What is quality leadership in higher education? A case study of a Latvian institution

¿Qué es el liderazgo de calidad en la enseñanza superior? Estudio de caso de una institución de Letonia

Dr.paed. Manuel Joaquín Fernández González
senior researcher, manuels.fernandezs@lu.lv (corresponding author)

Mg.paed. Laimīte Seņkāne Soste
lsenkane@gmail.com
Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, University of Latvia

ABSTRACT

Researchers who wish to improve the quality and effectiveness of education have found it useful to focus their studies on educational leadership. The objective of this study was to investigate the way educational leadership was understood and implemented in a high-quality institution of higher education in Latvia ten years ago, as a baseline for comparison with current situation. Based on the reference frame proposed by S. Gento Palacios for research on educational leadership (Gento Palacios, 2002), a study with a parallel mixed-method design using questionnaires and interviews was conducted at the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences of the University of Latvia. The research question was: which are the characteristics and strategies of educational leadership used inside this institution?

The results indicated that, when striving for professional excellence, effective educational leadership can include emotional challenges that can be profitable within the context of institutional and social wellbeing, based on mutual trust and confidence. The discussion underlines the specificity of the findings in comparison with similar research in other European countries.

Keywords: "Educational leadership", "higher education", "Latvia", "post-Soviet", "leadership emotions".

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RESUMEN

Los investigadores que desean mejorar la calidad y la eficacia de la educación han considerado útil centrar sus estudios en el liderazgo educativo. El objetivo de este estudio es investigar la forma en que se entendía e implementaba el liderazgo educativo en una institución de enseñanza superior de alta calidad en Letonia hace diez años, como punto de partida para la comparación con la situación actual. Basándose en el marco de referencia propuesto por S. Gento Palacios para la investigación sobre el liderazgo educativo (Gento Palacios, 2002), se realizó un estudio con un diseño paralelo de métodos mixtos utilizando cuestionarios y entrevistas en el Instituto de Ciencias Pedagógicas de la Universidad de Letonia. La pregunta de investigación fue: ¿cuáles son las características y estrategias de liderazgo educativo utilizadas dentro de esta institución? Los resultados indican que, en la búsqueda de la excelencia profesional, el liderazgo educativo eficaz puede incluir desafíos emocionales que pueden ser provechosos en un contexto de bienestar institucional y social, basado en la confianza mutua. La discusión subraya la especificidad de los resultados en comparación con investigaciones similares realizadas en otros países europeos.

Palabras clave: "Liderazgo educativo", "educación superior", "Letonia", "postsoviético", "liderazgo emocional".

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays concerns about quality of education are still topical for policymakers and educators around the world. The economic crisis in 2008 raised awareness of the necessity to coordinate efforts on all levels (supranational, national, and institutional) to improve the quality of education and to act with social responsibility when using public assets allocated to educational activities (Tooms & Boske, 2010).

In order to promote better knowledge of what quality of education is and how it can be improved, research on educational leadership is a relevant task for academics of the third millennium (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Young, Crow, Murphy & Ogawa, 2009) because it is one of the main aspects of the educational process. Educational leadership appears inextricably linked to education quality and plays a fundamental role as a predictor of the quality of an educational institution. As S. Gento Palacios and R. González put it, "the main concern of [educational] leadership should be the promotion of the potentialities of all the members of the institution, oriented to provide a high-quality education, preferably within the approach of total quality" (Gento Palacios & González, 2012:8).

The enlargement of the European Higher Education Area opened up new possibilities for researching innovative and successful ways of understanding and implementing educational leadership and quality of education in post-Soviet countries (Michalak, 2008). In fact, there are some general studies about the forces involved in the transition in post-Soviet Eastern Europe in general (Anchan, Fullan & Polyzoi, 2003; Heyneman, 2010), corruption in higher education in the former Soviet Union (Osipian, 2009), and about intercultural education in post-Soviet countries (Bleszynska, 2013). There are also studies that focus on post-Soviet transition processes in education in specific countries such as Poland (Michalak, 2008), Ukraine (Kutsyuruba, 2011) or the Republic of Belarus (Strazhau & Kostjukevich, 2007), but there is almost no research about educational leadership in the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).

