1 Current Challenges of Educational Leadership: Research Results and Analysis of Good Practices

Marta Ambite
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Luna Galván
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Alicia Hernández-García
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Helena López-Alonso
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Laura Camas-Garrido
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Juan Luis Fuentes
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

Introduction

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in shaping learning experience, ensuring equitable access to quality education, and fostering environments that support students and educators. In an ever-evolving educational landscape, leaders must navigate complex challenges, including emotional well-being, cultural responsiveness, and ethical commitment. The role of the educational leader is not simply to manage institutions but to act as a catalyst for positive change, fostering an environment where students and teachers alike can thrive. This chapter explores the complexities of educational leadership, offering a detailed analysis of contemporary challenges, research findings, and exemplary practices that contribute to effective leadership in educational settings. Education, as framed through a Deweyan perspective, is an inherently relational and life-embedded process that extends beyond mere knowledge acquisition, involving the socio-emotional and ethical

dimensions of both teaching and learning. As such, the chapter emphasizes three key elements: (1) the essential role of the emotional dimension in the educational relationship, (2) the necessity of inclusive and culturally responsive leadership, and (3) fundamental qualities that any leader should have today for fostering meaningful and transformative learning environments.

The first part examines the role of emotionality in education. To what extent does the emotional dimension of educational leadership influence student engagement and academic success? The ability to care is not merely an additional trait of educators but a core responsibility that directly impacts students' academic achievement and overall well-being. In this part, we delve into how care pedagogies serve as a foundation for creating supportive learning environments that foster trust, motivation, and resilience. Adopting Noddings' perspective, care is a multidimensional concept that encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological support. Particularly, care ethics, as an approach to educational leadership, emphasize relational interdependence and moral responsibility, advocating for pedagogical strategies that prioritize student engagement, inclusivity, and the emotional well-being of both students and teachers. Implementing care-centred approaches within schools has been shown to not only improve academic outcomes but also to contribute to the emotional and psychological sustainability of educational institutions. This necessitates systemic changes that include teacher support structures, professional development opportunities, and leadership models that mitigate burnout and promote long-term professional fulfilment. By fostering organizational environments that value emotional engagement, educators can create learning spaces that are both intellectually stimulating and emotionally nurturing.

Beyond emotional engagement, educational leadership must also address the challenges of diversity, inclusion, and social justice, characteristic of our times. In contemporary educational settings, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities requires a transformation in leadership practices. Drawing upon research on culturally responsive pedagogy, the second part emphasizes the ways in which educational leaders can implement strategies that acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity. Specifically, the notion of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) is explored in-depth, emphasizing the need for leaders to cultivate critical self-awareness, develop inclusive curricula, and foster school environments that actively support minoritized students.

How does culturally responsive leadership contribute to fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments? Effective leadership in this context involves not only structural and curricular adaptations but also a fundamental shift in the philosophical approach to education, moving away from neoliberal frameworks that prioritize economic utility over humanistic and inclusive educational values. By engaging with communities, resisting deficit narratives, and advocating for policies that ensure true educational equity, leaders can create institutions that genuinely reflect and embody principles of social justice and inclusion.

At the heart of high-quality educational leadership lies a strong ethical and moral foundation. But what role do ethical and moral principles play in shaping good educational leadership? The final component of this chapter explores the moral responsibilities of educational leaders, emphasizing the role of teachers and administrators as exemplars who inspire and guide students toward learning, autonomy and self-improvement. Drawing from philosophical perspectives, including those of David Carr, Linda Zagzebski, and José Manuel Esteve, the discussion examines the concept of moral leadership as an essential characteristic of good educators. The ability to lead by example, fostering a sense of admiration and reflective imitation among students, is presented as a critical factor in ethical education. Rather than enforcing compliance through authority, true educational leadership is framed as a liberating force that encourages students to engage in critical self-reflection and personal development. The role of dialogue, prudential advice, and reciprocal trust between teachers and students is explored as a means of reinforcing ethical learning environments that respect individual autonomy while guiding learners toward moral and intellectual growth.

This exploration of ethical leadership also engages with contemporary critiques that question the potential limitations of moral exemplarity in education. Concerns regarding autonomy and critical thinking are addressed by emphasizing that the admiration and imitation fostered by exemplary leadership must be reflective rather than passive. This distinction ensures that students actively engage with ethical principles rather than merely conforming to external expectations. By framing ethical leadership as a dynamic and reciprocal process, it underscores the importance of adaptability, context-awareness, and genuine commitment to student empowerment. Recognizing that educational leadership does not exist in a vacuum, but rather within complex

social and institutional frameworks, the discussion acknowledges the challenges leaders face in balancing ethical integrity with the practical demands of policy implementation and institutional accountability.

