



UNIVERSIDAD ANDINA
SIMÓN BOLÍVAR
Ecuador

Revista Andina de Educación

<https://revistas.uasb.edu.ec/index.php/ree>

<https://doi.org/10.32719/26312816.5720>

Educational Leadership in Ecuadorian Technical Schools: A Qualitative Analysis of Policy Impact on Leadership Practices

Liderazgo educativo en las escuelas técnicas ecuatorianas: un análisis cualitativo del impacto de las políticas en las prácticas de liderazgo

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received on June 8, 2025

Accepted on September 11, 2025

Published on October 02, 2025

Keywords:

educational leadership

leadership practices

technical schools

Ecuador

INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO

Historial del artículo:

Recibido el 08 de junio de 2025

Aceptado el 11 de septiembre de 2025

Publicado el 02 de octubre de 2025

Palabras clave:

liderazgo educativo

prácticas de liderazgo

escuelas técnicas

Ecuador

ABSTRACT

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

RESUMEN

El liderazgo educativo ha atraído una atención significativa en la investigación occidental durante las últimas dos décadas. Sin embargo, en América Latina, solo recientemente se ha convertido en un foco de estudio. Gran parte de la investigación existente aplica conceptos de liderazgo sin considerar adecuadamente los contextos políticos, culturales y sociales únicos de los países individuales. Ecuador, en particular, ha experimentado numerosas reformas educativas en los últimos quince años, alterando significativamente su panorama educativo y sus prácticas de liderazgo. Este estudio investiga las prácticas de liderazgo de los líderes educativos en las escuelas técnicas ecuatorianas, centrándose específicamente en establecer direcciones, desarrollar personas y reculturar escuelas. A través de entrevistas y análisis de documentos, el estudio revela que los líderes educativos tienen como objetivo rediseñar las organizaciones escolares de manera colaborativa integrando los esfuerzos de estudiantes, padres y maestros para lograr objetivos colectivos. También navegan por las tareas administrativas mientras fomentan un entorno de apoyo para maestros y estudiantes. El estudio identifica los factores que influyen en estas prácticas, como las reformas educativas y las responsabilidades de liderazgo, y aborda desafíos como las relaciones profesionales tensas y la resistencia de los maestros experimentados. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de un enfoque de liderazgo colaborativo y distributivo adaptado al contexto social y educativo único de Ecuador. Esta investigación contribuye a avanzar en el conocimiento contextualizado del liderazgo educativo en Ecuador.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, educational leadership has been extensively studied in Western contexts, with researchers examining the role of educational leaders and

their influence on school improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Davis et al., 2005; Leithwood et al., 2008; Bolívar, 2010; Hallinger & Huber, 2012). Studies have also investigated the relationship between leadership and

student academic achievements (Elmore, 2000; Witziers et al., 2003; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Robinson, 2007; Day et al., 2016), as well as the broader impact of leadership practices on the school community (Begley, 2001; Fowler & Jouganas, 2020).

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

Despite the growing focus on educational leadership in Latin America, much of the research has applied Western leadership models without contextualising them within the region's distinct political, cultural, and social realities (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Weinstein et al., 2014b). Leadership theories are often transferred uncritically, portraying Latin American countries as homogeneous entities while overlooking significant national and local variations (Tedesco & Tenti, 2002). Consequently, scholars have called for more localised and contextually grounded studies on leadership practices to develop theoretical frameworks that better reflect the region's unique characteristics (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Leithwood, 2013; Aguinis et al., 2020).

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

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

State of the art and theoretical framework

This section begins with a comprehensive review of contemporary educational leadership scholarship across Latin America. Subsequently, empirical evidence

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

Educational leadership in the context of Latin America

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

Since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Latin American countries have undergone significant political and economic transformations. The privatisation and decentralisation policies of the 1980s led to numerous school reforms aimed at improving efficiency (Edwards, 1998; Arnove et al., 2013). By the 1990s, reforms centred on four key areas: management, quality and equity, teacher training, and financing (Gajardo, 1999). However, these initiatives often suffered from poor implementation and limited long-term impact (OREALC/UNESCO, 2012).

Entering the 2000s, new policy agendas sought to address educational and social inequalities through compensatory programs, teacher professionalisation efforts, and curricular reforms designed to enhance learning quality (Rivas, 2015). Despite these efforts, the region remains characterised by centralised governance, reinforcing regulatory, financial, and incentive policies at the national level (Pineda et al., 2019; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022). This centralised approach has left educational leaders with limited autonomy in decision-making, as they must adhere strictly to national policies and administrative regulations (Oplatka, 2019). Consequently, educational leadership in Latin America tends to be heavily bureaucratic, with leaders primarily responsible for administrative compliance rather than pedagogical innovation (Treviño et al., 2010).

