

Marta's story: a female principal leading in challenge contexts

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Marta's story: a female principal leading in challenge contexts

Abstract

Recent international research highlights the importance of a strong professional identity based on pedagogical leadership to achieve educational improvement. Several studies indicate a clear relationship between the role of gender identity and the development of a leadership identity. This article tells the story of a female school principal in a Spanish school context. Using a biographical narrative approach, we explore how this female principal built a professional identity oriented towards leadership based on professional commitment and social justice. This study is part of a more extensive international research project whose main objective is to explore the factors that influence the construction of a professional leadership identity for school principals. The analysis was based on an outpouring of deep reflections through a professional biogram. We identified a series of key events in Marta's life that had a clear professional and personal impact and consolidated her current professional identity. Marta's story shows the influence of gender, personal life factors, socioeconomic status, and the socio-political environment on the development of a professional identity of leadership along with the challenges encountered as a woman. Facing these challenges has led to the reconstruction of an identity that is more oriented towards social equality and professional commitment.

Introduction

There is a wide variety of international studies on the development of a strong professional identity and its influence on the way in which pedagogical leadership is exercised (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Crow, Day and Moller 2017; Cruz-González et al. 2019) whilst a growing body of studies has focused on the important role of the principal in the achievement of such successful leadership (Hallinger 2018; Johnson 2009). However, less attention has been paid to examining the factors that influence the construction of a principal's leadership identity.

The recent literature has established a clear relationship between the role of gender identity and the development of a leadership identity (Lumby, 2015; Weiner and Burton 2016). In these studies, the findings indicate several obstacles that are faced by female principals when they are in leadership positions. Construction of professional identity is based on a cultural process in which characteristics of the society are influential. For this reason, patriarchal societies are often a battleground for educational leadership in female principals (Haase 2008). Several international events and initiatives have been witnessed in recent decades to make visible the current situation of women in our societies. One example of these initiatives is the #MeToo movement. This movement became an ideal means to give voice to silenced collectives through social networks, seeking real change and equal opportunities (McKinney, 2019). More specifically, the international campaign Time's Up against discrimination and abuse of women in various contexts and especially in the work environment (Bell et al. 2019). Focusing on our research context, Spain, there are several movements that attempt to shed light on this

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3 complex situation. Evidence of this are the protests celebrated last March 8
4 (International Women's Day), which brought together millions of people who were
5 pursuing a dream: the eradication of situations of inequality and gender discrimination.
6 The foregoing justifies the importance of studies such as the present one, which
7 approaches research on school leadership from a gender perspective, bringing to light
8 the adversities encountered by women when faced with historically masculinised work
9 contexts.
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13 This study is part of the 3rd Strand of the International Successful School Principals
14 Project (International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP). This key strand
15 intends to explore the importance of a strong and positive sense of professional identity
16 in the work of a principal, with Spain being one of the participating countries. This
17 study forms part of a more extensive research project focusing on a unique and
18 exemplary life story about the construction of a female principal's leadership identity.
19 Furthermore, the female principal was selected on the basis of the following ISSPP
20 criteria: the school had a record of student academic achievement that was above the
21 average for expectations in the area, and professional members of this school perceived
22 the principal as being successful. It is important to consider how the cultural
23 expectations of leadership can differ according to the social environment, and for this
24 reason, we investigated the practise of pedagogical leadership in the Spanish context.
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30 This article tells the story of a female principal, who relates some of her key
31 professional experiences and how these have influenced the development of her
32 leadership identity. Although she has faced certain difficulties in her professional
33 career, she regards these as being relevant lessons and important events that have helped
34 her to achieve her current professional identity. Going deeper into the gender approach,
35 this raises questions about precisely which challenges she has faced in her professional
36 life.
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40 Marta's story is composed of different circumstantial elements, which show the
41 influence of gender, social class, political environment, and social context on the
42 achievement of pedagogical leadership. Some studies have similar purposes (Hernandez
43 and Murakami 2016; Jones 2017; Nickens and Washington 2016), but in this case, we
44 present a unique case to represent the link between personal factors and the
45 development of a leadership identity in challenging contexts.
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49 We traced the evolution of Marta's professional identity, focusing on the following
50 central question: what are the influential factors in constructing a female principal
51 leadership identity?
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54 The next section describes a theoretical framework of the leadership identity of school
55 principals and the influence of the gender factor on the construction of this identity,
56 followed by a research context section that describes the peculiarities of the school
57 administration in Spain.
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60 **Female principals and the construction of a leadership identity**

Relationship between gender identity and leadership identity

Several studies about gender identity and its influence on the construction of a leadership identity have focused on different geographical locations (Hernández, Murakami and Cerecer 2014; Jones 2017; Lumby 2015; Weiner and Burton 2016). It can be seen from their findings that gender is a critical factor in the construction of professional identity.

In particular, Schein (2010) explains that there is a complex situation for female principals, arguing that there exists a strong link between school management and the masculine professional role. A number of studies have identified some of the obstacles perceived by female principals. In this regard, it is important to note the relevance of the political and social environment (Shah 2010). The presence of patriarchal and restrictive cultural norms results in a disadvantageous situation for female principals (Arar and Saphira 2016). Hernandez and Murakami (2016) argue that these gender barriers are conducive to creating a sense of social and professional isolation. For this reason, female leaders have to make twice the effort to exercise their leadership successfully (Méndez-Morse, Murakami Byrne-Jiménez and Hernández 2015)

Some theories such as Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957) argues that when an individual has knowledge that oneself and their cultural context are not coherent with each other, a state of cognitive dissonance is produced that provokes an attitude of rejection. This perspective might help to explain the complex situation faced by the feminine gender in a culture where positions of power are mainly occupied by males.

