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Educational leadership and teacher involvement as success factors in schools in disadvantaged areas of Spain

El liderazgo pedagógico y la implicación del profesorado como factores de éxito en centros de entornos desfavorecidos en España

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Abstract
Research into education and inequalities shows that families' socio-economic background is one of the factors that has a determinig effect on the achievement of academic results. However, while not denying the influence of external factors, research also highlight the key role the school and school agents can play in more vulnerable young people's educational pathways and academic achievements. It also finds that schools with similar student profiles display different levels of achievement.
This article presents the results of a research project aimed at identifying factors that contribute to academic success in primary and secondary schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic areas in four major cities in Spain (Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Valencia). This research shows the importance of internal institutional dimensions for academic results and the impact of the educational leadership displayed by school directors and teachers on academic achievement

Keywords:
disadvantaged backgrounds, academic achievement, educational leadership, teachers

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Resumen
Las investigaciones en educación y desigualdades muestran que el entorno socioeconómico de las familias es uno de los factores que condicionan en mayor medida el logro de los resultados académicos. Sin embargo, sin negar la influencia de los factores externos, las investigaciones ponen también de relieve el papel clave que pueden tener la institución educativa y los agentes escolares en las trayectorias y el logro del éxito académico de los jóvenes en situación de mayor vulnerabilidad. Y constatan que escuelas con similares perfiles de estudiantes alcanzan logros diferenciados
Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación cuyo objetivo ha sido identificar los factores que contribuyen al éxito académico en escuelas de educación primaria y secundaria obligatoria situadas en entornos socioeconómicos desfavorecidos de cuatro grandes ciudades en España (Barcelona, Madrid, Sevilla y Valencia). La investigación muestra la importancia que sobre los resultados académicos tienen las dimensiones institucionales internas y la incidencia del liderazgo pedagógico de la dirección y del profesorado en el logro académico.

Palabras clave:
entornos desfavorecidos, éxito académico, liderazgo pedagógico, profesorado

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Research into education and inequalities shows that families' socio-economic background is one of the factors that has a determinig effect on the achievement of academic results. This finding raises questions over whether schools are fulfilling their true purpose, while also highlighting that they are not meeting their objectives with regard to reducing inequalities (Ferrer, 2009). However, various reports and studies (PISA, PIRLS, Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005, among others) also reveal the existence of factors related to

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the education system and schools that affect student results, highlighting the fact that in some education systems inequalities have less of an effect on the educational experience and academic achievements of citizens. These data coexist alongside others which show how schools with similar student profiles achieve different results (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Murillo, 2007) and studies confirming that the actions schools take are key in reducing inequalities and that improving equality reinforces standards of excellence in the education system (Suchaut, 2007).

Barber and Mourshed (2007), studying the characteristics of 25 education systems participating in the PISA programme aimed at determining the causes of educational achievement, conclude that there are three key factors to success: a) the quality of the teachers, b) improving teaching and learning processes in the classroom, and c) achieving improvement among all students. The authors point out that the quality of the system cannot exceed the quality of the teachers, while also testifying to the effect of improving teaching and learning processes in the classroom and the effect of school leadership in improving results. Bolivar (2010) points out that the effect of this leadership, which generally turns out to be a "principal -effect", is an indirect factor that contributes to creating the conditions for teachers to work effectively in the classroom. Furthermore, Hargreaves (2010) points out that school directors that promote improvements at the school can achieve improvements in student achievements; in other words, the actions implemented by directors have an impact on both teachers and students.

In this article, we present empirical data on educational leadership and teacher functions. Findings are based on the results of a research project aimed primarily at identifying factors that contribute to the academic success and continued education of young people in primary and secondary schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic areas of four large cities in Spain (Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Valencia). In addressing the *school effect*, the study highlights the importance of internal institutional dimensions on academic results and educational processes and of the educational leadership shown by school directors and teachers in this respect.

Educational leadership: engine of change

Studies such as those conducted by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) show how school management teams can make a significant difference to students' education and the quality of the school. These data are corroborated by the McKinsey report (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) and the OECD itself (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2009) in concluding that the improvement of an educational institution depends largely on the work done by management teams in exercising effective leadership capable of stimulating the school and fostering continuous improvement. These studies find leadership to be the second most important internal school factor in learning achievement, behind the direct action teachers exercise in this regard. The TALIS (2013) report also highlights the importance of school leadership in enhancing the effectiveness of the work done by teachers at the school. However, the report awards Spain one of the lowest scores for educational and administrative leadership.

