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Leading from care: the experiences of Chilean female school principals during the pandemic

Liderar desde el cuidado: experiencias de directoras escolares chilenas durante la pandemia

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Abstract

COVID-19 implied a great challenge for schools as it reorganised learning processes and their functioning, a context in which the role of male and female principals was fundamental. Previously, the literature had reported on characteristics of female leadership such as the incorporation of emotions and the development of more collaborative and supportive environments. This article analyses the actions deployed by female school principals that facilitated the approach to the crisis generated by COVID-19. A case study was carried out in which the experiences of 12 female principals in the capital of Chile were addressed through in-depth interviews. The results show that the principals exercised positive leadership marked by a caring component in the areas of their interactions, their context and their management and administration. It is concluded that these actions allowed them to achieve a balance between individual and collective needs, promoting the well-being of their communities.

Keywords: leadership; women; school; school, education administrator, pandemic.

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Resumen

El COVID-19 implicó un gran desafío para las escuelas en tanto reorganizó los procesos de aprendizaje y su funcionamiento, contexto en el cual el rol de directores y directoras fue fundamental. Previamente la literatura había dado cuenta de características propias del liderazgo femenino tales como la incorporación de las emociones y el desarrollo de entornos más colaborativos y solidarios. Este artículo analiza las acciones desplegadas por directoras escolares que facilitaron el abordaje de la crisis generada por el COVID-19. Se realizó un estudio de caso en el que se abordaron las experiencias de 12 directoras de la capital de Chile a través de entrevistas en profundidad. Los resultados muestran que las directoras ejercieron un liderazgo positivo marcado por un componente de cuidado en los ámbitos de sus interacciones, su contexto y su gestión y administración. Se concluye que dichas acciones permitieron lograr un equilibrio entre las necesidades individuales y colectivas impulsando el bienestar de sus comunidades.
Palabras clave: liderazgo; mujer; escuela, administrador de la educación, pandemia.

Introduction

The COVID pandemic has had a significant impact on education worldwide, which meant that from 2020 onwards, daily life in schools changed drastically, first closing and then moving to a virtual scenario for which there was no preparation (Harris and Jones, 2020; Zhao, 2020). This change implied a reorganisation of learning processes, as well as of all the administrative practices necessary for their functioning (Lucena et al., 2021), generating an educational crisis that occurred precisely at a time when several countries were making efforts to improve their educational quality (Bolívar et al., 2022).

In this moment of crisis, leaders had to act quickly and proactively, while operating very cautiously considering the options, consequences and side effects of the measures taken (Netolicky, 2020). This was also an opportunity to learn from and improve on what education systems were already doing and doing well (Bolívar et al., 2022).

Thus, different types and styles of leadership were used, characterised by caring, adaptive and systemic practices, opening up a series of new questions for the exercise of school leadership (Bolívar et al., 2022). It is in this scenario that distributed, collaborative, creative and responsive leadership and networking became particularly relevant during the pandemic and post-pandemic (Azorín, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020); as well as leadership styles centred on practices that promote care, empathy and concern for others within schools (Brezicha et al., 2015; Louis and Murphy, 2017). This is in addition to attention to the socio-emotional well-being of post-pandemic students (Bolívar et al., 2022).

Chile is not exempt from this reality and the ways of leading have also changed, highlighting the need to simultaneously maintain a coherent long-term vision and a set of effective short-term solutions, along with being able to rebuild relationships within school communities (Montecinos et al., 2020).

For its part, Chilean education has experienced an increase in the presence of women in leadership positions (MINEDUC, 2021). In this context, the present research asks: what actions were taken by female school principals that facilitated addressing the crisis generated by the pandemic, and how do these actions reflect female leadership?