This study aims to contribute to filling these gaps in the scientific literature by integrating the perceptions of teachers, students, and researchers in order to analyse the features of educational leadership in a higher education institution in a post-Soviet context (Latvia) using mixed-methods (interviews and questionnaires). These features were evaluated through two different lenses: the 'importance given to' and the 'evidence found for' in the institution. This double perspective was useful for investigating the research question more accurately since it allowed grasping the difference between the participants' expectations (importance) and the reality they perceived (evidence).

Higher education in Latvia

Some background information about higher education in Latvia can be useful in order to place this study in context (see also https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/higher-education).

Latvia is a full-fledged participant of the European Higher Education Area. The majority of Bologna Process reforms have been successfully implemented (three-cycle degree system, Diploma Supplement, ECTS, internal quality assurance systems etc.). In the study year 2011/2012 there were 97,035 students, 3,376 pedagogical staff, 56 accredited educational institutions and 890 programmes. The number of students in basic studies (Bachelor, trade schools) was 79,285, while 15,227 students were enrolled in a Master programme and 2,523 in Doctoral studies. The number of foreign students in Latvia over the past 6 years has almost doubled. They come from 74 countries (48% from the EU), and its share in 2011 was 2.9% of the total number of students. The modernisation process of university administrations seeks to strengthen the autonomy of higher education institutions (legal status, funding), to increase their international competitiveness (a new, stricter higher education accreditation and quality management model, ensured by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education), and to ensure efficient use of resources in the best institutions (consolidation process for reducing the number of universities and increasing their capacity). A regulatory framework has been prepared in order to attract foreign academic staff and students in the future (joint study programs, joint degrees, scholarships to foreign students).

How does the 'post-Soviet' culture influence educational leadership 25 years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe? In spite of the efforts of policy makers described in the previous paragraph, the introduction of an educational model that is based on the ideals of democracy in post-Soviet Latvia faces still a number of difficulties. One of these difficulties is that a totalitarian ideology remains partly present in the consciousness of policy makers themselves, as well as in educational leaders and teachers (Rubene, Geikina, Svece, Vanaga, Garjāne, Kuzmenko & Līduma, 2008). For instance, the results of the study "Teachers' Tolerance Barometer", completed in 2007, showed a comparatively high indicator of authoritarianism among teachers in Latvia; most teachers also believe that they do not need additional knowledge in intercultural education (Austers, Golubeva & Strode, 2007).

In this context, the objective of this study was to investigate the way educational leadership was understood and implemented in a high-quality institution of higher education in Latvia ten years ago, as a baseline for comparison with current situation. The research question was: which are the characteristics and strategies of educational leadership used inside this institution?

The theoretical framework of the study

Educational leadership studies cover a wide range of topics. Some of them are more general, presenting different theoretical models of educational leadership (Bush, 2010, Palestini, 2012), or focusing on the Europeanization of educational leadership (Clarke & Wildy, 2009; Nicolaidou, 2008). Other studies are rather concerned with

more concrete governance and management issues (Moos, 2009), the relation to poli-cymakers (Wright, 2001) and sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). While some scholars analyse teachers' leadership in communities of practice (Farr, 2010; Ismi, 2011), other studies are 'student centred', focusing on leadership for learning (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2010), inclusive education (Capper & Frattura, 2009), or trans-formative leadership (Oord, 2013). The emotional aspect of educational leadership has been mainly studied from the perspective of teachers, claiming that leadership be-gins with the 'character' of teachers, including emotional and moral capacities (Green-field & Ribbins, 1993). The relation between teachers' emotional intelligence and leadership style has also been stressed (Medina Domínguez, 2013). Research has also explored the perceptions of students and teachers of the importance of pedagogical leadership (e.g., González-Fernández, et al., 2020; González-Fernández et al., 2021). However, there is still little research on the emotional dimension of educational lead-ership that considers and integrates the perceptions of students and teachers.

