The Perspectives of School Principals in Spain: Identifying Professional Competencies Beyond Their Scope

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School leadership plays a crucial role to quality education. Social changes have led to an increase in school principals' competencies, responsibilities, and demands. There are significant gaps in the literature on school leadership and limitations in the study of principals' responsibilities. This study aimed to analyse whether principals consider the competencies assigned to them by educational legislation to be within their scope. Participants were 394 principals from state-owned schools in Andalusia, southern Spain. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were performed. We identified four competencies that the principals believed they were unable to effectively assume within the Andalusian educational context: (1) awarding contracts for construction, services, or supplies; (2) authorising expenditures, arranging payments, and preparing the school budget; (3) promoting the qualifications and training of teaching staff; and (4) supervising non-teaching staff in the school. This study emphasizes the need of a comprehensive reevaluation of how competencies assigned to school principals are managed, highlighting the significance of incorporating principals' perspectives. For future research, we recommend exploring alternative approaches in competency management to enhance their effectiveness and relevance in the educational context.

Keywords: school leadership; educational leadership; school leader; functions; tasks.

Introduction

School leadership has been identified as the key to quality education (Harris and Jones 2023; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008; Tan, Gao, and Shi 2022). The European Commission (2020) stated that schools require competent principals. Indeed, school leadership is one of the factors that most influences student achievement (López, García, and Expósito-Casas 2022; Rodríguez-García et al. 2022) and the implementation of appropriate social and educational policies within schools (Longás, Riera, and de Querol 2020). Social changes have led to an increase in principals' competencies and responsibilities and what is demanded of them (Tan, Gao, and Shi 2022). In the Spanish context, this has resulted in an increase in workload and various demands from principals for which they are not prepared (Collado 2016). Consequently, school leaders in Spanish state-owned schools face serious problems, such as an excessive administrative burden and insufficient autonomy for management (Bolívar 2019). Social, lifestyle, and digital changes require a review of their impact on the performance of school principals (Aguilar 2021). Updating school leadership improves the quality of education. These changes, together with the increase and diversity of competencies to be developed and the related workload and demands, threaten the well-being and health of school principals (Beausaert et al. 2023).

School leadership model in Spain

Spain's school leadership model is unique compared to other European countries. For instance, principals are elected from among their peers (Montero 2011; Ritacco and Bolivar 2019), and their function is characterized by a hybrid or semi-professional nature: representing the administration, enforcing regulations, and being a teacher (Bolívar 2019). The Spanish model remains bureaucratic, managerial, and individualistic (Pont 2014). Owing to the duality of school principals' roles and their intermediate position between the administration and mediation with colleagues, the complexity of the school leadership model in Spain deserves further study (Ritacco and Bolívar 2018). However, the debate on professionalising school leadership is still at an early

stage in Spain. Álvarez and Fernández-Gutiérrez (2020) observed that the significance of competent leadership has not been fully recognized in Spain. Pont (2020) also emphasizes the importance of valuing and understanding the perspectives of school principals within each country's unique context. Consequently, factors like the requisite initial training, the influence of peers in the selection process, and the semi-professional nature of Spanish school leadership could significantly shape their views on assigned professional competencies, thereby influencing the leadership model they are able to promote.

In Spain, the Ministry of education (2020) established in article 131(1) of Organic Law 3/2020 that school principals should 'combine the institutional responsibility for managing the school as an organisation, administrative management, resource management and pedagogical leadership and dynamism, from a collaborative approach, seeking a balance between administrative and pedagogical tasks. Vázquez et al. (2016) organised the competencies and functions of school leadership in Spain into five areas: executive, bureaucratic, innovative, integrated, and institutional. Carrington et al. (2022) identified four attributes of school principals that contribute to improving educational quality: appreciation of diversity, support for staff, collaborative leadership style, and recognition of teachers' professional knowledge.

Competencies such as awarding contracts for construction, services, or supplies, and authorizing expenditures, arranging payments, and budget preparation fall under a bureaucratic dimension (Vázquez et al., 2016). Notably, in several countries, an overabundance of bureaucratic and administrative duties hinders effective leadership (Vaillant, 2015). Furthermore, the development and updating of institutional documents, generating accountability reports for inspection, handling disciplinary tasks, drafting reports, and overseeing school renovation efforts continue to pose significant challenges for school principals (Serrano and Martín-Cuadrado, 2017).

Conversely, supervising non-teaching staff and enhancing the qualifications and training of the teaching team are categorized within the executive dimension (Vázquez et al., 2016). Associated tasks, such as ensuring adherence to the curriculum and overseeing the implementation of

120 educational programming, are pivotal to pedagogical leadership yet are perceived as challenging,
121 similar to the tasks involving the leadership and management of the school's staff (Serrano and
122 Martín-Cuadrado, 2017). Interestingly, Serrano and Martín-Cuadrado (2017) noted that more
123 experienced school principals often find tasks related to staff direction and management particularly
124 demanding.

125 ***Sociodemographic factors in professional competencies of school principals***
126 Although no attention has been given to the potential role that sociodemographic factors may have
127 on professional competencies of school principals in Spain, a small basis of studies at the
128 international level has shown results suggesting that sociodemographic characteristics of school
129 principals could condition the performance of their professional competencies. Specifically,
130 Alkhawaldeh and Saleem-Khasawneh (2023) revealed that competencies for administration,
131 management and instructional leadership were similar to all the school principals participating,
132 irrespective of their gender, educational level (primary and secondary) and years of experience in
133 school leadership. Similarly, Sawati et al. (2013) reported that school principals' age, experience,
134 and academic qualifications showed no effect on competences for leadership style. In contrast,
135 Ballou and Podgursky (1995) showed that school principals' academic qualifications and
136 experience both in teaching and in school management had no effect on performance of leadership
137 competencies, although gender was a significant indicator for leadership competence such that
138 female school principals higher performed than male school principals in leadership competencies.
139 Le et al. (2021) found that the professional competencies of school principals were affected by their
140 own personal characteristics (i.e., gender, age, health and family), and external factors (i.e., school
141 location, school demographics and school facilities), yet they were not conditioned by the school
142 principals' academic education and qualifications. On the other hand, Leithwood et al. (2006) found
143 that school conditions such as school structure, size, locations, and socio-economic status of

144 families could have certain influence on competencies for school leadership, although their impact
145 remains to be explored.