Positive and caring leadership

The role exercised by principals is a key factor in achieving educational success as it empowers and mobilises teachers and the school community (Barber and Mourshed, 2008; Bolívar, 2012, 2019; Leithwood, 2009). Thus, Leithwood (2009) has defined school leadership as the influence exerted on people to mobilise them under one direction and purpose in order to achieve shared goals. Meanwhile, in recent years there has been an increase in research that addresses female leadership from a gender perspective (Cruz-González et al., 2020).

Elements that characterise female leadership include leadership practice that incorporates emotions and aims to be supportive (Blackmore, 2005; Glass and Cook, 2016) and the development of more collaborative environments (Kaiser and Wallace, 2016). This is linked to positive leadership that focuses on members of an educational community feeling affirmed, supported and motivated in their work, but is not limited to this, but has also been shown to be associated with productivity and school climate (Louis and Murphy, 2018). This is critical because the development of the educational community requires the construction of environments that are conducive to learning for both teachers and students (Lee and Louis, 2019; Louis and Murphy, 2017, 2019). In this sense, the role of positive school leadership should focus on developing practices that promote trust, cultivate a sense of organisational justice and contribute to the promotion of the collective good (Louis and Murphy, 2019).

Positive leadership can also function as a driver for transformation insofar as positive actions within an organisation, regardless of the field, improve the happiness and well-being of the professional team (Puertas and Shahar, 2012). At the same time, positive practices have been shown to have effects on effectiveness and improvement at the organisational level, especially when organisations themselves select the criteria for effectiveness, in addition to positive effects at the individual level, such as greater job satisfaction, improved personal well-being and improvements in performance and participation in occupational activities (Cameron et al., 2011).

The origins of positive leadership lie in positive psychology, which has been gaining ground in the field of education, emphasising well-being and creating school environments in which all people can develop to their fullest potential (Louis and Murphy, 2018). Positive psychology emerged as a critique of the discipline for focusing primarily on disorders and dysfunctions, thus seeking to develop a psychology that placed new emphasis on positive aspects, with positivity being a function of: (a) relative preference (preference over something else); (b) sustainability over time; (c) sustainability between people; (d) sustainability between effects; and (e) sustainability between structures (Lomas et al., 2021). The term positive is increasingly used, but remains controversial and further empirical development is required (Cameron et al., 2011).

In this sense, based on a study using narrative synthesis methodology, Louis and Murphy (2018) focused on positive school leadership and developed a categorisation of what people look for in leaders, identifying four categories. The first is positive orientation, which focuses on assets and improving work environments. The second is moral orientation, which refers to leaders being value-driven and seeking to do the right thing. Thirdly, they identified the relationship orientation, defined as one that is based on caring, guidance and support for the development of the organisation's members. Finally,

they identified the stewardship orientation, which refers to leaders' pursuit of individual, group and organisational good, balancing these interests when they are not aligned.

A key element will be the ways in which leaders exert influence and maintain meaningful relationships with others, establishing relationships characterised by value orientation, trust and consistency of character (Louis and Murphy, 2018), with trust being a multidimensional phenomenon, based on people's reciprocity (Louis and Murphy, 2017). Positive leadership can be defined along the following dimensions (Murphy et al., 2017):

1. Strong professional vocation: implies the feeling of being attracted and driven towards a life of service to others and of working for the wider social good.

2. Strong moral framework: the leader has a principled system of right and wrong, is not ambivalent and is guided by issues of fairness and justice.

Focus on character and virtue: positive organisational scholarship is highlighted, including passion, optimism, authenticity, benevolence, respect, transparency, courage and resilience.

4. Focus on the interests of others: they act in the interests of the educational community.

5. Personalised relationships: emphasises the importance of personalism, care, trust and respect in relationships and interactions.

Empowerment and community building: seeking the growth and formation of individuals and groups through learning and empowerment. It comes from an optimistic and asset-based view of human nature and potential.