As the chapter concludes, it reinforces the interconnectedness of emotional, inclusive, and ethical dimensions in educational leadership. To cultivate caring and sustainable educational environments, leaders must integrate care ethics into their pedagogical approaches. They should promote culturally responsive school practices that address structural inequities, and embody moral principles that inspire and empower learners. By embedding these principles into both daily practice and institutional frameworks, educational systems can become more equitable, resilient, and attuned to the holistic needs of learners. In an era of rapid social and technological change, the transformative power of education lies in its ability to bridge intellectual rigour with emotional depth, cultural inclusivity, and ethical leadership, ultimately shaping future generations with the values of empathy, justice, and lifelong learning.

The Emotional Dimension of Educational Leadership: The Ability to Care

Examining the multifaceted nature of education presents a critical challenge requiring a nuanced perspective on human development and the transmission of knowledge. To face this reality, framing education through a Deweyan lens helps to broaden the understanding of pedagogical practice as an inherently life-embedded process fundamentally shaped by relational dynamics (Dewey, 1930). Therefore, the holistic role of education highlights the socio-emotional context in which it is created, emphasizing its interpersonal nature (Habimana, 2024).

Thus, to institutionalize emotionality as a fundamental aspect of pedagogical accountability, it is essential to recognize and strengthen the role of 'care' in educational practice. This can be achieved by implementing care pedagogies and strategies that cultivate supportive organizational environments, mitigate burnout, and prioritize teachers' emotional well-being (Duffy, 2018; Hawkes & Dedrick, 1983; Webb et al., 2009).

Care is a fundamental, cross-cutting factor that influences both students' academic performance within the educational system and their overall well-being. It is often positioned in the persistent educational dichotomy between the holistic nurturing of student development, pri-

marily associated with early education, and the formal transmission of knowledge, which is more prominently emphasized in higher educational stages (Noddings, 2013). Nevertheless, inequality or resistance in the distribution of care practices in education constitutes a lack of socio-emotional institutionalization. Therefore, the framework of care ethics as a moral responsible approach that states relationality and interdependence among individuals is appropriate to address this issue, especially due to its resilient nature, which fosters adaptation to unforeseen circumstances by prioritizing well-being and engagement, thereby preserving the integrity of education (Kolarić & Taczyńska, 2022).

Specifically, embedded in this context, care can be defined as 'a multidimensional concept that involves both the provision of physical, emotional, and psychological support, and the active maintenance of the well-being of others, often within intimate relationships or professional roles' (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Nevertheless, the recognition of 'care' within educational practice can be acknowledged in care pedagogies. These pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies are often characterized as care-informed practices that foster reciprocal and transpersonal relationships within safe, inclusive and responsive learning environments (Duffy, 2018).

The materialization of this approach can range from the acknowledgement of the individuality of the learner, to the adoption of didactic models and policies that place care at the centre of the agenda. For instance, when teachers develop a deep understanding of students' backgrounds, cultural identities and linguistic knowledge, while intentionally avoiding deficit-based perspectives, they create an affirming learning environment that validates students' identities and fosters their overall development (Soto, 2005). Similarly, implementing pedagogical approaches that emphasize students' interest-driven, real-world problem-solving, such as service-learning projects, cultivates reciprocal caring relationships. This fosters a sense of social responsibility by actively engaging students in meaningful, community-centred projects (Park et al., 2023).

The multiple benefits of care pedagogies entail the development of a positive self-concept enhancing motivation and learning engagement. Additionally, they cultivate positive self-esteem and emotional well-being, encouraging active participation, intellectual risk-taking, and perseverance in the face of challenges. Furthermore, they cultivate trust and confidence, strengthening self-efficacy and fostering key values

such as intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and resilience (Noddings, 2013). On another note, care pedagogy could be interpreted as an equitable approach towards learning, especially during times of crisis, since it emphasizes mutual respect, fostering resilience through significant dialogue and adaptability (Mehrotra, 2021). Finally, caring relationships in the academic environment promote a sense of community. However, when implemented through cooperative learning activities, they enhance social and emotional learning components in the curriculum, developing prosocial behaviours and supportive classroom environments (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016).