146 ***School principals' competencies***

147 The daily workload of school principals is characterised by the performance of diverse tasks
148 (Sebastian, Camburn, and Spillane 2018), with competency defined as the degree of expertise,
149 knowledge, and leadership ability (Holmes and Parker 2018). The effectiveness of school leadership
150 depends on an appropriate balance between the various functions to be performed and the specific
151 context of the educational institution (Hallinger 2005). However, Mestry (2017) found that many
152 school principals place more emphasis on their administrative and managerial tasks than on
153 instructional leadership, even though they play an important role in achieving high-quality teaching
154 and learning (Forssten and Söderström 2022). The lack of agreement regarding school principals'
155 dimensions of work and practical tasks calls for further research (Izquierdo 2015). The European
156 Commission (2020) indicated the need to reflect on the competencies of school principals.
157 Therefore, the competencies that they must possess to effectively fulfil their roles and contribute to
158 the educational success of their schools must be analysed. Tierno-García et al. (2020) concluded
159 that research on expectations from school principals is needed to respond to the challenges they
160 face. Thus, although school leadership has become a priority in many countries, it is not the case in
161 Spain, where the system is poorly professionalised and embedded in a highly bureaucratic
162 framework (López-Rupérez, García, and Expósito-Casas et al. 2022). School principals'
163 suggestions must be considered while deciding their assigning them duties (Martínez and
164 Hernández-Amorós 2018). Indeed, the position of principals in terms of their knowledge of their
165 students suggests that their voices should be heard to improve the education system (Harris,
166 Campbell, and Jones 2022). Harris, Jones, and Hashim (2021) concluded that there are significant
167 gaps in the literature on school leadership, and Sebastian et al. (2018) noted a limitation in the study

of principals' responsibilities, because most studies do not consider all areas of their responsibilities.

While previous studies on school leadership have significantly contributed to the field of educational leadership, there is a lack of evidence regarding how school principals perceive the professional competencies attributed to them by educational legislation, in terms of whether these are inherent or extraneous to their role and functions. Considering the potential impact of sociodemographic factors on the professional competencies of school principals, this research seeks to expand the existing knowledge on the competencies and professional practices of these educational leaders, employing a mixed research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative elements (Leithwood et al. 2020).

This study focuses on the competencies and tasks of school principals within the context of the prevailing leadership model in Andalusia, Spain, guided by findings from previous research that highlight the importance of these aspects in the Spanish educational setting (Pont, 2014; Mestry, 2017; Serrano and Martín-Cuadrado, 2017). Our endeavor focuses on analyzing and understanding the gap between the official competencies assigned to school principals and those they identify as less relevant to their roles. This includes a thorough consideration of their skills, training, and the availability of resources necessary for effective implementation in schools. Therefore, our study aims to explore the opinions of school principals regarding the professional competencies conferred upon them by educational legislation. We also aim to uncover the factors that influence principals' perceptions of these competencies, as well as their implications for school management and educational policy.

Materials and Methods

Participants

A total of 394 school principals (210 men, 277 women, and 7 who did not answer) from *from state-*

owned schools of Andalusia (Spain) participated in our study. Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 68 years (M=52.13, SD=6.49), and their leadership and management experience ranged from 2 to 20 years (M=7.26, SD=3.51). A total of 129 participants (32.7%) reported working in early childhood education, 38 (9.6%) in primary education, 219 (55.3%) in compulsory secondary and upper secondary education, and nine (2.2%) in vocational education. Regarding the contextual characteristics of the educational institutions, 114 (28.9%) schools were in rural areas and 280 (71.0%) were in urban areas. Similarly, 217 (55.0%) schools had students from low socio-economic backgrounds, while 177 (44.9%) had students from medium-high socio-economic backgrounds. Regarding the characteristics of the teaching staff, 160 schools (40.6%) had fewer than 30 teachers, 114 (28.9%) had between 30 and 59 teachers, 82 (20.8%) had between 60 and 89 teachers, and 38 (9.6%) had more than 90 teachers. Additionally, 205 (52.0%) principals reported that half of the teachers had job stability at school, 135 (34.2%) principals reported that up to 75% of the teachers at the school were stable, and only 54 (13.7%) principals reported that more than 75% of the teachers at school were stable. Finally, 33 (8.3%) schools had less than 100 students, 201 (51%) had between 101 and 500 students, 137 (34.7%) had between 501 and 1000 students and 23 (5.8%) had more than 1001 students.

Instruments

An online survey was designed using Google Forms[1] to collect the opinions of school principals regarding professional competencies that should not be their responsibility. The following closed multiple-choice question was created for this purpose, 'In your case, please indicate the competencies that, in your opinion, should not be the responsibility of the school principal'. This was followed by a list of the 15 professional competencies attributed to school principals by law (Ministry of Education 2020): (Competency 1) exercising pedagogical leadership and promoting

[1] https://forms.gle/hXJEJh3hvRbkizdV9

plans to achieve the objectives of the educational project; (Competency 2) promoting educational innovation and research; (Competency 3) promoting the qualification and training of the teaching team; (Competency 4) promoting organisational forms and the school timetable for subjects or areas; (Competency 5) convening and chairing academic events and meetings of the school board and the faculty, and ensuring the implementation of adopted agreements; (Competency 6) designing the educational planning and organisation of the school, as outlined in the annual general programme; (Competency 7) awarding contracts for construction, services and materials; (Competency 8) authorising expenditure, arranging payments, and preparing the school budget; (Competency 9) endorsing certificates and official documents of the school; (Competency 10) exercising leadership over the teaching staff of the school and proposing the appointment and dismissal of the management team; (Competency 11) supervising the non-teaching staff of the school; (Competency 12) promoting coexistence, ensuring conflict mediation and imposing corrective measures on students; (Competency 13) promoting internal evaluations of the school and participating in external and teacher evaluations; (Competency 14) acting as a representative of the educational administration in the school and as an intermediary with the educational community and administration; and (Competency 15) fostering cooperation with families, institutions and organisations in the environment. To explore the reasons for the selection of the abovementioned professional competencies, the research team included the following open-ended question: 'Please state the reasons for your choice'. In addition, the online survey collected basic sociodemographic data (e.g. gender, age, experience in leadership positions, and level of education) as well as contextual and human characteristics of the educational institution.