In spite of the wide range of topics covered, a study (Sugrue & MacRuairc, 2013) that sought to identify dominant and recurring foci of scientific papers on educational leadership during 2002-2012, revealed that only 1% of the abstracts analysed focused on students' leadership, only 16% used in-depth mixed-methods in their research, and only 2% focused on higher education. A deeper insight into the way educational leadership is understood and implemented in the best institutions of higher education around the world is an important contribution to the task of scientifically defining what quality of education is.

This study was conducted in the frame of a wider inquiry leaded by the research group "Pedagogical Leadership and Quality of Education" at Spain's *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* (UNED), coordinated by S. Gento Palacios (see www. leadquaed.com). The theoretical framework of this inquiry (Gento Palacios, 2002), which was used in this study, was considered by the authors as appropriate, because of its attention to a wide range of dimensions of educational leadership, especially the relational and emotional ones. S. Gento Palacios's model was designed to be applied in educational institutions and tested with professionals of the educational field. It has been improved continuously since its first version appeared in 1996, contrasting theo-retical reflexion with the work of professionals and practitioners. In the proposed ref-erence framework, a pedagogical leader is defined as the person (or group of people) with the ability to enhance other persons' agency for attaining in a most effective and comfortable way their personal, social, and professional goals. According to this con-ception, educational leadership is characterized by the following eight dimensions: *charismatic, emotional, anticipatory, professional, participatory, cultural, formative,* and *administrative.*

As there are far too many dimensions within this theoretical frame for one single article, the decision was made to focus on the leadership aspects that will emerge as most relevant from the analysis of the interviews and to look then at these aspects

more widely analysing the questionnaires. We tried to grasp which were the institution's main priorities, where they originated, how they were shared by members of the institution, and how they were implemented in practice.

METHODOLOGY

The main research question of the study was: which are the characteristics and strategies of educational leadership used inside this institution? During the data analysis and interpretation of the results More concrete questions were formulated: What is most important in the institution —the emotional wellbeing of students and staff or reaching the expected learning outcomes and research goals? Whose interests —the individual, institution or external— define the direction of the work of this institution?

To address these issues, a study was conducted at the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences (IPS), a structural unit of the Faculty of Education and Psychology of the University of Latvia, from September 2012 to February 2013. The IPS was founded in 2007. The academic staff at the time of the study included the head of the Institute, 6 researchers and 10 teachers. In the field of education, the IPS was involved in realization of doctoral programme in pedagogy, interuniversity master's programme "Educational Treatment of Diversity" and doctoral school "Human Capacity and Life-wide Learning in Inclusive Contexts of Diversity". Around 30 Master's and 12 doctoral students were conducting research under the guidance of the academic staff, and participated in the research process, acquiring specific research capabilities. The Institute's academic staff and students were also involved in many international and national projects, such as the international research networks of Asia-Europe Meeting, ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning, Europe-America research network of Educational Treatment of Diversity and international research group "Pedagogical Leadership and Quality of Education". The Institute cooperated in the fields of education and scientific research with several Latvian and international higher education institutions.

The IPS is recognized nationally and internationally as a high-quality institution promoting excellence in pedagogical research and offering an innovative and flexible study environment for Master's and doctoral students. International and national experts from academic and professional associations and trade and student unions, who were involved in the nation-wide project "Evaluation of higher education study programmes and proposals for quality improvement", carried out by the Latvian Council of Higher Education from May 2011 to April 2013 (Council of Higher Education, 2012), emphasized in their Joint Report that the education provided at the IPS conformed to the best practices of Master's and doctoral programmes in Latvia, and is sustainable and exportable (Council of Higher Education, 2013:138).

Design and chronology of the study

The study had a parallel mixed-method design, combining qualitative and quantitative methods —i.e., survey and interviews. Mixed methods (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012) allowed combining the high reliability of scientifically validated quantitative research instruments with the interpretative phenomenological approach, where participants construct and provide meanings based on self-perceptions of their interaction with the institution through different practices (research, studies, direction).

In September 2012 the research tools (questionnaire and guidelines for interviews) were chosen, adapted and piloted. In December 2012 data collection started (questionnaires and interviews in parallel). Data analysis, interpretation, and discussion of results with participants were carried out in January–March 2013.