While caring pedagogies emphasize the importance of establishing relationships based on reciprocity, as well as sensitive learning environments, it is of great importance to recognize the need to support and care for teaching staff in order to develop their functions effectively, since the ability to care is closely linked to personal and professional well-being, highlighting the need to implement care strategies that prioritize caregivers (Travers & Cooper, 1997).

The concept of 'caring for the caregiver' is framed by the idea that the well-being of teachers influences both their individual performance and their relationship with their students; experiencing high levels of stress, lack of recognition, or burnout affects their ability to optimally engage in caring pedagogical practices (Hawkes & Dedrick, 1983).

One of the major challenges facing teachers is burnout syndrome, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of low personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Factors such as excessive workload, lack of support, and high expectations can lead to burnout, as well as reduce the ability to meet the needs of students (Herman et al., 2018).

To mitigate the impact, it is essential that educational institutions adopt strategies that prioritize the well-being of teachers. Among these measures is school leadership that promotes environments of trust, support and collaboration among teachers, thus strengthening their comfort and job stability. Likewise, the implementation of collaborative work can contribute to reducing professional isolation, fostering motivation and increasing job satisfaction. This shows that the combination of effective professional development and a trust-based environment has a positive impact on teacher motivation and commitment. When teachers have access to continuous learning opportunities and the autonomy to apply their knowledge without excessive supervision, their

involvement in the educational process is strengthened. In this sense, achieving a balance between performance evaluation and promoting a work environment that values teacher professionalism would not only reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, but would also foster innovative pedagogical practices focused on learning (Webb et al., 2009).

Another key in teacher care is the promotion of personal autonomy, as well as the recognition of work done, since these are fundamental in order to promote deeper learning and greater persistence in their tasks, favouring development and performance as opposed to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This should not be exclusive among teachers, but should involve the different actors in the educational community, from managers and teachers to students, since supportive relationships between teachers and students, social cohesion and a sense of belonging in the school contribute to the participation and emotional commitment of students in their learning (Ulmanen et al., 2016).

In summary, while care pedagogies prioritize the creation of safe and responsive learning environments, equal attention must be given to the well-being of teachers and the broader educational community to foster an education that fully acknowledges the emotional dimension of development (Soto, 2005; Webb et al., 2009). Education should not be seen solely as an intellectual pursuit but as a deeply human experience shaped by care, trust, and relational interdependence (Noddings, 2013). Therefore, by embedding care into both pedagogical practices and institutional frameworks, educational systems can become more equitable and sustainable, ultimately reinforcing the transformative power of education in society (Mehrotra, 2021; Ulmanen et al., 2016).

Inclusion for All? Lessons from Culturally Responsive School Leadership

The Eurydice report (European Commission, 2023), titled *Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe,* states that all European education systems have established comprehensive policy frameworks – legislation, strategies, and action plans – aimed at eliminating educational barriers and fostering equality and inclusion at a systemic level. However, in countries like Spain, 63% of Roma students do not finish compulsory education, compared to 4% of non-Roma students (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013). This issue has been similarly observed in other European countries, as evidenced by Rutigliano (2020). Regarding immigrant students, after analysing the evolution in the achieve-

ment gap between native students and students with an immigrant background in 2009–2018 PISA results, Porcu et al. (2023) show how differences are narrowing but still present in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain.

Echoing the Salamanca Statement and Framework (UNESCO, 1994), the 2017 UNESCO Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education, defines inclusion as 'a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners' (p. 7) and inclusive education as 'the process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to *all* learners' (p. 7, emphasis added). However, once these goals are established, responding to them as educational leaders can take multiple forms, as Thrupp (2003) identifies in his tripartite division of writers' reactions to education policy:

- 'Problem-solvers' are apolitical: it is difficult to tell whether they know that schooling occurs in a context of neoliberal reforms and structural inequality as they barely refer to either in their reform processes. This type of leader would, for example, implement after-school tutoring programmes for low-performing students without analysing the structural barriers behind their difficulties. [1]

- 'Overt apologists' are supportive of contemporary policy without critically examining its implications. An example of a reform they may promote could be adapting teaching to prioritize success for all in skills demanded by the labour market without questioning whether these demands benefit or harm certain groups of students.

- 'Subtle apologists' do acknowledge problems around social justice and might critique the reform, but still fail to deeply interrogate the causes of these problems. An example of this might be criticizing the process to access tertiary education and starting initiatives that help some disadvantaged students enter university without understanding or advocating to transform the structures that make access difficult in the first place.