Among the effects that positive leadership in schools can have, Louis and Murphy (2018) point out that it can improve students' social-emotional learning levels, as well as generate favourable work environments. Such leadership is defined by the following characteristics; firstly, what leaders do is based on authentic knowledge and understanding of their educational community, while paying attention to the well-being of the community. In addition, their actions and behaviour are motivated by supporting and developing people, impacting teachers' work environment, especially in the case of collaborative relationships (Louis and Murphy, 2018).

The exercise of positive leadership will also have beneficial effects on critical variables that mediate the relationship between leadership and school performance such as students' self-esteem, motivation and engagement with their learning, improving the classroom environment and outcomes (Murphy et al., 2017).

Along the same lines, and delving deeper into the "personal relationships" dimension of positive leadership, it is necessary to highlight *caring leadership* practices as leadership that is concerned with relationships and care, noting that the practices that leaders deploy must be consistent with the objectives and understanding of care (Murphy et al., 2017; Smylie et al., 2016). This allows for the development of more supportive communities in which all members of the educational community feel cared for and cared for, generating a shared sense of responsibility for the collective well-being, which translates into a climate of personal security (Murphy et al., 2017; Smylie et al., 2016). Care appears there as a key element for educational improvement, which can be deployed in multiple directions regardless of whether the relationships between its participants are symmetrical or not (Smylie et al., 2016).

This relates to the conceptualisation of the "ethic of care" that has historically linked women to care and responsibility in both its subjective and material dimensions (Molinier and Legarreta, 2016). Care must be considered from a relational perspective in which caregiver and cared-for contribute to the relationship involving emotions and affect (Noddings, 2001). For Gilligan, (2013), women are able to connect reason, emotion and the "I" with social relationships, generating an interdependence with others, which makes them, for example, when faced with conflict, act in a responsible and caring way towards themselves and the collective. However, as the author highlights, this is not due to a natural capacity, but to a social construction of gender that has linked care with "women's morality". For her part, Tronto (2018) goes further by pointing out that rather than linking the ethics of care to female morality, this should be analysed as a social morality, without gender, where care is organised in a more democratic way. This moves care from its secondary and private role to public life, giving it the real value, it has in a society, which implies rethinking the political and economic, along with redefining gender and the value that has historically been attributed to women (Tronto, 1987). The issue of care has taken on even greater relevance after the pandemic and the right to be cared for has been recognised and that this responsibility must be assumed individually and collectively, since caring consists of accompanying and caring practices, but it is also a way of doing things and interacting with others; it is not just a principle that must be complied with, but an attitude that should accompany all relationships between people (Camps, 2021).

In educational institutions, the 'ethic of care' can support the ways in which interpersonal relationships develop, an area in which female leadership has been highlighted as a distinct way of leading schools. Thus, "Caring can aim to promote certain experiential benefits: social, psychological and emotional benefits that come from being in caring relationships and feeling cared for" (Smylie et al., 2016, p. 7). In this sense, it is possible to affirm that women have developed more supportive leadership styles and manage emotions better (Blackmore, 2005). This caring culture in turn generates expectations of female managers, who are expected, for example, to be kinder in their relationships, which can generate a negative image of them when this does not occur, developing a sense that they cannot publicly show their emotions (Blackmore, 2005).

For Soares (2012), care involves three elements; firstly, the "sexual" dimension that refers to the use of the caregiver's body, whether paid or unpaid, through activities that are directly linked to the body of the person being cared for. Secondly, there is the "relational" dimension which refers to the balance in the interaction to achieve communication. Finally, the "emotional" dimension is identified, which requires the management and evaluation of both one's own emotions and those of others.

