PLCs unfolded within a tension between institutional obligation and personal ownership of learning. This subsection highlights several conditions that shaped leadership learning within PLCs, including participation requirements, levels of commitment, opportunities for reflection, practical relevance, follow-up, and available time for engagement.

Participation in PLC meetings was not initially voluntary; rather, school principals and vice-principals were formally summoned by local school authorities. Fernanda ensured that the school district obliged school principals and vice-principals to attend such meetings. However, in some cases, the attendance was voluntary due to educational leaders’ interest in improving professional skills. This is seen in the following narrative: ‘...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...’ (Daniel). This contrast illustrates how PLC participation was shaped by both external requirements and individual learning orientations.

Levels of engagement varied considerably among participants. Some educational leaders demonstrated strong commitment to PLC work, while others participated more sporadically or disengaged altogether. Fernanda summarized this variation: ‘Some participants are committed to PLC work, other participants need extra support, and other ones are not involved at all...’. Elena similarly noted that sustained participation required ongoing commitment: ‘...many school authorities have quit PLC 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’. At the same time, other educational leaders adopted a proactive stance towards their professional learning. 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 contrasting orientations highlight how leadership learning was closely tied to participants’ willingness to assume ownership of the PLC process.

Educational leaders also identified several challenges that shaped their learning experiences within PLCs, particularly during the early stages of implementation. Participants reported uncertainty about the purpose and potential contribution of PLCs to their professional learning, often linked to the absence of clear guidelines. Bernardo recalled:

As school authorities, we have attended many meetings about different school issues. So, 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.

In addition, participants described some PLC practices as overly time-consuming. Daniel commented that extended reflective processes sometimes felt inefficient: ‘...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...’. Others emphasized the need for more dynamic and practice-oriented activities. Bernardo suggested: ‘...PLCs should be more active and dynamic. For instance, school authorities should do some practice at PLCs then transmit what we have learnt to each school...’.

A further concern related to the lack of systematic follow-up and feedback. Fernanda expressed frustration with the absence of monitoring mechanisms: ‘...there is no following-up process. We do not know if we are doing it right or where we are doing it wrong’. She elaborated on the perceived lack of impact:

I have been to some meetings, and I do not see that it has contributed to change. There is nothing new in this. Other participants do not present, do not attend, and do not go. I wonder how they are going to change schools. What are we doing here? I say we are doing nothing.

Finally, heavy administrative workloads constrained educational leaders’ capacity to engage fully in PLC activities. Angel explained:

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 that we have to carry out. Unfortunately, such training is not benefiting us. (Angel)

These limitations show that experiential learning requires more than participation—it demands clearly defined objectives, streamlined processes, interactive practice, structured feedback, and the time and space for leaders to reflect and apply new insights.

Despite these challenges, educational leaders described a gradual shift in the learning dynamics within PLCs. Over time, inquiry-based approaches, experience-sharing, and collaborative reflection became more prominent. PLC facilitators emphasized a move away from directive training towards reflective questioning. Helga explained this:

It is not the same to be in a workshop where you tell them what to do, and we are going to do it in this way. In the PLCs, you have to ask questions so that they continue reflecting and the answers come out of them.

This new approach enabled educational leaders to take a deeper look at improvement processes at technical schools. Elena referred to this: ‘...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 emerged as a central mechanism for leadership learning. Fernanda highlighted its value: ‘...all the colleagues have lived important experiences in their environment. Sharing them allows us to have a broader vision of school issues’. More experienced leaders also played a key role in supporting their peers. As Daniel observed: ‘...the colleagues who have had the most experience in management positions have been the ones who have contributed to less experienced ones...’.

Through these collaborative interactions, PLCs fostered interpersonal leadership learning grounded in mutual support and collective responsibility. Ciro captured this: ‘...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’. These findings show how experiential learning within PLCs evolved from compliance-driven participation towards greater ownership, relational engagement, and shared professional growth.

3.2 Leadership unfolded: Outcomes, role dynamics, and aspirations in PLCs

As educational leaders engaged in PLCs over time, they described a range of learning outcomes related to how they understood themselves as leaders, how they interacted with others, and how they approached leadership action within and beyond their schools. Rather than representing linear or uniform effects, these outcomes reflect intra- and interpersonal leadership learning processes shaped through participation, reflection, and collaboration. In this sense, leadership learning unfolded gradually, alongside participants’ evolving expectations for future professional practice.

3.2.1 Awareness, advocacy, alliance: Three pillars of leadership change in PLCs

Educational leaders’ accounts point to three interrelated expressions of leadership learning through PLC participation. The first reflects intrapersonal learning, particularly through increased self-awareness and reflection on leadership style. The second and third reflect interpersonal learning, as leaders circulated knowledge within their schools and developed collaborative alliances across institutions.

First, increased self-awareness emerged as a central intrapersonal learning outcome. Through participation in PLCs, school authorities reported becoming more reflective about their leadership styles and relational practices. Several participants described a shift towards more collaborative and inclusive approaches to working with colleagues. Elena reflected on this change as follows: ‘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 further highlighted improved relationships 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’. These accounts illustrate leadership learning as a process of self-development grounded in reflection and ongoing social interaction within professional communities.

Second, leadership learning was enacted through the dissemination and adaptation of knowledge within schools. After PLC meetings, management teams described sharing insights, tools, and experiences with other school authorities and teaching staff. In some cases, this dissemination occurred through hierarchical channels. As Bernardo explained: ‘...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 other cases, educational leaders engaged directly with teachers. Ciro stated: ‘...knowledge has been spread with the teaching staff in the area and committee meetings. They have been oriented in educational leadership and pedagogical support...’. Beyond information sharing, participants emphasized collaborative application. Elena described this process: ‘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 illustrates leadership learning as contextualised and practice-oriented, where knowledge is adapted and enacted through collective engagement rather than simply transferred.

Third, leadership learning extended beyond individual schools through the development of inter-school alliances. Participation in PLCs prompted educational leaders to reconsider the scope of their professional relationships. Irma referred to this: ‘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 school work’. As collaboration deepened, participants reported jointly identifying shared challenges and coordinating responses across schools. Fernanda explained ‘...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 further emphasized the value 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.

These accounts highlight inter-school networking as a form of distributed leadership learning, in which shared goals, mutual recognition, and collaborative problem-solving contribute to leadership development at a broader system level. Through increased self-awareness, active advocacy within schools, and alliance-building across institutions, educational leaders described how participation in PLCs supported the gradual unfolding of leadership learning in technical school contexts.

3.2.2 Supporting, convening, leading: How different PLC actors co-construct their development

This subsection shows how interpersonal learning within PLCs was shaped by role dynamics and distributed coordination, particularly through the evolving roles of facilitators and internal coordinators.

For educational advisors acting as PLC facilitators, participation in the PLCs prompted a reorientation of their advisory practices. Rather than providing directive guidance, facilitators increasingly described their role as supporting reflective inquiry among educational leaders.

Gabriel explained: ‘...I started to conceive educational counselling from another point of view... making school authorities think about their role as school managers within their schools...’. This account illustrates how facilitators’ leadership learning involved moving towards inquiry-based support, in which questioning and reflection became central mechanisms for engaging others’ professional growth.

Internal coordinators likewise described leadership learning as emerging through relational influence and shared responsibility. Irma reflected on how assuming this role contributed to her own sense of leadership: ‘...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’. Through these experiences, internal coordinators developed confidence and responsibility within socially supportive environments. This learning was reinforced as coordinators encouraged their peers to connect PLC work with institutional expectations. 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 accounts show how leadership learning involved integrating policy frameworks into collective practice, rather than applying them individually.

Educational leaders’ leadership learning also evolved in relation to changes in self-perception and recognition by colleagues. Participants described gaining new perspectives on school management and teaching as they navigated different roles within PLCs. Ciro, an experienced school authority, reflected on strengthened management capabilities: ‘...by being involved in PLCs, we strengthened our school management skills...’. In contrast, Daniel, who anticipated returning to a teaching role, described how management experience reshaped his understanding of teaching practice: ‘...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’. These shifting perspectives illustrate how leadership learning was shaped through role transitions and reflective comparison of professional positions.

As educational leaders developed greater awareness of leadership as a collective endeavor, they increasingly emphasized shared responsibility and power distribution within their schools. Bernardo described how this orientation was transferred to school-level practice: ‘...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...’. This reflects leadership learning as a relational process in which experience, reflection, and mutual acknowledgment contribute to the ongoing construction of professional identity and collaborative leadership practices.

3.2.3 Educational leaders’ future expectations for PLCs

Educational leaders articulated clear expectations regarding the continuation and future development of PLCs, particularly in relation to the conditions that could sustain leadership learning over time. Many participants expressed a desire to remain involved, describing PLCs as learning spaces that supported reflection on educational leadership and encouraged

ongoing professional change. Over time, PLCs came to be viewed not merely as a mandated initiative but as a meaningful platform for school improvement. Bernardo reflected this shift when he stated: ‘...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...’. This account suggests that sustained participation in PLCs was increasingly associated with long-term leadership learning and collective school development.

Participants also described notable changes in their attitudes towards PLC participation. While some educational leaders initially experienced discomfort and even hoped that PLCs would be short-lived, their perspectives evolved as they became more engaged in the process. Elena captured this transformation: ‘...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 illustrate a learning trajectory in which continued participation fostered confidence, openness, and a more positive orientation towards collaborative professional learning.

At the same time, educational leaders emphasized the need for greater autonomy in how PLCs were conducted. Several participants noted that PLCs were strongly framed by structures and requirements imposed by the Ministry of Education, which sometimes limited local decision-making. Ciro articulated this concern: ‘...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 expectation highlights the role of agency in leadership learning, suggesting that PLCs are experienced as more meaningful when leaders are empowered to adapt processes to their local contexts.

Educational leaders further described PLCs as a source of motivation for distributing leadership responsibilities within schools. Participation encouraged them to involve others in school development and to move away from individualized leadership practices. Fernanda noted: ‘...this encourages educational leaders to distribute the work with other school staff and support each other...’. Irma reinforced this view: ‘...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 an orientation towards distributive leadership, in which leadership learning involves fostering shared responsibility and collective engagement.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of extending support to novice school authorities. Jaime emphasized the value of mentoring less experienced colleagues: ‘...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 aspiration aligns with collaborative learning approaches and points to mentoring and peer support as key mechanisms for sustaining leadership learning within and beyond PLCs.

Together, these future-oriented expectations indicate that educational leaders viewed PLCs as spaces for ongoing leadership learning rather than as temporary interventions. Their aspirations emphasized continuity, autonomy, shared leadership, and peer support as

conditions for sustaining professional growth and strengthening leadership practices in technical schools.

3.3 Obstacles to sustainable PLCs: Institutional fragmentation and contextual resistance

Educational leaders' accounts also revealed several institutional and contextual conditions that constrained leadership learning within PLCs, particularly those related to continuity, participation, workload, and policy support.

3.3.1 Institutional barriers: How bureaucracy undermines continuity

Educational leaders consistently pointed to institutional and administrative factors that weakened the long-term sustainability of PLC work. A recurring concern was the absence of clearly defined structures or specialized personnel responsible for coordinating technical education within the Ministry of Education. Jaime highlighted this gap: 'The Ministry of Education does not have the staff to coordinate technical education. They assign any person to deal with those issues'. In the absence of stable coordination, PLC initiatives were perceived as vulnerable to discontinuity and shifting priorities.

Participants also described a lack of institutional memory and stability within school districts. Changes in administrative personnel disrupted ongoing processes and created uncertainty around PLC organisation. Irma explained: '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' organisation'. Such transitions hindered the accumulation of shared knowledge and weakened the institutional support needed to sustain professional learning over time.

Bureaucratic fragmentation further affected participation in PLC meetings. Educational leaders described difficulties related to authorization procedures and scheduling, which sometimes discouraged attendance. Bernardo noted: '...the lack of organisation 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 suggest that administrative uncertainty constrained leaders' capacity to engage consistently in PLC activities, interrupting leadership learning trajectories.

Another institutional barrier concerned the frequent rotation of school leadership personnel, particularly principals. Educational leaders emphasized that leadership turnover undermined the continuity required for sustained professional learning. Gabriel observed: '...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 similarly pointed to instability in key positions: '...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 disrupted collective learning processes and limited opportunities for leadership learning to accumulate over time.

3.3.2 Contextual barriers to PLC implementation: Overload, resistance, and community disengagement

Educational leaders identified a set of interrelated contextual barriers that constrained the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes essential to leadership learning through PLCs. These barriers were rooted in everyday school conditions and shaped leaders’ capacity to engage meaningfully with PLC-related learning and change initiatives.

First, heavy administrative workloads limited educational leaders’ opportunities for reflection and application of learning. Participants described how competing responsibilities absorbed the time and cognitive space needed to translate PLC insights into practice. Angel explained: ‘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’. This account illustrates how workload pressures disrupted the continuity between learning within PLCs and leadership action in schools.

Second, participants pointed to teacher fatigue and, in some cases, resistance to additional initiatives as barriers to collaborative engagement. Educational leaders described teaching staff as experiencing high levels of exhaustion that limited their willingness or capacity to participate in new processes. Fernanda captured this challenge by referring to teachers’ ‘intellectual, physical, mental, and psychological exhaustion that does not allow them to move forward’. Such conditions constrained efforts to extend leadership learning beyond management teams and to foster broader collective involvement.

Third, educational leaders highlighted persistent difficulties in engaging families and the wider community. Despite recognizing the importance of school-family collaboration, participants reported limited responsiveness from parents and community members. Ciro described this challenge as follows: ‘The main challenge is to reach out to the community. Sometimes, they show some resistance to being involved in new processes’. This lack of external engagement further complicated leaders’ attempts to align PLC-driven initiatives with broader community support.

These contextual barriers illustrate how leadership learning through PLCs was shaped not only by institutional structures but also by the everyday realities of school life. Workload pressures, staff exhaustion, and community disengagement constrained opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and shared responsibility, limiting the extent to which PLC-related learning could be enacted and sustained in practice.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This discussion interprets how participation in PLCs supported leadership learning and development among educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, while also highlighting the conditions that constrained these processes. Section 5.1 examines PLCs as

collaborative learning spaces. Section 5.2 analyses the bureaucratic, institutional, and contextual conditions that shaped these learning processes. Finally, Section 5.3 outlines the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

4.1 Collaborative learning as a counterbalance

The findings show that educational leaders experienced PLC participation as both a professional opportunity and an administratively mediated process. On the one hand, PLCs created spaces for exchange, reflection, and collaborative engagement that differed from conventional training activities. On the other hand, participants' experiences were strongly shaped by the bureaucratic organisation of the Ecuadorian public education system, including hierarchical accountability, unstable role continuity, and limited institutional support for sustained participation. In this sense, PLC participation was experienced not as an autonomous professional space, but as a learning opportunity negotiated within policy-regulated institutional arrangements.

Moreover, the findings suggest that PLC participation influenced leadership learning through both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. At the intrapersonal level, educational leaders described increased self-awareness, greater reflection on their leadership style, and a shift from predominantly managerial orientations towards more relational and pedagogical understandings of leadership. At the interpersonal level, leadership learning unfolded through knowledge circulation, collaborative sense-making, and the development of alliances across schools. These processes suggest that leadership development in PLCs was not limited to the acquisition of techniques, but involved changes in how leaders interpreted themselves, interacted with others, and approached leadership practice over time.

As educational leaders became more aware of the limitations of traditional, compliance-oriented training, participation in PLCs fostered reflection on their own leadership learning processes. Through the sharing of experiences and collaborative engagement, PLCs supported a constructivist approach to leadership learning in which meaning was co-constructed through interaction. In this sense, leadership learning was not transmitted but developed relationally, as leaders compared practices, questioned assumptions, and negotiated understandings of school management. Consistent with Crow et al. (2017), these interactions enabled principals and vice-principals to recognise one another as professional peers and to interpret their leadership roles through shared learning experiences rather than hierarchical position alone.

Importantly, this collaborative learning process extended beyond individual reflection to influence leaders' orientations towards collective action. The findings indicate that participation in PLCs contributed to the adoption of new insights and attitudes regarding school management, prompting educational leaders to seek stronger partnerships with other schools. In doing so, PLCs supported the emergence of inter-school collaboration as a resource for leadership learning and school improvement, reinforcing a sense of professional community that transcended individual institutions.

Leadership development within PLCs unfolded through two complementary processes. First, distributed leadership functioned as a key mechanism through which learning was enacted. Educational advisors and more experienced school principals and vice-principals assumed facilitative roles that promoted shared responsibility, accountability, and empowerment within the PLCs. This finding resonates with Elmore's (2000) conceptualisation of distributed leadership as a collective endeavor grounded in the recognition of diverse expertise and interdependent roles.

Second, distributed leadership practices within PLCs supported the development of pedagogical leadership at the school level. Educational leaders increasingly sought to engage management teams and teaching staff in collective efforts to improve teaching and learning, positioning pedagogical concerns at the centre of leadership practice. In this regard, PLCs enabled leaders to translate collaborative learning into purposeful action by aligning leadership practices with instructional improvement. This interpretation is consistent with Androniceanu et al. (2015), who argue that effective leadership development requires educational leaders to mobilize others around shared educational goals.

Together, these findings suggest that PLCs can mitigate some of the constraining effects of bureaucratic governance by fostering collaborative learning environments that support leadership learning, relational agency, and pedagogical focus. However, their capacity to do so depends on sustained support and alignment with the institutional conditions in which educational leaders operate.