Research studies such as Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) visualize these complex scenarios. In these studies, the findings revealed the factors that underlie the social and professional exclusion suffered by female principals. Exclusion factors interact with the hidden management curriculum, leading to marginalization and exclusion of female principals, which impedes their development as professional leaders.

When facing crisis situations, female principals develop a particular leadership style, which is based on dialogue and communication. In the majority of cases, female principals build a close and solid relationship with teachers, students, or student families (Popescu and Gunte 2011)

Furthermore, some authors argue that in a professional development crisis, female principals reconstruct their identity through the exercise of distributed leadership, leading with others rather than leading others (Nickens and Washington 2017). Coinciding with this idea, authors such as Arar and Oplatka (2014) or Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) describe female professional identity that is based on empathy and a sense of community values, adopting a democratic and collaborative leadership style.

Construction of a leadership identity in a challenging context

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3 In the last decade, several studies have highlighted the peculiarities found in the
4 construction of a leadership identity in a challenging context (Carpenter et al. 2015;
5 Toure and Dorsey 2018; Riveros et al. 2016)
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8 Referring to the influence of context in the construction of a leadership identity, it is
9 necessary to highlight the different types of challenging context that could be addressed.
10 The first of these is "the situated context" which contemplates the historical,
11 geographical and social location of the school. The second is "the professional context"
12 which encompasses the professional culture of the school. Thirdly, "the material
13 context" refers to aspects of infrastructure. Finally, "external contexts" refer to political
14 and social pressures and expectations (Ball et al. 2012).
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18 With regard to the situated context, authors such as Spies and Heystek (2015) analysed
19 the construction of a leader identity in rural school principals. The findings of this study
20 indicate that each principal responds uniquely to the demands of his or her particular
21 school. In this way, the location and characteristics of the educational community were
22 determining factors in developing adapted educational leadership strategies.
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26 On the other hand, a study by Jo (2014) focused on the importance of a collaborative
27 professional culture. The findings demonstrated the relevance of the relationships and
28 professional commitment between the teaching staff and principal. However, other
29 studies such as that of Arar and Shapira (2016) or Nickens and Washington (2016)
30 argue that the professional culture of a school context can restrict the way in which
31 female principals in particular can develop their leadership.
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34 Thus, the cultural context determines the lifestyles, professional expectations and power
35 structures of school principals, and social and ideological backgrounds determine their
36 way of developing leadership practices (Arar and Oplatka 2014).
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39 School leaders who have to deal with complex educational realities must develop a
40 leadership for change. They must be analytical with regard to the new social realities
41 that involve their students and must adapt the school to these social, personal, and
42 academic demands (Carpenter et al. 2015).
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45 According to this perspective, the term "social justice leadership" becomes significant
46 (DeMatthews 2018; Ozdemir 2017). In a changing educational environment, the
47 growing cultural diversity in the school, the imbalance between educational policy and
48 reality in the classroom, or the socio-educational inequality of the students (which
49 affects their academic results) are notorious (Furman 2012; Shields 2004).
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52 In general, the term "social justice" encompasses three main axes: distributive, cultural
53 and associational justice. Thus, a leadership for social justice would base its principles
54 on social equity (distributive justice), the non-supremacy of dominant social groups
55 (cultural justice) and the active participation of traditionally marginalized groups
56 (associational justice) (Furman 2012).
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3 The literature that focuses on this type of leadership indicates that the principals who
4 develop this type of leadership are those who guide and adapt their professional
5 practices according to issues of race, gender, and social class, amongst others
6 (Theoharis 2010).
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9 Finally, political pressures and educational reforms pose a challenge when it comes to
10 developing a leadership identity in principals. In light of this situation, Connolly,
11 Milton, Davies and Barrance (2018) explain that the principal's real professional
12 identity should be rethought. They suggest that, from state levels, a greater linkage of
13 their work with inherent aspects of professional practice should be encouraged.
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16 In particular, when focusing on "female principals", many studies have yielded a series
17 of findings that highlight the need for lines of action in this regard. For instance,
18 Murakami and Tornsen (2017) analysed the influence of the evaluation, hiring, and
19 recruiting of female principals on their professional identities. The results reported
20 indicate that local education policies did not ensure the inclusion of female principals in
21 leadership positions.
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25 *Female principals in Spain*