As for other findings in this area, the APA (2010) report carried out in Colorado also identified improvement factors at eight schools with a high proportion of students from low-income families. Among these, the report noted the existence of high expectations for all students, individualized support for students with difficulties, the active participation of teachers in decision-making and the development of a collaborative culture. Other important factors were the flexibility of the school in using resources, stability and, in particular, consistent leadership. A large amount of research shows the important role of school leadership in achieving effectiveness and improvement at schools (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2009, Parsons and Beauchamp,

2012). Studies such as those conducted by Scheerens and Bosker (1997), Teddlie and Reynolds (2000), Harris and Mujis (2002) and Townsend (2007) are proof of this, and also of how leadership is an indirect effect mediated by other factors interwoven within the school's structure and organization, teaching and environment. Although it was not deemed possible to find evidence of what constitutes the most effective leadership style – despite the fact that this would appear to be distributed and participative-style leadership (Harris & Muijs, 2002) – and as Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2009) point out, there are no large-scale studies that make a direct link between leadership, student learning and school results, some case studies do report that the school leader exercises an important function. This figure, whose work is most effective when it focuses on aspects of teaching and learning (Harris & Chapman, 2001), is the one who does or does not create the necessary conditions to influence the motivations and working conditions of the teachers, who are those ultimately responsible for shaping school practices and effective learning.

The management function and its educational leadership role are therefore crucial in both formulating a view of the school shared by teachers and the entire educational community and creating an annual strategic plan with measurable targets, defined around academic and linguistic needs, as well as those related to student development (Garcia & del Campo, 2012).

Teacher implication: the key to success

Teachers are conceived as a key agent in bolstering students' success, the principal managers of the teaching and learning processes, and the architects of the school's organization; their expertise, teaching role and personal attitude are critical to the school's success. Thus, teacher quality is seen in many studies (Aaronson, Barrow & Sander 2007; Kane & Staiger 2008; Muijs and Reynolds, 2010; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2005; Rockoff 2004, among others) as an essential factor in explaining the effectiveness of schools and differences in the results they obtain. In this regard, it is relevant to consider such contributions as that provided by Ofsted (2008), which offers a view of improvement that should also inspire the teachers training and the education supervision. For Ofsted (2008), teachers' contribution to school success is marked by their interaction with students and other members of the educational community. With regard to the former, it highlights three principles: that teachers be aware of the educational needs of all students and analyse these in depth; that they focus their attention on the causes and not the effects of any student disengagement from school; and that their assessment of students goes beyond the mere measuring of academic performance through objective tests.

Research in this area provides similar findings on the profile of an effective teacher (Attali & Bressoux, 2002; Lessard, 2006, among others). The effective teacher is a *facilitator* who implements activities in a structured way, introduces challenges to students progressively, asking them questions and providing them with opinions and positive feedback. He or she is also strict. To other researchers (Perrenoud, 1999; Meirieu, 2006, among others), the effective teacher is one who organizes and manages learning situations, placing students in an investigative situation and asking them to solve problems. Effective teachers are firm advocates of the principle of "educability". They believe that all students have the potential to learn, and that each student's intelligence should be fostered individually; they advocate a school that prepares students for life, and express doubts over the relevance of repetition for learning; they advocate conducting learning experiences based on action, usually in collaboration with other teachers within the framework of comprehensive education cycles; they set their students problems, challenges, and projects, not so much as a product but rather as a learning process; they create a climate of good communication and trust in the classroom. Their aim is for all students to feel secure and confident when speaking and intervening in

the resolution of tasks; they watch and listen to their students attentively, and question themselves regarding their own performance, above and beyond their lessons; these teachers are always willing to create a cognitively stimulating environment, mobilize students to perform activities, and create an environment rich in learning tasks; they are also aware that their educational role is not restricted to the classroom. Their overall aim as an educator is at all times to create the conditions whereby students feel the whole school is a pleasant place to be and to always be ready to set further learning challenges (Meirieu, 2006).

Methodology

The findings in this article form part of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness R&D&I- financed project "Educational success and inequality in schools in disadvantaged environments". The study has addressed different levels of analysis and combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, among which is the analysis of educational policy at an international level, the use of quantitative databases (such as PIRLS and PISA), and a qualitative phase which has carried out 24 case studies in schools in five Spanish urban environments: Barcelona (5) and its metropolitan area (5), Seville (4), Madrid (5) and Valencia (5).