Description of the research instruments

The questionnaire used in this study ("questionnaire on educational leadership in educational institutions" —176 items) was elaborated under the direction of S. Gento Palacios in 2002 (Gento Palacios, 2002) and updated in the Fall of 2012 by the research group "Pedagogical Leadership and Quality of Education" at Spain's university UNED, which also translated into English and piloted the questionnaire for usage in international studies such as the present one. The questionnaire addresses the eight dimensions of educational leadership and contains 80 indicators (ten features or characteristics for each leadership dimension). For this study an online version of this questionnaire was set up using *Google Forms* to improve reliability, minimizing errors in data transcription. During the elaboration and validation of this online questionnaire, different versions were piloted and the best one was retained for the study. As mentioned in the introduction, the participants were asked to evaluate each item of questionnaire on a nine-point Likert scale through different lenses: the 'importance given to' and the 'evidence found for' in the institution, in order to grasp better the difference between the participants' expectations (importance) and the reality they perceived (evidence). For example, when evaluating the *formative* dimension, participants evaluated first the overall "importance" given in the institution to this dimension and the "evidence" found for it, and then they evaluated in the same way the ten indicators of this dimension, such as *commitment to own training, fostering collaborators' training, supply of training materials (books, documents, etc.), facilitation of inter professional interchanges*, etc.

The guidelines for the semi-structured interviews were provided in the aforementioned reference frame (Gento Palacios, 2002). The topics of the interviews were mainly related to the eight leadership dimensions (charismatic, emotional, anticipatory etc.). The interview will attempt to show strengths and weaknesses, expectations and realities of these leadership dimensions in the institution and to describe relevant situations.

Participants

As mentioned above, this study focused on the IPS of the University of Latvia. One representative from each group of the IPS was interviewed (student, researcher, teacher, and the director) in order to enrich the study with different points of view. For the choice of the participants the following criteria were used: representativeness (director), years of experience in the institution (two for the Master's student, six for the researcher, who was co-founder of the institute, and five for the teacher), good knowledge of the study programs offered in the institution and of the pedagogical processes (the chosen teacher was also study program manager, was well acquainted with most of the students, and had a deep insight into the pedagogical work in the institution), and the ability to speak English fluently, which helped to avoid translation bias. The average time of each interview was 30 minutes, and they were recorded in audio and/or video format.

Regarding the survey, 15 answers to the questionnaire on educational leadership were recorded. The participants belonged to different groups of the IPS: students (N = 8), researchers (N = 3), teachers (N = 3), and the director. All had direct knowledge of the IPS as they had been working or studying in this institution for at least one full year, and often more than 3 years. In spite of the relatively small number of questionnaires and interviews, the sample is representative for the IPS as a whole, considering the overall numbers of students, researchers and teachers in the IPS.

Data processing, coding, and analysis

Interviews were transcribed and imported into the AQUAD_6 software package for qualitative data processing. Interview coding was also done by two researchers working simultaneously: researchers read the transcriptions, looked for units of meaning (phrases and short paragraphs) that expressed the importance of and evidence for the different aspects of educational leadership, and coded them. The system of codes was partly provided by the reference frame of the study and partly developed from the new relevant topics that emerged in participants' answers. During the coding process the researchers were aware that "qualitative analysis has something to do with the 'quality' [understood as value judgment] of events and states captured in our data. Therefore, our codes... have to inform also about their quality – or expressed bluntly: Were these events good or bad?" (Huber & Gürtler, 2004:90). So, additionally, each unit of meaning was evaluated as positive (+) or negative (–), according to the sense given by the participant during the interview.

For quantitative data processing, the data obtained from the online survey were downloaded into an Excel file from the *Google Form*. After preliminary data cleaning, which was done by two researchers working simultaneously to enhance the reliability of the process, data were imported into the SPSS_19 software package for further analysis.