4.2 Educational leaders navigate bureaucratic cascades

The findings indicate that leadership learning within PLCs depended on a set of enabling and constraining conditions. In line with the conceptual lens, these conditions were not limited to the internal design of PLCs but also included broader institutional and policy factors. Participants' accounts point especially to the importance of continuity, practical support, facilitative coordination, workload, and opportunities for follow-up. When these conditions were weak or unstable, PLCs struggled to function as sustained spaces for leadership learning.

This bureaucratic configuration produces a cascading effect across three interrelated levels that shape both PLC implementation and leadership professionalisation. At the macro level, participants pointed to the absence of a coherent and sustained policy framework for principalship development. In particular, frequent rotation of school authorities undermines role stability and weakens leaders' sense of professional identity and belonging. This instability constrains educational leaders' willingness and capacity to invest in long-term professional development initiatives. These findings resonate with Elmore's (2000) argument that improving leadership performance requires structural adjustments in educational systems, not merely isolated training efforts.

At the meso level, a disconnect between the Ministry of Education and local school authorities further limited PLC effectiveness. Although a formal legal framework authorized

PLC implementation, participants described a lack of practical support (such as release time or administrative facilitation) to enable meaningful participation. As a result, PLC engagement often competed with school-based obligations rather than being institutionally integrated into leaders' professional roles. This finding reinforces Brauckmann et al.'s (2023) assertion that supportive organisational conditions are critical for sustaining leadership development over time.

At the micro level, internal PLC dynamics were shaped by both organisational design and leaders' workload. Participants frequently described PLCs as resembling conventional training activities, characterized by limited follow-up and constrained opportunities for application. Educational leaders' extensive responsibilities within schools further restricted their engagement in PLC tasks and their ability to disseminate learning outcomes. Similar patterns have been identified by Salazar (2007), who noted that educational leaders often prioritize immediate administrative demands over mentoring, coaching, or networking activities. In this sense, participants' preference for concise, task-oriented training formats appears less as individual resistance and more as an adaptive response to structurally constrained professional environments.

Taken together, these findings highlight how educational leaders' professionalisation is shaped by a layered bureaucratic context that simultaneously necessitates and limits leadership development initiatives. PLCs offer a promising pathway for re-centring professional learning around collective reflection and experiential engagement, but their transformative potential depends on addressing the structural conditions that currently frame leadership practice in Ecuadorian technical schools.

4.3 Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study point to several implications for policy and practice aimed at strengthening leadership development through PLCs in technical schools. These implications are grounded in participants' accounts of both the enabling and constraining conditions shaping PLC implementation and leadership learning.

First, at the policy level, ministries of education and district authorities may benefit from establishing stable coordinating units for leadership development initiatives such as PLCs. Participants consistently highlighted how staff rotation and fragmented administrative responsibility undermined continuity. Dedicated personnel with clear mandates could support sustained PLC coordination, reduce disruption caused by leadership turnover, and streamline authorization processes that currently limit participation.

Second, at the organisational level, time allocation emerged as a critical condition for leadership learning. The findings suggest that school schedules and administrative arrangements should be reconsidered to protect reflective time for educational leaders. Without such structural adjustments, PLC participation risks becoming an additional burden rather than a meaningful learning opportunity. Creating protected time for reflection and collaboration may enable leaders to translate PLC learning into school-based practice more effectively.

Third, the design of PLCs would benefit from the inclusion of ongoing follow-up mechanisms. Participants described limited continuity between sessions, which weakened the consolidation of leadership learning. Integrating peer coaching, mentoring structures, or digital communities of practice could help sustain dialogue, reinforce learning, and support application between meetings, particularly in contexts where face-to-face interaction is constrained.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of situating PLCs within a broader ecosystem of engagement. Educational leaders identified challenges related to teacher fatigue, limited family involvement, and weak community connections. Policy and practice efforts that intentionally link PLC work to family engagement strategies and partnerships with local technical industries may amplify the impact of leadership development initiatives and align them more closely with the socio-economic realities of technical education.

These implications suggest that PLCs hold significant potential as vehicles for leadership development in technically oriented school systems. However, realizing this potential requires policy alignment, organisational support, and intentional design choices that address the structural and contextual barriers identified in this study.

5. Limitations and future research

This study presents certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study is situated within a specific national and institutional context: Ecuadorian technical schools participating in an emerging PLC initiative. While this focus allowed for in-depth exploration of leadership learning processes, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Rather, they offer analytically transferable insights into leadership development processes that may be relevant to other policy-regulated and bureaucratic educational contexts.

Second, the study was conducted in a research landscape where empirical work on educational leadership (particularly leadership development in technical education) remains limited. This lack of prior research did not constrain the analysis but instead shaped the study's exploratory and theory-building orientation. At the same time, it restricted opportunities for direct comparison with similar contexts, underscoring the need for further empirical work in under-researched educational systems.

Third, although this study captured leadership learning through participation in PLCs over two years, it focused primarily on leaders' experiences within structured professional development spaces. Future research could extend this work by examining how leadership learning is sustained beyond PLC participation and how it interacts with broader career trajectories, appointment processes, and leadership mobility within public education systems.

Building on these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge. Further studies could explore leadership networks as mechanisms for professional growth, particularly in systems characterized by high administrative centralization and frequent leadership rotation. In addition, research examining educational leaders' professional development needs—from

the leaders' own perspectives—could provide valuable evidence to inform policy design and resource allocation. Such work may help policymakers move beyond short-term training initiatives towards more coherent and sustained leadership development strategies.

Finally, comparative research across regions or educational subsystems could deepen understanding of how contextual factors shape leadership learning and professionalisation. By situating leadership development within diverse governance and policy environments, future studies may contribute to a more nuanced and globally relevant knowledge base for educational leadership research.

Chapter 7

Opening the black box of PLCs: A multiple-case study of PLC functioning and leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools

This multiple-case study examines how professional learning communities (PLCs) foster leadership development among principals and vice-principals in Ecuadorian technical schools. Two PLCs—Alpha and Beta—were followed across two academic years. Data came from five day-long naturalistic observations, informal interviews with participating leaders, and analysis of agendas, facilitator reports, and ministerial documents. Constant-comparison coding and cross-case synthesis revealed contrasting trajectories. Alpha PLC progressed from reflective dialogue to inquiry-driven action: members jointly analysed student data, redesigned lesson-study cycles, and redistributed leadership tasks. Beta PLC, by contrast, remained at an early stage; collaboration centred on sharing personal concerns, with limited movement towards collective inquiry or school-wide change. Across both cases, three enabling conditions emerged: a clear facilitation structure, protected meeting time, and trust-building rituals. Conversely, leadership turnover, heavy administrative workloads, and inconsistent district support impeded deeper learning and sustained follow-through. Despite these constraints, PLC participation strengthened leaders' professional identity, encouraged distributed leadership practices, and provided a rare space for peer coaching. The findings suggest that, when adequately supported, PLCs can serve as a low-cost, context-responsive strategy for developing educational leaders in under-resourced systems.

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Opening the black box of PLCs: A multiple-case study of PLC functioning and leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools

Over the past two decades, research on educational leadership has expanded rapidly, largely in Western contexts, examining leaders' roles and influence on schools and student outcomes, as well as their professional learning needs (Daniëls et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2005; C. Day et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Koonce et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2007b; Wright & da Costa, 2016). Despite this growth, leadership research continues to be uneven, with comparatively limited empirical attention to low- and middle-income contexts and to education systems characterized by high levels of structural inequality and policy instability.

In Latin America, systematic research on educational leadership is more recent and remains fragmented. Studies from countries such as Chile, Mexico, and Brazil have begun to examine principal preparation, leadership practices, and policy reforms aimed at strengthening educational leadership (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Flessa et al., 2018; Weinstein et al., 2018). However, much of this literature remains policy-oriented or descriptive in nature, offering limited insight into how leadership is learned, enacted, and developed in practice.

Concurrently, professional development is increasingly conceptualised as situated, collaborative, and dialogic, emphasizing networks and communities through which practitioners co-construct knowledge and access social support (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2016; Coburn et al., 2012; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Within this framework, PLCs are promoted as mechanisms for reducing professional isolation, fostering shared problem-solving, and supporting continuous improvement within and across schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006).

While PLCs are frequently associated with teacher learning, emerging research suggests that they may also function as important sites for leadership learning and development. Through sustained interaction, collective reflection, and engagement with practice-based challenges, PLCs can support leaders' sense-making processes, relational capacity, and organisational learning (Allen, 2013; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009). However, empirical studies that examine PLCs explicitly as spaces for leadership development—particularly in non-Western contexts—remain limited.

This study explores the role of PLCs as a strategy to enhance the professional growth of technical school principals and vice-principals in Ecuador. Beyond examining whether PLCs contribute to leadership development, an important contribution of this study is that it opens the black box of PLCs by showing how they were progressively built, enacted, and sustained

over time. In particular, the study follows the full PLC process: how participants constructed a shared identity, how inquiry routines and collaborative work evolved across sessions, how facilitators and educational leaders negotiated their roles, and how these dynamics shaped leadership development in practice. Given that many school authorities do not perceive themselves as formal educational leaders and often lack formal preparation in management and leadership, technical schools represent complex environments for leadership practice. By examining how educational leaders engage in and learn through PLCs, this study contributes evidence from an under-researched context and provides new insights into how collaborative professional learning structures can support leadership development in technical education systems.

1. State of the art and conceptual framework

This section is organised into two parts. First, it reviews the state of the art on the professionalisation of educational leaders in Latin America and Ecuador, with particular attention to leadership preparation and professional development. Second, it presents the conceptual framework guiding the study. In this chapter, the state of the art clarifies how leadership development has been approached across the region, while the conceptual framework specifies the particular lens through which the PLCs examined here are interpreted. More specifically, PLCs are approached as leadership networks for collaborative learning, through which educational leaders develop shared practices, inquiry processes, and supportive conditions for leadership growth. This distinction provides the analytical vocabulary that guides the presentation of the results and the discussion.

1.1 Professionalisation of educational leaders in Latin America and Ecuador

Over the past two decades, Latin America has witnessed significant efforts to enhance the leadership capabilities of educational leaders. According to Weinstein, Hernández, et al. (2015), six noteworthy initiatives were implemented across Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, each with distinct approaches yet sharing the common goal of strengthening educational leadership.

In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia, private institutions spearheaded these development programmes. Argentina's 2012 initiative focused on comprehensive training across four critical domains: management, leadership, culture for life and work, and school improvement projects. Brazil followed in 2013 with a programme designed to enhance the teaching and learning process by promoting effective school management, emphasizing principal performance, fostering democratic relationships, and facilitating equitable learning outcomes. Chile established a master's programme in leadership and educational management in 2011. This programme was specifically designed to support education professionals seeking to enhance their leadership and administrative capabilities within the education sector. Colombia's 2010 programme similarly prioritized transformational

leadership practices, with the explicit aim of strengthening the professional capacities of educational leaders.

By contrast, Mexico and the Dominican Republic implemented their initiatives through public institutions. Mexico's 2007 national training programme sought to develop educational leaders' competencies based on the fundamental belief that public schools can drive social transformation. The Dominican Republic adopted a comparable approach in 2012, launching a training initiative to enhance educational management across various institutional levels. These diverse initiatives across Latin America reflect a shared conviction: improving educational quality necessarily involves strategically strengthening the leadership capacities of those who guide schools.

In relation to the professional development of Ecuadorian educational leaders, it is necessary to highlight two distinct stages. Firstly, in 2008, the MINEDUC released a report titled 'The Development of Education: National Report of Ecuador'. This report presented statistics on the state of education in Ecuador since the 2001 school year and stated the necessity to hold on some courses or training sessions for teachers, educational leaders, and administrative staff regarding human relations, motivation, and human quality. Specifically related to principals' professional development, the report stated that 'once the managerial staff qualifications have been analysed, not all of them have the degree of educational managers, which can guarantee their expertise as competent authorities within schools' (p. 131). These disadvantages were supposed to be addressed through the creation of a national plan for professional improvement, to increase education professionals' opportunities for professional development, improvement, and continuous training. Secondly, in 2010, as part of the effort to strengthen the educational system, the MINEDUC administered a Test of Educational Leadership to educational leaders. This tool was intended to measure the minimum level of knowledge needed to manage a school effectively and to serve as a reference point in the Assessment System and Social Accountability (SER). Based on the results of this assessment, the MINEDUC created the Comprehensive System for Educational and Professional Development (SÍPROFE), which aimed to enhance the performance of teachers and educational leaders. To this end, in 2012, the MINEDUC published and distributed a self-study training book for educational leaders titled 'Pedagogical Management for Educational Leaders'. The book was designed as a 60-hour self-training workshop that focused on various educational topics, including the national curriculum, standards for improving the quality of education, educational planning, inclusive education, curricular adaptations, meaningful learning, community learning, cooperative learning, professional development for teachers and educational leaders, educational supervision, and monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement.

While these regional initiatives signaled an important policy commitment to leadership professionalisation, they were largely programmatic and content-oriented. Less attention was paid to sustained, situated learning structures capable of supporting leaders' ongoing sense-making, peer learning, and adaptation to local challenges. In Ecuador, leadership development has therefore tended to rely on episodic training rather than on embedded professional learning processes connected to everyday leadership practice.

1.2 Leadership preparation: pre- and/or in-service training?

The literature commonly distinguishes between **pre-service** and **in-service** training for educational leaders. Pre-service training refers to formal programmes and academic preparation undertaken prior to assuming leadership roles, often as part of certification or graduate-level studies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contrast, in-service training encompasses ongoing professional development designed to support practicing educational leaders in responding to emerging challenges and enhancing their leadership effectiveness (Pont et al., 2008; Bush, 2018).

Research shows that many countries invest in the training and professional development of educational leaders, yet the way such training is organised varies significantly across contexts (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). Differences exist in admission processes—such as self-selection or pre-selection by governments, employers, or training institutions—as well as in the type of providers involved. These providers may include public authorities, specialized training institutions, professional organisations, educational networks, universities, or private entities (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). Content focus also varies, ranging from regulation-oriented frameworks to broader emphasis of instructional and transformational leadership. Moreover, the timing of the training also differs across systems. Pont et al. (2008) distinguish three forms of leadership preparation: (1) pre-service training, which takes place before educational leaders assume their role; (2) induction programmes, aimed at supporting newly appointed educational leaders during their transition into the role; and (3) in-service training, targeting those already established in leadership positions. While some systems implement all three forms simultaneously, others offer only one or two, and participation may be mandatory or optional depending on national regulations (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). These structural differences underscore the importance of understanding leadership preparation within its specific national and institutional contexts, since models of preparation and induction need to be adapted to local policy arrangements, school cultures, and leadership expectations (Bush, 2018; Pont et al., 2008).

Initial professional preparation represents the first stage in a leader's professional trajectory (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Pre-service leadership preparation entails a deliberate commitment by individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills associated with leadership roles (Cliffe et al., 2018; Lyons, 2016). This preparation responds to the inherently complex and multifaceted nature of the principalship, which involves multiple sub-roles and responsibilities (Boylan, 2018). An issue that is reflected when newly appointed principals are expected to demonstrate organisational and administrative competencies. With an emphasis on human resource management, financial administration, educational policy, school curriculum, and instructional leadership practices (Ng & Szeto, 2016). Adopting a leadership role therefore requires a shift in professional identity and perspective. Evidence suggests that the earlier aspiring leaders internalize a principal's perspective, the better prepared they are to respond to the demands of the role (Xu & Patmor, 2012).

As principals progress along their leadership trajectories, in-service professional development takes on very different forms according to their professional needs (Villegas-Reimers, 2003) and the contextual challenges they face (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Tamadoni et al., 2024). These challenges may include social inequalities, limited school funding, negative perceptions of educational leaders, and increasing accountability pressures related to student performance. A persistent concern among educational leaders is the limited availability of sustained and meaningful professional learning opportunities (Bayar, 2014; Wise, 2015). Daresh and LaPlant (1983) identify five principal approaches to in-service professional development. First, the traditional model emphasizes obtaining an advanced graduate degree, a management degree, or a combination of both. A second common model is short-term learning experiences, which are topic-specific through workshops or seminars. Third, competency-based training programmes sponsored by professional associations seek to enhance principals' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Fourth, the government, through school districts, provides structured learning experiences to principals. Involvement in such training is based on principals' needs and interests. The last in-service approach is networking, where principals from different schools share concerns and exchange management strategies. In networking models, principals assume primary responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on professional associations, school districts, or other institutions. Across these approaches, the central objective remains the enhancement of leaders' capacity to address complex school-level challenges (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000).

Together, this progression from pre-service to induction to in-service underscores the value of job-embedded, collaborative models—such as PLCs—that connect leadership development directly to leaders' everyday work and therefore form the analytic focus of this study.