The care and role of women reflect a situation that has been paradoxical for feminism, because at the same time that women's rationality has been made visible and that they have the same capacities as men to participate in social life, "emotions have been theorised as they destabilise the generalised dichotomies that oppose emotion and reason, body and mind, private and public, nature and culture" (Solana and Vacarezza, 2020, p. 2). (Solana and Vacarezza, 2020, p. 2). However, continuing with the privilege of "masculine categories - self, reason, mind - to the detriment of others considered feminine - emotions, the body, reciprocities -, or maintaining this binary division that distributes the functions of each gender, implies maintaining patriarchy and weakening democracy" (Camps, 2021, p. 2). (Camps, 2021, p. 13). For this reason, feminist theories seek to recover the place of

feelings, recognising that men and other gender identities are also bearers of feelings (Solana and Vacarezza, 2020).

For her part, (Batthyány, 2020) proposes that if care is understood as a right that is collectively assumed in society through, for example, the provision of services that allow for greater autonomy and well-being of families and their members, the challenge of including it as an important part of public policies emerges, which would allow for the development of a feminist agenda of care that transforms gender stereotypes in order to achieve an effective redistribution of care.

Similarly, Camps (2021) proposes the need for a "caring society" in which care is assumed as an unavoidable social and political activity that provides conditions for care and also for caregivers. In this sense, four virtues are required to implement the idea of care as a public value: trust, empathy, flexibility and diligence. For the author, the pandemic made the caring function of schools visible when, from the uncertainty of an unprecedented situation, they had to take charge not only of people's education, but also of their health.

Caring leadership is organised on two levels of understanding, a first level associated with the characteristics that the leader should have, both in his or her practice and in the work of leadership. The leader has a strong impact on collective responsibility and support for learning (Louis et al., 2016), therefore, the leader is characterised by being an authentic and empathetic person, consistent in his or her actions, who cares for others, considers caring "not simply by what the caregiver wants and does, but also by the extent to which the cared-for person perceives that intention and action to be caring" (Smylie et al., 2016, p. 6). In this sense, relationships within the educational community are conceived from symmetry and asymmetry between strata so that mutuality and reciprocity can occur in multiple directions (Smylie et al., 2016).

A second level of understanding is associated with the institutionality of the educational establishment, in the concretisation of care in institutional objectives and values. Embodying these qualities of care in an institutional document or in concrete actions, as well as ensuring their appropriation and support, can help to develop the capacity to care between people, foster close social relationships and generate better organisational conditions (Smylie et al., 2016).

All these elements enhance the development of supportive communities, communities that are transformed into spaces of collaboration, reciprocity, collective work, etc., i.e. capacity for care, reciprocal trust is generated, between the caregiver and the cared-for (Louis and Murphy, 2017).

Methodology

Population and Sample

The research that supports this article worked from a qualitative approach and was exploratory in nature, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in the phenomenon from the perspectives and relationships that the participants themselves generated in their daily lives of leading the educational institution (Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza, 2018). In turn, this research was a case study, which implied a singular and distinctive approach (Stake, 1999), privileging "depth" rather than representativeness within the object of study.

In this research we worked with 12 female principals of educational establishments in the capital of Chile, Santiago. The sample was selected on the basis of: being female and being in charge of school management during the COVID-19 pandemic in primary or secondary schools. Table 1 below presents the female principals, indicating the type of school they lead and its characteristics.

Table 1

Characterisations of principals and the type of schools they lead

Name of director	Type of establishment	Type of Establishment unit	Number of students	Number of teachers
Director 1	Basic education	Municipal Unit	325	20
Director 2	Basic education	Municipal Unit	622	50
Director 3	Basic education	Private Subsidised	892	51
Director 4	Secondary school	Municipal Unit	725	75
Director 5	Basic and secondary education	Municipal Unit	374	30
Director 6	Basic and secondary education	Municipal Unit	458	36
Director 7	Basic education	Municipal Unit	365	28
Director 8	Basic education	Municipal Unit	298	29
Director 9	Basic education	Local Education Service Unit	588	55
Director 10	Basic and secondary education	Private Subsidised	948	50
Director 11	Basic and secondary education	Municipal Unit	397	30
Director 12	Basic and secondary education	Private Subsidised	485	40

Instrument

In-depth interviews were conducted in 2021, using an in-depth interview guideline that was validated by a group of three experts with knowledge of school leadership and gender issues. This validation was focused on ensuring the internal and external coherence of the interview guidelines, according to the theoretical references of the study. The interview schedule focused mainly on two themes: the exercise of leadership and the changes faced

in school management due to the pandemic. Some questions were: how would you define your way of leading; what is your focus in school management; how do you think the pandemic has affected or modified your way of leading; what complexities or obstacles have you noticed in school management during this period?