The methods used for qualitative data analysis with the AQUAD_6 software package were frequency analysis, cross table analysis, and linkage analysis. The methods used for the quantitative data analysis with the SPSS_19 software package were reliability analysis (Cronbach's α), frequency analysis, cross table analysis, and paired sample *t* test. In order to improve the reliability of the interpretation of the results, the preliminary results of this study were made available to all the students, teachers, and researchers of the institution through a *Google Docs* document uploaded to the IPS's Moodle platform. They were asked to make comments and/or to answer the researchers' or other participants' questions. Some of their contributions were used to interpret the results. The participants were asked also to express any concern about research ethics.

Ethical issues

A preliminary oral explanation was given to participants in the interviews about the way their answers will be used. Once the draft of the article was ready, and before uploading it on the IPS's platform, it was sent to each one personally, with the request to express any personal concerns or to suggest any changes. An explanation on the exclusive use of the data for the purposes of the study was given also at the beginning of the online questionnaire. In order to protect the participants' anonymity, the survey was carried out in such a way as to make it practically impossible to trace the identity of the participant. Even if some of them chose to reveal it, their identity was not diffused. The names of the participants to the interviews were omitted in all the versions of the article.

RESULTS

In this section we present first the qualitative results obtained from the interviews and then the quantitative results obtained from the questionnaires. At the end we present a short summary of the results based on the integration of qualitative and quantitative data as an introduction to the discussion section.

Results of the analysis of interviews

During the interviews the participants were asked to describe how they perceived the different dimensions of educational leadership, and secondarily, to make reference to different aspects of the quality of education in the institution. The analysis was done in two steps: (1) a frequency analysis (F) of the units of meaning that were found in the interviews; and (2) an analysis of linkages that sought to reveal inner linkages between the units of meaning and to unfold latent structures of meaning in the participants' accounts.

Frequency analysis

A total of 217 units of meaning regarding the importance (F = 61) and evidence (F = 156) of the educational leadership dimensions were found and coded as good (+) or bad (–), according to the evaluation made by the participants. The results of the frequency analysis are presented in Table 1 and, following an interpretative phenomenological approach, commented using citations from participants.

[Table 1 over here]

The frequency analysis showed that the *participatory dimension* of educational leadership was the most frequently mentioned as being important (F = 18, 30%) and present (F = 32, 21%) in the institution. As the director of the institution put it, "*participatory dimension is extremely important. It is an active participation, where everyone is aware of the work of the team and is always involved in it. In the team each one should be able to replace or to be replaced by another person*". The student commented: "*I can say that the strongest point in this university is this democracy, that here* [teachers] *do not just use their theory, but they let you choose what is important for you, what you want, and this is important*". However, it is interesting to note that a number of units of meaning that expressed difficulties in the participation processes were also found in the data (F = 13, 8%). Commenting this point, the researcher stated that "*we are involving Master's students and doctoral students in data collecting, processing and analysis... but they are often changing, it is not always a stable participatory process*".

The *professional dimension* of educational leadership was the second most mentioned (importance: F = 13, 21%; evidence: F = 23, 15%), with a clear focus on the 'seriousness' and international scope of the institute. For example, the student commented: "*my teachers... are absolutely leaders and I want to follow them. I can see that they are so deep inside their knowledge and so deep in what they are doing... this is a big pleasure!*"; the researcher stressed "*the international dimension,... that is the first thing: we meet an international audience, and we are one of the rare cases where we have research members in all five ASEM research networks* [refers to the Asia-Europe Meeting – ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning], *and all five are from this Institute*". In the opinion of the director of the institute, this professionalism and international projection of the institute "*make the institution itself charismatic, attractive... this is an original, charismatic institution*".