1.3 Conceptual framework: PLCs as leadership networks for collaborative learning

In this study, PLCs are understood as leadership networks for collaborative learning. This means that they are approached not only as professional development arrangements, but also as relational and practice-based spaces through which educational leaders build shared purpose, engage in collective inquiry, and support one another's development over time. This conceptual framework provides the vocabulary used later in the analysis, particularly in relation to shared vision, collective inquiry, distributed leadership, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

According to Boylan (2018), leadership professional development occurs not just through individual efforts, but also through the establishment of diverse networks. Hoppe and Reinelt (2010) state that leadership networks may be intentionally created, or they may emerge from a strong need or desire among leaders to connect. They identify four types of leadership networks. **Peer leadership networks** involve leaders who share common interests, commitments, or experiences, fostering ties that enable shared work. **Organisational leadership networks** emphasize the ability to guide direction, align efforts, and sustain

commitment within an organisation to achieve goals. **Field-policy leadership networks** focus on influencing problem framing, envisioning solutions, mobilizing action, developing innovative approaches, and engaging in policy decision-making. **Collective leadership networks** involve diverse groups of individuals connected through shared actions aimed at creating positive impacts on themselves and their communities. These different forms of leadership networks highlight some particular features. For instance, a leadership network usually consists of individuals who bring diverse interests (Leithwood & Azah, 2017), common concerns, and potential solutions to challenges (Gobby & Wilkins, 2020). Moreover, networking encourages open communication and the active participation of all involved to build lasting relationships (Daresh & LaPlant, 1983).

Currently, an alternative peer networking model (lastly focused on educational leaders' professionalisation) that contributes to leadership development is PLCs (García-Martínez et al., 2018). Within PLCs, educational leaders interact with their peers, enabling them to acquire knowledge and share strategies (Harris & Jones, 2010) to foster innovations and establish lasting enhancements at schools (Mellado Hernández et al., 2020). To characterize leadership networks to go beyond traditional professional development, we present the key characteristics of the PLCs, as framed by DuFour and Eaker (1998) and Hord and Sommers (2008).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) asserted that shared mission, vision, and values; engagement in collective inquiry; building collaborative teams; taking action; focusing on continuous improvement; and results orientation frame a PLC for school improvement. In particular, shared mission, vision, and values articulate current beliefs looking into a better future. Collective inquiry as the core of the improvement process represents a new way of thinking and acting focused on reflective practice. Collaborative teams set the organisation's policy based on the collective learning experience. Action orientation and experimentation promote educational research. Continuous improvement seeks to implement relevant actions to stimulate a progressive process that enhances performance. Results orientation focuses primarily on monitoring performance and results.

On the other hand, Hord and Sommers (2008) argued that shared beliefs, values, and vision; shared and supportive leadership; collective learning and its application; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice are components of a PLC that seeks to improve schools. More specifically, shared beliefs, values, and vision mark the way to work together to achieve students' learning. Shared a supportive learning involve power, authority, and decision-making as elements to be shared. Collective learning and its applications are based on what to learn and how to learn within everydayness. Supportive conditions such as structural factors and human capacities promote PLC work, contributing to the effective functioning of the PLCs as well. Shared personal practice creates the opportunity to provide mutual feedback. Based on both approaches, educational leaders' leadership development is propelled into action by the active nature of the PLCs model, which occurs within the context of community involvement.

Viewed in this way, PLCs provide the conceptual framework for this study because they allow leadership development to be examined not only as an individual trajectory, but also as a collective and relational process shaped by networked interaction, facilitation, shared inquiry, and supportive conditions. For this reason, PLCs are analytically significant here: they operationalise leadership networks at the practice level, simultaneously supporting individual leadership growth and collective capacity building within technical schools.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

The guiding question of this chapter is: How do PLCs promote educational leaders' leadership development at technical schools in Ecuador? Based on the conceptual framework, which understands PLCs as leadership networks for collaborative learning, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- How do PLCs evolve over time through processes of shared vision, collective inquiry, and collaborative practice in Ecuadorian technical schools?
- Which supportive conditions and leadership dynamics shape the functioning and development of PLCs over time?
- What leadership practices and collective learning dynamics emerge within PLCs as they function and evolve over time?

2.2 Methodological approach

This study adopts a longitudinal multiple case study design to examine how PLCs functioned and evolved as spaces for leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools. A case study approach is appropriate when the aim is to understand a bounded system in depth and in relation to its real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Bryman, 2012). In this study, the bounded cases are two PLCs created for educational leaders and followed across two academic years. This design was selected because the study does not seek only to capture participants' perceptions of PLCs, but to reconstruct how PLCs were progressively built, enacted, and sustained over time through concrete sessions, interactions, routines, and roles. The longitudinal dimension is therefore essential, as it makes it possible to trace changes in participation, facilitation, collaborative inquiry, and leadership development across sessions rather than treating PLCs as static arrangements (Saldaña, 2003). By combining case study logic with repeated observations and documentary analysis, the study opens the black box of PLCs and provides a process-oriented account of how leadership development unfolded in practice.

2.3 Context of the study and participants

In Ecuador, school principals and vice-principals are appointed through merit-based public selection processes regulated by the MINEDUC. Eligibility criteria typically include prior teaching experience, professional credentials, and performance in competitive

examinations. However, formal pre-service preparation specifically focused on educational leadership and school management has historically been limited. In addition, a significant proportion of educational leaders serve in acting positions, often for extended periods, which contributes to role instability and can constrain leaders' professional identity formation. As a result, many educational leaders assume their roles with strong pedagogical backgrounds but comparatively little structured preparation for leadership, administration, or organisational management. Professional development opportunities are therefore largely provided in-service and are frequently linked to policy initiatives, such as the PLC programme examined in this study.

PLCs in Ecuador are not uniformly institutionalized across the national school system. Rather, their implementation has begun through targeted improvement initiatives promoted by the MINEDUC in collaboration with VVOB. As a result, PLCs have emerged as policy-initiated professional learning spaces rather than as fully embedded organisational routines within schools. Within this emerging landscape, technical schools in the province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas were among the first to participate in a structured PLC initiative. In October 2017, VVOB and the MINEDUC presented the concept of PLCs at an informative session on the status of technical education. Subsequently, seven PLCs were created, with participation limited to principals and vice-principals. The sessions were to be held at participating urban and rural technical schools, with the venue of each PLC meeting changing to enable the management teams to observe different school contexts. PLCs agreed to concentrate their efforts on improving human resources and leadership. In the school year 2018-2019, PLCs started fieldwork with three sessions. And the second part of the project kept going with four sessions in the school year 2019 - 2020. The PLCs examined in this study should therefore be understood as illustrative cases of an emerging professional development strategy rather than as representative of all Ecuadorian schools.

Within this implementation context, we purposefully selected two PLCs from the seven initially to maximize access to leaders engaged in reflective work on leadership and to allow theoretical replication (Yin, 2018). Participants included principals and vice-principals from both PLCs, with inclusion criteria based on active PLC participation during the study period. Leadership team structures varied by site: some schools were led by a single principal, others by a principal and one vice-principal, and some by a principal with two vice-principals (see Table 1). The selection strategy followed qualitative sampling principles that prioritize information-rich cases aligned with the study aims (Bryman, 2016). This approach resulted in a participant group representing varied leadership experience levels, ages, and gender identities, supporting analysis across diverse professional trajectories (see Table 2).

Table 1. PLCs organisation

School year	PLC	Schools in PLCs	Management teams			Total participants	PLC facilitators	
			1P	1P + 1VP	1P + 2VP		National	Local
2018 2019	ALPHA	8	5	3	-	11	2	1
	BETA	7	-	6	1	15	1	3
2019 2020	ALPHA	7	4	2	-	10	1	1
	BETA	7	-	6	1	10	1	1

Legend. Management teams' composition: P = principal, VP = vice-principal; PLC facilitators: National facilitators are ministry-level advisors, Local facilitators are district-level advisors.

Table 2. Participants characteristics

PLC	Role	Gender	Age range	Teaching experience	Years as leader
ALPHA	Principal	F/M	50 - 57	18 - 28	1 - 6
	Vice-principal	F/M	40 - 47	18 - 20	1 - 4
BETA	Principal	F/M	52 - 59	27 - 30	4 - 8
	Vice-principal	F/M	32 - 58	6 - 30	3 - 4

2.4 Data collection

We drew on non-participant observations and a review of documentary sources (ministerial regulations, PLC agendas and minutes, facilitators' reports, and field notes). The use of multiple methods made it possible to capitalize on their respective strengths and mitigate limitations, thereby capturing different dimensions of the phenomenon under study (Maxwell, 2012). The observation process was structured at three progressive levels to deepen the understanding of the context. First, descriptive observations offered a broad and preliminary view of the field. Then, focused observations directed attention to aspects specifically related to the research questions. Lastly, selective observations concentrated on core elements identified as central to the development of educational leadership within the PLCs (Flick, 2014b).

To clarify how these observational procedures were enacted in practice, the researcher adopted a non-participant observer role during PLC sessions, refraining from facilitation or intervention in activities. While the researcher was known to participants as an academic observer, no evaluative or supervisory role was held. In addition to the formal sessions, countless hours of informal conversations were observed during breaks, lunchtime, and before and after meetings. These observations provided a schematic view of how educational leaders operated within the PLCs. Excluding breaks and lunchtime, the effective observation

time averaged five and a half hours per session. Reflexive field notes were maintained to monitor potential researcher influence and to support analytic transparency.

In terms of observation scheduling, three PLC meetings were observed between May and October during the 2018–2019 school year. In the following cycle (2019–2020), two additional meetings were observed between April and November. In total, five out of seven PLC sessions were examined over the two-year period (see Table 3.). Each meeting took place approximately every three months and involved two separate observations—one per PLC—held on different days. These sessions typically ran from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. in one PLC and from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in the other. The variation in duration reflected factors such as the school authorities' availability, the urban or rural setting of the venue, the nature of the day's activities, administrative demands, and whether school district permission to leave had been granted on time.

To further enrich the data, a thematic analysis was conducted on supplementary sources, including official documents, agendas, reports, and field notes. As noted by Yin (2011), triangulating multiple data sources allows for cross-verification and enhances credibility. Ultimately, the aim was to synthesize all the information to construct a comprehensive picture of the professionalisation processes of educational leaders through their participation in PLCs.

Table 3. Educational leaders' attendance PLCs

PLC		School year 2018 – 2019						School year 2019 – 2020			
		Session 1		Session 2		Session 3		Session 6		Session 7	
ALPHA	Schools	4		8		6		4		4	
	Participants	4P	2VP	7P	3VP	6P	3VP	4P	2VP	3P	3VP
BETA	Schools	5		6		7		7		5	
	Participants	3P	4VP	6P	4VP	5P	6VP	5P	5VP	4P	2VP

Legend. Sessions 4-5 were not observed due to unexpected issues

2.5 Data analysis

The analysis focused on understanding how the two PLCs evolved over time and how leadership development was enacted through their functioning. To do so, PLC meetings were first organised chronologically by session, date, and main activity, allowing us to trace the progression of each case across the two school years. We also documented individual and collective participation in each session to capture how leadership engagement and collaborative dynamics changed over time. More, in particular, first cycle and second cycle coding were used to label data (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). First cycle coding includes descriptive and In Vivo coding. Descriptive codes are more suitable for understanding the social settings of the PLCs. Moreover, we include In Vivo codes to enrich the description of

the PLCs through the voices of the educational leaders. Both methods of coding stress the PLC methodology within the construction of two PLCs. Second cycle coding determines to pattern first cycle codes into categories which were based on relations of similarity-difference and contiguity (Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Maxwell, 2012). Initially, contiguity relationships patterned codes in the particular context of the PLCs, comparing and contrasting the development of each session. For instance, session 1 referred to building identity, session 2 PLC methodology, session 3 to sharing school experiences, session 6 to leadership development, and session 7 to self-evaluation of the PLCs. Then within the relations of similarities and differences, we patterned codes of both PLCs observed. Those codes included the role of PLC facilitators and participants as well as PLC functioning. We supplemented observations with a thematic analysis of other sources. Based on Scott's criteria (1990), we considered authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning as a means to analyse documents and reports. Moreover, analysing these kinds of resources contributes to contextualizing and constructing the narrative of particular events (Flick, 2014b). Thus, we sought to frame our observations within the professionalisation of the educational leaders through their participation at PLCs.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with national regulations governing research in public educational institutions in Ecuador. Conducting research in public schools requires formal authorization from the MINEDUC, which entails the submission and approval of the research project, including its objectives, data collection instruments, consent forms, and supporting documentation. Authorization to access PLC sessions and related documents was obtained through this official process. Formal approval from a centralized ethics committee was not required for this type of educational research. All participants received written and oral information about the study's aims and procedures and provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from all research materials.

3. Results

Over two school years, this chapter traced two PLCs created for educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools. Section 4.1 reconstructs this process session by session, showing how the PLCs evolved as leadership networks for collaborative learning through shared vision, collective inquiry, distributed leadership, and supportive conditions. Section 4.2 then identifies the main factors that shaped these trajectories, particularly facilitation, participant stability, and system-level bureaucracy.

3.1 Mapping growth at PLCs for educational leaders

The observations revealed the longitudinal development of two PLCs, Alpha and Beta, as emerging leadership networks for collaborative learning. Across the two school years, the

analysis traces how shared identity, inquiry routines, collaborative practice, and supportive conditions were progressively built, negotiated, and, at times, constrained. During the 2018–2019 school year, the PLCs focused on getting involved in the community (session 1), clarifying the PLC methodology (session 2), and evaluating the work carried out within the PLCs (session 3). During the 2019–2020 school year, Alpha and Beta entered a second stage, in which discussions on school improvement acquired a different focus (session 6) and the work of the PLCs was evaluated within the framework of the learning community (session 7).

3.1.1 First year of implementation of the PLCs

Building identity and setting rules – Session 1

In May 2018, it was observed that after sharing the background of their schools, educational leaders gave the PLCs a name that provides them with a particular identity. In this sense, Alpha and Beta were the names suggested and selected. This action reflects the construction of a shared vision and group identity, which is one of the foundational elements of a PLC. Establishing a name is not merely symbolic; it fosters a sense of belonging and collective purpose within the leadership network.

Under a common framework, the two PLCs established some guidelines for ensuring their functioning: punctuality, confidentiality, commitment, and teamwork. These agreements laid the foundation for mutual trust, respect, openness, and shared responsibility, all of which functioned as supportive conditions for sustaining a collaborative learning environment.

Other guidelines promoted a participatory approach. For instance, only principals and vice-principals were required to attend, while sharing professional experiences was essential. The induction of new participants became the responsibility of PLC members, reinforcing the principle of shared personal practice and collective learning, both central to the collaborative professionalisation process within PLCs. By delegating this responsibility, PLCs also took early steps towards distributed leadership, fostering a culture of shared accountability. However, some educational leaders did not agree with the attendance of only principals and vice-principals. They stated that the complexities of their role oblige them to delegate tasks like these to other school representatives. This moment illustrates a tension in implementing distributed leadership, where responsibilities must be negotiated within the practical constraints of school management. It reveals how leadership structures interact with institutional realities.

To address certain misperceptions, the facilitators highlighted that the main purpose of the PLCs was to increase the leadership skills of school management teams. This purpose is aligned with the conceptualisation of PLCs as ongoing, situated, and collaborative professional development mechanisms, supporting leadership learning in authentic school contexts.

Collective inquiry: An investigative approach

As part of the learning process within the PLCs, educational leaders had to adopt an investigative approach. They would learn to formulate a hypothesis through an inquiry question, execute actions and collect evidence, analyse evidence with members of the PLCs, share conclusions with the PLCs and schools, and change school practices at schools. This process reflects the principle of collective inquiry as conceptualised in the literature on PLCs, where improvement is driven by the systematic questioning of practice and collaborative reflection on school issues.

Facilitators clarified that this methodology seeks to develop improvements for schools through school authorities' training on leadership issues. This reinforces the idea of professional development as situated and contextualised, allowing educational leaders to engage with real problems from their own institutions while developing leadership capacities.

The educational leaders of the Alpha PLC focused their discussion on the strained relations between teachers and students. They raised questions about demotivation and resistance to the teaching-learning process on the part of teachers and students. Moreover, they suggested strategies to improve good school relations during the teaching-learning process. For instance, engage in dialogue with teachers, provide pedagogical accompaniment, establish learning circles, and implement agreements and commitments. These interactions demonstrate collaborative problem-solving in action, as participants not only identify issues but also co-construct strategies based on shared professional knowledge. The emphasis on reflection and peer support aligns with the notion of shared personal practice, a core component of PLCs.

On the other hand, educational leaders of the Beta PLC focused their discussions on the lack of direct communication as a school issue to overcome. More specifically, it raised awareness about direct communication of the management teams as a strategy to improve teachers' leadership. This example highlights how PLCs function as learning communities that foster leadership growth through dialogic processes, helping participants redefine their roles and responsibilities in response to context-specific needs.

In both PLCs, facilitators invited the management teams to execute such strategies and collect evidence that shows their work within schools. Such a cycle of action, evidence gathering, and reflection is central to the inquiry-based orientation of PLCs, where change emerges through iterative engagement with practice.

A new perspective: Collaborative work

At the end of the first session, educational leaders showed a positive attitude towards their participation in the PLCs: 'I am glad to be involved in this kind of activity. I can say most of us have been actively involved' (Participant 3, PLC Beta). This expression of engagement reflects a key outcome of situated and collaborative professional development, in which educational leaders recognise the relevance and authenticity of the learning process within their own contexts. Another educational leader highlighted the construction of a community framework:

The schemes have been broken. School authorities used only to look out for the interest of their schools. Today, on the other hand, the situation is different. We are talking about a community that seeks to follow the same path even though sometimes schools are in different contexts. (Participant 1, PLC Beta)

This insight aligns with the core principle of shared vision and collective purpose, which is foundational in the development of PLCs. It also illustrates the emergence of a leadership network mindset, in which individual school agendas begin to shift towards common goals and mutual support.