Data collection and analysis procedure

Interviews with school principals were conducted over the course of two months, each principal gave her consent to participate in the research and the identity of each principal has been protected. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and finally analysed using Atlas ti ® software. Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2002) was used for the analysis. Through grounded theory, emphasis was placed mainly on the common elements present in all the accounts, allowing the study phenomenon to be approached from the deployment of a series of phases of inductive thinking. In this sense, we worked on the basis of open coding guided by the question: How was the leadership exercised by female directors during the pandemic? This made it possible to identify emerging categories that were then related in an axial coding process. Subsequently, the central problem was identified, which led to the emergence of a new question: What are the elements of positive and caring leadership of female principals during the pandemic? This allowed the development of selective coding in which the analysis combined the information emerging from the interviews and the theories linked to positive and caring leadership. Three analytical dimensions were identified: the interactions of the principals, the context they promote, and their management and administration during the pandemic.

Results and discussion

Positive interactions

This category of analysis is defined by the relationship orientation that is mainly linked to caring relationships, trust and respect in interactions. The directors in this study report these virtues in their leadership and how they are able to provide guidance and support for the development of community members (Camps, 2021; Murphy et al., 2017). They have been able to listen and attend to the feelings and needs of the actors in their educational community, as they indicate:

These last two years, which have been quite complex years where you can't come in and make decisions because people's feelings are very sensitive, redundant, feelings: how I feel. I can tell you today that we are going to meet and we are going to work on feedback, to say something, after a class and the teacher may take it as a threat. Nowadays teachers, assistants, students are very sensitive and therefore we have to be very careful (Principal 9).

This means being willing to accompany, be empathetic and build trust:

So, I think that trust today... has of course gone from less to more. Also, I have had to learn to be very empathetic with my fellow teachers, especially in this year and a half of the pandemic, which has not been easy, and to put myself in the shoes of many situations. (Director 11).

Managers demonstrate an ability to understand what is happening to their teams, trusting in their abilities and focusing on the interests of others (Murphy et al., 2017). Along with this, they show interest in the needs of their communities in search of a collective wellbeing that allows them to build caring relationships and to feel cared for (Smylie et al., 2016). This is indicated by the following directors:

(...) whenever you ask them for something, they always say "No, I'm swamped, I don't know when I'm going to do this, it takes me much longer to plan" and clearly, if I understand it, because the teacher has to plan for two sides, that is, you are here in the classroom and you are with the children online, so you have to have two activities; it really requires more time. (Principal 2).

So, in the end it was a bit subsidiary in terms of content, in terms of covering their economic needs because they were given tools, they were given chips; in the end we sort of supplied them, we sort of tried to tell them "you are not alone, we are here", but without the demand for learning, for monitoring. So I think that was the change in perspective of being able to take the school to the home and then worrying little by little, knowing case by case, how much we could demand. (Director 6).

Positive context

This second category of analysis aims to consider the positive relationships within the educational communities that improve relationships and the working environment. This was particularly relevant during the pandemic, as the health situation forced schools to migrate towards virtuality and to generate actions that they had not developed until then. For this area in particular, the actions that the principals promoted in an institutionalised way and the shared decision-making allowed them to strengthen trust and commitment, generating an impact on collective responsibility and support for learning (Louis et al., 2016), as the following principal points out:

I think this stands out in the leadership I have had, especially in times of pandemic. Why? Because we have taken decisions as a management team. From the simplest things: school activities, the chronogram with the activities; what we are going to celebrate and what we are not going to celebrate, what we are going to complement, when we went little by little... in other words, I made them part of the decisions, first of all in the planning of any activity, however small or big. I felt that they became part of the project or activity, whether it was a big project or a small activity; they became part of it. And they also took responsibility for the results and that had a positive impact, because if we were doing badly, we were all doing badly. And if we did well, it was a joy for everyone (Director 9).