While constraints on autonomy persist, research identifies three core dimensions of leadership that remain relevant in the Latin American context: establishing a shared vision, fostering organisational structures, and promoting positive school environments (Treviño et al., 2010). Nonetheless, as Santizo and Ortega (2018) highlight, managing schools effectively requires leaders to engage in coordinated and delegated actions that extend beyond strict bureaucratic mandates. Leadership practices in the region are thus shaped by a combination of performance standards, institutional responsibilities, and national policy frameworks, all of which evolve at an uneven pace

across different countries (Tedesco & Tenti, 2002; Vaillant, 2011; Weinstein et al., 2014a).

Educational Policy and Leadership in Ecuador: Empirical Insights

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

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

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

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

schools, fostering informal leadership practices even in the absence of formal training (Fabara & Padilla, 2007).

Conceptualising Educational Leadership through Leadership Practices

Defining educational leadership remains a complex endeavour, as leadership itself is context-dependent and shaped by diverse socio-educational realities (Hannon, 2007; Cheng, 2010; Vaillant, 2011; Amores & Ritacco, 2021). Due to this complexity, leadership models vary significantly, including instructional, managerial, transformational, moral, and distributed leadership, among others (Bush & Glover, 2014). In this sense, the "awareness of alternative approaches is essential to provide a set of tools from which discerning leaders can choose when facing problems and dealing with day-to-day issues" (Bush, 2007, p. 393). Recent scholarship highlights the role of value-driven and spiritual leadership in shaping educational leaders' practices. Value-driven leadership emphasises the integration of ethical and moral principles into decision-making, fostering trust and commitment within educational communities (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Similarly, spiritual leadership underscores the importance of meaning, vision, and interconnectedness in inspiring teachers and students (Fry, 2003). Including these perspectives broadens the analytical framework by highlighting the moral and relational dimensions of leadership, particularly relevant in contexts where leaders face socio-economic and cultural challenges that extend beyond managerial tasks.

A particularly useful perspective for analysing leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools is Leithwood's (2005, 2006) leadership practices framework, which provides a structured approach to understanding leadership behaviours within schools. Unlike broader leadership theories that often emphasise abstract principles, this model categorises leadership practices into three key dimensions: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organisation. *Setting directions* involves defining a school's vision and goals while fostering high expectations for performance. *Developing people* focuses on enhancing professional capacity through intellectual engagement, mentoring, and personal support, ensuring that educators and staff are well-equipped to fulfil their roles effectively. *Redesigning the organisation* emphasises collaborative decision-making, school improvement initiatives, and the establishment of stronger connections with the broader educational community. By adopting this framework, educational leadership can be examined through a structured and context-sensitive lens, particularly in environments where bureaucratic constraints and a lack of formal leadership training present significant challenges. Leithwood's (2005) approach is especially relevant given that educational leaders' practices are shaped not only by institutional regulations but also by local policy frameworks and student demographics.

Methodology

This investigation applied a qualitative-interpretative methodology to examine and elucidate leadership practices among Ecuadorian school authorities. This approach considers contexts, individuals, and behaviours through

meaningful interpretations of reality (Kvale, 1983; Merriam, 1998). The qualitative methodology allowed us to analyse “views and values as well as acts and facts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 525), which provided comprehensive insights into educational leadership within Ecuadorian technical schools.

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

Research questions

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

1. How do educational leaders enact their leadership practices in technical schools?
2. What are the conditions that explain educational leaders’ practices in technical schools?

Context of the study and participants

Ecuador has implemented several educational reforms aimed at enhancing school staff professionalisation in both technical and pedagogical areas (MINEDUC, 2015). VVOB has partnered with the MINEDUC since 2015 to bolster professional development programs for educational leaders. A significant initiative launched in 2017 involved establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in technical schools throughout this province (details omitted for blind version), a region previously identified as facing critical gaps in educational leadership and institutional management (MINEDUC, 2017). The identified inadequacies have constrained the establishment of sustainable professional development practices. This reality necessitates the urgent implementation of structural

capacity-building programmes for school leadership personnel. For this study, we employed purposeful sampling to select participants from two among six PLCs, securing access to reflections from school principals and vice-principals regarding their educational leadership roles in technical schools (see Table 1). This sampling method, commonly used in qualitative research, ensures participants possess characteristics relevant to research objectives (Bryman, 2016). The selection facilitated an examination of the enactment of leadership practices by school authorities within technical education frameworks.