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27 As explained in the previous sections, the national school context plays a decisive role
28 in determining the way in which school principals develop and conceive their
29 professional identity.
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32 The under-representation of women in the management of educational institutions is a
33 reality, both nationally and internationally. This fact is even more alarming given the
34 predominance of this group in the field of education (Cubillo and Brown 2003). With
35 regard to the Spanish context, it is interesting to consider the numbers of women in
36 leadership positions in the education system.
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40 Statistical reports provided by the Women's Institute of Spain (Ministry of Health,
41 Equality and Social Policy) and CNIIE (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport) show
42 that women made up more than two-thirds of the professionals who were part of the
43 education system (Grañeras- Pastrana et al. 2012). Díez (2016) highlights the complex
44 Spanish educational scenario in his study, stating that "there is a much larger number of
45 women at the bottom of the pyramid, in pre-school and primary education and in small
46 schools considered less influential or prestigious due to their size" (p.343). Authors
47 such as García-Prince (2008) or Torres and Pau (2011) have given this phenomenon the
48 name of "sticky floor". The pyramid hits women so hard that they cannot move up to
49 higher educational levels. The term "glass ceiling" or "glass barrier" has also been used
50 by various authors in the context of research in Spain to refer to the invisible barriers
51 that block women's access to senior positions (Valle 2012; Gómez and Moreno Sánchez
52 2011). Furthermore, it is interesting to question their low presence in leadership
53 positions, when the same conditions of access to management have been established for
54 both genders (Coronel, Carrasco and Moreno 2012).
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3 In Spain, the last decade has seen an increase in the scientific literature on this subject
4 (Gómez Delgado and Moreno Sánchez 2011; Moncayo Orjuela and Pinzón López 2013;
5 Moncayo Orjuela and Villalba Gómez 2014). All of these studies agree that women are
6 poorly represented in leadership positions.
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9 A number of studies have suggested some possible answers to this question. For
10 instance, the shortage of women in leadership positions could be due to the structural
11 issues inherent to a patriarchal society (Coronel, Carrasco and Moreno 2012). García
12 (2006) argues that the main motive is the "fear of success" of women in a professional
13 role as masculinized as the figure of the school principal in Spanish society. The
14 expectations of the traditional role of motherhood and care were also arguments found
15 in the literature (Santos-Guerra 2000).
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19 To this we should add another aspect that is very significant and worthy of special
20 attention. In the Spanish context, there is a certain reluctance or refusal to participate in
21 the position of school principal, so much so that, a low number of candidates apply for
22 this position and, in many cases, it is the Educational Administration in charge of
23 electing the principal in the school (Batanaz 2005).
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26 All these questions pose a need for research that analyses how a leadership identity is
27 constructed in the face of a challenging scenario, particularly for the female population
28 in Spain.
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31 **Research methods**

32 This study tells the story of a female school principal, leading in challenging contexts.
33 Using the life history method (Alderton 2017; Keddie and Holloway 2019; Keddie
34 2016; Mills and Niesche 2013), this study explores the construction of the professional
35 leadership identity of this principal. A biographical-narrative approach was used (Craig
36 2007; Kelchtermans 1993).
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41 Bolivar and Domingo (2019) argue that life histories should focus on exemplary or
42 singular cases. According to these authors, the cases covered by life stories must
43 comply with a series of requirements in order to guarantee: their relevance to the object
44 of study, and relevance and/or degree of exemplarity. In our case, Marta's life story
45 meets the desired study characteristics for analysis:
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- 48 ✓ To be a female principal
- 49 ✓ To have a school leadership identity
- 50 ✓ To have lived through professional experiences of particular difficulty
- 51 ✓ To have a professional commitment oriented towards social justice
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54 In addition, the selection of this key informant was made on the basis of the criteria of
55 the international project within which this study is framed (ISSPP). The school where
56 Marta carries out her professional work presents higher educational results than those
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3 expected according to its socio-cultural context (based on her ISEC¹ and the results of
4 AGAEVE²); and both the educational and social community considers our participant to
5 be a successful educational leader. Several studies argue that the narrative approach is
6 truly successful in deepening our understanding of professional identities (Clandinin
7 and Connolly 2000; Watson 2006). For this reason, authors such as Craig (2007) argue
8 that narrative as the most appropriate means by which to study human life experiences,
9 taking into account the spatial-temporal dimension.
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13 In our study, Marta's professional life story has been contextualized in the socio-cultural
14 context in which it was developed, based on Bolívar's approach, which argues that life
15 stories should be inscribed in the social and historical context in which they are
16 immersed (Bolívar 2014). Based on these principles, we trace the biography of a female
17 school principal, in order to delve deeper into the way in which her professional identity
18 was built to develop a strong leadership identity within a historical educational context.
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22 We conducted in-depth interviews to analyse the participant's professional biography. In
23 order to achieve the proposed objective, we conducted our interviews through the
24 process of cascade of reflexive deepening (Kelchtermans 1993) (see Figure 1). This was
25 useful to validate the information gathered in each of the interviews conducted by the
26 participant herself, in addition to orienting the topical focus of each interview towards
27 our main objective. After that, these interviews were transcribed and analysed through a
28 biogram (Domingo, Fernández and Barrero 2013), which is displayed in Table 1. This
29 biogram allowed us to analyse Marta's life story, contextualizing it with historical-
30 political academic sources. In our in-depth interviews, our conversations with Marta
31 focused on the milestones, leitmotifs and/or key characters that shaped her professional
32 life, and how these personal and professional experiences impacted her current
33 leadership identity. In order to manage the information collected from the interviews,
34 and to be able to translate it in a rigorous way in the professional biogram, we use the
35 qualitative analysis software Nvivo 12.
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41 Figure 1. Process of analysis through Cascade of reflective deepening
42 Source: Prepared by the authors
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44

45 **Marta's story**

46
47 In this section, we tell Marta's life story. In order to visualize and present our findings,
48 her professional biogram is shown in Table 1. In this biogram, the most significant
49 moments of her professional life and the impact they have had on her professional and
50 personal identity are collected.
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56 Table 1. Biogram of Marta's life story.
57 Source: Prepared by the authors
58

59 ¹ Indices of the cultural and economic status in PISA

60 ² Andalusian Agency for Educational Evaluation

Background and context of Marta's early experiences

Marta was born in 1958 in a village in the fertile plain of Granada. Being within a dictatorial regime, Marta grew up in a simple family. **Despite the patriarchal ideals of that time**, her parents shared a concern for their **female** children's education, and as Marta explains

"My parents never told me that for being a woman I could not access certain things, even though in those days, that wasn't normal. I did not notice the gender bias in my house".