The following criteria were taken into account in the selection of schools: that they were either state-run or state-subsidized private primary and secondary schools, that they were located in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and that their academic results were higher than those of other schools in the same city located in similar environments. We received the support and collaboration of the boards of education in each autonomous region to this end[1]. Five schools were chosen in each city[2]: four state-run schools - two primary and two secondary - and one state-subsidized private school. In each of the schools (24), in-depth interviews were carried out with head teachers (1), inspectors (1) and municipal education managers (1), and focus groups were organized with students (1), teaching staff (1) and families (1). We carried out a total of 55 interviews – the original intention was to conduct 60, but two inspectors declined to take part in the research and on three occasions the municipal education manager was involved in more than one school – and 75 focus groups

Permission was obtained for this fieldwork to be undertaken from the local authorities and from the schools, their teaching staff, families and students, who took part in both the interviews and the focus groups. It was agreed that the findings would be returned in the form of an individual report for each of the schools; as is customary, these have been made anonymous for the purposes of this article.

Results

Research context: the schools

The schools participating in the research are located in densely populated areas. These are working class neighbourhoods which were the destination for many internal migrants in the 1960s and international migrants in recent decades. They have high unemployment rates, are considered to be conflictive areas by most respondents, especially the younger people. This is what some of them said when asked what they liked most about the neighbourhood:

- *There is nothing we like about the neighbourhood*
- *The good thing about the neighbourhood is that it has a* subway *station and you can get out of it* (Student, AMB/C5)

Most of the schools' students are from working class families with a low socio-economic status, and 30%-50% are children of immigrant families. Generally speaking, having previously been very undesirable on the city's educational market the schools'

[1] In some cases, the participation of the board of education was more pro-active. We are grateful for the support provided.

[2] With the exception of Seville, where only 4 schools were able to take part in the research.

current enrolment figures are steady, an aspect the schools themselves consider positive and the result of work done in recent years. However these schools are still seen, in the neighbourhood, as a "conflictive schools". The following comment from one of the focus groups with families is evidence of this, "*I heard that a girl had been killed in the bathroom*" (Family focus group B/3). Contrarily, even those families that convey a negative image of the school enrol their children there when they need more individualized support. This is a situation that has also been found in previous research (Pàmies, 2008).

Educational leadership as an engine of change

Leadership is the first element of institutional culture interviewees refer to. This leadership generally falls on the school management team. The explicit and implicit acknowledgement of the school management team as project leaders is evident in the following extract

> "*He [the head teacher] is a very good communicator and transmits a lot of information, he is also able to explain in a way that you know what is going on. […] And that is very important. This energy, and the enthusiasm the school management team has, they transmit it, in the teachers' room, to the children, and also to the parents. I think this is like a contagious chain. And that's vital*". (Families, school AMB/C3)

In the schools studied, two situations are detected regarding leadership effectiveness. On the one hand, cases in which it is due to the head teacher's lengthy career (over 10 years in this role) and on the other, those in which, since the change is recent, it implies a break and a novelty; that is to say, it is seen as a "before and after", or as a change for the better in the evolution of the schools.

> "*The director has changed it a lot (the school), because my brother was very conflictive when he came and he saw things because he was a teacher. Then when he became the director, he began to change everything, because there were many gangs before and my mother was worried about me coming here, because of the gangs. And then I came here and there was no problem with gangs or anything because he had changed everything" (Student, AMB/C 3)*

Neither is there uniformity in the type of leadership exercised. Some schools have been identified with a distributive leadership – and they are highly valued due to this – and others with more personalistic and hierarchical characteristics:

> "*It's like Noah's ark. There are two elephants, two tigers, two lions, two flies, two mosquitoes, two iguanas, two this, two that. But I've given everyone an oar. One rows one way, one rows another… But I've told them all where we have to get to*". (Director, school B/C3)

In cases of distributive leadership, it is accompanied by a knowledge of teachers' strengths and weaknesses, which allows these to be improved or addressed, while at the same time promoting intense collaboration between all educational agents, as mentioned by the management team of one of the schools:

> *"At an organizational level, we work a lot, very closely with the stage coordinators, as they are the ones who know the reality behind each stage of education, the reality in every classroom, you know, and so all decisions are taken together with them."* (Management team, B/C1)

In cases of distributive leadership, teachers think that the director has the ability to accompany, seduce and respect them, a situation that leads some of them to express the following:

- *"The management team has the ability of knowing how to invite everyone to work together".*
- *"Obliging people is not the same as inviting them, and X (the director) invites"*

- *"X (the director) is a bit like God: he is everywhere and knows everything" (Teacher, AMB/C3)*

In cases of hierarchical and/or personal leadership, the decisions fall more on a single figure, thus leading to a concentration of attributes, characteristics and values in this person that are valued by others and presented as an example to follow:

"*Another key to success is the example. The example. […]. You have to give a certain example of authority without... that is, they know that you're there, not become invisible, not shut yourself in an office, get out there, look, be, listen …*". (Director, school B/C3)

In both cases it is also noticeable that the participation of the management team represents a working example for other teachers. They transmit an "infectious motivation" and represent a model of participation and work for the rest of the teaching staff.