For the online survey's development process, firstly, the researchers created, through a discussion group, a closed-opened question measuring the competencies that should not be the responsibility of the school principal in the eyes of the principals and 15 response options, as well as the initial proposal of open-ended question exploring the reasons for the selection of professional

241 competencies. Both the closed-opened question and the 15 responses, and the open-ended questions
242 were formulated by taking as a point of reference the Organic Law 3/2020 by the Ministry of
243 Education (2020). Secondly, to make refinements in the first online survey's version, the
244 researchers independently and qualitatively analysed the content of the closed-ended and open-
245 ended questions, as well as the 15 responses options. Thirdly, a consensus meeting took place
246 among the researchers to solve the small discrepancies conducting slight modifications in the
247 closed-ended and opened-ended questions and to verify the set order for the 15 response options.
248 First, a group of six experts independently examined the content of the closed-ended question and
249 their 15 response options, and the content of the open-ended question, using a 5-point Likert scale
250 to assess representativeness, clarity, and comprehensibility. To gather evidence of content-based
251 content and interrater reliability, the content validity coefficient and interrater agreement were
252 estimated, taking scores over .70 as satisfactory (Lynn 1986). For the closed-ended question, its 15
253 response options and the open-ended question, the content validity coefficient and interrater
254 agreement presented values of 1.00, indicating unanimous agreement among the experts regarding
255 the representativeness, clarity, and comprehensibility of each analysed element. Notably, the
256 experts met the criteria suggested by Grant and Davis (1997): a) significant training in survey
257 development, b) extensive experience as content experts, c) teaching experience in teacher training,
258 and d) publications in refereed journals on the subject. Additionally, the number of experts in our
259 study met the recommended requirement of at least two experts per stage of survey development, as
260 suggested by Lynn (1986). A pilot study was then conducted with ten school principals who
261 reported no problems with the comprehension and readability of the developed short survey.

262 Procedure

263 Information about the research was distributed in January and February 2023 to the official email
264 addresses of state-owned pre-schools, primary, secondary, and vocational education schools in
265 Andalusia (Spain), as well as through WhatsApp groups of school principals through professional

associations. This was done to obtain the largest possible number of school principals, and follow a purposive sampling technique. To participate in this cross-sectional study, potential participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: a) over 18 years of age, b) school principal, c) have at least one year of experience in school leadership and management, d) work in a state-owned educational institution, and e) sign an informed consent form. Following the research dissemination process, 474 principals contacted the research team and expressed their interest in participating in the study. However, 62 principals had less than one year of experience in school leadership, 8 worked in the private education system, and 4 did not provide informed consent to participate in the research. Although 400 principals were invited to complete the online survey via a link sent through email, only 394 completed questionnaires were received. Participants were informed that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers to control for social desirability bias in responses. The aim was simply to gather opinions on the professional competencies attributed to school leadership. Participants were assured that the data would be kept confidential and used only for academic and research purposes. An average administration time of 10 min was estimated for the online survey. This study was part of the [masked details for the review process] project and was approved by the Ethics Committee on Research with Human Beings of the University of [masked details for the review process], protocol code 50-2022-H.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis

First, the configuration of the online survey did not allow for blank responses if it was to be completed in its entirety; therefore, there were no missing values. Second, due to the categorical nature of the data, absolute and relative frequencies were calculated to report descriptive statistics related to the professional competencies that principals believed were not the responsibility of school principals (Field 2017). Third, Pearson's chi-square test (Field 2017) was used to analyse

potential differences (versus similarities) in school principal' professional competencies based on each of the principal's personal characteristics which were gender, age, and leadership experience; contextual factors which were rural or urban setting and socioeconomic level; and human factors which were number of teachers, staff stability, and number of students. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS (version 29.00).

Qualitative data analysis

Following the completion of the closed-ended questions, respondents were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question without any restrictions on word count or length. This question, phrased as "If you have marked any competencies in the previous question, please indicate the reasons" allowed the school principals to freely express their reasoning and motivations behind their choices of specific competencies. This format was deliberately chosen to provide a comprehensive insight into the factors influencing their selections, enabling a deeper understanding of their perspectives and the rationale behind their decisions. Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using both inductive and deductive approaches. Following Charmaz (2014), we conducted a three-phase coding process. The initial coding phase aimed to minimise interpretation by researchers and involved a line-by-line analysis of the data to identify the words and phrases expressed by the principals. The second phase involved the identification of the focused codes and further analysis through constant comparison with the codes developed in the first phase. Additionally, analytical memos (i.e. informal notes) were used to categorise the codes. The third phase focused on refining the reasons why the mentioned professional competencies were considered outside school principals' responsibilities. It is important to note that while the first phase was characterised by inductive and descriptive analyses, the second and third phases were more deductive in nature. The researchers engaged in regular discussions and consensus building on the development of emergent themes using memos and grouping as prompts in the discussion process. Finally, the research team translated the excerpts from Spanish into English. The codes for

the excerpts were based on the participant number (e.g. ID38). The data were analysed using Atlas.ti software (version 23.00).