The Primary Education Law (1945) regulated Marta's academic journey. She points out that as her level of education increased, she noticed that her **female** childhood friends were staying in their village and acquiring the roles of a patriarchal society, leaving the educational system and devoting themselves to household chores, while she moved along a different path.

Even the school curriculum differed according to gender, so much so that in the Elementary School stage, the women's school curriculum included subjects about housework, receiving an education where the school was intimately linked to the church and the values of that time. In addition, she perceived there to be differential treatment according to economic and social status. Marta relates this educational stage with rigidity and inflexibility. Looking back, she remembers the absolute absence of women in leadership positions, and even in such a feminized professional as that of a teacher:

"There was no female school principal at that time. If there was any female principal, she belonged to a religious order"

This whole social scenario provoked feelings of frustration in her. From very early on, Marta independently developed a political and social conscience. As a teenager, she reminisces about how she began to question everything. She started reading authors such as Herman Hesse. She remembers one of his books "Steppenwolf", which consisted of a reflection on the profound spiritual crisis suffered by Hesse. Marta identified herself with this book consistently.

She relates her passage through Secondary Education in the following way:

"It was a dark period. Teachers did not make us think. At school, the characteristics of society were replicated: poverty and social inequality, unequal treatment, repression (...)"

Political transition in Spain (1975-77) was a relevant development for her. This period coincided with Marta's Elementary Post-secondary education. For this and other reasons, this academic period was decisive for her. She relates it as follows:

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3 “Political transition marked me. It was a period of methodological innovation, a
4 change of educational values. I perceived it as openness toward freedom, logic,
5 and reasoning. I was able to reflect on other realities that were there. Up until
6 that point, I never thought it over. There was talk of social classes, social
7 exclusion and vindication of the human rights of the underprivileged groups”
8
9

10 When she began her university studies to become a primary school teacher, she knew
11 two professional referents. They fuelled her love of education by the values of
12 methodological innovation, external openness, and responsible freedom.
13
14

15 *Marta relates that her academic trajectory was a base to establish her first professional*
16 *values. A series of factors were key for the construction of her professional identity*
17 *until that moment: having been educated in a family context with ideals of equal*
18 *opportunities and a high value to education; having experienced in first person the*
19 *transition from an education based on inequality of opportunities and rigidity, to an*
20 *education that sought freedom of thought and social equality; and having met two*
21 *professors who became references for her because of their good educational practices.*
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25 **Professional beginnings and construction of Marta's leadership identity**

26
27 After finishing her university studies, Marta began her professional career. Her first
28 professional position was in an adult education centre in 1984. This type of education
29 had not been provided by the Spanish education system until then. Thus, she faced this
30 first professional experience with a high level of personal exigency but also, and
31 especially, with great enthusiasm.
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35 Adult education was created for a particular reason. During the Spanish dictatorship,
36 there were a large proportion of illiterate and culturally deprived people. With the
37 establishment of a democratic government, this type of education was created with the
38 aim of fighting against the cultural and educational poverty that was present in a large
39 proportion of society.
40
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42 For this reason, Marta became one of the pioneers of adult education. In this context,
43 she felt the responsible freedom that she so highly valued.
44
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46 “...it was my professional beginning (...) the most exhilarating professional stage
47 that I have experienced (...) I remember the first day in that centre... It was
48 necessary to build everything! I had to develop and produce all my curriculum
49 materials myself. No one said to me how to work among other things because
50 there was no adult education. I understood this freedom as a responsibility and a
51 demand on myself”
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54
55 Marta describes this professional stage as a key event for the construction of her
56 professional leadership identity.
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58 “I had to develop a self-entrepreneurial capacity. I wished to achieve satisfactory
59 results working in something that fascinates me. Working with adult people
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3 contributes to many learning experiences. My class was characterised by a broad
4 range of ages, and cultural and cognitive differences. For this reason, I had to
5 design an exploratory study to adapt my teaching methods to such a diverse
6 classroom. This provided me with the basis for the construction of professional
7 identity towards inclusive leadership: giving to each what was needed for
8 learning”
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11
12 In 1985, Marta's mother became ill and she made the decision to move to a closer
13 destination in order to care for her mother along with her sister. In 1986, Marta met her
14 husband. She explains that
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17 “For me, my husband was one of the most important axes of my life. He
18 encouraged me and accompanied me to advance in my profession and in my life.
19 He was a person who respected me, he strengthened me in all the initiatives and
20 ideas that excited me professionally. We shared very important values such as
21 solidarity, respect, effort, the struggle for social justice, commitment... Despite
22 this great bond, he always knew how to respect my freedom”
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24