During the analysis of the *emotional dimension*, the interviews revealed the existence of regular emotional challenges in different fields. The situation "*can vary from the most comfortable and marvellous situations to somehow emotionally uncomfortable situations*" (teacher). As regards the learning process, "*well in general at the beginning, there was panic... I was completely shocked about what was going on*" (student); "*During the learning process the emotions sometimes explode... by moments the situation is quite unpleasant*" (teacher). Speaking about the relation between

managerial problems and emotional wellbeing, the researched said: "*I think that nobody is satisfied about these external aspects*"; also the director recognised that "*the administrative dimension is the weakest in the Institute*" (director). The instability of the workplace appeared also to be impacting negatively personal wellbeing (F = 5): as the teacher put it, "*for improving both researchers' and teachers' wellbeing, it would be necessary to reduce the anxiety that you do not know if in one or two months you will be still working or not working anymore here*". These emotional challenges are sometimes perceived as an obstacle (F = 7), but more often as an impulse to work better (F = 10): "*It is hard to say whether satisfaction is the process driver, because, if I'm satisfied, I can think that it is time to stop and I will not wish to do anything more. Short breaks are necessary. But something starts to happen and we change only when we are a little unsatisfied*" (director). The role of these emotional crises will be one of the main points of discussion of this study.

Linkage analysis

When participants spoke about a concrete dimension of educational leadership, they spontaneously made reference ('linked') to other dimensions. The analysis of these inner linkages revealed the latent structures of meaning implicit in participants' accounts, and made it possible to understand better which role and importance each dimension had for them.

The analysis of the linkages revealed that the *participatory* dimension of educational leadership was often mentioned spontaneously when a participant spoke about the other dimensions (for example, 11 linkages with the *emotional* dimension, 7 with the *anticipatory* dimension and 6 with the *professional* dimension were found); this finding can be understood to mean that this *participatory* dimension was perceived as an appropriate background or context for developing the other leadership dimensions. Commenting this point, the researcher stated that "*there is a team of researchers;... difficulties do not affect the team of researchers. Moreover, we have such a good team, that we are helping each other also outside of the institution*".

Summarizing the results obtained from the analysis of interviews, the *participatory* dimension had a predominant importance and evidence in the participants' accounts, together with the *professional* dimension. The importance of and evidence for the *emotional* dimension of leadership was ambiguously valuated in the interviews: personal emotional challenges appear together with satisfaction with the social environment of the institution. These results will be examined in light of the results of the analysis of quantitative data obtained from questionnaires.

Results from the questionnaire on educational leadership

The reliability analysis for the questionnaire on educational leadership showed a very high reliability for the set of answers (Cronbach's ⍺ = 0.993). As was mentioned earlier, in this article we reduced the items covered, and we concentrated on the dimensions relating to emotional and professional aspects that appeared as most relevant in the interviews; we considered it to be worthwhile to explore this area on its own as it offers an unusual entry point into educational leadership issues. This approach also made it easier to integrate qualitative and quantitative findings. However, to facilitate comparison, in the tables we present the results for the other dimensions as well.

In this section we present first the results concerning the main dimensions of pedagogical leadership, and then a deeper analysis of their main features (indicators). In general, the overall importance given to leadership dimensions was notably higher (M = 7.76) than the evidence for them (M = 7.16) (see Table 2). The paired sample t test indicated that this difference was statistically significant (t (19) = 4.13, p = 0.01, d = 0.92). The effect size (d) was very high, according to L. Cohen (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This gap between the 'importance given to' and the 'evidence found for' could indicate a certain level of dissatisfaction at the institution.

The results indicated that the *professional dimension* of educational leadership was the most important and evident in the institution (see Table 2). The *emotional* dimension was as important as the *professional dimension* (M = 8.00, SD = 1.13), but its evidence was ranked lower (4th out of 8, M = 7.53, SD = 1.13). This ambiguity appeared also in interviews. The *administrative dimension's* rank was the lowest in importance and evidence, as in the interviews, where the administrative dimension appeared as the weakest.

[Table 2 over here]

As regards the most relevant features (indicators) of educational leadership (see Table 3), two indicators of the professional dimension appear in the first place in importance (*use of appropriated methodology*) and evidence (*use of appropriated evaluation*). Several highly ranked indicators of educational leadership were related with the socio-emotional environment in the institution: *recognition of collaborators' professional value* (importance: 2nd out of 80; evidence: 4th/80), *enhancement of positive interactive atmosphere* (evidence: 3rd/80) and *promotion of collaborators' team working* (importance: 5th/80). These quantitative findings confirm the opinions reflected in the interviews regarding the importance given to professional and socio-emotional dimensions.