Results

Quantitative results

Table 1 shows the absolute and relative frequencies of professional competencies that the principals felt should not be their responsibilities. Specifically, competency 7, awarding contracts for construction, services, or supplies, had the highest absolute and relative frequency, followed by competency 11, supervising non-teaching staff; competency 3, promoting the qualification and training of the teaching team; and competency 8, authorising expenditures, arranging payments, and preparing the school's budget. The identification of these four professional competencies accounted for 70.21% of the total responses (N=564) to the multiple-response question: 'In your case, indicate the professional competencies that you think should not be the responsibility of the school management'.

[Please insert Table 1 here].

The identification of these professional competencies was consistent across school principals' personal characteristics, including gender (χ^2[*df*=26] =28.62, *p*=. 329), age (χ^2[*df*=39] =32.80, *p*=.748), previous experience in leadership positions (χ^2[*df*=143] =120.84, *p*=.911), and educational level (χ^2[*df*=65] = 60.49, *p*=.635). Similarly, no significant differences were found for the contextual characteristics of the school, namely rural or urban location (χ^2[*df*=13] =10.77, *p*=.630) and socioeconomic level of the students (χ^2[*df*=13] = 10.75, *p*=.632). No significant differences were found for the human characteristics of the schools, such as the number of teachers (χ^2[*df*=39] = 41.40, *p*=.366), proportion of stable teaching staff (χ^2[*df*=26] = 31.60, *p*=.207), or number of students enrolled (χ^2[*df*=65] = 65.05, *p*=.475).

Qualitative results

The open-ended question, 'Please state the reasons for your choice' yielded responses that corresponded to the same four professional competencies that accounted for 70.21% of the responses in the quantitative analysis, all with a relative frequency of more than 10% and an absolute frequency of more than 60 responses: competency 7, competency 8, competency 3 and competency 11.

Awarding contracts for construction, services, or supplies

The lack of specific training and the substantial number of administrative tasks associated with this competency were the main reasons given by school principals for not wanting to perform this task. They identified a mismatch between the training required to become a school principal and the qualifications required for this competency. One participant pointed out, 'school principals are teachers' (ID38) and not technical engineers, economists, or other professionals with more technical and specific training. In this respect, they suggested that this competency should be performed by specialised personnel: 'I think that contracts, construction work, as well as self-defence programmes should be conducted by non-teaching specialised advisors' (ID 21).

Although some school principals proposed the creation of the role of an administrator or officer in educational institutions with these functions, the main proposal advocates a more centralised model, with staff having more specialised training and the ability to manage this competency with greater guarantee and efficiency. In this respect, this competency should be assigned to another agent of local or regional administration and not delegated to school principals. Principals favour taking on a complementary or subsidiary role in this area of competency by communicating with the relevant administration about the building, service, or equipment needs identified in the school.

> Construction, services, and supplies should be centralised in Territorial Delegations, which should have qualified personnel to make decisions and promote necessary work and repairs.

> School principals can make suggestions and proposals, but we should not be promoters of construction projects or contracting parties for services. The principals are part of the education sector and not the business sector (ID 137).

Similarly, school principals perceive that the high administrative workload associated with this competency, which could be more efficiently handled by more qualified staff, takes time away from other competencies that are considered more closely related to school leadership, for which they feel prepared and less available.

> I think that we waste a lot of time on bureaucratic tasks (certificates, etc.) and tasks that are typical of building maintenance workers like managing bricklayers, electricians, plumbers, etc. Different people should be responsible for these tasks, not school principals, because we are not prepared, and we might make mistakes (ID 81).

Authorising expenditures, arranging payments, and preparing the school budget

Similarly, the number of administrative tasks involved and the lack of specific training are the main reasons given by principals to justify why this competency should not be their responsibility. As one principal admitted, 'we do not have enough knowledge of financial management to fulfil this role, nor do we have the time to devote to it fully' (ID 43). Principals argue that the current regulations give them an overwhelming workload and responsibilities that exceed what they can handle: 'It is impossible for one person to have so many competencies and to take care of them all' (ID 63), and they believed that competencies that are further from what they consider to be their profile (more academic and less administrative) and that do not directly impact students' education should be delegated to other professionals. According to the principals, these competencies attributed to them 'do not correspond to our qualifications or teaching duties and do not directly affect the education of the students, which should be our sole objective' (ID 15). It is proposed that this competency be taken over by specialised personnel, since 'financial management and maintenance should be handled by specialists' (ID 63).

Once again, they prefer the competency to be taken over by specialised staff, inside or outside the school, in a collective or centralised solution coordinated by the administration: 'I think that all financial management, especially the aspects related to payments and banking relations, should be handled by a dedicated manager in the corresponding department' (ID 193).

Supervising non-teaching staff in the school

School principals feel that they are responsible for this competency, but the legal framework does not provide them with the necessary mechanisms to fulfil it. Particularly among secondary school principals, arguments related to the lack of authority over non-teaching staff in schools stand out as justifications for believing that this competency should not be their responsibility. As one principal pointed out, 'it is absolutely useless to have authority over non-teaching staff if we are not given the tools to exercise that authority effectively' (ID 134). The general perception is that this is a 'virtual' competency and in practice, the administration only partially (and unclearly) delegates the management of non-teaching staff to principals. 'It is the administration itself that does NOT see us as their supervisors, so personally I no longer see myself as their boss, and their problems are not mine' (ID 243).

Managing non-teaching staff in the school is also associated with a high administrative workload, and some feel that managing such staff 'causes a lot of problems' (ID 30). Similarly, participants felt that legislation on non-teaching staff is not adapted to the needs of an educational institution, being governed by 'outdated agreements that are not adapted to the reality of education' (ID 243), which further complicates the management of these staff members to ensure their effective contribution to the school environment. 'Exercising leadership over non-teaching staff is exceedingly difficult under the current regulations. It is not adapted to working in an educational institution' (ID 92).

As with previous competencies, they proposed that this function should be conducted directly by another body within the local or regional administration. 'I believe that these matters

413 should primarily be dealt with by the educational administration on a larger scale' (ID 204) or by
414 external personnel, following the example of private institutions, without ruling out the possibility
415 of relinquishing this competency if the regulatory context is modified to allow its effective
416 implementation. 'Either the service is outsourced to external companies, or the school principals are
417 really given real competencies' (ID 171).