Positively oriented leadership and an institutional framework with clear objectives, which considers care, from caring intentions and actions (Smylie et al., 2016), will enhance the development of supportive, empathetic communities, as indicated by the following principal:

But what we proposed was that the school had to reach the home and not only the school in terms of subjects: we had motivational workshops, yoga workshops, socio-emotional workshops. That hit the community hard, the students we attended were very bad because there was a lot of

overcrowding, a lot of domestic violence. So in the end we had to take in, try to reach them with the school, try to reach them with food, because there was no food in the schools (Director 6).

In this way, it is evident that during the pandemic, head teachers deployed care actions that were not necessarily present in schools on a daily basis. The challenge in this context was to generate activities to keep students in contact with the school, even when this meant reducing certain curriculum content. In addition, confinement exacerbated the students' situation of vulnerability, so special attention was paid to the support that the school could generate in this context for both its students and their families.

This ability to lead by considering what happens to others, from a relational perspective between the person who cares and is cared for (Noddings, 2001), leads us to advance in the construction of communities, learning with others and collaborative relationships (Louis and Murphy, 2018) that brought students and families closer to the schools. This was also reflected in the relationships between teachers, where new needs emerged, for example with regard to the knowledge needed to conduct virtual classes, as expressed by a head teacher in the following account:

So the teachers who were more technologically competent supported the teachers without any criticism, without any judgement. They gave a lot of support to the teachers who did not have these technical competences, including me, the headmistress, in making us all level up equally in a certain degree of technological competence. A very nice communion of agreements was formed, of help, so I think that this strengthened us (Principal 6).

Undoubtedly, these gestures enabled empowerment and community building through peer learning and empowerment (Murphy et al., 2017). In this context, communities fostered concern for others and care for each other, generating reciprocal trust (Louis and Murphy, 2017), especially when there was coherence and consistency in what the leader said and did (Louis et al., 2016). As the principal below indicates:

We have tried, and this has been a very hard job, to always keep colleagues informed of what is happening, of the decisions that are being taken, and we try to make decisions transparent in order to try to lower tensions, basically, so that nobody thinks something wrong. (Director 7).

Thus, during the pandemic, care actions were deployed in response to this exceptional context, such as attention to the socio-emotional health of students and their families in order to provide support and keep them in contact with the school, collaboration between school professionals to acquire new technological tools, and attention to information flows and the collectivisation of decisions to facilitate work in a health emergency context.

Positive management and administration

This category of analysis is defined by the leader's ability to organise the team between individual and collective demands and interests, balancing these interests when they are not aligned (Louis and Murphy, 2018) to deliver community well-being. In this context, one example was the challenges of learning to conduct virtual classes for teachers, who did not have all the knowledge to take on this challenge. The directors of this study respected the time of each professional and gave them the confidence to carry out the classes. This is indicated in the following account:

"Oh, yes", the history teacher said to me today, but "Can I start only with the eighth grade", "Yes, start with the eighth grade and we will be there to help you". In the way I give the teacher the confidence to deliver or to be this learning guide with his students, but with the methodology he considers most convenient for his group of students'... He thinks that they were like burning stages, because those who never wanted to do a virtual class ended up doing all virtual classes. But there was respect for each person's time. Some took longer and others took less time. (Director 9).