If the dominant neoliberal perspective views education primarily as a means to develop human capital that will sustain economic growth (Choo, 2020; Qvortrup, 2009), the necessary shift toward inclusion

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[1] Although, in this sense, we could call this view 'apolitical,' we believe that not engaging with politics or the social context is, in itself, a deeply political stance.

and equity is not merely a technical or organizational adjustment but rather a transformation rooted in a distinct philosophical perspective (Fulcher, 1989, cited in U N E S C O, 2017), that also involves moral and political reasoning.

To expand on this vision of an educational leadership that fosters inclusive education through a critical lens that is justice and equity-oriented, we will engage with research on culturally responsive pedagogy, and its contributions to the inclusion paradigm.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (C R S L)

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies emerged at the end of the twentieth century (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and aim to reform all elements of the educational system to respond to the specific educational needs of minoritized students, especially those who are marginalized in most school settings (Gay, 2010).

In the synthesis of the existing literature made by Khalifa et al. (2016), 4 major strands of behaviour of C R S L emerged:

1. Critical self-awareness or critical consciousness: leaders must know who they are as people, understand the context in which they lead and closely explore their own assumptions and biases related to race, class, ethnicity, gender and culture, and how these affect the school environment, actively challenging hegemonic, white- and western-centred leadership practices.

2. Culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation: provide resources and curricula that reflect cultural responsiveness, mentor and model culturally responsive teaching, and offer professional development opportunities. This would also include encouraging courageous conversations where educators speak up against or critically examine their assumptions about marginalized groups and counselling out teachers who acknowledge that this work is not for them.

3. Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments: create a culturally affirming school climate by, for example, using student's voices or challenging policies and behaviours that do not meet an equity and social justice stance, which might sometimes look like 'creative noncompliance'[2] (Meier & Gasoi, 2017).

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[2] Creative noncompliance is defined by Meier and Gasoi (2017) as avoiding adherence

4. Engaging students and parents in community contexts: designing environments that are both supportive, caring communities, and learning organizations by, for example, validating and including different cultures and knowledge in the school, resisting deficit images of students and families by maintaining high expectations in all areas, advocating for community-based causes, or sharing resources with families.

As we can see, culturally relevant leadership is considered an ethical stance that educational leaders need to adopt, rather than a fixed collection of strategies designed for minoritized students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Developing true critical awareness and creating opportunities to dialogue about gender, race, or class, together with shifting the perception of families and students from passive recipients of school services to active participants in the educational process, appear to be strong antidotes to overlooking the structural causes of inequality and reproducing neoliberal patterns of oppression.

Some limitations of these practices, gathered by Schmeichel (2012) would include teachers' difficulty in applying CRSL due to large class sizes, insufficient support, and a focus on standardized testing and completing the curriculum (Morrison et al., 2008), which could lead to well-intentioned educators with a lack of time and an excess of paperwork to reduce culturally relevant pedagogy to recognizing ethnic holidays, incorporating popular culture into lessons, or using informal language (Irvine, 2010), ultimately using students' culture as a performative and superficial hook or as a tool of assimilation (Evans et al., 2020).

Additionally, developing awareness of their cultural biases and blind spots is a gradual process that takes time and effort for teachers and leaders – it does not happen overnight. Effective (and not structural) change, and an idea of continuous improvement is not the same as a process of genuine and profound transformation (Ward et al., 2015), which takes time and could be equated to a marathon more than a race.

Ward et al. (2015), facing the fact that leaders normally have a rather limited scope of action, proposed three options: exit, voice and loy-

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to external mandates when they hinder our ability to address the genuine needs and interests of the children in our care. The Civil Rights Movement activist John Lewis refers to similar actions when he speaks of causing 'good and necessary trouble' by speaking up, speaking out, and getting in the way.

alty (Hirschman, 1970). When exit is not an ethical choice and loyalty has consequences on students' lives, voice is all that remains: school leaders retain the power to inform themselves and others, to speak up about the needs of all their students, without exception, and, slowly but surely, to make inclusion a reality in their schools. Fundamentally, since the educational system has historically marginalized minoritized students – deliberately or unintentionally – CRSL serves as a source of inspiration and guidance to ensure that inclusion is both truly inclusive and just.

Core Qualities of the Educational Leader: Foundations for Ethical and Moral Guidance

The early years of the twenty-first century are facing a profound moral crisis, marked by individualism, violence, radicalization and political polarization, which urgently calls for the search for effective methods for the moral and ethical development of society. Since moral learning is largely dependent on the influence of others (Carr, 2023), the teacher's role as a formative agent takes on a central role due to their continuous contact with students. Therefore, this last section explores the core qualities an educational leader must possess to contribute to the holistic development and human flourishing of scholars.