418 *Promoting the qualifications and training of the teaching staff*

419 For school principals, voluntary training for teachers and the absence of a regulatory framework
420 that allows them to mandate participation in training activities affects the performance of this
421 competency. In this respect, this competency should not be the responsibility of school principals as
422 they do not have the authority to effectively obligate teachers to participate in training outside their
423 regular working hours.

424 > The qualifications and training of the teaching staff are complex because their training is
425 > voluntary. School principals do not have the authority to compel staff to attend training and, in
426 > many cases, staff refuse to attend such training (ID 76).

427 This reality sometimes leads to a sense of failure among school principals: 'principals
428 sometimes feel frustrated when their teaching staff refuse to participate in training' (ID 141).

429 As an alternative, this competency should be taken over directly by the administration, since
430 'the responsibility for adequate teacher training should lie with the administration' (ID 136). It is
431 emphasised that the education administration may have resources and strategies that are beyond the
432 reach of school principals to stimulate and ensure adequate teacher training. In some cases,
433 specialised organisations for the in-service training of non-university teachers are suggested, such
434 as Teacher Training Centres or the Education Inspectorate itself, considering that 'teacher training
435 is an obligation of the teachers themselves; therefore, the Inspectorate must promote these
436 measures, considering the results of the Improvement Plan' (ID 81).

> I do not think that the role of school principals should be to encourage teachers to take courses unless it is necessary for the implementation of their educational projects or educational innovation. Teacher training centres should play this role by offering attractive and practical courses that are adapted to the reality of schools (ID141).

Discussion

This study provides an extensive exploration of the perspectives of school principals in state-owned schools in Andalusia concerning the professional competencies delineated by educational legislation. It specifically scrutinizes those competencies that school principals consider more difficult to take accountability for and develop in the context of Andalusia, such as contracting work, services, or supplies; authorising expenditures and payments; preparing school budgets; and overseeing non-teaching staff. A notable reluctance among school principals to engage in these competencies, particularly in areas like fostering teachers' professional development, signals a potential misalignment in the school leadership model of Andalusia. Recognizing the importance of these competencies is crucial, as they significantly contribute to the progress of educational institutions (OECD, 2016; Pont, 2017; Robinson, 2019). This is particularly true for the competency of promoting teacher qualifications and training, a key area underscored by Fullan (2020). Such competencies not only enhance institutional progress but also directly contribute to the quality of education.

One of the main reasons school principals selected these competencies as those that should be managed in a different way is the high administrative and bureaucratic workloads associated with them.

This finding aligns with Niesche et al. (2023), whose Australian study noted a similar trend of decreased engagement in instructional leadership due to increased workload and bureaucratic processes. Bolivar (2019) also observes this trend in Spain, where the bureaucratic-administrative model of school leadership often focuses more on management than on pedagogical aspects. This research, therefore, underscores the critical need for more pedagogically focused and democratic

463 leadership within schools in Andalusia, a viewpoint echoed by Leithwood et al. (2020) and
464 Hallinger (2005), and further supported by Hallinger, Gümüş, and Bellibaş (2020), who emphasize
465 the growing expectation for 'instructional leadership' worldwide and the emergence of 'integrated
466 models of school leadership.'

467 As a result of the task definitions and degrees of responsibility outlined in Spain's regulatory
468 framework, pedagogical leadership is not highly developed, which agrees with the results of Harris
469 and Jones' (2021), study conducted in Wales. However, in other countries, leadership focus has
470 shifted to school outcomes rather than administrative or managerial matters (Collado, 2016; Pont,
471 2017). Bolívar (2019) pointed out that this leadership model influences school principals to improve
472 the quality of education, a perception also expressed by the participants. Principals believe that this
473 additional workload takes time away from focusing on competencies that can directly lead to
474 improved student learning. The competencies in which principals find most objections to being able
475 to assume are often those that are less related to the dimensions identified by Robinson (2019) as
476 critical for leadership to positively impact student learning: setting goals related to learning
477 outcomes, ensuring quality teaching process, being directly involved in teachers' professional
478 development processes, ensuring a safe school environment, and engaging the school with the
479 community.

480 The perception among school principals in Andalusia that certain competencies fall outside
481 their roles may stem from the mixed nature of school leadership in Spain, which combines
482 administrative and pedagogical responsibilities (Bolívar, 2019). This dual responsibility often leads
483 to an imbalanced allocation of time and resources, usually favoring administrative over pedagogical
484 tasks. The current structure for selecting and training school principals, with its emphasis on
485 administrative skills (Pont, 2017), may not adequately reflect the actual needs of schools.

486 Bolívar's (2019) description of Spain's semi-professional model of school management,
487 along with the complex role of mediating between administration and teaching staff (Ritacco and

Bolívar, 2018), may contribute to school principals feeling disempowered in critical areas such as teacher training development and the management of contracting and financial tasks. The varying degrees of decentralization in school leadership authority worldwide (OECD, 2016; Vaillant, 2015) further highlights the contrast with Spain's approach, where there is less autonomy for school principals compared to the more autonomous roles prevalent in other countries (García, Gertler, and Patrinos, 2019).

This dichotomy between the need for managerial autonomy and the principals' perceptions of their role underscores the urgency for additional research. School principals are advocating for greater decision-making authority, focusing on strategic allocation rather than an authoritarian approach to leadership. This necessitates consideration of the constraints on principals' time and the need for judicious allocation of their responsibilities (Hochbein & Meyers, 2021; Huang, Hochbein, & Simons, 2020).