Working on a differentiated approach – Session 2

In August 2018, observations showed that the dynamic of the whole work differed from the Alpha PLC to the Beta PLC. During this session, the emphasis of the PLC lay in clarifying the PLC methodology. This focus reflects the importance of building a shared understanding of processes and goals, which is a core element of establishing supportive conditions for collaborative professional learning.

Alpha PLC: PLC framework

Facilitators reminded educational leaders that the investigative approach adopted at the PLCs seeks to enhance their competencies as school authorities. So, they need to learn to formulate a hypothesis about how to solve a particular school problem. Such a hypothesis must be framed within four issues: 1) raise the interest of the school authorities, 2) improve student learning, 3) be relevant to the school, and 4) must be framed as a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based). This aligns with the PLC principle of action orientation, where professional learning is linked to school improvement through inquiry and experimentation. It also reflects the emphasis on developing leadership competencies through situated problem-solving.

Based on such framework, educational leaders planned to implement strategies to strengthen school relationships during the teaching-learning process. However, they did not provide any evidence of these efforts being enacted in schools, citing teachers' workload as a key barrier to their participation in PLC activities. This gap between planning and implementation reveals the practical constraints that hinder distributed leadership, particularly when institutional demands and time limitations restrict collective engagement. Participants' comments further illustrate these challenges: 'Other tasks occupy the teachers' time and do not allow them to perform other activities' (Participant 1, PLC Alpha). 'I have a collaborative teaching staff. However, the problem arises around all the paperwork that we must submit' (Participant 6, PLC Alpha). 'Although the DECE department and I organised a workshop for teachers, I am unsure whether the strategies were implemented with students, as teachers' other responsibilities consumed their time' (Participant 2, PLC Alpha). These reflections highlight the ongoing tension between bureaucratic demands and instructional leadership roles. They also underscore the need for supportive organisational conditions to ensure that collaborative practices promoted in PLCs can be successfully enacted.

In response to the lack of evidence that supports their PLC work at schools, facilitators stated that their purpose is not to overload work to school authorities; instead, they seek to enhance their professional competencies. Then, after reviewing several techniques to collect evidence, for instance, field notes, student work, interviews, focus groups, reflexive diaries, weblogs, surveys, and school grades. In management teams, educational leaders mentioned what they would do to demonstrate their work on the subject of their hypothesis. Restorative circles and surveys were the main techniques selected by them. This moment demonstrates the use of reflective practice and evidence-informed action within the PLC, as participants are encouraged to make their learning visible through documentation and feedback. It also reinforces the goal of professional growth based on contextual inquiry.

Beta PLC: Reformulation of ideas

Facilitators invited educational leaders to discuss the standards of quality in education. In particular, the standard for school management and the professional performance of school authorities and teachers. This aligns with the principle of competency-based professional development, in which leadership growth is structured around clear performance expectations and standards. Facilitators also referred to the need to link the school management standard D1.C3 Information and Communication with the school authorities' interest in establishing better communication with teachers as a strategy to improve their leadership within the classrooms. According to the manual of educational standards issued by the MINEDUC, schools should have guidelines for timely communication of academic and administrative issues among educational stakeholders. This illustrates how professional learning in PLCs can be rooted in national policy frameworks, encouraging leaders to reflect on their practices in light of formal expectations. Facilitators recognised several problems concerning effective communication with and among students, teachers, and authorities. For instance, there was a lack of interaction among colleagues and a lack of communication from students at home. Other problems included a lack of systematic knowledge of TICs and a lack of resources to access technology. These discussions reflect the collaborative identification of real, context-specific problems, which is central to the collective inquiry process within PLCs. Addressing such issues through dialogue fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges to instructional leadership in diverse school environments.

Contrary to the expected PLC methodology, in which school authorities were supposed to present evidence supporting their hypothesis, facilitators instead opened the discussion to new issues. This shift reflects flexibility in the inquiry process, recognizing that professional learning is non-linear and must adapt to emerging school needs. As a result, management teams brainstormed the following topics: teachers' lack of punctuality at the start of the workday and students' lack of interest in using technology for learning. This collaborative problem identification highlights PLCs as spaces where leadership teams set priorities and develop improvement strategies based on shared concerns.

Sharing experiences and self-evaluation – Session 3

In October 2018, educational leaders of both PLCs shared school experiences and evaluated the PLC work. Several commonalities and differences were found.

Alpha PLC: Shared personal practice

Educational leaders reflected on their inquiry questions and the activities performed since the last session. The main focus of the Alpha PLC was to improve the performance of students and teachers and the improvement of the relations in the school environment. This process reflects the principle of shared personal practice, one of the pillars of effective PLCs, where members engage in dialogue about their actions and assumptions to improve student outcomes.

Concerning the performance of students and teachers, the results of the surveys applied to students showed two issues. Firstly, teachers impart knowledge with enthusiasm and carry out academic reinforcement activities. However, their teaching is based on rote learning and does not show interest in solving learning difficulties. They are the only actors in the classrooms and maintain a rigid attitude towards students. Secondly, some students came from marginal urban areas with many social problems, and a high number of them attended technical schools because they were assigned by the school district, not on the basis of their interests in technical education. Added to this, educational leaders discussed the fact that school performance is affected by the lack of teachers specialized in technical education. The results of this work illustrate the diagnostic function of collective inquiry, where professional learning is rooted in the identification and analysis of practice-based problems. Moreover, these contextualised discussions exemplify situated professional learning, where leadership development is embedded in the realities and constraints of the school environment.

Concerning the improvement of school relations, educational leaders emphasized that the enormous number of activities they have to carry out made it difficult to find time to cover this issue. However, restorative circles with teachers and meetings with school members were the techniques employed to promote a better school environment. These actions show an effort to translate PLC dialogue into context-responsive leadership strategies and reflect a move towards a culture of trust and collaboration.

In the end, educational leaders concluded that both teachers and school authorities are responsible for students' performance. Unfortunately, teachers are not interested in changing their practices, and school authorities do not support or motivate teachers. This mutual attribution of responsibility suggests a partial emergence of distributed leadership, though still limited by resistance to change and a lack of sustained support structures. As a final thought, educational leaders pointed out that the PLCs helped them to consider different points of view concerning the way to deal with school issues. This reflection exemplifies the development of professional agency through dialogic learning; a central goal of PLCs aimed at enhancing reflective leadership practices.

Self-evaluation approach: Beginning a transformative process

After three sessions, educational leaders made a self-evaluation of their level of involvement in the PLC on the base of seven parameters set by the facilitators. While participants rated their own engagement at the highest level, these ratings reflect self-perceptions rather than external evaluations. This self-assessment process exemplifies the

principle of reflective practice, a foundational component of PLCs, in which members continuously examine their own contributions and development. This self-assessment highlighted several features of PLC functioning, including the following:

- **PLC standards:** there is an initial focus on improving students' learning and outcomes. This aligns with the action orientation of PLCs, where professional learning is aimed at student improvement through leadership development.
- **Collaborative learning:** collective learning processes are mostly directed towards practical problem-solving. This reflects the core dimension of collective learning and inquiry, where professionals address real-world school challenges through shared dialogue and experimentation.
- **PLC structure:** participants' learning is often supported by students' learning. There are moments for group learning. This demonstrates the integration of adult learning with instructional leadership, reinforcing the idea that effective educational leaders must understand and adapt to the learning needs of both students and staff.
- **Culture:** openness and trust are present among all participants. Feedback is given if necessary, and leadership is seen as a collective responsibility among them. This clearly reflects supportive conditions and a collaborative culture, essential for sustaining PLCs as professional communities. Moreover, the reference to leadership as a shared responsibility is also indicative of distributed leadership in practice.
- **Leadership within the PLC:** the educational advisor organises the meetings and gives psychological or pedagogical support if asked by any of the participants. The leadership of the PLC is in the hands of the advisor. This suggests that while collaborative elements are present, leadership remains centralized, which may limit the development of full distributed leadership.
- **Knowledge building:** reflection uses not only their experiences but also more objective evidence such as feedback from teachers, students, or parents.

This evidences a move towards data-informed reflective practice, combining subjective insights with more systematic sources of evidence—a key characteristic of professional inquiry. Research and good practice: the school principal and the vice-principal practice leadership guided by routine and established methods although they adapt it based on subjective experiences. This shows partial professionalisation, where leadership is still driven by habit but is beginning to be shaped by reflective adaptation—pointing to an early stage of transformational leadership learning.

Beta PLC: An ideal PLC vs. a real PLC

The facilitator pointed out that the PLCs pretend to build a network among the schools to meet their needs. Such articulation aligns with the notion of PLCs as leadership networks, aimed at fostering inter-school collaboration and mutual support among educational leaders. Then, a document with three aspects of the PLCs was shared as part of the learning process: 1) Context and background, 2) What a PLC is? 3) Characteristics. As regards the characteristics section, the document specified some points. For instance, a) focus on improving student learning and well-being, b) trust and respect among participants, c) collaboration of its members, d) systematic and rigorous inquiry into leadership practice, e) promote active involvement and self-management, and f) internal and external

accountability. Based on such PLC characteristics, the facilitator and the participants reflected on the reality of this PLC.

First, they said that their main objective was to improve student learning. This goal is consistent with the student-centred orientation that underpins the conceptual framework of PLCs, where leadership development is directed towards instructional improvement.

Second, there was a bond of trust and respect among the participants. The emergence of mutual respect and trust among members aligns with the preconditions for effective collaboration, which are considered essential for sustaining collective inquiry.

Third, there was a lack of sharing experiences and joint planning. They were starting, but there was still work to be done. This situation reflects an early stage of development regarding shared professional practice, in which mechanisms for joint reflection and planning are still being established.

Fourth, the investigative approach was taken as the axis of learning within the community, which sought to inquire about one's actions but not those of others. Such emphasis on individual reflection, while valuable, suggests a limited realization of collective inquiry, which in its full form involves reciprocal examination of practices among peers.

Fifth, the long-term mission of the internal coordinator would be to take over from the advisors who would only come to support. This intention illustrates a gradual transition towards distributed leadership, as responsibilities are progressively assumed by members of the school community.

Sixth, social responsibility was an issue that could not be solved due to the lack of collective commitment within schools. The limited capacity to address this aspect points to persistent challenges in fostering a shared sense of accountability, which remains a crucial element in the consolidation of PLCs.

Sharing personal practice: An interest in improving education

After two sessions in which educational leaders sought to define their inquiry questions, the focus of the Beta PLC had been the use of technology in the learning process. Results of the survey, in which students took part, showed that technology is used only for entertainment. The selection of a school-based issue rooted in student realities illustrates an application of situated professional learning, where inquiry emerges from the participants' own institutional challenges.

Not all educational leaders presented some evidence of the PLC work at schools. The facilitator stated that they did not intend to judge whether they had taken some actions regarding the inquiry question and the collection of evidence. He recommended doing so to strengthen their educational leadership. This moment reflects an emphasis on reflective and non-evaluative professional dialogue, which supports the creation of a safe environment for learning and development—key to the sustainability of PLCs.

Then, the facilitator reminded participants that the investigative approach adopted at the PLCs seeks to enhance their performance as school authorities. So, the PLC facilitator insisted that an inquiry question must be framed within four issues: 1) raise the interest of the school authorities, 2) improve student learning, 3) be relevant to the school, and 4) must be framed as a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based). Such framing reinforces the inquiry-oriented nature of PLCs, emphasizing the intentional design of improvement initiatives guided by clearly defined leadership objectives. After reviewing this framework, educational leaders stated their interest in promoting the use of technology in the teaching-learning process. This redefinition of focus suggests a progressive internalization of inquiry as a leadership practice, pointing towards the development of professional agency and goal-directed collaboration within the community.

Year-one reality check: Convergences and constraints

As the first year of PLC implementation concludes, a closer examination of Alpha and Beta PLCs highlights both progress and persistent challenges. The self-evaluation process, combined with an analysis of the gap between ideal and real PLCs, provides a nuanced understanding of their current status. Three key issues show this:

Trust and collaboration as foundations: Both Alpha and Beta PLCs have developed trust, openness, and a shared vision, essential conditions for successful professional learning communities. Participants recognise the importance of student-centred leadership, and initial steps towards collaborative learning have been made. However, the degree to which these PLCs engage in structured collective inquiry and shared decision-making varies.

Challenge of distributed leadership: While both PLCs demonstrate some level of collaboration, leadership remains largely centralized. In Alpha PLC, leadership functions have not been fully shared among participants, limiting opportunities for true distributed leadership. Similarly, in Beta PLC, leadership is transitioning but still constrained by external facilitation rather than being fully internalized.

Professional inquiry and evidence-based practice: One of the biggest challenges facing these PLCs is the shift from individual reflection to collective, research-based inquiry. In Alpha PLC, discussions remain largely experience-driven, with limited engagement in structured, data-informed reflection. Beta PLC, while in a transition phase, also struggles to embed systematic collaborative research and shared accountability into its practice.

3.1.2 Second year of implementation of the PLCs

A differentiated approach – Session 6

In June 2019, the Alpha and Beta PLCs displayed differentiated trajectories, revealing how leadership networks for collaborative learning can evolve unevenly depending on local priorities and working conditions. Alpha PLC focused on strengths and weaknesses of technical schools for continuous improvement, whereas Beta PLC concentrated on sharing school experiences and reflecting on distributed leadership. In both cases, inquiry questions

and action plans remained central, confirming the role of collective inquiry as a mechanism for leadership development within PLCs.

Alpha PLC: Building community

Educational leaders were asked to share their views about what helps them to improve their professional learning. All of them coincided with the importance of sharing experiences among colleagues. Moreover, they added that observing other school contexts enriches their educational leadership and provides them with a better understanding of school management. Such insights point to the importance of collaborative dialogue and exposure to diverse practices as key components of situated professional learning. This perspective was clearly articulated by one participant: 'Being surrounded by other school authorities has helped me to improve my personal and professional skills. But within the PLCs, I have gotten a new perspective on school management' (Participant 3, PLC Alpha). This statement also exemplifies the deepening of professional identity, which emerges through community interaction and shared reflection—core aspects of leadership learning within PLCs. After hearing their voices, the PLC facilitator argued that she was pleased to know the PLC work was currently in progress. She added that personal growth was essential, but also that of the community. Her emphasis reinforces the collective nature of learning in PLCs, where individual development is interdependent with the advancement of the group as a learning community.

Collective learning: Sharing leadership actions

In a former meeting, educational leaders were asked to read the book 'El líder del futuro' and based on it to adopt some strategies to improve their leadership within their schools. Those who did read the book shared their comments. For instance, the internal coordinator said: 'A leader takes an open and inclusive approach. He trusts and sees that people can achieve things. So, he assigns tasks and does not do everything' (Participant 3, PLC Alpha). Such reflection reveals the internalization of distributed leadership principles, where authority is shared and trust is central to empowering others. By following such beliefs, she described what she did at her school. She asked teachers of specific areas to stay at school to accomplish some tasks one day a week and after working hours. Such action annoyed the teaching staff. However, she had to justify her decision by arguing that the local educational law stipulated the obligation to work extra hours in case of school needs. This example illustrates the tensions between formal authority and participatory leadership, which often emerge when institutional requirements meet collaborative intentions. Another educational leader commented: 'It is not only doing but to invite the teaching staff to work by always giving them guidance'. She shared her particular experience. She invited a teacher to work on a specific activity; because of this, he got excited. Moreover, she emphasized the need to listen to teachers. However, she argued that lack of time makes it challenging to engage the teaching staff in activities other than teaching. These accounts highlight efforts towards inclusive and relational leadership, grounded in recognition, communication, and the building of professional trust.

Other educational leaders who did not read the book shared their impressions about leadership. For instance, it is difficult to make new colleagues into new leaders because they argue that they must be assigned activities according to their appointment. There is the need to learn to delegate responsibilities to teaching staff to get them involved. Delegating tasks makes principalship much more functional. This commentary reveals an emerging awareness of the practical value of leadership distribution, even in contexts where hierarchical expectations remain embedded. It reflects an ongoing negotiation between traditional roles and new leadership practices within the PLC setting.

Inquiry questions and action plans: Motivating students through teacher training and community partnerships

The PLC facilitator reminded educational leaders the purpose of setting an inquiry question is to improve technical education. She invited them to reflect on school issues. Firstly, they stated that students see technical baccalaureate as a challenging option. They do not want to participate in technical subjects. Educational leaders added that teachers demotivate students and make them reluctant to be involved in fieldwork. So, they agreed that it is mandatory to take two actions: train teachers and motivate students to pursue a technical career. At the end of the discussion, educational leaders formulated the following inquiry question: To enhance technical education, how can teachers be engaged to motivate students to opt for a technical baccalaureate? The formulation of this question exemplifies a problem-focused approach to professional learning, characteristic of inquiry-based leadership within PLCs, where the learning agenda is shaped by immediate school realities.

Then, they brainstormed their action plans. For instance, hold restorative circles with students, hold meetings with parents to know their opinion of the technical baccalaureate, involve teaching staff and the DECE department to motivate students to study a technical career, sign a partnership agreement with partner institutions to strengthen the technical baccalaureate, involve other school authorities to assign responsibilities and commit to solving school needs. The facilitator pointed out that the evidence of the work had to be presented at the next meeting. She clarified that long-term actions could address school needs and not only compliance with the PLC. Her emphasis on long-term engagement reflects the value of sustained, context-responsive leadership, which moves beyond procedural implementation towards transformative school improvement.