Data collection

This study adhered to fundamental ethical principles for qualitative research. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participant identities and securely storing all research data. In addition, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the findings would be disseminated. These measures were taken to respect participants’ dignity and to comply with ethical standards in educational research (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The methodological approach incorporated semi-structured interviews and field notes as primary data sources. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their capacity to explore participants’ lived experiences thoroughly, enabling a nuanced understanding of educational leadership practices (Seidman, 2019). The semi-structured interview guide was developed through a review of the literature on educational leadership and was reviewed by two experts to ensure clarity and validity. The final protocol consisted of three thematic blocks: (a) professional trajectories and leadership entry paths, (b) leadership role identification and enactment, and (c) professional development experiences within PLCs. For this study, the first two blocks were prioritised. Field notes complemented the interviews by capturing contextual aspects such as the school environment, participants’ nonverbal cues, and the researcher’s reflexive comments, which enriched data interpretation.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, researchers conducted six in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 40 and 80 minutes and took place in participants’ schools, ensuring a familiar and authentic environment. Open-ended questions stimulated discussion, while additional probes emerged naturally to pursue emerging themes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes complemented the interviews by documenting contextual details, non-verbal cues, and reflexive observations by the researchers, adding depth to the interpretation of data.

Table 1. School authorities involved in the PLCs development strategy.

Participants	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	(H)
Angel	M	50	- Master’s in educational projects - Agricultural engineer	Acting school principal	28	4	Sociology	1160
Bernardo	M	58	Bachelor’s degree in literature	Acting school vice-principal	30	3	Language and literature	3700
Ciro	M	47	- Master’s in educational management and leadership - Bachelor’s degree in education	Acting school vice-principal	20	1	Biology	900

Daniel	M	37	- Master's in computing - Bachelor's degree in computing	Acting school vice-principal	12	1	Accounting projects	800
Elena	F	59	- Master's in school management and curriculum - Bachelor's in school management - Bachelor's degree in social sciences - Bachelor's degree in education	Appointed school principal	26	1	Philosophy	3381
Fernanda	F	53	- Master's in Education - Bachelor's degree in accounting	Acting school vice-principal	28	2	Accounting	1163

Table information:

(A) Gender (C) Educational background (E) Teaching experience (years)

(B) Age (D) Role

(G) Current teaching subject.

(F) Time working in this position at the school (years) (H) Number of students enrolled at the school

Data analysis

Researchers performed verbatim transcription of all interviews in Spanish, followed by editorial refinements to ensure clarity and accuracy. The study applied a rigorous inductive and iterative coding methodology to analyze collected data (Miles et al., 2014). The initial analytical phase utilised descriptive and in vivo coding techniques to capture participants' exact terminology and identify core thematic elements. The coding sequence progressed through three structured phases. (1) Open coding: Researchers identified initial themes by assigning descriptive labels to meaningful text segments. (2) Axial coding: The research team established relationships between codes, refining categories and subcategories. (3) Selective coding: Analysts synthesised key themes to develop a cohesive narrative.

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

The research team implemented multiple validation strategies to ensure credibility (Mertens, 2009). Peer debriefing sessions involved senior researchers who provided feedback to refine data interpretation and mitigate researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An independent researcher conducted an external audit to assess the coherence and rigor of findings (Creswell, 2007). Document analysis corroborated key insights and reinforced contextual validity (Bryman, 2016). The combined application of peer debriefing, external auditing, and document analysis strengthened research reliability and trustworthiness.

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

Results

This section presents insights into the essence of educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools. Our theoretical framework guided the identification of leader-

ship practices structured around three dimensions: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organisation. Moreover, the analysis of results examines factors that influence leadership practices within technical school contexts.

Leadership Practices of Educational Leaders in Ecuadorian Technical Schools

The subsequent analysis illuminates the multifaceted nature of leadership practices in Ecuadorian technical schools, encompassing a rich interplay of strategic, interpersonal, and organisational dimensions. Leadership approaches concerning direction-setting concentrate on cultivating shared institutional visions, facilitating goal attainment, and elevating performance expectations across the educational community. The developmental dimension extends beyond conventional professional training to create holistic environments where personal growth and professional advancement flourish simultaneously. Organisational redesign manifests through collaborative endeavours that transform institutional structures, enhance operational processes, and adapt systems to emerging educational demands. Within this comprehensive framework, educational leaders exhibit a constellation of competencies: adaptability in dynamic contexts, cultural sensitivity amid diverse stakeholder groups, and engaged participation across the spectrum of administrative responsibilities and human-centered interventions. Consequently, educational leadership in technical schools emerges as a complex praxis characterised by unwavering commitment to nurturing cohesive, supportive, and responsive scholastic communities that authentically resonate with the distinctive needs, aspirations, and potentialities of their members.