The findings of this study carry profound implications for education policymakers, as well as for the training and professional development of school principals in Andalusia, Spain. This study suggests that a reassessment of the professional competencies assigned to school principals, their training, and the resources available to them for effective and efficient implementation in the real context and daily management, is advisable. Such a reassignment would allow principals to focus their attention on aspects that more directly and significantly impact student learning. Embracing this approach would pave the way for the adoption of a pedagogical leadership model that is not only collaborative, participatory, distributed, and autonomous but also more deeply centered on the teaching-learning process and the well-being of the educational community. This model stands in contrast to the current focus on administrative and bureaucratic control processes, suggesting a transformative shift towards a more educationally enriching and community-oriented leadership paradigm in schools.

Awarding contracts for construction, services, or supplies and authorising expenditures, arranging payments, and preparing the school budget (competencies 7 and 8)

School principals believe that directly exercising the competencies of contracting works, services, or supplies and authorising expenses, payments, and preparing the school budget takes them an excessive amount of time and they do not feel prepared to assume effectively in the context of Andalusia. This aligns with Pont (2017), who stated that school principals in other countries have evolved from having administrative and representative functions to leadership functions focused on developing teachers and strengthening learning processes. However, the reality of school leadership in Andalusia does not seem to have experienced such an evolution. As Vaillant (2015) suggested, educational policies act as an obstacle to effective school leadership in some countries, due to excessive emphasis on bureaucratic and administrative tasks, which were denounced by the participating school principals in this study. In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that school principals wish to be freed from professional competencies that force them to engage in bureaucratic leadership, as Scheerens (2012) pointed out. A managerialist approach to school leadership runs the risk of subordinating educational goals to managerial goals with greater efficiency (Bush and Glover 2014). Indeed, one of the reasons cited by the participants was the high administrative and bureaucratic workload and tasks associated with exercising these competencies.

Furthermore, the results underscore a mismatch between the training required to attain school leadership positions and the essential qualifications necessary for performing these roles effectively. The training that school principals receive in educational leadership often proves to be insufficient and inadequately suited for addressing the practical challenges they encounter in their schools, as highlighted by Chilah, García-Carmona, and Hinojo (2023). In addition, these authors note that the interviewees emphasise the overwhelming number of administrative tasks required of them, which frequently impedes their engagement in pedagogical practices and the exercise of educational leadership. This gap between theoretical training and practical requirements is not unique to this context; it has been previously identified by Rivero et al. (2018) in their study of

538 school leadership in Chile and echoed by Klein and Schwanenberg (2022) in their analysis of
539 school principals in Germany.

540 Principals are in favour of these professional competencies being taken over by specialised
541 personnel within a collaborative or centralised solution structured by the administration, which is in
542 line with the findings of Beausaert et al. (2023), who concluded that given the increasing demands
543 of responsibilities, community, and administrative support positively impact the well-being and
544 health of school principals. Thus, these authors emphasise the importance of school principals with
545 both internal and external collegiate networks and governments investing in restructuring tasks and
546 competencies. In the case of professional competencies related to contracting work and services and
547 financial management, the participants also pointed to the need for a specialised professional with
548 specific training in contracting tasks and financial matters.

549 ***Supervising non-teaching staff in the school (competency 11)***

550 School principals perceive that they have been assigned this professional competency which they
551 are unable to develop effectively due to the lack of a legal framework that provides them with the
552 necessary mechanisms to exercise it properly. They felt that they did not have sufficient authority
553 over non-teaching staff to perform this competency. This is consistent with the findings of Aravena
554 (2016), who argued that the development of school leadership is unproductive if principals are not
555 given decision-making power. Similar to previous professional competencies, it is associated with a
556 high workload of bureaucratic tasks, and they suggested that another administrative body or
557 specialised professional take on this responsibility. Similarly, Collado (2016) pointed out that the
558 heterogeneity and complexity of the educational organisation creates a constant tension between all
559 the characteristics required of the principal, resulting in an interdependence between subsystems
560 such as students, families, teachers, and non-teaching staff such as caretakers, administrative staff,
561 cleaning or maintenance staff. However, the ability to manage non-teaching staff in educational
562 institutions is not considered a determinant of educational leadership (Ritacco 2019). Similarly, a

563 systematic review by Lee and Mao (2023) concluded that teachers who aspired to become
564 principals expressed a desire to influence educational processes and students. This perspective may
565 be related to the results of our research and may explain why the principals participating in this
566 study were reluctant to assume the principals' competencies of non-teaching leadership, as they
567 have little direct influence on teaching and learning processes. Comparable results were found in
568 Portugal, where the management of non-teaching staff was undervalued (De Carvalho and Felizardo
569 2019). However, López et al. (2021) studied non-teaching staff and emphasised the need to regulate
570 comprehensive training strategies for them and required specific training and certification to work
571 in schools.

572 ***Promoting the qualifications and training of the teaching staff (competence 3)***

573 While some participants expressed the view that promoting the qualification and training of the
574 teaching team should not fall within their purview, this stance contrasts with the perspectives of
575 several educational researchers. Robinson (2019) posits that the ability to foster teacher
576 development is a crucial dimension of student-centred leadership, which he argues has a beneficial
577 impact on student learning outcomes. Echoing this sentiment, Pont (2017) emphasizes the evolving
578 nature of school leadership, advocating for a focus on 'leading' teacher development, among other
579 responsibilities. This idea is further supported by Aravena (2016), who concluded that effective
580 school leadership is instrumental in enhancing the quality of the teaching staff. The critical role of
581 principal leadership in teacher learning is reinforced by Huang, Huang, and Zhou (2023), who
582 found that such leadership practices are essential for the growth of teacher learning at both
583 individual and collective levels. Tan (2018) extends this argument, stressing the need for principals
584 to prioritize teacher learning development. He asserts that for leadership to exert a lasting and
585 significant influence on teacher learning, school principals must dedicate considerable effort and
586 time to promoting teachers' professional growth. Collectively, these insights highlight the
587 multifaceted role of school principals, positioning them as key agents not only in administrative

management but also in driving teacher development and, by extension, student achievement.

The divergence between the scientific literature's emphasis on certain competencies and Andalusian school principals' experiences in executing them is notable. Principals contend that their limited authority, constrained by current legislation that renders teacher training voluntary, hampers their ability to promote staff qualification and training effectively, as highlighted in studies like those by Robinson, Claire, and Kenneth (2008). This contrast between academic perspectives and practical realities accentuates the necessity for additional research to address these discrepancies.