Beta PLC: Building community

Educational leaders were asked to share a professional experience that made them feel proud of their current role and contributed to their schools' development. An educational leader said that as a newly appointed school principal, he had the opportunity to get to know basic education closely. Other ones said that they felt satisfied with teachers' performance and parents' commitment to the school. Another educational leader said that she felt excited about being a school authority because this was the first time she worked in such a position. This activity created a space for recognition of professional identity and leadership narratives, which are essential elements in fostering a sense of belonging and ownership within the PLC structure.

Collective learning: Characteristics of the PLCs

In a previous meeting, both the PLC facilitators and the internal coordinator agreed on the need to continually revisit and reinforce the core characteristics of the PLCs in each session. To support this process, the facilitator shared short texts addressing key PLC principles, which then served as prompts for collective reflection. Educational leaders were invited to share their perspectives, particularly regarding foundational values such as trust and respect. Trust was understood as the willingness to participate voluntarily and openly, without fear of judgment. Respect, in turn, was associated with the confidence that discussions about school-level practices and challenges would remain confidential within the PLC. These reflections demonstrate the cultivation of a safe and respectful professional culture, which is foundational for sustained collaboration in effective PLCs. The principle of internal and external accountability was also emphasized. Furthermore, the importance of sharing successful experiences, collaborative work, and inquiry processes to foster school improvement was highlighted. The integration of accountability with collaboration and inquiry reinforces the alignment between PLC practice and school improvement goals, positioning professional dialogue as a mechanism for both reflection and action. Based on such comments, facilitators emphasized trust and respect as principles that orient PLC work. Moreover, they stated that inquiry and reflection in each school are the axes of the whole improvement process. This reaffirmation positions inquiry as an ongoing practice, not a one-time activity, consistent with the conceptualisation of PLCs as continuous, context-embedded learning communities.

Shared personal practice about educational leadership

Facilitators invited educational leaders to share their experiences concerning their educational leadership within technical schools. They asked about the survey applied to teaching staff about school management and decision-making. It was an activity formerly planned during the last PLC meeting. Some educational leaders excused themselves by saying they did not perform such a task. Facilitators highlighted the fact that all the PLC activities assigned to be performed within schools had to be seen as support processes to enhance their leadership skills. This emphasis reaffirmed the formative intent of PLC-related tasks, designed not as external mandates but as embedded opportunities for leadership development.

The management team that administered the survey explained what they did at their school. They mentioned that they dealt with these issues as newly appointed school authorities. For instance, teachers were getting involved in the elaboration of curricular documents. Moreover, they were encouraged to be part of school self-evaluation processes. They expressed that the school staff had rights to participation, expression, and involvement in decision-making. However, there was some resistance from a group of teachers to be part of this. These efforts reflect a gradual attempt to distribute leadership responsibilities, fostering teacher agency and inclusive governance practices in the school. After listening to this specific case, educational leaders engaged in a discussion about structural and procedural challenges within their schools. For instance, an excessive number of students and teachers,

including non-cohesive teaching staff, and school facilities problems make it challenging to run a school. According to them, this issue is the result of the process of reordering the educational offering sought to eliminate small schools to group them into new schools with much more complete infrastructure. The discussion foregrounded the contextual constraints that shape leadership practices, revealing how broader systemic reforms influence the everyday functioning of technical schools.

To address the difficult conditions, they agreed on the importance of seeking strategies to improve the teaching process. The discussion was centred on classroom visits and observation. Within technical schools, 'Teachers do not like to be observed and monitored' (Participant 6, PLC Beta).

So, 'It is necessary that teachers understand that the purpose of the classroom visits is not punitive but is to know how teaching-learning is being developed' (Participant 5, PLC Beta). Another educational leader added that 'Classroom visits should be seen as part of school improvement process' (Participant 4, PLC Beta). Educational leaders argued that feedback processes are mandatory to support teacher and school development. These exchanges illustrate a shared concern with shifting the culture of supervision towards one of developmental support, where observation and feedback are understood as tools for professional growth rather than control.

Reflection on distributed leadership

PLC facilitators shared some information about distributed leadership. Participants read it individually and then were grouped into two teams. The first group shared their thoughts. To them, distributed leadership does not mean only delegating tasks. It is based on collaborative work that can promote teamwork, helping people to pop up their skills. This kind of work is not competitive; instead, it seeks people to act more cohesively as a whole. To proceed in this way, a climate of trust is needed. These perceptions show an emerging understanding of distributed leadership not as task delegation, but as shared, trust-based engagement, consistent with theoretical views that emphasize collaboration and capacity-building over formal authority.

Likewise, the second group pointed out that promoting distributed leadership involves cultural change. A different leadership approach is needed. Teaching staff engages in collective action and joint effort to achieve a common goal. To this, the leader supports and develops the school's synergy. Moreover, the leader promotes shared roles and responsibilities. This perspective underscores the transformational nature of distributed leadership, which requires changes in beliefs, norms, and school culture, not just in structures or procedures.

After the school authorities' discussion, facilitators added that distributed leadership seeks to keep the institution functioning, even if the leader is absent. To this, two things must be understood by all school staff. First, there is a difference between collaborating and getting involved. Being involved in decision-making is an important issue within schools. Secondly, teachers must create a culture of self-learning. Facilitators stated that educational leadership

could be seen in different contexts. For instance, when teaching staff works together on the elaboration of curricular documents. This is an example of school involvement. By highlighting concrete school practices such as curriculum development, facilitators made visible how leadership can be enacted collectively, reinforcing the practical relevance of the concept within participants' own contexts.

Inquiry questions and action plans: Reorienting PLC efforts towards measurable, shared leadership outcomes

Educational leaders were reminded that their former inquiry question was framed around bringing technology to the classrooms. But once the topic of educational leadership had been addressed, a different inquiry question was developed. The new question must be framed as a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based). A protocol that school authorities learned since the very beginning of their participation at PLCs. This continuity illustrates the scaffolded nature of inquiry-based learning within PLCs, where structured frameworks guide educational leaders in articulating and refining their leadership focus.

Facilitators highlighted the importance of the inquiry processes and told educational leaders that the issue is to pose a question that motivates and inspires them. They invited them to reflect on how to elaborate on such a question by taking into account their role as school authorities and that there are only two months to carry out the actions and collect some evidence before the next PLC meeting. The Beta PLC was interested in knowing to what extent applying distributed leadership in the school would improve student learning. Educational leaders planned to organise leadership workshops with teachers and promote an incentive plan for them. This shift in focus demonstrates how professional learning communities evolve, integrating newly explored concepts—like distributed leadership—into ongoing inquiry and action planning.

After hearing their voices, facilitators invited educational leaders to integrate the concept of distributed leadership into their action plans. They also reminded them that they had to collect evidence, such as observation sheets. As a final comment, educational leaders believe that higher authorities are responsible for educational changes. In contrast to this idea, facilitators told them that even though the scope for action is often limited, as educational leaders, they are called on to initiate change. This closing exchange touches on a central tension in leadership learning: navigating between external constraints and internal agency, while reinforcing the belief that change can be initiated from within schools, even in restrictive systems.

Evaluation of the PLC – Session 7

In August 2019, observations showed us that the work dynamic of both PLCs emphasized the relation between educational leadership and technical schools. Moreover, Alpha and Beta PLCs evaluated their performance as community.

Alpha PLC: Building community

Facilitators explained to a new participant what building a community means and how it is developed. They highlighted that building trust between all is necessary to generate work within the PLC. The emphasis on trust as a foundation for community-building aligns with key conditions identified for sustaining collaborative professional learning. Then, the internal coordinator added that building a professional community allows school authorities to know each other and to work together. She started the meeting by asking this question: As a school authority, what had been their main concern during the last week? This prompt illustrates the use of structured reflection to anchor leadership development in participants' immediate realities, reinforcing the situated nature of the learning process.

Educational leaders commented about teachers' attitudes, students' academic and behaviour issues, and the complex school environment. Moreover, they referred to the time-consuming administrative procedures. After hearing educational leaders' comments, facilitators stated that their main concern was the lack of support from the school district. Even though the PLCs have a pre-set agenda, this department constantly asks school authorities about compliance with other activities during training days. Likewise, facilitators argued about the lack of commitment of the management teams involved in the PLCs as their concern. However, they invited the group to reflect on improving their educational practices as managers. In turn, some educational leaders expressed that they had improved certain skills through their participation in the PLCs. For instance, a school vice-principal stated that she had learned how to be an educational leader. Other vice-principals agreed, mentioning that they had developed a stronger capacity for teamwork. These reflections reveal the perceived impact of the PLCs on both leadership identity and collaborative engagement, two central dimensions of PLCs.

Inquiry question and action plans: Linking ethical governance, parent voice, and teacher collaboration

In a previous meeting, the participants formulated the inquiry question of how teachers can be effectively engaged to motivate students to opt for a technical baccalaureate, to enhance technical education. Some actions had been taken and evidence was presented, such as promoting the technical baccalaureate offered at the school and applying vocational orientation tests. Moreover, teachers and school authorities committed themselves to improving their professional skills, while requesting support from small farmers, cattle ranchers, and small businessmen, as well as professional development training from the MINEDUC. These actions reflect an integrated approach to school improvement that links leadership, teacher development, and community engagement, consistent with the collaborative and inquiry-based spirit of PLCs.

However, the organisation of some activities faced difficulties due to the lack of collaboration from certain teachers. Furthermore, survey results demonstrated that a minimum number of students had opted for the technical baccalaureate due to a lack of

motivation from their parents. As a result of collective reflection, participants agreed to involve parents or legal representatives of students in their improvement plans, leading to the reformulation of the inquiry question: 'How can I, as a school authority, help legal representatives and technical teachers motivate students to opt for a technical baccalaureate?' The reformulation of the inquiry question exemplifies the adaptive nature of professional learning within PLCs, where reflection on outcomes informs ongoing cycles of planning and revision.

Educational leaders discussed the possibility of training technical teachers at all schools involved in the PLC. To them, this work would strengthen the institutional bonds. Additionally, it was noted that finding ways to make legal representatives understand the importance of not intervening in students' decisions when opting for a technical baccalaureate was necessary. After hearing the voices of educational leaders and corroborating the veracity and the accuracy of the information, the facilitator argued that PLCs aim to promote honesty in school governance. This comment was made after a management team showed some photos of other activities performed within their school. The emphasis on transparency and integrity connects to the value-driven foundation of leadership learning in PLC contexts, where ethical reflection and shared responsibility are encouraged.

Finally, facilitators emphasized that the purpose of reflecting on their action plans is to provide collective feedback based on the evidence gathered during the performance of the PLC tasks within each school. Feedback based on documented evidence is central to the professionalisation of leadership practice, as it reinforces accountability and shared learning among peers.

Beta PLC: Building community

Educational leaders were asked to share a professional activity they found enjoyable during the last month within their schools. For instance, some of them promoted leadership with the school community members, imparted information concerning distributed leadership, and reflected on collaborative teamwork. Others expressed contentment with the positive feedback received from the school community regarding the effectiveness of school administration practices. These experiences reflect a growing sense of agency and recognition within the school context, enhancing educational leaders' confidence and perception of their impact.

Then, educational leaders engaged in reflection and shared their comments on a text outlining five characteristics of the PLCs: 1. Focus on improving student learning, 2. Trust and respect among participants, 3. Collaborative work, 4. Leadership reflection, and 5. Promote the development of self-management skills. On these characteristics, they pointed out that the PLCs promote their professionalisation, experiential learning, and self-reflection. Added to these, they agreed that punctuality is inherent to the PLCs functioning. However, they justified their absenteeism or tardiness at the PLC meetings due to their responsibilities as school authorities. In this sense, the internal coordinator mentioned that school authorities' rotation is a fact that constrains leadership development and affects the consolidation of the PLCs.

At the end of the discussion, a school principal argued that school authorities could leave the PLC if they felt that the work done did not fulfill their expectations. Facilitators mentioned that they might do so by informing such a decision to the school district. However, they reminded them that the MINEDUC does not offer training courses to improve school management. For this reason, the work performed within the PLCs seeks to improve educational leadership to enhance students' learning. Finally, the internal coordinator invited their colleagues to be optimistic and seek empowerment and autonomy. This closing message reinforces the aspirational dimension of PLCs, which not only address immediate school concerns but also foster leadership identity and self-directed growth.

Inquiry question and action plans: Balancing scarce funding and collective agency to advance distributed leadership

Facilitators reminded educational leaders that if they did not fulfill the action plan, there was no punishment or sanction. They argued that the most important thing is that they are conscious about performing such work because a management team asked teaching staff to develop and apply the action plan. Facilitators emphasized that this is not the PLC objective. This clarification aligns with the core principles of PLCs, which emphasize internal motivation, autonomy, and the non-punitive nature of collaborative inquiry. After such clarification, educational leaders highlighted that their interest is to spread the concept of distributed leadership within schools. More specifically, to see how teachers and students assumed leadership roles. Based on the legal framework and by integrating some educational quality standards, they performed specific actions. For instance, some educational leaders sought to implement educational spaces to make teaching practice more didactic and meaningful and to improve students' academic development. They sought to get the economic collaboration of the local government and some other state companies. Moreover, they sought to integrate the work of different school areas. According to them, fellow teachers proposed several ideas but did not receive responses from the local government and state companies. Even though they got support and feedback from different school areas, there was a feeling of frustration because of the lack of economic resources. However, they valued the support from parents, students, and school areas that did not usually work together. This experience reflects how PLCs initiatives often extend beyond the school walls and rely on broader community engagement.

Other educational leaders conducted leadership workshops with students and teachers. Then, they organised a 'minga' (voluntary communal work with the school community) to evaluate the results of the involvement. This initiative resonates with the idea of leadership as a shared social practice rooted in context and culture, where traditional forms of collaboration gain new meaning within the PLC framework.

A different team of educational leaders commented on the design of an incentive plan for teachers which intended to publicly acknowledge the work done by teachers by taking into account their professional performance and personal values. The school community showed interest in not only getting to know the project but also in making it happen. In the end, educational leaders referred to the many school responsibilities, which did not give them

enough time to promote new practices at schools. However, they highlighted some issues about the work within the PLCs. For instance, the elaboration of action plans invited them to reflect on their leadership practices. Working on action plans gathered people who want to solve the schools' needs. This illustrates the role of reflective planning as a mechanism for collective agency, a key feature in the development of leadership capacity within communities of practice. They added that PLC meetings are valuable resources to improve educational leadership and, at the same time, to improve the quality of education at technical schools.

Alpha and Beta PLC: Self-evaluation

Educational leaders were asked to evaluate the work done within the PLC meetings. Two main aspects were considered. Firstly, educational leaders rated the results of the PLC meetings on three rating levels (poor, good, and very good). All of them rated the meetings as very good. Secondly, six parameters with three rating levels (low, medium, and high) were used to assess the competencies of the PLC facilitator. These parameters included interpersonal, pedagogical, didactic, organisational, coaching, and gender focus. All of the participants rated such parameters as high.

Evolution of PLCs for educational leaders: Identity, leadership, and barriers

As the second year of PLC implementation progresses, Alpha and Beta PLCs reveal distinct leadership trajectories. Three central themes define their evolving leadership dynamics:

From identity to application: Both PLCs have strengthened their leadership identity, with members recognizing the value of trust, collaboration, and reflective practice. Alpha PLC has leveraged these insights into concrete initiatives, focusing on ethical school governance and stakeholder engagement. Meanwhile, Beta PLC members express increased confidence in their leadership roles but remain focused on internal discussions rather than external action.

Leadership development: Alpha PLC's action plans demonstrate a commitment to inquiry-based leadership, emphasizing real-world problem-solving and evidence-based decision-making. Their engagement with parents, local businesses, and other external actors reflects an evolving leadership approach grounded in practical implementation. In contrast, Beta PLC is still in the process of embedding inquiry-driven leadership, with discussions on distributed leadership often remaining conceptual rather than applied.

Overcoming structural barriers to distributed leadership: Both PLCs acknowledge the importance of shared leadership but encounter systemic constraints. In Alpha PLC, efforts to decentralize decision-making are emerging, though hierarchical structures continue to limit progress. Beta PLC recognises the potential of distributed leadership but struggles with leadership turnover and inconsistent support from external authorities. While both communities foster collaboration, long-term sustainability will depend on stronger institutional backing and cultural shifts towards shared governance.

Ultimately, Alpha PLC represents a leadership community in transition from reflective practice to strategic action, while Beta PLC embodies the early stages of leadership culture transformation, where foundational values must solidify before broader systemic change can occur.

3.2 Critical factors: Balancing facilitation, participant dynamics, and PLC workflow

Whereas Section 4.1 traced the evolution of the PLCs over time, this section identifies the main factors that shaped those trajectories in practice. It focuses particularly on facilitation, participant dynamics, and workflow-related conditions.

3.2.1 Facilitators: From external coordinators to community-led capacity building

The team of the PLC facilitators consisted of foreign, national, and local professionals. The foreign educational advisor, affiliated with VVOB, assumed a coordinating role, while the national educational advisor was based at the central office of the MINEDUC. In addition, four local educational advisors worked at the district level in the province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas. During the first year, the VVOB representative and the educational advisor from the MINEDUC led the PLC meetings. At the same time, the local educational advisors were progressively prepared to assume facilitation responsibilities. Their role involved learning how to lead PLCs and providing guidance to educational leaders as they developed both individual and collective tasks. In long-term the ambition is that PLCs can be led by community members themselves. This gradual transfer of responsibility from external advisors to local professionals and then to school-based leaders reflects core PLC principles related to capacity building, professional empowerment, and sustainability.