25
26 His new professional destination was also an adult education center. In that centre, for
27 the first time, she was school principal. She took inspiration from pedagogy of
28 liberation, based upon Paulo Freire. She aimed to achieve educational improvement
29 through active engagement, educational renewal and social transformation, critical
30 thinking, and reflections on reality. In a challenging context, she wanted to educate to
31 liberate.
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33

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35 “I had it very clear since the beginning. I wanted to develop critical thinking in
36 our students. In that moment, I began to particularly devote my efforts towards
37 gender relevant issues”
38

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40 With regard to the characteristics of the school context, the students were predominantly
41 female, with a low socioeconomic level, unexpectedly high levels of illiteracy, and
42 conditioned by a patriarchal mentality.
43

44
45 “A high proportion of my students were female students. They lived in a
46 patriarchal atmosphere; you could see it in their eyes. They did not know what
47 freedom was. They were made to feel uncomfortable going to school, because
48 they were not dedicating their time to household chores. When I perceived this
49 problematic situation, I decided to act. I tried to project a transformative capacity
50 through my teaching. I tried to help my female students to become empowered
51 women. How did I do it? We opened our doors to the outside, to the local
52 community. We became more visible in the village”.
53
54

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56 Such is Marta's gender awareness that she tried to promote, even creating — together
57 with a local councillor and some of her students — an association for women "Lazos",
58 radio programmes, and even magazines called "Yo también escribo" (I also write) and
59 "La Ventana" (The Window). In the interview she relates how her students had a hunger
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3 for culture; they wanted to escape from darkness. Numerous educational workshops and
4 activities were implemented to educate about equality as a social value. Such was their
5 success they received an UNESCO prize for their educative activities in the local
6 community.
7
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9 During this time, Marta has two daughters. She explains that motherhood was
10 something extraordinary for her, but points out that she tried to live it a little differently
11 than usual.
12
13

14 “Many women conceive of motherhood as something that inhibits them in other
15 areas, and of course in the workplace. I considered it to be the most important
16 thing in my life, but I thought that just being a mother was a mistake. I always
17 tried to educate my daughters through my example. In other words, I wanted my
18 daughters to see me as a brave woman, with commitment, participation and
19 social initiatives. For that reason, being a mother was for me another reason to
20 continue facing my profession with enthusiasm and commitment”
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22
23

24 In 2002, after several years in the adult school, Marta decided to face another challenge
25 became a teacher in a Social Guarantee Programme, in a particularly challenging
26 context. This high school was intentionally chosen by her. The reason for this choice
27 was the excellent collaboration and distributed leadership that existed in this high
28 school. She attached high value to cooperative working and collaborative efforts for
29 improving education quality. She wanted to be part of this educational team. According
30 to this approach, she took on the challenge as a work of challenge to learn.
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34 During this period, she alternated her teaching duties with a part-time role in a trade
35 union. After these three years, Marta was released full time. She belonged to the union
36 from the beginning of her work, but at that moment she was interested in seeing how
37 this work could bring educational improvement to the centres and professionals. She
38 relates her professional experience in the union as follows:
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42 “Syndicalism participation was the hardest professional work for me. It was not
43 my vocation. I was so used to teaching at the school. Trade union work was the
44 other thing... This work relied too much on legislation. We worked in groups
45 with a strong sense of task force. They taught me a fundamental way of
46 practising good leadership: to break down unsuitable dynamics. When a
47 professional team doesn't work satisfactorily, it is necessary “to break their
48 dynamics”. I remember the secretary of the trade union saying something that
49 has stayed with me to this day: Marta...Do you want to know why we work like
50 that? - I was intrigued- if you notice that professional team does not work
51 correctly, you have to change it. The most important thing is to change the
52 working dynamics. These dynamics must be changed gradually, never in a
53 sudden way. But always with a clear purpose: instilling different work dynamics
54 aimed at making changes that affect the structure”
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3 Marta argues that this lesson was key for the rest of her professional career, particularly
4 in school management.
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6 “These words contributed to the construction of my professional identity. Of
7 course, it has been very important to practise my personal leadership as
8 principal. If you project specific features in your group, these will take form
9 gradually. It is important to believe in it. If this is so, these dynamics will
10 develop, and over time, these dynamics will operate by inertia. If your
11 professional team is doing things indolently or with disdain, that way of working
12 will be expanded. It is similar to an oil stain impregnating everything. However,
13 if you set a good example by your deeds, other people will strive to work as you
14 do. If you work as a team, you distribute commitments and promote the
15 participation of your group, and you will give the professional team confidence”
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20 In her daily work, she visited schools and educational institutions with different
21 contextual and cultural features. Marta learned another important lesson in this job:
22
23