[Table 3 over here]

Summarizing the results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire, two main aspects can be underscored: (1) the *professional dimension* of educational leadership was the most highly ranked in importance and evidence, as were several of its fea-

tures; and (2) the institution's social environment was highly ranked (*positive atmosphere of interpersonal relationship*, *participatory dimension*).

The overall results of this study, integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, indicate that in the IPS:

– The professionalism comes first. This feature makes the institution attractive, more than the teachers' and staff's personal charisma does.
– Students' and staff's emotional satisfaction is mainly related to social wellbeing that includes the sense of belonging to a learning community. However, at the IPS emotional satisfaction is not the first priority: leadership for learning includes some moments of emotional challenges or discomfort.
– A central dimension of educational leadership is the *participatory* dimension: it is the context in which other leadership dimensions (emotional, professional, formative, etc.) can develop.
– Administrative and managerial aspects are not considered to be a priority.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section is organized around two main topics that emerged from the comparison of the results of this study with the scientific literature. The first is the relation between educational leadership and learning. The second is the relation between educational leadership, participation, and wellbeing.

Leadership and learning

As already mentioned, the institution analysed in this study is attractive because it puts professionalism first. But professionalism is understood as a learning process, not just as a result; and educational leadership is primarily *for learning*, not for managing. This finding is congruent with recent leadership studies in education, in particular those analysing the relationship between pedagogical leadership and the teaching—learning processes during COVID-19 times (Álvarez-Arregui et al., 2021). Previous research has also addressed this topic. For example, speaking about the process of the Europeanization of education, S. Clarke and H. Wildy stated that in Europe, "the interdependence of leadership and learning, at least in the rhetoric of educational policy, seems to have been recognised" (Clarke & Wildy, 2009:354). Moreover, research has presented academic leadership as a 'self-designed' lifelong learning process (Ismi, 2011): leadership itself *is* learning.

This study revealed that leadership for learning and as learning can include some moments of emotional crisis. In this institution, students' and staff's emotional satisfaction is not considered to be the most important aspect of quality of education, but

rather a collateral consequence of seeking for professional development and excellence. And this could imply going through learning periods of personal or relational challenges and discomfort. Lifelong learning processes are not exempted from periods of instability and emotional risk that, if well managed, allow reaching a greater personal and professional development (Antes & Mumford, 2012). Research has enlightened also the positive role emotional crises can have to enhance the individual's agency in constructing his or her academic identity inside a community of practice (Ismi, 2011).

The appearance of challenges in learning processes can be not just an 'unavoidable eventuality' but a concrete 'planned strategy', as seems to be the case in this institution. Studies on management and leadership showed that a balanced positive-negative strategy resulted in higher quality solutions and more viable visions than an exclusively positive strategy that focuses mainly on positive outcomes and means for attaining success (Antes & Mumford, 2012). In higher education settings, creating relatively uncomfortable situations can be a pedagogical way of enhancing students' and teachers' reflection and meaning-making. L. Moos (2009) called this kind of non-directive strategy 'soft leadership', understood as a pedagogical approach that influences the way people think, and helps students and teachers 'make sense' of the educational processes. Ironically, 'soft leadership' effects are more profound and 'harder' than those of a more directive or 'hard leadership'.

Intentionally provoking a controlled emotional dissatisfaction comports certain risks: losing motivation, mental fatigue, burn-out syndrome etc. However, tolerance for risk-taking was found to exert positive effects on innovative performance, if accompanied by appropriate support (Alpkan, Bulut, Gunday, Ulusoy, & Kilic, 2010). In educational and research environments, taking the risk of provoking a certain level of emotional dissatisfaction among students or staff could help to enhance their creativity and innovation skills for facing new problems. As one of the participants in this study put it, "*creativity, concerning the functions to assume and the way of solving problems and improving uncomfortable situations, is very important, and I think we are very creative here*" (researcher).

This aspect of leadership, leadership as learning and for learning through emotional challenges that enhance proactive thinking and creativity is related to recent research on the affective dimension of teachers' pedagogical leadership (Gento Palacios et al., 2020). It is also related with the second topic of this discussion. Leadership learning happens in communities of learning that promote their own educational quality through participatory learning processes.