Indirectly, this argument could be related to Pont's (2017) suggestion that school principals cannot supervise teachers' work in the classroom, and that Spanish legislation may not grant them sufficient authority to exercise this competency. Therefore, the participants suggested that the professional competency to promote the qualification and training of teachers should be assumed by specialised bodies, such as Teacher Training Centres or the Education Inspectorate, which could be related to the findings of Beltrán et al. (2009), who highlighted teachers' resistance to the supervision of their tasks. Furthermore, the lack of regulatory norms empowering school principals to decide on pedagogical leadership, innovation (Ritacco 2019) and teacher training could also justify these findings. However, as indicated by Lash et al. (2023), school principal training should focus on the learning and training students and teachers, similar to the findings of Tan et al. (2022) who concluded that school principals should be trained on how to motivate and equip teachers to achieve their educational goals. Thus, the type of leadership provided by principals seems to be affecting teachers' job satisfaction (Sucuoğlu and Uluğ 2022). The perspective of school principals in Andalusia, who contend that certain leadership competencies, particularly in the area of teachers' professional development and enhancement, fall outside their scope of responsibilities, presents a significant challenge to the prevailing model of school leadership in this region. Given the well-established benefits of these competencies in advancing educational institutions, as documented by the OECD (2016), Pont (2017), and Robinson (2019), there is a pressing need to develop effective

strategies and policies that support school principals in their role as facilitators of teacher support, as suggested by Haglund and Glaés-Coutts (2023). However, it is important to critically examine the perspective of school principals regarding their role in promoting the qualifications and training of the teaching staff. While some principals may perceive this responsibility as outside their scope due to limitations imposed by legislation and administrative constraints, it is essential to consider the broader implications of such views. By delegating the promotion of staff qualification and training to specialized organizations, there may be a risk of diluting the direct impact and accountability of school principals in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in teaching. Therefore, while acknowledging the challenges faced by principals in executing certain competencies, it is imperative to encourage a critical reflection on their role in promoting teacher development and to explore innovative solutions that empower principals to effectively lead in this aspect of educational leadership. It is suggested that criticism should be focused not on the existence of the competency among their responsibilities, but at the necessary provision of resources to develop it effectively.

On the other hand, the identification of these professional competencies among school principals was homogeneous in terms of their personal characteristics (i.e., gender, age, educational level, and experience in school leadership), contextual factors (i.e., location, students' socioeconomic status, number of students and number of teachers). Our findings partially contrasted with those reported in previous international research (Leithwood et al., 2006; Leo et al., 2020), which indicated that different sociodemographic factors impacted competencies for management and leadership. Unlike previous studies that focused on the performance of management and leadership competencies, our research aimed at identifying professional competencies that school principals consider outside their scope of responsibility. This involves addressing the potential gap between legally established assignments and the feasibility of implementing them in the everyday reality of school management, particularly within the semi-professional Spanish school leadership model. In this sense, principals in Andalusia, regardless of their sociodemographic factors, concurred in

highlighting four professional competencies, likely perceiving them as more administrative tasks that fall outside the realm of student learning and the effective operation of the school.

Additional analysis should explore the relationship between the selection process of school principals in Andalusia, the specific training they receive for their role, and the actual leadership model implemented in Spanish schools. The educational administration should implement policies to ensure that the professional competencies assigned to school principals (Ministry of Education, 2020) can be applied with quality assurance in different educational contexts. Hargreaves (2020) asserts that an excessive emphasis on top-down administrative control has led to inconsistencies across entire educational systems. He advocates for a shift towards a shared, democratic, or distributed leadership model. While this approach has been championed for years, its practical implementation has proven challenging. Our research findings suggest that this issue might also be present in the Spanish context, particularly in Andalusia. The findings of this research may indicate that there is a gap between the intention of legislative regulation and the practical application possibilities in educational institutions.

In addressing this challenge, it is worth considering the school leadership models prevalent in Anglo-Saxon contexts, as these are distinguished by a substantial degree of autonomy in school leadership, as noted by Castillo and Racero (2022). Additionally, it would be insightful to explore the European Nordic models, which are renowned for their focus on pedagogical leadership, a perspective highlighted by Haglund and Glaés-Coutts (2023). These diverse approaches offer valuable perspectives for enriching and diversifying leadership strategies in education.

These models, which emphasize a pedagogically focused approach, have demonstrated efficacy, as noted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008). Adapting a similar model in Spain could involve reforming the training of school principals to focus more on pedagogical leadership and educational innovation, a concept supported by Bush & Glover (2014). Furthermore, a reorganization of

663 competencies, including the delegation of certain administrative tasks to specialized staff, would
664 allow principals to devote greater attention to pedagogical leadership, as advocated by Del Arco,
665 Ramos-Pla, and Flores-Alarcia (2023). It is essential to emphasize the provision of resources,
666 preparation, and support required for school principals to effectively execute the identified
667 competencies. Rather than solely focusing on reducing competencies, our approach highlights the
668 importance of equipping principals with the necessary tools and support systems to excel in their
669 roles. This includes access to professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and
670 collaborative networks aimed at facilitating knowledge sharing and best practices. Moreover,
671 ensuring adequate funding and staffing levels is crucial to enable principals to implement
672 competencies effectively. By emphasizing the significance of providing comprehensive support to
673 school principals, we aim to foster a culture of co-responsibility among authorities, directors, and
674 teachers, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and school success.

675 This research has significant implications for educational policy and practice in Andalusia, Spain,
676 indicating a shift towards a leadership model that strikes a balance between administrative duties
677 and pedagogical responsibilities. Such a model could potentially enhance the quality and
678 effectiveness of education in schools throughout Andalusia.