24 “If you want to be useful to others professionally, you must not make hasty
25 decisions. I advise the following: keep a sharp eye, listen to what the ear does
26 not hear, have a pause for thought, and then, act accordingly. You must not pick
27 up the fist card. It is necessary to listen to what the workers need”
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30 Marta explains that, “it is a great art to know how to listen”. She practises her school
31 leadership, in part, through her active listening. Over several years of experience in
32 syndicalism, she came to occupy leadership positions. Marta explains that a significant
33 turning point occurred at that moment:
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36 “...in those places of power I could see what a patriarchal organization is, where
37 the themes were hatched in bars or corridors, in the moments when women did
38 not participate because they had domestic obligations that were not assigned to
39 men”.
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42 Marta began to notice that despite her role in the union, her immediate superior did not
43 ask her opinion on important issues related to her work.
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46 “... in an institution with ideals of struggle for equality, they assume that the
47 roles of patriarchy are normalized. Their comments and language dictated much
48 of equality.
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50 After the change of co-workers, she began to notice that despite being an important
51 member of the trade union organization, her new professional group treated her as an
52 invisible entity.
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55 “It was an institution which fights for equality, democracy and human rights.
56 Therefore, this discrimination was not visible. But, when you (female) want to
57 become a part of decision-making or propose initiatives, these are not considered
58 in the same way. If you make a brilliant decision, they will ask themselves: Was
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3 it you or was not it you? Or is all that coming from you? Unfortunately, I
4 realized that if you are a woman, you have to fight twice as hard. You must think
5 very carefully about what you say and how you act, because if you make
6 mistakes later, the effects are doubly worse”.

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8
9 For this reason, Marta decided to leave this job and went back to being a school teacher
10 after 7 years of trade union work.

11 12 **A female principal leading in a challenging context**

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14
15 Following this professional change, she began to work as a primary school teacher in
16 school located in a particularly difficult area. In spite of this, this school had excellent
17 educational outcomes, endorsed by AGAEVE. She never considered becoming the
18 principal of that school, but an extraordinary combination of circumstances led Marta to
19 become a female principal.

20
21
22 At the beginning of her stage as a primary school teacher, she met two teachers who
23 shared with her a special vision of the profession, and educational values. They had the
24 same needs and desires for learning and improving the school. The school principal left
25 during that term, and Marta and her female colleagues believed that it would be a good
26 idea for her to be part of the school management.

27
28
29 “We shared the same dreams, educational ideals and the purpose of improving
30 the school. We wanted to develop an innovative methodology and train teachers
31 in new forms of work. We definitely wanted to bring about educational
32 improvements, but we knew that this must be achieved gradually, without
33 sudden breaks, without overwhelming the teachers. We should give them
34 confidence and train them in this field. If your professional team is trained in
35 collaborative working, they will not be afraid to come together to achieve
36 educational changes”

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41 Marta and her two colleagues decided to present a school management project, and
42 finally, they were chosen to form the school administration. Currently, she is the school
43 principal. She feels satisfied with her professional career; this is a rewarding time for
44 her. She argues that all of her professional experiences have been crucial in building her
45 professional identity. In this way, she feels very strongly the idea about how the school
46 could be improved and how to exercise successful leadership, setting up a clear vision
47 of her professional purposes:

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51 “I have a vision of my school management such as collegiate school
52 management. All three of us are part of the school administration. We make
53 decisions as a team so that one does not decide things without the other's
54 involvement. However, I consider my school administration as a diversified
55 administration. “Power” is not confined to three people, the “power” is
56 diversified. When I highlight diversified school administration, I refer to the
57 following: just the way I learnt in the union trade work, I distribute tasks to
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3 different people. I give them my trust, and I support them in any difficulty,
4 Why? It is very simple... They must feel a part of the school; they must feel a
5 true commitment. There are schools in which management teams design the
6 school's programme. This is not how it works at our school. Our school's
7 programme is designed by all professional members... It took us almost a year to
8 design it. We have met weekly, we have all proposed ideas, we have reflected on
9 this; (...) I think this point is fundamental. Throughout this process, I also guided
10 them and served as a supporting figure. When we had a joint and definitive idea,
11 this was approved by different school boards and educational bodies in such a
12 way that if any professional member does not comply with this school's
13 program, I can demand that he/she comply with that. It has been proposed not
14 only by me, but by all”

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20 Marta reflects that it is a product of what she has lived through. After all the learned
21 lessons, she tries to adopt a special leadership approach:

22
23 “We want to open up to the outside of the school. I have always proposed this.
24 In my professional experience in adult education, I learnt that it is an excellent
25 way to empower the students. It is so important to make them feel that they can
26 be part of the school, and what they do at school has implications for the
27 community. My leadership is based on this vision: reach out to society, reach out
28 to families...My doors are always open. I practice active listening, in view of
29 what was previously explained: see, hear, reflect, and act coherently”

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33 When Marta assumed the role within the school administration, the school presented
34 major educational challenges. She therefore, together with her team, decided to design a
35 diagnostic study to detect the priority needs of action in the centre. This study was
36 based on special values such as constructive criticism and professional commitment. In
37 addition, they requested assistance from external agencies to achieve this educational
38 improvement.

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42 She explains some of her current professional challenges as a school principal. Of
43 course, these professional challenges are shared with the rest of her professional team:

44
45 “What do we want to achieve? An egalitarian and fair society. For this, we are
46 committing to the issue of equality. We are proposing many interesting
47 initiatives and projects. If it weren't for the fact that family environments are still
48 very patriarchal, we would be very developed. But that makes it very difficult”

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52 Despite this complex scenario, Marta and her professional team are committed to the
53 participation and development of the social and critical awareness of their students.