Throughout history, several authors in the field of philosophy of education and from different cultural and geographical contexts have reflected on the effects of exemplars in societies. For instance, Plato was worried about the influence of the gods of Greek mythology on the education of young people, because it could constitute a grave danger as they embodied ways of life contrary to good and human flourishing. Similarly, in last decades, some prominent voices from the international sphere, such as David Carr from the United Kingdom, José Manuel Esteve from Spain, Linda Zagzebski the from United States, or Kristján Kristjánsson from Iceland, have made significant contributions that facilitate an understanding of the role of educators as a guide in the ethical education of students, with relevant consequences for educational leadership.

First, Zagzebski (2017) argues that in every community there are individuals who are admired because they show excellence in a specific area, which inspires others to improve, which she calls 'role models' or 'exemplars' (p. 153). Therefore, the very first trait of an educational leader could be to possess an excellent quality that elicits that need for

improvement in the learner. Carr (2002) goes even further, claiming that the educational leader must be 'an example of the best values and virtues found in a particular way of life' (p. 117). For him, this is so because no one can teach well what one does not know deeply, and a theoretical knowledge is not enough to fully comprehend some educational contents, specifically, those related to ethics, which are essentially practical. Therefore, an educator cannot teach something that they do not live. In other words, the leader must be a moral exemplar to which the students aspire, which necessarily requires the cultivation of virtuous character in the teaching profession.

Given that the teacher embodies an excellence that the student still lacks, Esteve (1977) maintains that there is a distance between them, derived from the superiority that the educational leader holds over the student. However, according to the author, this excellence must be recognized by the student for the leader to be considered an authority. In this sense, Zagzebski (2017) adds that the recognition of a superior quality in the other causes admiration, which drives the desire to imitate the other to achieve that better self. Henderson (2024) reinforces this idea by explaining that such admiration arises precisely from the lack of that excellence, as it is perceived as a moral ideal worthy of attainment.

By recognizing this ideal, the learner freely and consciously accepts the teacher's influence to imitate them. Nonetheless, the leader's superiority is not exercised for personal benefit – which would distinguish it from models such as authoritarianism – but rather directed towards guiding the learner in achieving their best self (Esteve, 1977), thus reducing the distance between them, which ultimately tends to disappear. For this reason, Esteve (1977) defines this relationship as a 'liberating authority' (p. 187). Therefore, another quality of educational leaders lies in the ability to inspire and guide students, not only through their example as a role model, but also by placing their excellence at the service of the moral development of the students, driving them towards the best version of themselves.

Esteve (1977) notes that another fundamental trait of the educational leader is the use of open dialogue and prudential advice as an essential means of communication with learners. In this leadership model, there is no room for the imposition of commands, as teacher and student progress together towards a shared goal. Rather than imposing a set of beliefs, the educational leader respects students' freedom by fos-

tering an environment where they can independently discover and explore their own convictions. As this author asserts, true leaders must encourage learners' initiative, given that actively exercising freedom is the only way for its full development.

The last key attribute of the educational leader that will be discussed here is the ability to embody consistent exemplarity while responding to the needs of the group they serve. According to Zagzebski (2017), admiration for a fleeting quality lacks true excellence; thus, 'reflective admiration is the test of exemplarity' (p. 63). In this regard, Esteve (1977) maintains that a leader's authority endures only if they effectively address the needs and interests of their community; otherwise, admiration fades. Carr (2002) reinforces this idea, emphasizing the importance of teachers understanding and addressing the specific demands of their group.

This conception of the educational leader as a moral role model has been subject to criticism, especially around the concern of whether imitation of others might limit autonomy, an aspect of particular relevance in education. For example, Kant (1997) argues that true autonomy is based on acting according to one's own principles, not relying on external models. Similarly, Taylor (1992) stresses that moral models are only valuable if critically reflected upon and internalized by the individual. To address this concern, Zagzebski (2017) offers a fundamental contribution, stating that when admiration arises from critical reflection, the individual consciously recognizes that imitation benefits their own development. In this sense, the decision to imitate an exemplary figure is not an external imposition, but the result of autonomous judgement. The disciple, then, freely trusts that the orientations of the educational leader are a suitable path for their improvement (Esteve, 1977). Therefore, the person who makes this decision is autonomous, as it is the result of the exercise of their own freedom.