However, despite this carefully planned facilitation structure, educational leaders initially had different expectations about the facilitators' role. Rather than viewing them as learning partners or facilitators of inquiry, they saw them as authority figures responsible for solving problems or advocating on their behalf within the ministry. The following narratives describe this issue: 'As educational advisors, you should help us to solve school problems' (Participant 4, PLC Beta). Additionally, participants constantly argued that the facilitators as ministerial workers could bring their concerns to the attention of the school district authorities: 'as educational advisors, you should take our claims and demands to the school district' (Participant 7, PLC Alpha). These expectations were especially evident in relation to complaints about workload and administrative demands. As one participant explained: 'The school district does not take into account that school authorities have too much work to do and still asks us for the submission of several documents' (Participant 8, PLC Alpha). This initial framing of facilitators as authority figures underscores the importance of the gradual role clarification that occurred over time, as PLCs increasingly functioned as spaces for shared learning rather than institutional mediation.

3.2.2 Participants: Evolving engagement, peer support, and the impact of leadership turnover

Regarding participants' involvement, three key aspects were identified during the first year of PLC implementation. As the sessions progressed, engagement increased: while some school authorities actively contributed by sharing experiences and providing insights into session topics, others participated more moderately or only in response to direct prompts from facilitators. This pattern illustrates how participants' involvement evolved over time as individuals progressively found their place within the learning context. A second notable aspect concerned the level of collaboration observed among most schools with complete management teams. These institutions demonstrated stronger collective engagement during task presentations, providing mutual support and reinforcing a shared sense of responsibility. This behaviour aligns with conceptualisations of effective PLCs, in which collaboration is not incidental but rather an intentional and structured component of school improvement. Institutional turnover emerged as a third significant challenge. In cases where principals were reassigned or removed—such as the dismissal of an internal coordinator, their immediate withdrawal from the PLC disrupted continuity. An action that evidences the vulnerability of professional learning structures in contexts where leadership stability is not guaranteed.

Despite these challenges, noticeable progress was observed during the second year. Participants displayed greater confidence when engaging in peer feedback, and the internal coordinator increasingly contributed by sharing reflections and encouraging colleagues to critically examine their leadership practices. This evolution reflects a growing sense of ownership, trust, and collective responsibility among PLC members.

3.2.3 PLC functioning: Challenges to collaborative inquiry in a high-bureaucracy environment

During the first year, limited and inconsistent engagement with task completion constrained educational leaders' understanding of both the purpose and the operational logic of the PLCs. This issue was further compounded by the absence of consistent follow-up by facilitators regarding the work being carried out in schools. Although participants expressed familiarity with theoretical concepts, they frequently expressed that practical solutions to the challenges they face on a daily basis would be more valuable. These observations point to a recurring tension in capacity-building initiatives: while conceptual frameworks are introduced, their relevance often remains abstract in the absence of sustained, practice-oriented guidance closely aligned with leaders' immediate professional realities.

Field observations further revealed persistent inefficiencies in communication among the school district, PLC facilitators, and educational leaders throughout both years of implementation. Despite PLC sessions being scheduled in advance, educational leaders often failed to receive timely official authorization to attend, which negatively affected participation. In several instances, participants were required to leave plenary sessions to address external obligations imposed by district-level authorities. Such disruptions illustrate a structural barrier to collective learning, whereby institutional misalignment undermines the continuity, predictability, and trust necessary for PLCs to function effectively.

In addition, although facilitators repeatedly informed school authorities that key relevant documents and communications would be made available via digital platforms, access to such resources was not always granted, even when formally requested. This inconsistency limited transparency and contributed to the exclusion of participants who were unable to attend all meetings. The problem was exacerbated in cases where educational leaders from the same institution did not systematically share information with absent colleagues, resulting in uneven levels of awareness and understanding regarding the PLC's progress and objectives.

By the end of the second year, local educational advisors voiced growing concerns about the difficulty many principals and vice-principals experienced in critically reflecting on their management practices and translating insights into actionable school improvement plans. This challenge was particularly pronounced among leaders serving in acting positions, whose limited sense of permanency appeared to weaken their engagement with long-term planning. Furthermore, the overwhelming volume of administrative responsibilities assigned to school authorities appeared to reduce their motivation to design and implement school improvement plans.

As noted by one local facilitator, some educational leaders maintained the expectation that facilitators should provide ready-made solutions or standardised guidelines for institutional improvement, rather than supporting autonomous, context-responsive planning. This perception runs counter to the spirit of PLCs, which emphasize collective inquiry, shared agency, and professional responsibility over top-down problem-solving. In response, the national advisor consistently reiterated that the inquiry process must be seen as a collaborative endeavor, in which educational leaders actively engage in shared reflection and joint decision-making. He further emphasized that, even in contexts characterized by limited institutional support, a commitment to improving educational leadership practices should remain central to the role of school administrators as educational leaders.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This discussion interprets the findings by examining how the PLCs functioned as leadership networks for collaborative learning, what shaped their trajectories in practice, and what these findings imply for policy and practice in Ecuadorian technical schools. Section 5.1 focuses on the organisational features of the PLCs as a framework for leadership development. Section 5.2 discusses the factors that shaped their trajectories over time. Finally, Section 5.3 considers the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

4.1 PLCs as a framework for leadership development

The findings show that PLCs functioned as an organisational framework for leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools. More specifically, they created a structured yet collaborative space in which principals and vice-principals could engage in shared reflection, collective inquiry, and practice-based learning. Interpreted through the conceptual framework, the two PLCs functioned as emerging leadership networks for

collaborative learning, although their capacity to sustain this role depended on the quality of facilitation, the continuity of participation, and the degree of institutional support available over time.

Drawing on Davis et al.'s (2005) framework, our findings suggest that leadership development within Ecuadorian technical schools can be understood across three interrelated dimensions: structure, methods, and content. Structurally, our findings show that a staged partnership—external (VVOB), national (MINEDUC), local district advisors, and school-based internal coordinators—created a pipeline from external facilitation towards locally led communities. Together, these actors guided and monitored the performance of school principals and vice-principals within the PLCs. Rather than operating solely as an administrative arrangement, this collaboration between state and non-state bodies created the organisational conditions for leadership learning, fostering experience sharing and networking tailored to the needs of technical schools.

Methodologically, PLCs operationalised a simple improvement routine—posing an inquiry question, acting, gathering light evidence, reflecting with peers, and adapting practice. Facilitation shifted from 'expert delivery' to questioning and coaching, nudging leaders to interrogate their own practice rather than wait for top-down fixes, a shift progressively observed across PLC sessions. This approach empowered leaders to build their capacity to effectively lead and support teaching staff. Such findings align with Harris and Chapman's (2002) insight that challenging contexts demand diverse leadership strategies that foster participatory leadership and shared ownership.

Content-wise, topics were tied to Ecuador's management and professional-performance standards but filtered through local needs—conflict resolution, diagnostic practices, planning, instructional support, and collaborative work. In technical schools this yielded a blended repertoire of leadership practices (instructional, distributed, and community-engagement oriented) rather than a single leadership style. This finding is consistent with McCulla and Degenhardt's (2016) claim that leadership development must be responsive to context-specific needs. PLCs thus provided targeted support addressing the areas educational leaders identified as priorities in their leadership growth journeys. Together, these findings indicate that PLCs in technical schools do not transmit a single leadership model but enable leaders to assemble context-responsive repertoires over time.

4.2 What the PLCs looked like—and why that matters

The findings show that the two PLCs evolved unevenly as leadership networks for collaborative learning. Across the cases, the session-by-session analysis revealed how key dimensions of the conceptual framework—shared vision, collective inquiry, shared personal practice, distributed leadership, supportive conditions, action orientation, continuous improvement, and results orientation—were progressively built, negotiated, and sometimes constrained. In this sense, the study opens the black box of PLCs by showing how these characteristics were enacted in practice rather than assuming them as fixed organisational features.

Across the two cases, eight PLC dimensions were visible—shared beliefs/vision; collective inquiry; shared personal practice; action orientation; collaborative teams; supportive conditions; results orientation; continuous improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008)—but with contextual inflections:

- ***Shared vision and collective inquiry*** were catalyzed by concrete, school-based problems (e.g., weak teacher–student relations; limited uptake of technical baccalaureate).
- ***Shared personal practice*** grew through peer feedback, yet routines for reciprocal observation and evidence use remained uneven.
- ***Action orientation*** produced feasible, light-evidence plans; implementation was strongest when facilitators followed up and teams remained intact.
- ***Collaborative teams and supportive conditions*** were strengthened by rotating meeting sites (exposure to diverse contexts) and constrained by leadership turnover and late authorizations to attend.
- ***Results orientation and continuous improvement*** advanced when inquiry cycles were revisited, not reset, and when leaders linked actions to student learning and stakeholder voice (teachers, families, and local industry).

In contrast to PLC studies conducted in more stable education systems, where results orientation and evidence use are often institutionalized and routinized, the PLCs examined here relied more heavily on relational trust, facilitator mediation, and engagement with local stakeholders—particularly families and local industry—to sustain leadership professionalisation in the absence of stable institutional supports. This pattern reflects the conditions of technical schools operating within early-stage leadership professionalisation contexts, where leadership continuity and formal data infrastructures cannot be assumed.

Taken together, these findings show that the PLCs did not simply reproduce an ideal model; rather, they enacted the conceptual characteristics of PLCs in partial, context-dependent, and evolving ways. However, implementation in this context was mediated by two persistent tensions evident across both PLC cases. First, obligation vs. ownership: initial participation was often mandated; over time, some leaders internalized PLC purposes and led change, while others remained peripheral. Second, facilitator as ‘solver’ versus coach: participants initially positioned advisors as bureaucratic fixers; reframing their role from bureaucratic problem solvers towards facilitators of reflective leadership learning required deliberate contracting and modeling.

These patterns suggest that PLCs will remain episodic ‘seminars’ unless three design levers are secured: (1) protected time and explicit between-session follow-up; (2) simple, shared evidence routines (brief observation notes, mini-surveys, reflection logs) to make learning visible; and (3) continued localization of facilitation, so questioning, feedback, and accountability are owned inside the community rather than introduced and maintained through external facilitation or top-down mandates. These tensions illustrate how PLC frameworks are reshaped in practice when enacted in systems characterized by provisional leadership appointments, policy-driven participation, and limited pre-service preparation. While a substantial body of PLC research has examined leadership development in relatively

stable education systems, empirical studies focusing on PLC enactment in non-Western vocational and technical education contexts remain limited. This study contributes to addressing this gap by showing how PLC frameworks are reinterpreted and operationalised under conditions of leadership instability and emerging professionalisation.

4.3 Conditions enabling and constraining PLCs as spaces for leadership development

The findings indicate that PLCs became meaningful spaces for leadership development only under certain enabling conditions, and that their growth was constrained when those conditions were weak or unstable. Interpreted through the conceptual framework, the most important conditions were not only structural but also relational: protected time, facilitation, participant stability, shared accountability, and institutional support. When these conditions were present, PLCs were more likely to function as leadership networks for collaborative learning. When they were absent, PLCs risked remaining episodic meetings rather than sustained professional communities. From this perspective, the policy and practice implications are not add-ons to the findings but direct responses to the conditions identified as central to the sustainability of PLCs.

- ***Institutionalize the PLC spine.*** Stabilize coordinating units and annual calendars; align district-level demands with PLC schedules; minimize rotation in key leadership and advisory posts; and ensure rapid onboarding of new principals and vice-principals into ongoing PLC work.
- ***Protect reflective time.*** Ring-fence dedicated PLC hours within school schedules; reduce low-value administrative tasks during PLC cycles; and formally recognise PLC participation and leadership learning within appraisal and evaluation processes.
- ***Invest in facilitation capacity.*** Support a gradual transition from externally supported to locally and community-led facilitation, accompanied by targeted coaching in inquiry design, reflective questioning, feedback practices, and follow-through across sessions.
- ***Embed light evidence routines.*** Promote the consistent use of simple, low-burden tools (e.g., one-page observation protocols, exit tickets, brief surveys, reflection logs) to support evidence-informed dialogue without overwhelming schools' limited capacities.
- ***Extend PLCs outward.*** Link leadership inquiry to structured engagement with parents and local technical-industry partners, thereby strengthening the relevance of leadership work and reinforcing the social and economic mission of technical baccalaureate programmes.

Together, these implications highlight the conditions under which PLCs can move from policy-supported experiments to enduring mechanisms for leadership development in technical education systems.

4.4 Conclusion

In Ecuadorian technical schools, PLCs offered a pragmatic route to leadership development amid limited formal preparation. They helped leaders move from compliance to collaborative inquiry, from solo problem-solving to peer learning, and from supervisory routines to more developmental, distributed practice. At the same time, bureaucratic churn,

workload pressures, and role instability constrained depth and consistency. The lesson is not that PLCs are a panacea, nor that they can substitute for coherent leadership policy, but that—when structurally protected, well facilitated, and locally owned—they provide a credible backbone for the intra- and interpersonal work through which leadership actually changes. Consolidating this backbone system-wide is the next step if PLCs are to become an enduring driver of school improvement in Ecuador’s technical education sector.

5. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that temper its claims and point to clear next steps. First, the empirical base on educational leadership in Ecuador—especially in technical schools—is thin. The absence of prior local studies limited the availability of context-specific frameworks against which to interpret our findings. Second, our design is centred on PLC meetings. While these data illuminate interactional dynamics and identity work within the PLCs, they do not fully capture how leaders translated learning into day-to-day school practice. Third, the sample (two PLCs in one province) is context-bound, and we did not track outcomes (teacher practice, student learning, organisational indicators) or use independent measures of leadership growth—so causal claims are limited. Finally, researcher presence may have influenced participants’ behaviour (observer effects).

Future work should broaden and deepen designs. Compare models across provinces and providers (ministry programmes, NGOs, graduate routes) to see which best build leadership identity and capability in technical schools. Use mixed-method, longitudinal designs—PLC observations plus in-school shadowing, artifacts from peer observation, social-network mapping, and validated leadership rubrics—to track transfer and sustainability. Add outcomes (quality of feedback, instructional walkthroughs, retention in technical pathways, student course performance) to strengthen impact claims. Finally, run design-based/improvement-science studies that iterate on three levers—protected time with follow-up, simple shared evidence routines, and localized facilitation—to generate practical guidance for scaling PLCs in high-bureaucracy systems. Taken together, these directions would build more robust evidence base for leadership development in Ecuador’s technical schools and inform coherent, sustainable policy and programme design.

Chapter 8

General discussion

General discussion

This dissertation examined how educational leadership is learned, enacted, and developed by principals and vice-principals in Ecuadorian technical schools. Rather than treating leadership as a static role or a fixed set of competencies, it approached leadership as a situated, relational, and developmental phenomenon shaped by policy conditions, organisational contexts, and collective learning processes. Across the four empirical chapters, the dissertation showed that leadership development emerges unevenly and conditionally through the interaction between identity construction, leadership practice, and professional learning and development through PLCs.

This chapter brings those findings into dialogue with broader debates in educational leadership research. Rather than revisiting each study in isolation, it interprets the dissertation as a cumulative inquiry into how leadership is constructed, enacted, learned, and developed in a policy-regulated and under-supported context. The discussion therefore moves across three interconnected levels: first, it synthesizes the main empirical findings; second, it positions these findings in relation to international and Latin American scholarship on leadership in constrained contexts, professional learning and collaboration, and distributed leadership; and third, it outlines the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications that emerge from this dialogue. In this sense, the contribution of the dissertation lies not only in making visible the realities of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, but also in using those realities to refine broader understandings of educational leadership and leadership development.

1. Interpreting the key findings

Synthesizing findings across the four empirical chapters reveals three interrelated insights that illuminate how educational leaders construct their professional identities, enact leadership practices, and engage in leadership learning processes that—under certain conditions—translate into leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools.

1.1 Leadership identity is dynamic, policy-contingent and emotionally charged

Leadership identity emerged not as a stable attribute, but as an ongoing process of negotiation between personal commitments and accountability demands imposed by the Ecuadorian education system. Principals and vice-principals consistently described tensions between their aspiration to act as pedagogical leaders and the realities of bureaucratic compliance, temporary appointments, and policy volatility.

Identity work intensified during moments of role transition or policy reform, when leaders were required to reinterpret their legitimacy, authority, and professional purpose. These findings reinforce conceptualizations of leadership identity as dynamic, relational, and

context-bound (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), while highlighting the emotional labour involved in sustaining a sense of professional coherence under unstable conditions.

These findings suggest that in constrained and policy-volatile contexts, leadership identity is not only relational and dynamic, but also institutionally unsettled and emotionally burdened.

1.2 Leadership practice is a hybrid of instructional, transformational and distributed moves

Leadership practices in Ecuadorian technical schools did not align neatly with singular theoretical models. Instead, leaders enacted hybrid configurations of practice, blending instructional, transformational, managerial, and distributed elements in response to situational demands and resource constraints.

Instructional leadership was visible in commitments to teaching quality and student learning, yet frequently constrained by administrative overload. Transformational practices appeared in efforts to motivate staff and sustain collective morale, though often unsupported by formal leadership preparation. Distributed leadership emerged informally through relational trust rather than through structured delegation.