However, in which dimensions have we found management leadership to have had a beneficial impact, facilitating a better response to educational challenges? Let us consider a few:

- *In the positive acceptance of the school's public image based on the students it schools*. Management teams have fostered a school project that does not aim to change the social composition of the students and their families. The school positively accepts the young people it schools and analyses their needs to promote educational responses to them. Furthermore, most teachers do not reproduce the discourse on the presence of minority, immigrant or special educational needs (SEN) students as an anomalous situation that needs resolving. A local government official expressed it as follows:

  "*These are generally inclusive schools, which is another key to their success. And not valuing the prestige of the school according to the type of student you have, but according to the type of work you do at the school"* (Local government representative, AMB/C5)

- *In constant analysis and the search for answers and solutions to everyday challenges*. The commitment of the management team and teachers to improving the school and the academic results of its students translates into a constant analysis of the school, as well as ongoing reflection on the actions being implemented. The use of both internal evaluation – both internal and external – in the serch for improvement and answers to identified problems are examples of how the schools approach their actions for change and their not working on the basis of improvisation. We can state that there is a prevailing positive and can-do approach at these schools, a clear indicator that reflects the presence of a culture of transformation.

- *In developing a strong and shared school project that ensures all students have the opportunity to acquire competences*. The management team has promoted a project in this direction and this is accompanied by teachers enjoying freedom to implement their own initiatives. The balance of freedom and trust placed in teachers by the management team generates a high level of commitment and bonding to the school.

- *In fostering participation in educational programmes and projects and establishing support networks in order to adapt and enrich the school's response to its educational challenges.* Via the leadership of the management team, openness has been promoted towards the neighbourhood together with networking with local organizations in a pre-established programme which is reviewed each year. These schools consider it essential to open up to the local environment and work in collaboration with institutions and services in the neighbourhood and the city.

- *In establishing structures that allow the school, via collaboration with other agencies, to respond adequately to the needs of all students from an inclusive perspective.* Collaboration takes the form of normative management bodies coexisting in the school alongside structures created expressly to address educational inequalities from an inclusive perspective and via organizational flexibility. Examples of this would be the "new structures" that some schools have created, such as the *driving team*, comprising the management team and a group of teachers, or the *social committee*, comprising agents internal and external to the school and which constitutes an example of networking. Or the *Friends of the School Association*, set up at the behest of the management team as a new body that offers scholarships to students.
- *In developing a positive school climate and culture.* In the schools there is the notable existence of a positive school culture that is promoted by the school management having created spaces to encourage teacher dialogue, reflection and participation. We could say that human relations play a prominent role in all schools. This situation encourages the establishing of emotional ties among members of the educational community and contributes to developing a positive school climate and culture.
- *In the development of ad-hoc teacher training strategies sustained over time.* Most of the schools have management-driven training strategies aimed at teachers. These focus on cooperative work, basic skills training, digital tools, the training of mediators, joint education or reading comprehension. With regard to this, teachers highlight the influence that training has had on the eductional planning. However, it is acknowledged that not all teachers are involved in these processes.

Teachers: involvement in the school project

Related to some extent to leadership, we find the decision-making processes of the teaching team. Both the teachers and directors of most of the schools researched state that the most common form of decision-making is by means of consensus on the various representative bodies where they are present: staff meetings, teaching teams, committees, etc. Regardless of the leadership style, the director shows trust in the other teachers, which leads to a stronger sense of shared responsibility in the common project and increases teachers' loyalty and commitment. There is a feeling of *contagious involvement* and willingness to cooperate and improve. The families have this perception, and highlight the application of teachers, in the sense that their commitment goes beyond the strictly academic and means hours spent working outside the normal school day.