54
55 She explains that remembering previous professional experiences has served as a push
56 and reference in this new professional stage. Throughout her professional experiences,
57 Marta reflects on the fact that she has continuously sought to achieve new professional
58 contexts for learning. In addition to her years of experience, she attributes the
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3 development of her leadership to different people and events that have marked her
4 professional career. A number of elements (family environment, **personal life factors**,
5 political context, former teachers, professional context, type of education provided, or
6 the fact of being a woman) have constructed her identity, and at the same time, have
7 been protagonists of her crisis and professional rebuilding.
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10 **Discussion and conclusions**

11
12 This study analyses the construction of the leadership identity of a female principal,
13 through the telling of a unique and exemplary life story. The choice of this female
14 principal was supported by the criteria of the International Project ISSPP. One of the
15 main objectives of this study was to explore the challenges faced by this female
16 principal throughout her professional career from a gender perspective and taking into
17 account the school context, in this case, the Spanish school context.
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21 In this section, we present a discussion of our findings. Therefore, we present some
22 conclusions and implications for professional practice drawn from the analysis of this
23 case. It is important to mention that since this is a single case, these findings are not
24 generalizable or comparable, although they could be useful for guiding the professional
25 practice of school principals.
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29 The construction of Marta's professional leadership identity began in her early
30 childhood. As shown in her life story, from her earliest experiences she built a
31 distinguished identity from others, due to the family, social, political and educational
32 factors that marked her childhood.
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35 Family values, the transition to democracy in Spain, the visible discrimination against
36 women in the world of work, and the social injustice experienced at that time were the
37 triggers that channelled her personal and professional trajectory towards a life full of
38 professional challenges. This aspect agrees with findings of other studies on this issue,
39 which link early experiences (Popescu and Gunte 2011) or the political and social
40 situation lived (Armstrong and Mitchell 2017), with the construction of a particular
41 professional identity.
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45 Marta began her studies as a teacher because of her educational vocation, without
46 thinking that at some point in her life she would become a female principal and assume
47 leadership positions in educational institutions and unions. In this regard, national
48 research studies (Padilla 2008; Díez Gutiérrez 2004) have highlighted the low
49 expectations presented by female teachers for access to hierarchical positions in the
50 education system. From her first professional experiences, Marta developed a leadership
51 identity in the school context. Faced with a complex scenario, such as the beginning of
52 Adult Education in Spain, Marta reconstructed her professional teaching identity and
53 assumed a role oriented towards social justice (Furman 2012; De Matthews 2018), in
54 which she based her practice on opening up to the freedom/knowledge of her students.
55 At that time, Adult Education represented a vast cultural diversity, socio-educational
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3 inequalities, and curricular imbalance among students. "Educate to liberate" was Marta's
4 response and provided the basis of her leadership in this school.
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7 In that context, the patriarchal society that prevailed at that time was palpable. Most of
8 her students were females. For this reason, she prioritized her educational actions to
9 make her class a group with social and critical awareness. Given this, Marta faced this
10 complex situation by adapting her teaching to what her students needed to do in order to
11 "open their eyes". Among some of the various educational actions carried out, she
12 conceived that a key aspect to empowering her students was to make them feel part and
13 proud of their learning. This way of dealing with a difficult performance context is
14 compatible with the results of studies such as that of Carpenter et al. (2015). In their
15 research on how school leaders develop their professional practice in low-performing
16 schools with marginalized populations, they argue that an analysis of the social reality
17 of the student body is key to adapting the school's teaching model and vision. Further,
18 this type of educational practice has also been included in other research indicating that
19 this curricular adaptation in situations of disadvantage is extremely useful and effective
20 (Day et al., 2010).
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26 Throughout the course of Marta's life story, **the figure of her husband and daughters was**
27 **key. Her family provoked in her a feeling of illusion and professional and personal**
28 **improvement, encouraging her to take on new challenges and be an example of a**
29 **woman with strong values and initiatives that seek equality and social justice. Also, the**
30 **value of experience in the performance of her leadership is appreciable. Méndez-Morse,**
31 **Murakami Byrne-Jiménez and Hernández (2015), in their study with female principals,**
32 **agree with this aspect, defining experience as being of added value for improving their**
33 **professional leadership practices. It is all these professional milestones and lessons**
34 **learned that have consolidated her current professional identity.**
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39 The gender discrimination suffered by Marta in the union meant a renegotiation of her
40 professional identity. The working environment and the professional culture of the
41 patriarchal "corridor" limited her professional practice. In relation to this situation,
42 Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky (1992) point out that when a woman occupies leadership
43 positions she has a greater risk of being considered unfavourably in comparison with
44 her male colleagues. At the same time, the findings of the study by Hernández and
45 Murakami (2016) warn us of the institutional discrimination that could exist in certain
46 educational centres with the incorporation of the female figure in management
47 positions, considering this to be a member who does not belong to this context. Thus,
48 Blackmore (2005) proposes a wider political and social implication that combats the
49 discriminatory items on the basis of gender in school management.
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54 Marta's last stage in the syndicate was a difficult moment for her. This situation led to a
55 re-construction of her professional identity, contributing to this new learning. What is
56 certain is that in spite of this, Marta opted for a leadership identity based on empathy
57 and community in her next professional destiny. The experience of suffering gender
58 discrimination did not extinguish her love for her vocation and her aspirations for
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3 education, but rather consolidated her values of democracy, social justice, and
4 professional commitment. In a similar study, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) share this
5 vision, explaining that when faced with complex situations, the professional identity of
6 female school leaders is usually related to values such as a sense of community,
7 professional collaboration, and empathy.
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10 On the other hand, and as can be seen in the last results section, Marta's leadership has
11 certain peculiarities. Her previous professional experience, and the school context in
12 particular (Spies y Heystek 2015), have personalized the way in which she carries out
13 her professional work. She has developed a form of distributed leadership, which
14 chooses to open the doors of the school to the outside world. In practising her
15 leadership, she promotes the professional commitment of teachers (Jo 2014) and their
16 teamwork skills. Knowing how to listen is a key component for her to exercise
17 successful leadership. Linked with this, Popescu and Gunte (2011) argue in their study
18 that most of the female principals interviewed defined their leadership in terms of
19 attributes related to the willingness to open up dialogue and communication with the
20 different components of the educational community such as family, students, or
21 teachers.
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27 Finally, Marta's life story is a singular case of a female principal who, throughout her
28 professional life, has faced several professional destinies that have consolidated key
29 lessons for building a leadership identity. Intentional decisions and unexpected events
30 have led to a substantial professional life. Marta's case is a reflection of the various
31 barriers that female school leaders have faced (Jean-Marie 2013; Kaparou and Bush
32 2007). However, it also represents a case of facing adversity, "leading with others and
33 not over others". In this way, in a society that still presents certain patriarchal
34 stereotypes, Marta's approach reflects a leadership style based on equality and social
35 justice, despite having been the victim of clear discrimination at certain times in her life.
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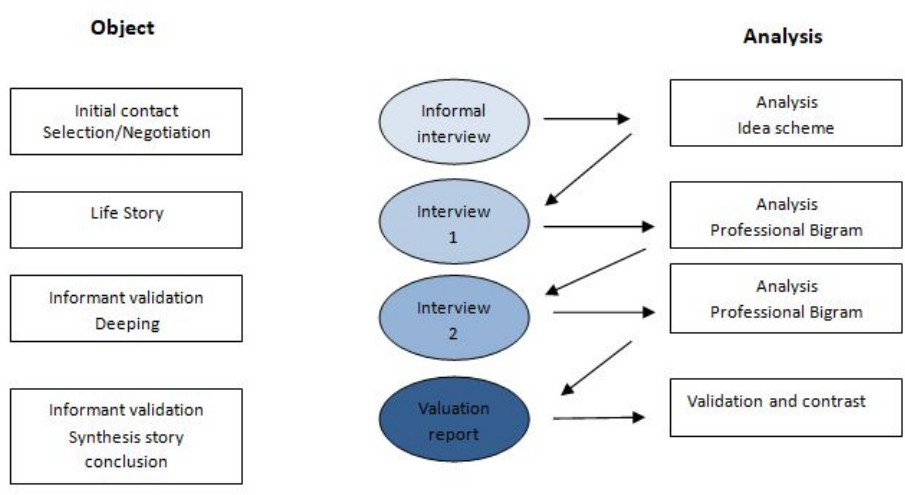