A similar situation occurs with seeking care for the community; the head teachers made pedagogical decisions that allowed them to prioritise the care of their students, more than just advancing in disciplinary content; there was flexibility and diligence (Camps, 2021) when thinking about the well-being of the community. This is how the following headmistress describes it:

I think that this is like the most important practice to privilege the wellbeing of the students. In fact, in the class where I have more student participation today is in the guidance class, they like it more because in guidance classes they talk about their things, the teachers ask them how they feel and the truth is that I prefer to have left some subjects aside and have privileged guidance hours because I think it has been more important than the other (cognitive), just as in the containment it was also important. (Principal 2).

In this sense, the focus of the leadership that characterised the principals was the care and well-being of the community, for the construction of environments conducive to learning for both teachers and students (Lee and Louis, 2019; Louis and Murphy, 2017, 2019). Therefore, the principals took special care to relate to the students behind the scenes, empathising and showing interest in each other's reality (Murphy et al., 2017). This is indicated by the following account:

When we talked to them and insisted that they turn on the camera and that they were in class, they started telling you all these things: "No, auntie, how am I going to turn on the camera. My dad is drunk, he's lying drunk in bed. My mum has a black eye. The house is dirty, messy. "Then you realise that everything they go through is so heartbreaking and it affects them because they are not happy. And if they are not happy, if they don't come to class emotionally balanced, no matter what you do, you are not going to achieve anything. So this year we have proposed, quite a lot as a focus, social-emotional development. First of all, to recognise their emotions and what was happening to them (Director 6).

It is reflected that, for the directors of this study, the responsibility to care is assumed as a collective task, as a way of doing things and interacting with other members of the community, an attitude that should accompany all relationships between people (Camps, 2021).

Conclusions

This article aims to contribute to the reflection on the characteristics of the leadership exercised by school principals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and to contribute to the discussion on the type of leadership exercised by school principals in their educational communities during that period. By way of conclusion, we present the

following scheme that allows us to understand the leadership exercised by the school principals in this study during the pandemic.

Figure 1. Female leadership during the pandemic.

The above diagram allows us to conclude that, during the pandemic, the principals in this study were characterised by leadership with a strong component of care and what has been called positive leadership, configuring a type of leadership "from and for care". The principals in this study led during the pandemic "from care" in that they sought to generate relationships of affection, trust and listening, paying special attention to what their teams, students and families were feeling and what the educational community needed. This allowed them to exercise leadership "for care" in which their management and administrative practices were focused on the well-being of the educational community inside and outside the school.

Leadership "from and for care" is built from interpersonal relationships - individual aspects in the construction of relationships within educational communities - to aspects involving the administration and management of the educational institution. In this way, head teachers build a "positive synergy" between the different areas involved in school leadership, namely: personal characteristics - the context or environment generated in the educational community and school management as such. All of these areas develop as the needs of the pandemic context require, highlighting the ways in which the principals adapt to it.

On the other hand, we can conclude that the leadership of the principals in this study was strongly permeated by caring practices within the work teams, and by the construction of a climate of trust within the framework of the relationships that are established in the school communities and that allow for the well-being of the communities. These elements are consistent with the characteristics that have been associated with female leadership (Blackmore, 2005; Glass and Cook, 2016; Kaiser and Wallace, 2016), characteristics that became particularly relevant during the pandemic, and which showed that leadership in which care is exercised as a public value through trust, empathy, flexibility and diligence (Camps, 2021) were key.

In addition, the need to seek the right balance between individual and collective needs is a permanent theme in their stories, being an articulating axis of the exercise of leadership in pandemics to place the welfare of the community, i.e. the collective needs and interests over individual interests, permanently promoting positive management or administration, which is oriented towards care as a community value.

Finally, it should be noted that, as a case study, this research does not aim to generalise, but rather to provide an exploratory look at the leadership of school principals in pandemics. It is intended to inform future discussions on how the exercise of positive leadership with a focus on care is relevant to the well-being of educational communities.

Funding

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