This pattern of situated hybridity challenges the neat typologies still prevalent in the field (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2011). This pattern suggests that leadership practice in Ecuadorian technical schools is shaped less by adherence to a single model than by the need to respond pragmatically to contextual demands.

1.3 PLCs as mediating spaces between identity and practice

PLCs played a pivotal mediating role between leadership identity and leadership practice. When characterized by trust, skilled facilitation, and continuity, PLCs functioned as spaces of leadership learning, enabling leaders to articulate doubts, test emerging practices, and reframe their professional self-understandings.

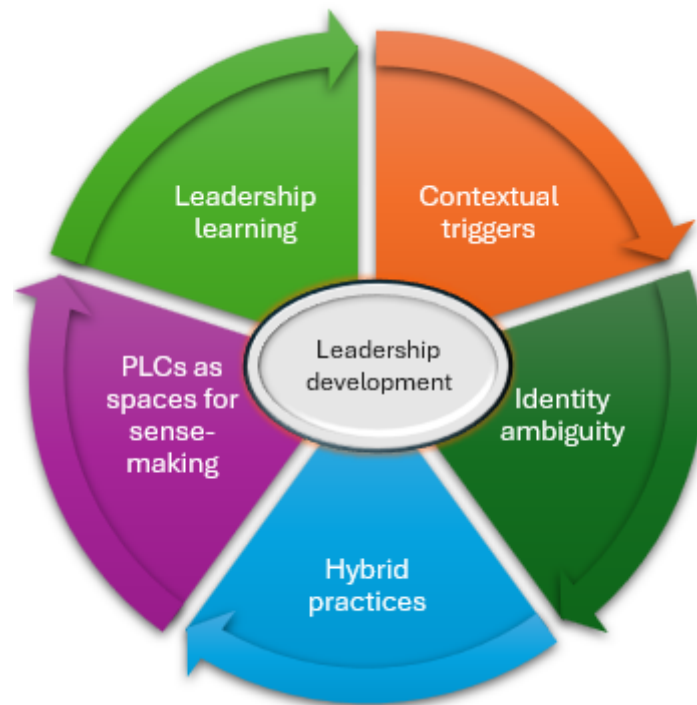
In such contexts, learning was not limited to knowledge acquisition, but involved sense-making, peer validation, and collective problem-solving. Conversely, when PLCs were weakly facilitated or framed primarily as compliance mechanisms, they failed to generate meaningful learning and reinforced existing patterns of role ambiguity. This echoes warnings that collaborative structures do not automatically deliver leadership learning (Harris, 2013; Stoll et al., 2006).

Across the dissertation, PLCs functioned as mediating spaces in which educational leaders could test practices, articulate uncertainty, and reinterpret their professional roles through collective sense-making.

1.4 Leadership development as a contextually mediated cycle

The findings of this dissertation suggest that leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools should not be understood as a linear progression from role ambiguity to professional growth. Rather, it emerges as a contextually mediated and recursive process in which leadership identity, hybrid leadership practices, leadership learning, and leadership development continuously shape one another. This process is enabled when educational leaders find opportunities for reflection, experimentation, peer validation, and collaborative sense-making, but it can also be interrupted or redirected by policy volatility, unstable appointments, fragmented support, and weak professionalisation structures. Figure 1 synthesizes this central argument by showing how leadership development unfolds through the interaction between contextual conditions, identity construction, leadership practice, and collective learning, while also remaining vulnerable to regression under fragile institutional conditions.

Figure 1. Contextually mediated cycle of leadership identity, practice, learning, and development



The remainder of this subsection unpacks each component of the cycle in turn. It explains how policy volatility generates identity ambiguity, how this ambiguity is enacted through hybrid practice, how PLCs mediate collective sense-making and leadership learning, and how

these processes may lead to renewed identity, refined practice, and a recursive but fragile form of leadership development.

1.4.1 Policy volatility as the triggering condition

The cycle begins with policy volatility. This dissertation shows that policy instability, fragmented institutional support, temporary appointments, and weak professionalisation structures are not merely background conditions. They actively shape how leadership is experienced in Ecuadorian technical schools. Leadership cannot be understood apart from a context marked by discontinuities in policy, unstable institutional arrangements, and limited professional support pathways. In this sense, policy volatility functions as the triggering condition of the cycle, producing uncertainty in roles, weakening continuity, and preventing the consolidation of stable professional trajectories.

1.4.2 Identity ambiguity under unstable conditions

From this instability emerges identity ambiguity. Educational leaders do not always act from a consolidated sense of themselves as leaders. Instead, they experience tension around who they are expected to be: administrator, pedagogical guide, teacher-leader, manager, or mediator. The dissertation shows that leadership identity in Ecuadorian technical schools is often constructed under contextual pressure, appearing as unstable, hybrid, or only partially settled. Policy volatility therefore generates not only practical difficulties but also uncertainty in professional self-understanding.

1.4.3 Hybrid practice as pragmatic response

When educational leaders face this ambiguity, they must still act. The result is the enactment of hybrid leadership practices that combine different leadership logics rather than expressing a single pure model. Across the dissertation, leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools appears as a situated combination of managerial, pedagogical, instructional, transformational, and distributed elements. Leaders handle administration because the system demands it, support pedagogical work because the school requires it, and distribute responsibilities when complexity exceeds the capacity of a single actor. Hybrid practice can therefore be understood as the behavioural expression of identity ambiguity under contextual pressure.

1.4.4 PLCs as spaces for collective sense-making

PLCs constitute the mediating turning point of the cycle. They do not simply train leaders in a technical sense, but provide collaborative spaces in which leaders can stop responding only individually and begin making sense of their work collectively. Throughout the dissertation, PLCs emerged as situated spaces for reflection, dialogue, experimentation, peer validation, and the comparison of practices. In this sense, PLCs mediate between identity and practice: they allow educational leaders to recognise that many of their struggles are not merely personal shortcomings, but structurally shared and professionally interpretable

experiences. It is through this process of collective sense-making that ambiguity becomes a possible source of learning rather than only a condition of uncertainty.

1.4.5 Leadership learning as developmental movement

Leadership learning constitutes the process through which collective sense-making begins to translate into developmental movement. If PLCs provide the mediating space, leadership learning refers to what educational leaders begin to acquire, reframe, or make possible within that space. Across the dissertation, this learning did not take the form of abstract knowledge transmission alone, but of new understandings, interpretive resources, practical strategies, and increased confidence in how to respond to the demands of leadership in context. Through reflection, dialogue, experimentation, and peer validation, educational leaders became better able to name their challenges, compare responses, and reconsider their own ways of acting. In this sense, leadership learning represents the moment at which shared interpretation becomes professionally meaningful: not yet a stable developmental outcome, but no longer merely the collective recognition of difficulty. It is the process through which ambiguity begins to be worked on rather than simply endured.

1.4.6 Leadership development as renewed identity and refined practice

Leadership development becomes visible when these learning processes begin to generate more sustained shifts in self-understanding and practice. At this point, the model moves to renewed identity and refined practice. Educational leaders do not simply return to the same place they started. Rather, the PLC experience allows them to reconstruct how they understand themselves and to adjust how they act. Identity becomes more conscious, more deliberate, and more pedagogically grounded, while practice becomes more reflective, more collaborative, and less purely reactive. In this sense, renewed identity and refined practice represent the developmental gain produced through leadership learning over time. Leaders do not leave the unstable context behind, but they become better able to interpret and respond to it.

1.4.7 A recursive but fragile developmental cycle

The cycle does not end here. Educational leaders return to the same unstable system, now with somewhat stronger identity resources and more refined practices, yet still under conditions of policy volatility and institutional fragility. New ambiguity may therefore emerge again. For this reason, the model should not be read as a linear success trajectory, but as a recursive and context-sensitive developmental cycle. It does not romanticize PLCs as a permanent solution. Rather, it shows that PLCs provide a meaningful but fragile developmental response within a structurally unstable environment. If PLCs are not sustained, the cycle becomes discontinuous: leaders may remain caught in policy volatility, identity ambiguity, and hybrid coping practices without the stable mediating conditions needed for collective learning and renewal. Leadership development in Ecuadorian technical

schools is therefore best understood as conditional, uneven, and recursively shaped by the interplay between context, identity, practice, and collaborative learning.

1.5 Revisiting leadership roles: Beyond principal-centrism and positional stability

Educational leadership research and policy frameworks have traditionally centred on the principalship as the primary locus of authority, responsibility, and accountability within schools. This principal-centric orientation has shaped both theoretical models and professional development pathways, often overlooking the contributions of other formal leadership actors within schools. In contrast, this dissertation deliberately included both principals and vice-principals as central participants, thereby broadening the analytical lens through which educational leadership is understood in Ecuadorian technical schools.

The findings indicate that vice-principals exercise substantial instructional, relational, and coordinative leadership functions, particularly in contexts characterized by administrative overload and policy volatility. While principals typically face greater symbolic accountability and external scrutiny, vice-principals frequently operate in closer proximity to teachers and pedagogical processes. This positioning situates them as key mediators between policy mandates and classroom realities. Although the intensity and visibility of institutional pressures differed, the underlying developmental dynamics were shared.

A distinctive feature of the Ecuadorian context further complicates traditional role distinctions: the prevalence of acting leadership appointments. Acting and formally appointed principals and vice-principals perform equivalent formal duties and confront similar bureaucratic and pedagogical challenges. However, the provisional nature of acting roles introduces a layer of structural precarity that shapes how leadership is experienced and enacted. Positional instability influences professional self-understanding, the exercise of authority, and the willingness or capacity to invest in long-term developmental initiatives. In this sense, leadership development unfolds not only within conditions of policy volatility, but also within role instability.

Recognizing both the distributed configuration of leadership roles and the structural precarity associated with acting appointments deepens the understanding of how leadership identity, practice, and development evolve in context. Moving beyond a narrow focus on the principalship, this dissertation contributes to a more inclusive and contextually grounded conceptualization of formal educational leadership—one that acknowledges differentiated yet interconnected roles operating within policy-fragile environments. This expanded view reinforces the conditional character of the developmental cycle identified in this dissertation, where institutional stability and role legitimacy emerge as critical factors shaping leadership trajectories.

These findings indicate that leadership work in Ecuadorian technical schools extends beyond stable principalship and is redistributed across multiple formal actors under conditions of instability.

2. Positioning the dissertation in broader academic debates

Beyond the interpretation of specific findings, this dissertation also needs to be situated within broader academic debates in educational leadership research. Its contribution is not limited to describing educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools; it also speaks to ongoing discussions about how leadership is exercised, learned, and developed under constrained institutional conditions. Three debates are especially relevant here: educational leadership in constrained contexts, professional learning and collaboration as pathways for leadership development, and distributed leadership beyond formal models of delegation. Taken together, these debates help position the dissertation not at the margins of the field, but in direct conversation with some of its central concerns.

2.1 Educational leadership in constrained contexts

A first theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies in its engagement with scholarship on educational leadership in constrained contexts. Educational leadership research has long been dominated by Anglo-American and high-income systems, where leadership is often examined within relatively stable institutional arrangements and supported professional pathways. In contrast, scholars such as Walker and Dimmock (2005), Hallinger (2011), and Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017b) have emphasized that leadership must be understood in relation to the cultural, political, and organisational conditions in which it is enacted. This dissertation aligns with that position, while extending it through an Ecuadorian case marked by policy volatility, temporary appointments, fragmented institutional support, and weak professionalisation structures. This argument is also consistent with more recent international work showing that leadership in education must be understood in relation to the conditions under which it is exercised, including uneven institutional capacity, policy environments, and the forms of support available to leaders across systems (UNESCO, 2024).

In this context, leadership cannot be understood as the straightforward enactment of formal roles or prescribed competencies. Rather, the Ecuadorian case shows that constrained conditions actively shape how leadership is interpreted, experienced, and developed. This extends context-sensitive critiques of universal leadership models by suggesting that under-supported systems require not only contextual applications of existing theories, but context-generated understandings of leadership itself. In this regard, the dissertation adds empirical weight to the argument that leadership identity and leadership development are differently configured when professional pathways are unstable, institutional support is fragmented, and policy environments remain volatile. Rather than treating such contexts as deviations from a presumed norm of stable leadership systems, the Ecuadorian case supports the more recent view that variability in leadership conditions is intrinsic to the field and must be theorised as such, rather than treated as peripheral to mainstream knowledge production (UNESCO, 2024).

2.2 Professional learning, collaboration, and leadership development

A second contribution concerns the literature on professional learning and collaboration. Much of this scholarship has focused primarily on teachers, especially through work on PLCs by authors such as Stoll et al. (2006), Hord (2009), and Timperley (2011), who have emphasized the importance of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection for professional growth. This dissertation builds on that tradition, but shifts the analytical focus towards educational leaders. It suggests that PLCs should be understood not only as structures for teacher collaboration, but also as potential infrastructures for leadership learning and development, especially in systems where formal preparation remains fragmented or weak. This interpretation is reinforced by recent work on inter-school networks, which suggests that collaborative structures can provide educational leaders with access to social capital, professional exchange, and peer support, even if their impact remains contingent on the quality of participation and the organisational conditions under which they operate (Brown et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that leadership learning in PLCs is not adequately captured as technical knowledge acquisition alone. Rather, it involves sense-making, peer validation, experimentation, and the reinterpretation of professional roles through collective interaction. In this regard, the dissertation resonates with D. V. Day and Harrison's (2007) understanding of leadership development as a process that involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal learning. PLCs mattered not simply because they transmitted tools or strategies, but because they offered settings in which leaders could articulate uncertainty, compare responses, and begin to transform ambiguity into developmental movement. At the same time, the dissertation nuances optimistic accounts of collaboration by showing that PLCs do not automatically generate meaningful learning. Consistent with Harris's (2013) warning and with Stoll et al.'s (2006) emphasis on supportive conditions, their developmental value depended on trust, continuity, facilitation, and institutional support. Where these conditions were weak, PLCs risked becoming procedural, fragile, or compliance-oriented rather than genuinely developmental. The dissertation therefore contributes to this debate by showing both the promise and the limits of collaborative professional learning as a pathway for leadership development. In this sense, the findings resonate with recent systematic evidence showing that collaborative networks may generate important relational and developmental benefits, but that strong evidence of impact is still uneven and highly dependent on context, design, and continuity (Brown et al., 2024).

2.3 Distributed leadership beyond formal delegation

A third contribution concerns debates on distributed leadership. Authors such as Spillane et al. (2001), Harris (2004, 2013), and Lumby (2013) have argued that leadership should not be reduced to the actions of one individual, but understood as stretched across multiple actors, interactions, and situations. This dissertation supports that view, but also complicates it. More recent reviews confirm that distributed leadership remains a central but conceptually evolving field, with continuing variation in how it is defined, studied, and operationalised

across educational settings (Mifsud, 2023). In the Ecuadorian case, distributed leadership was visible in the relational and collaborative practices through which principals, vice-principals, facilitators, internal coordinators, and peers supported one another within and across PLCs. However, this distribution did not primarily arise through carefully designed organisational structures or strategic delegation.

Instead, leadership work was often redistributed informally, pragmatically, and unevenly through trust, positional instability, and practical necessity. This is especially important because it moves beyond more idealised accounts of distributed leadership as a deliberate organisational arrangement. In Ecuadorian technical schools, vice-principals and other supporting actors became significant leadership figures not simply because leadership had been intentionally redesigned, but because unstable appointments, fragile support structures, and the demands of school functioning required leadership work to be shared across available actors. This is especially important in light of recent work showing that the distributed leadership knowledge base remains heavily shaped by Anglo-American and other Western contexts, which makes empirically grounded analyses from under-represented settings particularly valuable for refining the concept beyond its most institutionalised formulations (Adams et al., 2025). In this sense, the dissertation aligns with Harris's (2013) caution that distributed leadership should not be assumed to emerge automatically from formal structures. It also extends that line of argument by showing that in constrained systems, distributed leadership may emerge less as a planned reform than as an adaptive response to institutional fragility. The dissertation therefore contributes to distributed leadership debates by showing that, in under-supported contexts, leadership distribution may emerge through necessity and instability as much as through intentional design.

2.4 Integrative synthesis

Taken together, these three debates show that the dissertation contributes to educational leadership research in ways that are both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, it makes visible the realities of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, a context that has remained largely underrepresented in the field. Theoretically, it refines broader understandings of leadership by showing that leadership in constrained contexts is not simply reduced or incomplete, but differently configured through instability, hybridity, collaborative mediation, and fragile opportunities for development. In this sense, the dissertation does not merely apply existing theories to a new setting. Rather, it uses the Ecuadorian case to extend, nuance, and contextualise how educational leadership, professional learning, and distributed practice are understood more broadly. These findings also align with recent calls to understand educational leadership less as the enactment of abstract universal models and more as a contextually situated, relational, and system-dependent process shaped by conditions of support, collaboration, and institutional possibility (UNESCO, 2024).

3. Reflections on limitations

This dissertation offers a contextually grounded understanding of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools, but its claims must be interpreted in light of several limitations. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study; rather, they clarify the scope of its contribution and indicate the conditions under which its findings should be read.