Figure 1. Process of analysis through Cascade of reflective deepening
Source: Prepared by the authors

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CHRONOLOGY	DESCRIPTION	MILESTONE, KEY CHARACTER, THEME OR LEITMOTIV	PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL IMPACT
1958	Childhood and early educational experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maternal and paternal figure very committed to Marta's education. - Educational trajectory regulated by the Law on Primary Education (1945) - Dictatorial system in Spain (1939- 1975) - Social and Educational Inequalities in the School Climate - Democratic Transition in Spain (1977) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Values of responsibility, respect and solidarity attributed to her family - Critical conscience towards social injustices
1978	Teaching Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discovery of two teachers she considers to be "professional references". - Great aspirations to become a teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Values of methodological innovation, opening up schools to the outside and responsible freedom
1984	Work in Adult Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of Adult Education - First professional experience - Educational context characterized by illiteracy and patriarchal ideals - Creation of a women's association in the centre, and production of magazines and radio programmes on social justice issues and the visualization of the women's collective in the locality. - She officially begins her leadership role at the adult school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High level of personal exigency and responsibility - Development of a self-entrepreneurial capacity - Professional values based on social justice: "giving to each student what is needed for learning" - Opening up schools to the outside to empower students - Professional principle: "educate to liberate"
1986		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She meets her husband and they get married. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Her husband encourages and supports Marta in her professional illusions and becomes a supportive figure to achieve her goals.
1988		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Birth of his first daughter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maternity promotes even more in Marta the value of the struggle for equality, and professional growth and improvement.
2002	Work in a Social Guarantee Program (SGP) in a high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beginning of her work in a new type of education - Challenging school context, with adolescent students with severe learning difficulties and behaviour problems - Professional group characterized by dynamic and collaborative work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value of teamwork for the improvement of educational outcomes in challenging contexts
2005	Work in the Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real contact with the professional needs of teachers - Promotion to senior organizational positions within the Union - Change of working group and feeling of discrimination because of her status as a woman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Important notions of how to develop leadership in work teams - Development of good listening skills to understand the needs of professionals - Development of resilience due to discrimination against women in the world of work
2012	Principal in an early childhood education and primary school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional initiation in the context of primary and infant education - Educational context with great need for improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of a school management style based on lessons learned from the past, and professional values such as collaboration, openness of the school to the outside, professional commitment,

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		- Beginning of her stage as a school principal in an early childhood education and primary school	and social justice.
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