Leadership, participation and wellbeing

The results of this study indicate that in this institution the *participatory* dimension of educational leadership is most important. Participation is the context in which the

other leadership dimensions (emotional, professional, formative etc.) develop. This finding confirms the views of a number of authors who see leadership learning as a process of participation and interrelation that leads to personal and social wellbeing (Gento Palacios, 2002), a collaborative and critical process (Oord, 2013), and a form of participation and interaction within specific socio-cultural settings (Wenger, 1998; Engestrom, 2001). In this context, educational leadership appears as the ability of creating, organizing and taking advantage of opportunities for participation and collaboration, by empowering students and staff with a bigger autonomy and self-governance, rather than in the capacity of organizing their teaching-learning work.

However, participation is based on shared interests. In order to foster participation, the educational leader's guidance is crucial for learning how to combine personal and institutional interests. In this study teachers and researchers appear to be personally interested and involved in their work, in spite of material constraints and time shortage. Also in leadership literature the educational leader's ability of combining his/her own personal interests with the mission and needs of the institution appears as a key point in his/her role model function: "instead of looking at an academic leader as a passive participant… academic leadership identity involves the dynamic [active and reciprocal] interaction between individual projects and the rules determined by his or her communities of practice" (Ismi, 2011:831).

In addition, educational leadership demands also the ability to combine external and institutional interests. The problem of combining external demands with internal objectives has been addressed in other European educational research from different points of view. For some scholars, the project of Europeanization of higher education to make the European educational offer more attractive in the world education market could be considered as part of a globalising, even imperialising project (Robertson, 2009) that generates conflicts between the interests of Europe, of each concrete country, and of each educational institution. As regards educational leadership, L. Moos summarises the new leadership role found in the Danish educational context as "translating the external expectation into internal demands" (Moos, 2009:404), and subsequently putting the schools' own educational visions on the back burner, renouncing somehow to act and lead proactively. In this regard, M. Nicolaidou (Nicolaidou, 2008) advocates rather for a 'higher order conceptualisation of leadership' that is defined by the capacity to adapt external changes so as to harmonise with internal purposes. The priority is to make the effort of choosing an adequate response to external demands that allows realising the institution's internal purposes, instead of renouncing them or acting less proactively.

This study indicates that the paradox revealed by S. Clarke at the European level concerning school leaders who are "primarily responsible for leading learning while simultaneously being forced into managerial approaches" (Clarke & Wildy, 2009:356), appears also in Eastern Europe. In the IPS, the dilemma 'leading for learning' (internal purpose) versus 'leading for managing' (external demand) also excites and creates

tensions and some discomfort, but, as this study reveals, these problems do not take over the work of the institution and they are solved 'by elevation', i.e., not caring too much about managerial aspects. Managerial problems are seen as something normal and they do not interfere in the pedagogical and research processes, mainly because teachers and researches have a personal interest in their work, evolve in an institutional culture of mutual support and maintain an attitude of 'getting the work done' in spite of these difficulties.

Elements of crisis can even reinforce the internal links and social wellbeing inside the learning community. As E. Wenger put it, "the use of the term 'community' does not usually imply harmony or collaboration" (Wenger, 1998:85). In the institution, this social wellbeing is related with mutual confidence and trust rather than stability of workplace or good incomes, which are not granted with certainty. The charisma (attractiveness) of the institution itself is based mainly on the existence of a socially reassuring environment and of a 'team of leaders'. Some scholars have also highlighted the importance of having a strong leadership team as one of the prerequisites to establish a world class university (Salmi, 2009).

In conclusion, leadership as learning and for learning can include elements of crisis that enhance thinking and creativity. And leadership as participation and empowerment creates the institutional social wellbeing, based on trust and confidence, which makes it possible to overcome the crisis that can appear when trying to combine personal, institutional, and external interests. These findings open new directions for higher education research and can be used as a baseline for comparison with the current situation, particularly in post-Soviet countries.

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