A first limitation concerns the contextual and empirical specificity of the dissertation. The study was conducted within Ecuadorian technical schools and, more specifically, within a professional development initiative implemented in Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas. This context was analytically relevant because it offered a rare opportunity to examine leadership identity, leadership practices, leadership learning, and leadership development within a structured professional development setting. At the same time, this specificity means that the findings are not statistically generalisable to all Ecuadorian schools or to other educational systems. The value of the dissertation therefore lies in analytical rather than statistical generalisation: it provides concepts, patterns, and interpretations that may illuminate similar under-supported and policy-regulated contexts, but it does not claim universal applicability. This limitation is reinforced by the scope of the empirical base itself: the dissertation followed six principals and vice-principals in the phenomenological chapters and then focused on two PLCs as bounded cases in the multiple-case chapter. While this made it possible to sustain continuity across the dissertation and introduce variation in actors, roles, and collective processes, it cannot represent the full diversity of PLC implementation or leadership development trajectories across Ecuadorian technical education.

A second limitation concerns the weak local knowledge base on educational leadership within which the dissertation was conducted. In Ecuador, research on educational leadership remains limited, and leadership has often been subsumed under broader administrative or governance concerns rather than developed as a distinct professional and scholarly field. This meant that the dissertation had to engage a context in which there is still no strong national or regional research framework capable of adequately supporting the study of leadership identity, practices, learning, and development in technical schools. As a result, existing international frameworks had to be used critically and adapted carefully to the Ecuadorian setting. This was not only a theoretical challenge, but also a limitation, because the study could not build on a consolidated local tradition of leadership research.

A third limitation concerns the uneven access to leadership practice across the empirical chapters. While Chapters 4, 5, and 6 rely mainly on participants' narrated experiences, Chapter 7 adds observational access to PLC functioning over time. This combination was one of the strengths of the dissertation, since it made it possible to connect identity, practice, learning, and development through multiple sources. However, the observational dimension remained concentrated on PLC meetings rather than on day-to-day school life. As a result, the dissertation provides richer insight into some forms and settings of leadership enactment than others. In this sense, it captures leadership development as it was narrated, mediated, and partially observed, but not exhaustively as it unfolded in every dimension of school practice. Relatedly, the dissertation did not track these processes through independent

outcome indicators such as changes in teacher practice, student learning, organisational performance, or validated measures of leadership growth. For this reason, it should not be read as establishing direct causal effects between PLC participation and wider school outcomes. Its contribution is interpretive and explanatory rather than impact-evaluative.

A fourth limitation concerns the interpretive and linguistic mediation involved in the research process. As with most qualitative inquiry, the dissertation depended on interpretive engagement with interviews, observations, and documentary materials. This created the possibility of social desirability in participants' accounts and of researcher influence during fieldwork. Although triangulation across sources, prolonged engagement, and reflexive attention helped strengthen credibility, the study cannot claim complete neutrality or full replicability. This is particularly important in a dissertation that treats leadership as a socially negotiated and context-bound phenomenon: the findings emerged through interpretation, not through detached measurement. At the same time, the bilingual nature of the dissertation introduced an additional layer of complexity. The empirical material was generated primarily in Spanish, while the dissertation itself moves across Spanish- and English-language scholarly traditions. This required the translation not only of words, but also of meanings, institutional references, and culturally embedded expressions. In research on leadership, where identity, practice, and professional meaning are closely tied to language, some nuances inevitably pass through a process of mediation rather than direct equivalence. For this reason, the dissertation should be understood as a reflexive and bilingual interpretive exercise, not as a fully neutral representation of reality.

A fifth limitation concerns the broader historical and practical conditions under which the study was conducted. Although the dissertation benefited from sustained engagement with educational leaders and PLCs, the continuity of observation and interaction was not always stable. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated disruptions affected the stability of educational routines, limited opportunities for direct contact, reduced possibilities for immersive onsite engagement, and introduced additional challenges related to participation and communication. These conditions are not merely external inconveniences; they form part of the very reality that shaped the dissertation. At the same time, they also constrained the rhythm, reach, and continuity of the research process.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the dissertation should be read as a context-sensitive and analytically cumulative contribution rather than as a definitive or exhaustive account of educational leadership in Ecuador. Its strength lies in making visible processes that have remained largely under-researched: how leadership is constructed, enacted, learned, and developed in Ecuadorian technical schools under conditions of policy instability, fragmented support, and uneven professionalisation. Precisely because of these limits, the dissertation opens a broader agenda for future research and practice.

4. Implications for future research and practice

The findings of this dissertation generate implications at two interconnected levels: they point to new directions for research, and they also suggest practical orientations for

educational leadership development in Ecuadorian technical schools and in other constrained contexts. These implications follow directly from the central argument of the dissertation: leadership development is not a linear accumulation of competencies, but a situated, relational, and uneven process shaped by identity work, hybrid practice, collaborative learning, and institutional conditions. In this sense, the implications of the dissertation extend beyond the Ecuadorian case while remaining grounded in the specific realities from which they emerged.

4.1 Implications for future research

A first implication for research is the need to deepen context-sensitive studies of educational leadership in underrepresented settings. This dissertation has shown that leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools cannot be adequately understood through decontextualised or universal models alone. Future studies should therefore continue examining leadership in contexts marked by policy volatility, unstable appointments, fragmented professional development, and limited institutional support. Such work is especially important in Latin America, where leadership research remains uneven across countries and sectors, and where technical education continues to be comparatively underexplored.

A second implication is methodological. The dissertation demonstrated the value of a cumulative design that moved from identity to practice, then to leadership learning and development within PLCs, and finally to the collective functioning of PLCs over time. Future research could build on this through more explicitly longitudinal and multi-sited designs. In particular, studies that combine interviews, in-school shadowing, artefact analysis, social-network mapping, and repeated observation would make it possible to trace more clearly how leadership learning travels from professional communities into day-to-day organisational practice. Such designs would help address one of the key limitations identified in this dissertation: the need to understand more fully how leadership development is enacted beyond PLC sessions themselves.

A third implication concerns comparison. Future studies could examine leadership development across technical and general secondary schools within Ecuador, across provinces, or across Latin American countries facing similar institutional constraints. Comparative research of this kind would help clarify how leadership models are translated, reinterpreted, and reshaped in local settings. It would also allow scholars to engage more critically with policy borrowing, not only by examining what is transferred, but by analysing how leadership ideas are received, negotiated, and transformed in practice. This is particularly relevant in a field where contextually grounded leadership frameworks remain weak.

A fourth implication concerns outcomes. This dissertation has clarified how leadership identity was constructed, how leadership practices were enacted, and how PLCs mediated leadership learning and development. Future studies should connect these interpretive insights with stronger evidence on institutional effects, including the quality of instructional

feedback, teacher collaboration, organisational routines, retention in technical pathways, and student course performance. The aim should not be to reduce leadership development to metrics alone, but to understand more clearly how developmental processes become consequential for school improvement over time.

Finally, future research should move more directly into questions of design and implementation. Rather than studying PLCs only as completed initiatives, researchers could examine how they are built, adapted, and sustained under real institutional conditions. Design-based and improvement-oriented studies would be especially valuable for testing the conditions identified in this dissertation as central to meaningful leadership development: protected time, continuity, facilitation, follow-up, light evidence routines, and stronger local ownership. Such work could generate practical knowledge not only about whether PLCs matter, but about how they can become sustainable in high-bureaucracy systems.

4.2 Implications for practice and policy

For educational practice, the dissertation suggests that leadership development in Ecuador cannot rely on fragmented workshops, isolated courses, or role entry without structured support. The findings show that educational leaders in technical schools often construct their identities and practices under conditions of ambiguity, overload, and weak professionalisation. This implies the need for more coherent and sustained development pathways that accompany educational leaders across different phases of their role, from preparation and induction to in-service professional learning. Leadership development should therefore be treated as a continuing process rather than as a one-off event.

A second implication is that professional development for educational leaders should not be restricted to technical or administrative training. The dissertation shows that leadership development also depends on relational, interpretive, and pedagogical dimensions. Educational leaders need spaces in which they can reflect on uncertainty, compare practices, test responses, and reconstruct how they understand their role. This means that professional development policies should include not only managerial content, but also opportunities for reflection, peer dialogue, and collaborative inquiry.

A third implication concerns PLCs themselves. Across the dissertation, PLCs emerged as meaningful mediating spaces between identity and practice and as important settings for leadership learning and development. For practice, this means that PLCs should not be treated as optional add-ons or temporary projects, but as potentially central components of leadership development systems. Their sustainability, however, depends on concrete organisational conditions. Time must be protected, facilitation must be prepared, continuity must be ensured, and participation must move beyond formal compliance towards genuine professional ownership. Without these conditions, PLCs risk becoming procedural spaces rather than developmental ones.

A fourth implication is that support for leadership development should be more context-responsive, especially in technical education. Technical schools face specific institutional pressures, including tensions between general and technical curricula, workforce-oriented

expectations, and limited specialised support for leaders and teachers. Leadership development policies should therefore be tailored to the realities of technical education rather than imported in generic form. This includes linking leadership inquiry more deliberately to the broader social and productive mission of technical schools, including structured engagement with parents and local technical-industry partners.

Finally, the dissertation suggests an important practical caution: external leadership models should not be transferred rigidly into under-supported contexts. Imported models may be useful as reference points, but they become meaningful only when leaders can reinterpret them in light of their own professional realities. Policy and practice should therefore favour flexible and context-sensitive frameworks that enable educational leaders to adapt, negotiate, and reconstruct leadership in ways that are institutionally viable and educationally meaningful. In this sense, the dissertation supports a view of professional development that is less about implementation fidelity to abstract models and more about creating the conditions under which leadership can develop authentically in context.

Together, these implications suggest that improving educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools requires more than better individual preparation. It requires a stronger professional infrastructure: one that connects identity, practice, learning, collaboration, and organisational support within sustained and contextually grounded development pathways.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to describe and understand leadership development for educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools. Across four interconnected empirical chapters, it examined how principals and vice-principals construct their leadership identities, enact leadership practices, participate in PLCs as spaces for leadership learning, and experience leadership development over time. In doing so, it addressed a context that has remained largely underrepresented in educational leadership research, while also engaging broader debates on leadership in constrained contexts, professional learning and collaboration, and distributed leadership.

The dissertation shows that educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools is not best understood as the implementation of a fixed model or the possession of a stable set of competencies. Rather, it is a situated and evolving process shaped by policy volatility, institutional instability, relational demands, and uneven professional support. Leadership identity emerged as dynamic and often ambiguous; leadership practice appeared as hybrid and pragmatically composed; and leadership learning and development unfolded not as a linear trajectory, but as a recursive and fragile process mediated by collaborative conditions. Importantly, these processes were shaped not only by school principals, but also by vice-principals, whose proximity to pedagogical work and day-to-day school processes made them key actors in the enactment and development of leadership. At the same time, the distinction between acting and formally appointed leadership positions proved analytically significant, since positional instability affected professional self-understanding, the exercise of authority, and the possibility of investing in longer-term developmental processes. PLCs played a

particularly important role in this context by creating spaces where educational leaders could reflect, compare practices, test interpretations, and begin transforming uncertainty into professional learning and developmental movement.

In this sense, the dissertation contributes empirically by making visible the realities of educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools, and theoretically by showing that leadership in constrained contexts is not simply a weaker version of dominant models, but a differently configured phenomenon. The Ecuadorian case suggests that leadership development must be understood through the interaction between context, identity, practice, collective learning, and role stability rather than through abstract models detached from local conditions. The dissertation therefore does not simply apply existing theories to a new setting; it uses that setting to refine how educational leadership and leadership development may be understood more broadly.

At the same time, the dissertation points to a practical conclusion. In under-supported systems, meaningful leadership development is unlikely to emerge from fragmented preparation alone. What matters is the existence of coherent and sustained professional infrastructures through which educational leaders can learn with others, reflect on practice, and reconstruct their roles in response to the realities they face. PLCs are not a complete solution, nor a substitute for coherent leadership policy. But when structurally protected, well facilitated, and locally owned, they can provide an important backbone for the intra- and interpersonal work through which leadership development actually occurs.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues for a more contextualised understanding of educational leadership in Latin America and beyond. Leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools is shaped by ambiguity, hybridity, positional instability, and institutional fragility, but also by professional commitment, collaborative learning, and the possibility of renewal. Recognising this complexity is essential not only for research, but also for policy and practice. Educational leadership will remain insufficiently understood—and insufficiently supported—unless it is studied and developed in relation to the contexts in which it is actually lived.

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Appendix A. Overview of interviews conducted

PLCS	Educational leaders						Internal coordinators		Educational advisors	
	School	Role	Name	First round interview	PLC role	Second round interview	Name	Interview	Name	Interview
BETA	A	Vice principal	Bernardo	13/9/2018	Participant	29/5/2019	Jaime	9/12/2019	Gabriel	29/5/2019
	E	Vice principal	Daniel	31/10/2018	Participant	22/5/2019				
	D	Principal	Elena	17/12/2018	PLC participant and former coordinator	22/5/2019				
ALPHA	C	Vice principal	Ciro	17/9/2018	Participant	22/5/2019	Irma	9/12/2019	Helga	18/6/2019
	A	Principal	Angel	12/9/2018	PLC participant and former coordinator	He is not working as a principal anymore				
	B	Vice principal	Fernanda	20/12/2018	Participant	21/6/2019				

Appendix B. Timeline of ALPHA PLC sessions (1/2)

2017	ALPHA PLC (Final distribution)		2018				January-2019
October 5th	School	Role	May 22nd (session 1)	August 22nd (session 2)	October 2nd (session 3)		
General meeting PLC organization and schools distribution: 21 school authorities - 12 schools	1	Principal	1 Angel	Angel	Angel	General session all PLCs involved Evaluation of the first year	→
	2	Vice principal	2 Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 3		
	3	Principal	3 Participant 4		Participant 4		
	4	Vice principal	4	Fernanda	Fernanda		
	5	Principal	5 Irma	Irma	Irma		
	6	Vice principal	6 Ciro	Ciro	Ciro		
	7	Principal	7 Participant 5	Participant 5	Participant 5		
	8	No Vice principal					
	9	Principal	8	Participant 6	Participant 6		
	10	Principal	9				
	11	No Vice principal	10	Participant 8	Participant 8		
	12	Principal	11	Participant 10			
		Principal	12	Participant 11			
		No Vice principal					→
	Facilitator:		Helga	Helga	Helga		→
	Supportive role:		VVOB educational advisor	MINEDUC educational advisor	VVOB educational advisor		→
	Meeting time:		5h 48m	5h 24m	5h 07m		→

Appendix B. Timeline of ALPHA PLC sessions (2/2)

2019				January-2020	Individual observations
April 12th (session 4) Not observed	June 18th (session 5)	August 23rd (session 6)			First year - Interviewee
F	E	A			
Participant 1	Participant 1	Participant 1		General session all PLCs involved Evaluation of the second year	
Participant 3	Participant 3	Participant 3			
Participant 4	Participant 4				Interviewee
Fernanda	Fernanda	Fernanda			Interviewee
Irma	Irma	Irma			Interviewee
Ciro	Ciro	Ciro			
Participant 6	Participant 6				
Participant 7					
Participant 8		Participant 9			Second year - New participant
Participant 11					
	Helga	Helga		→	1 single facilitator
	MINEDUC educational advisor	MINEDUC educational advisor		→	2 Supportive people
	4h 46m	4h 33m		→	5h 07m Average

Appendix C. Timeline of BETA PLC sessions (1/2)

2017	BETA PLC (Final distribution)		2018			January-2019
October 6th	School	Role	May 23rd (session 1)	July 25th (session 2)	October 4th (session 3)	
General meeting PLC organization and schools distribution: 22 school authorities - 13 schools	1	Principal	Jaime	Jaime	Jaime	General session all PLCs involved Evaluation of the first year
	2	Vice principal	Bernardo	Bernardo	Bernardo	
	3	Principal	Participant 1	Participant 1	Participant 1	
	4	Vice principal		Participant 2	Participant 2	
	5	Principal	Participant 4		Participant 4	
	6	Vice principal	Participant 5		Participant 5	
	7	Principal	Elena	Elena	Elena	
	8	Vice principal	Participant 6			
	9	Principal		Participant 7		
	10	Vice principal	Daniel	Daniel	Daniel	
	11	Vice principal				
	12	Principal		Participant 9		
	13	Vice principal			Participant 10	
	14	Coordinadora zonal		Participant 11	Participant 11	
	15	Coordinadora general		Participant 12	Participant 12	
	Facilitator:		PLC facilitator 1	Helga	MINEDUC educational advisor	→
	Supportive role:		MINEDUC educational advisor	VVOB educational advisor		→
	Average meeting time:		6h 15m	3h 57m	6h 11m	→

Appendix C. Timeline of BETA PLC sessions (2/2)

2019				January-2020	Individual observations
April 10th (session 4) Not observed	June 24th (session 5)	August 21st (session 6)			
C	A	E		General session all PLCs involved Evaluation of the second year	Interviewee
Jaime	Jaime	Jaime			Interviewee
Bernardo	Bernardo				Second year - New role
	Participant 2	Participant 2			Second year - New participant
	Participant 3	Participant 3			
Participant 4					
Participant 5	Participant 5				
Elena	Elena	Elena			Interviewee
Daniel					Interviewee
	Participant 8	Participant 8			
	Participant 9				
Participant 10					
Participant 11	Participant 11	Participant 11			
Participant 12	Participant 12	Participant 12			
	Gabriel	Gabriel		→	4 different facilitators
	MINEDUC educational advisor	MINEDUC educational advisor		→	2 Supportive people
	5h 33m	5h 23m		→	5h 30m Average