Setting Directions: Building Collective School Vision

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

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

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

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

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

Developing People: Preparing Teachers for Future Leadership Roles

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

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

An additional pivotal dimension of leadership development involves bolstering teachers' confidence to surmount professional uncertainties while inspiring them to adopt proactive stances toward institutional enhancement. Fernanda offered an illustrative case demon-

strating how strategic leadership support can effectively counterbalance educators' disillusionment:

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

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

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

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

By engaging teachers in conversations about school management, educational leaders lay the groundwork for sustainable leadership succession. When analyzing the data through the lens of the leadership practices framework, it becomes evident that educational leaders in Ecuadorian technical schools transcend merely supporting teachers in their current capacities. They deliberately prepare them for potential leadership positions through strategic interventions.

Redesigning the Organisation: Collaborative Work for School Improvement

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

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

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

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

This analytical discourse illuminates the centrality of infrastructural development and technological integra-

tion within technical schools as an indispensable dimension of leadership-catalysed organisational innovation.

Conditions Enhancing or Hindering Educational Leadership Practices

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

Educational policy: Aligning leadership practices with regulatory frameworks

Educational leaders' leadership practices develop within the **regulatory framework of school reforms**, which establish the policies and guidelines that shape institutional decision-making. One significant policy change involved the **merging of small schools into larger ones** to improve educational quality and infrastructure. While this reform aimed to strengthen school management, it also **introduced new leadership challenges**, often increasing administrative burdens and limiting leaders' focus on instructional improvement. Angel reflected on these changes:

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

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

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

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

Conversely, vice-principals focus on academic and pedagogical matters. They manage curriculum develop-

ment, support teaching practices, and address student academic needs on a daily basis. Daniel stated: I advise teachers concerning rules and educational laws- I guide them about agreements issued by the school district, and support them in school activities".

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

Relations with Peers and Teachers: Overcoming Challenges to Sustain Leadership

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

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

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

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

This oppositional stance potentially emanates from inadequate professional development opportunities, incentive deficiencies, or scepticism regarding imposed leadership paradigm shifts. Educational leaders must navigate these interpersonal complexities while sustaining constructive professional relationships. Angel contemplated this dilemma:

I try to help students as much as possible to solve their problems. Most of the time, teachers do not agree with me because they say I am justifying what is not allowed in the law.

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

Discussion and Conclusion

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

Leadership Practices and Their Limitations

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

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

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

A particularly significant deficiency lies in the insufficient participation of educators in institution-wide decisions. This exclusionary practice not only adversely impacts the institutional climate but also constrains the implementation of innovative pedagogical methodolo-

gies. As Treviño et al. (2010) posit, when educators do not perceive themselves as integral components of leadership structures, they demonstrate diminished propensity to align their instructional practices with institutional objectives. This systemic issue demands the adoption of leadership paradigms that promote distributed decision-making processes and actively incorporate teachers in policy implementation initiatives.

Theoretical Implications and Leadership Models

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

Through addressing these systemic challenges, educational leadership in Ecuadorian technical schools can

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

Limitations and Future Research

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

To address these constraints, subsequent investigations should encompass a more expansive participant pool to validate our conclusions. Future research must incorporate observational techniques to capture authentic leadership dynamics and their institutional impact. The adoption of diverse methodological strategies, such as mixed-method approaches that combine interviews with observations and documentary analysis, represents an essential next step. Methodological triangulation, as advocated by Yin (2015), would enable researchers to examine leadership practices with greater depth and nuance while enhancing the validity and reliability of their findings. This integrated approach would facilitate a more thorough understanding of the complex interplay between leadership paradigms and institutional contexts within Ecuador's technical education sector.

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Acknowledgements

Special appreciation is extended to this organisation (details omitted for blind version) for their generous backing via their fellowship initiative. This support significantly contributed to the facilitation and progression of research endeavours in underdeveloped re-

gions. Sincere thanks also go to this NGO (details omitted for blind version) for granting entry to their training program, which played a crucial role in the execution of this research. Lastly, it is imperative to acknowledge all the participants who generously shared their time and insights, without whom this research would not have been feasible.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the results or interpretation of the data presented in this work.

Authors Contribution Statement

Authors have made significant contributions to the research and preparation of the manuscript, and each has reviewed and approved the final version for publication.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, informed consent, and responsible handling of information.