> "*We are making three groups out of two. [...] I make the teachers work 120 hours more than they are supposed to. [...] The management team works longer hours, and therefore, if we work more hours in the classroom and fewer hours in management, we have less hours of reduction, right? The department heads only have one hour of reduction, but most of them are tutors, so they are already being department heads and tutors. Most extracurricular activities coordinators, computers, languages, etc., have no hour of reduction. [...] Everyone is working maximum number of hours possible so we can do this. We made a pact in the staff meeting*". *(Director,* B/C4*)*

The families also highlight that the commitment of teachers goes beyond the strictly academic and means hours spent working outside the normal school day:

> "*I see them as people who really apply themselves, and who care about the whole education of the student. Not only about teaching them social studies or mathematics*". (Families, B/C3*)*

> "*Yes, the application. We mentioned it before, the Christmas concert, or the play...*

> *They're working out of school hours and have no problem with it. And if the children go in the afternoon, because they have to rehearse the play, the teachers are also there. [...] There is a different feeling to simply going to school and then going home*" (Families, B/C4)

This factor is crucial, according to the directors, as it generates dynamics that foster good results via working together and the existence of shared goals:

> "*I also think it's a project that has been very much integrated by most of the teaching staff. That is, one of our greatest assets is that we generally have very committed teachers, who make this school project very much their own and means they make more effort than most teachers. That's what I think*". (Teacher, AMB/C5)

Furthermore, we have noted that this dual causality is fuelled by the trust that the management team has placed in all of the teachers from the outset:

> "*I have shown a lot of trust in everyone. At first I didn't give them much, but the first thing I did was get rid of the sign-in log. You came in and and signed, and put the time you signed. All of the teachers, you know? Well the first thing I did was get rid of this. Because I trusted that everyone wanted to come in early. [...] Of course, trusting them that it wasn't necessary to sign in, has led to them feeling more responsible about being off work*". (Director, school B/C4)

In addition, in many cases this application is accompanied by teachers feeling a bond with the school and the collective project:

> "*Everyone has gradually entered into a dynamic where everyone has a job to do, everyone has a job at this school, apart from the typical job of teacher. [...] Very simple things, but everyone feels connected to school life, to something in the school, something that bonds us to the school*". (Director, B/C2)

In fact, some teachers say that one reason why all of the teachers are so involved in the school is that most of them live in the district where it is located.

> *"I think this also makes you become more involved, maybe not consciously, but somehow you see that the child's reality is actually your reality in the end"* (Teacher, M/C4)

This bond and commitment is perceptible in the discourse of students and families regarding expectations towards students and the treatment they receive. And also with regard to the great sensitivity displayed by teachers and the management team in respect of the everyday conditions of students. This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that in the absence of a school dining room, school meal vouchers are handed out to students from needy families so they can go to the adjacent primary school dining room:

> "*There are five or six students who currently go to the primary school dining room. As the management team we have committed to one of us going to help (in the dining room) each day*" (Director, B/C4)

In most cases, students and families highlight the fact that teachers and the management team are available to discuss any issues and that they "really" know the children, as highlighted by these comments by a primary school student and the families:

> "*They [the teachers] believe more in me than I do myself; I thought I couldn't do it and look, I can,…*" (Primary school student, B/C1)

> "*Here they care, and it's true that they do. They care for the kids and the families. And I think that's one of the reasons for the academic success of our school*". (Families, school B/C3)

The students have a positive opinion of the teachers. They identify various general qualities in them and their teaching practices in the classroom. The secondary school students consider that a *good teacher* is one

who explains well, is not repetitive, treats them as equals, listens, knows how to judge, allows and recognizes the ability to improve, is kind and friendly, gives them confidence, is strict in relationships, is tolerant and promotes teamwork. They believe some of their teachers have many of these qualities:

> "*That they know how to explain things to you, or to explain in their own way but when you have a complaint they listen* (…)"

> "*That they know how to explain well, they know how to judge and I don't know, that they are nice to their colleagues, to students"*

> "*I really like teachers who treat you as an equal, who don't treat you as inferior, as if we were little!*" (Students AMB/C3)

The families stress the importance of the work done by the teachers, and that all of the teachers know all the students at the school. The teachers confirm this situation, especially in those schools where there is greater staff stability and in the semi-private schools:

> "*Because there are kids you've known since... and you also know their brothers and sisters, their family ... You get to know each of them, which if you are only there for a year and go to another school you can't do*" (Teacher, AMB/C5)

In other words, the teachers at the schools share a concern for the students and their learning, but education is promoted above and beyond the purely academic, not only valuing curricular learning, but also that of shaping students' values. The teachers support students and transmit an individual commitment to each of them based on demandingness and affection:

> *"We educate the whole person and we try to ensure they don't only leave us with knowledge, but knowing how to share, and relate to others" (Director, AMB/C4)*

This support is perceived in the various strategies promoted at the schools and especially in tutorial and educational guidance, which in most cases is considered a priority. The teachers and management team work intensively on this. Both are involved in monitoring situations and the management team offers its support to the teachers, students and families, an aspect that is highly valued by all educational agents. For their part, the students feel supported by the teachers not only in academic but also personal aspects. Among those aspects the students consider to make the schools good is the teachers' attitude towards them:

> *"The attitude they have towards you, because even out of class time, if you have a family problem or something and you tell them, they help you, I really appreciate that". (Student, AMB/C 3)*

It is a situation that surprises some students and families in the stage of secondary education, and which helps to break with certain images related to this educational stage:

> *"I didn't expect them to be treated like that at secondary school, not at all, you would expect it at one of those small primary schools" (Families, B/C4)*

However, it has also been noted that some secondary students would prefer the support they receive to be strictly academic:

> *"No, I wouldn't like it...! No, no! .... It doesn't matter how much you can tell them stuff, they're still teachers, not friends, or brothers, but teachers and that's all" (Students, AMB/C4)*

The good climate identified in the schools and the close relationships between teachers, students and families are accompanied by a high degree of discipline, with a clear link established between the importance attached to respecting rules, demandingness and the learning achieved:

> "*These teachers, the ones who are demanding, are the ones you really learn from, you know? ... Of course they're on your side… they're teaching something... and they're the ones you really learn something from*". (Students B/C4)

Conclusions

International trends (Day et al., 2009) point to the need to consider educational leadership as leadership for learning, and thus link leadership with learning for all students. We have been able to ascertain that these linking processes are achieved through the school management teams and teachers themselves and how leadership actions are aimed at improving the achievement of all students.

In the schools researched in our study, the relational system is characterized by the existence of a positive climate in combination with strong leadership, which reveals itself to be one of the key factors. In all cases it is accompanied by a high level of dedication from both the management team and the teachers, with students and families valuing the high level of academic and personal commitment paid to each student, as other studies have also highlighted (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2002; Joyce et al., 1999; Lein et al., 1997; Leithwood & Steinbach, 2003; Montgomery et al., 1993; Muijs et al., 2004; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

Undoubtedly, fostering success in schools in disadvantaged areas requires application from trained and committed professionals, who must act in two main areas. The first is by contributing to clearly identifying the school project, through an ongoing review of the school context. This analysis will allow the school's situation to be established and the possibilities and limits of implementing various lines of action and strategies. The second is by looking for synergies among and collaboration from all of the educational agents involved. Collaborative work and the search for consensus is boosted when directors place their trust in the entire teaching staff, a situation that increases teachers' loyalty and commitment to the school project. In this article, we have tried to provide empirical evidence of this and have seen that the director's leadership role and application of teachers are a factor of quality and a necessary resource in combatting academic failure in disadvantaged environments. However, school leaders can only exert their influence if they have autonomy and support to make significant decisions and their responsibilities are well defined (OECD, 2009: 41), an uncommon situation in Spain, despite the existence of relevant experiences (see *Revista de Educación*, special issue, 2012).

In asking what policies favour a type of teacher more in line with a role that is conducive to success in these socio-educational contexts, Ronfeldt,Loeb and Wyckoff (2013) show how management and training policies can prove decisive in this respect. The aforementioned authors conclude that the most effective schools stand out due to, among other measures, the implementation of a policy characterized by employing teachers with higher added value, the more equitable distribution of new teachers (assigning them less to disadvantaged groups), improving their professional skills and promoting effective leadership and high quality teaching practices. The latter is an aspect that Johnston and Hayes (2007) consider key, when they highlight how *student learning is related to the professional learning of teachers*. In particular, they note that students tend to achieve greater success if teachers actively participate in the learning opportunities offered by the context of their school. This is an aspect that we were also able to identify in our study. However, as Bolivar (2010) also states, we find ourselves in a situation where we must ask the question of whether acting under the principle of educational leadership without considering other dimensions will be effective in itself or whether, on the contrary, we are trying to respond to problems by using the same approaches that we used when we created them.

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Notes

1 In some cases, the participation of the board of education was more pro-active. We are grateful for the support provided.

|2| With the exception of Seville, where only 4 schools were able to take part in the research.

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