679 **Limitations**

680 Despite of the relevance of the results, the present research has a series of shortcomings. Firstly, our
681 design was cross-sectional with all measures being administered at the same time. Hence, future
682 research is required to longitudinally explore if the opinions that school principals currently have
683 regarding their professional competencies are kept over time or undergo changes. Secondly, the use
684 of a non-probabilistic sampling method for the participant recruitment and selection makes it
685 necessary to interpret the findings with caution, given their limitation in being generalizable to other
686 populations. Therefore, further research is required to consider a greater heterogeneity in the sample
687 of participating school principals in terms of the inclusion of other types of schools (e.g., private

688 school) or type of education to be offered (e.g., online, or blended). Additionally, investigating the
689 perspectives of school leadership from other autonomous communities in Spain would enrich our
690 understanding by highlighting potential regional differences and similarities in leadership models.
691 In turn, factors that may influence the results have not been considered, such as leadership style,
692 schoolworking environment or climate, degree of teaching personalization, and teacher well-being.

693 **Conclusions**

694 This research sheds light on the perspectives of school principals in Andalusia, specifically focusing
695 on the mismatch between the competencies assigned to them and those they deem essential for
696 effective school leadership. Principals have identified four competencies - awarding contracts,
697 authorising expenditures, promoting teacher qualifications and training, and supervising non-
698 teaching staff - as being outside their preferred scope of responsibilities. The reluctance to engage in
699 these tasks is attributed to their bureaucratic nature, the lack of specific training, a perceived
700 disconnect from direct student learning, insufficient legal authority, and a belief in the efficiency of
701 a more centralised model for these tasks.

702 The findings of this study call for a critical reassessment of the competencies assigned to school
703 principals and the wat they are managed. It highlights the need to explore alternative approaches for
704 tasks that principals feel ill-equipped to manage, particularly due to inadequate training or authority.
705 This reassessment could lead to enhanced management efficiency and the adoption of more
706 collaborative, participatory, distributed, and autonomous leadership models.

707 Educational authorities should prioritize the development of strategies that effectively implement
708 key leadership tasks, especially those that foster teachers' professional development and enhance
709 their qualifications and training. In this vein, it's worth considering that leadership coaching is an
710 increasingly popular strategy aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of principals, as outlined by
711 Patrick et al. (2021). This necessity is supported by the research of Del Arco, Ramos-Pla, and

712 Flores-Alarcia (2023), which underscores the importance of management training in augmenting the
713 professionalization of school principals in Spain (Catalonia), specifically targeting challenges such
714 as excessive bureaucracy and time constraints.

715 Additionally, while examining the perspectives of school principals on certain professional
716 competencies, it becomes evident that their opinions may hinder the advancement of more effective
717 leadership models. This observation underscores the importance of not only addressing external
718 factors but also critically evaluating the role and speech of the principals themselves. Therefore,
719 alongside the call for further research to develop administrative strategies supporting principals in
720 managing competencies, it is equally imperative to encourage self-reflection and improvement in
721 their leadership approach. By fostering a culture of self-critique and continuous improvement
722 among principals, we could better facilitate significant advancements in pedagogical leadership and
723 overall school effectiveness.

724 This study underscores the need for policy changes and educational reforms in Andalusia, Spain,
725 that advocate for a balanced leadership model, one that harmonizes administrative duties with a
726 strong emphasis on pedagogical leadership. Such reforms are expected to not only enhance the
727 efficiency of school management but also significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of
728 education. This approach ensures that leadership roles are optimized for both administrative
729 efficiency and educational impact. In line with this, it is crucial for administrative authorities to
730 consider the insights of school principals. By formulating measures that ensure the proper and
731 quality execution of essential tasks, particularly those that focus on fostering teachers' professional
732 development and enhancing their qualifications and training, a more effective and responsive
733 educational leadership can be established.

734 For subsequent research, we recommend exploring alternative approaches in competency
735 management as suggested by school principals. Such a study could offer deeper understanding of

more efficient leadership styles and administrative methods, thereby enhancing educational leadership across diverse settings. The aim should be to conduct a thorough analysis of the competencies and responsibilities that principals deem secondary to their primary role, incorporating these essential factors. Furthermore, a comparative examination of the perspectives of school principals from different international and contextual backgrounds is likely to provide significant insights.

In summary, this article emphasizes the need for a systemic shift in school leadership roles in Spain (Andalusia), advocating for a more balanced, efficient, and educationally focused approach. The insights of school principals are invaluable in guiding this transformation, paving the way for future advancements in pedagogical leadership and educational excellence.

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Table 1.

Estimated absolute and relative frequency of professional competencies that school principals believe they should not perform under the conditions established by the Andalusian educational context.

Professional competence	Absolute frequency (*N*=564)	Relative frequency (100%)
1.Exercising pedagogical leadership and promoting plans to achieve the objectives of the educational project	7	1.24%
2.Promoting educational innovation and research	37	6.56%
3.Promoting the qualification and training of the teaching team	**67**	**11.88%**
4.Promoting organisational forms and the school timetable for subjects or areas	42	7.45%
5.Convening and chairing academic events and meetings of the school board and the faculty, and ensuring the implementation of adopted agreements	5	0.89%
6.Designing the educational planning and organisation of the school, as outlined in the annual general programme	9	1.60%
7.Awarning contracts for construction, services and materials	**180**	**31.91%**
8.Authorising expenditure, ordering payments and preparing the school budget	**64**	**11.35%**
9.Endorsing certificates and official documents of the school	31	5.50%
10.Exercising leadership over the teaching staff of the school and proposing the appointment and dismissal of the management team	7	1.24%
11.Supervising the non-teaching staff of the school	**85**	**15.07%**
12.Promoting coexistence, ensuring conflict mediation and imposing corrective measures on students	11	1.95%
13.Promoting internal evaluations of the school and participating in external evaluations and teacher evaluations	36	6.38%
14.Acting as a representative of the educational administration in the school and as an intermediary with the educational community and administration	12	2.12%
15.Fostering cooperation with families, institutions, and organisations in the environment	6	1.06%