Moreover, as previously noted, the genuine educational leader not only respects the learner's freedom, but also facilitates it. Hence, the leader does not seek to generate submission or dependence, but to accompany the student to achieve a common goal: the autonomy and freedom inherent to the rational being (Esteve, 1977). Thus, far from restricting the autonomy of the student, the educational leader actively contributes to its achievement. This demonstrates, once again, the close interconnection between the terms 'educational leader,' 'freedom' and 'autonomy.'

Lastly, as Kristjánsson (2006) notes, young people's attention has been diverted to social network sites, which reflect a society in moral decay. Thus, a major challenge facing this leadership model is to shift students' attention away from these questionable models and redirect it towards the figure of the educational leader, in order to meet today's ethical and moral challenges, respecting human dignity and contributing to human improvement.

An exemplary figure of educational leadership that is being studied again today is Janusz Korczak (Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2019; Tsabar, 2021), a Polish pedagogue, doctor and writer who devoted his life to the care of orphans in Warsaw. His pedagogy was grounded in respect for the dignity of the child, the promotion of autonomy, and moral education through personal example (Fuentes & García Bermejo, 2024). Korczak's leadership was not based on the imposition of rules, but rather on the ethical conduct he modelled, which inspired children to imitate him in a thoughtful and autonomous manner. In fact, his orphanage became a democratic community, where children practiced self-government through their own parliament, court and newspaper (Efron, 2005). This model enabled them to cultivate a sense of justice, responsibility and self-discipline, thereby illustrating that effective leadership does not restrict autonomy, but rather strengthens it by fostering a reflective admiration that motivates students to reach their fullest potential.

Korczak also embodies Carr's (2002) idea regarding the need for educational leaders to cultivate virtuous character. Korczak himself emphasized that the educator's responsibility is to continuously improve to become a force for change and a leader capable of transforming children's lives (Efron, 2005). Undoubtedly, his life proves that the true educational leader does not dominate, but accompanies; does not impose, but inspires; and does not restrict, but liberates.

Some Final Thoughts

In this chapter, we have attempted to answer the research question regarding the current challenges of educational leadership through a panoramic review of recent research on three key themes: the emotional dimension of leadership, especially related to the capacity for caring; the responsibility to promote culturally inclusive contexts through the effective recognition of the value of diversity; and attention to the ever-complex nature of the leader, as the primary cause and foundation

of positive influence on others. Thus, a critical synthesis is provided of some of the most significant contributions of recent years on the three themes addressed, in dialogue with established voices in educational research.

The first conclusion to be drawn from the review conducted, indicates that educational leadership entails great responsibilities that largely co-incide with some of the most important social and cultural challenges of our time, which places it at the forefront of society. This is good news insofar as education, in general, and the school, in particular, is not iso-lated from the society in which it operates, but is directly linked to it, as Dewey (1899) pointed out, and can respond to the social challenges it poses. At the end of the nineteenth century, the American pedagogue argued that the radical change taking place in education at that time required a radical change in education itself, such that schools would become the natural social unit they should aspire to be. More specifi-cally, he warned that 'Travel has been rendered easy; freedom of move-ment, with its accompanying exchange of ideas, indefinitely facilitated. The result has been an intellectual revolution. Learning has been put into circulation' (p. 40). These words seem to accurately define some of the most characteristic features of recent decades, where learning as a capacity for adaptation has become an essential activity where the in-tellectual has adopted a renewed vision in the complex interpretation of reality in continuous relationship with the emotional.

However, this intellectual revolution cannot be supported solely by schools; rather, it must, in a certain sense, be led by education. In other words, between the social isolation of schools and complete subordi-nation to social trends, there is a place where it is possible to balance educational autonomy with an eye toward the emerging demands of so-ciety. Indeed, educational leadership cannot uncritically subject schools to passing trends and dominant fads (Esteban & Fuentes, 2020). Unlike other occupations, the task of education entails a high level of auton-omy in decision-making and personal initiative (Carr, 2002), which goes beyond the mere application of a series of teaching techniques, or the reproduction of procedures designed by agents outside the school en-vironment. This has direct consequences for the training of future ed-ucators and gives meaning to their development in higher education institutions, where intellectual demands and autonomy are prominent signs of identity.

A recent example of this can be found in the processes of integrat-

ing technology into schools, which have captured the attention, efforts, and resources of many educators, researchers, administrators, and politicians in recent years, relegating other fundamental issues of education to the background. However, there seems to be a decline, or at least a slowdown, in the placement of technology at the centre of learning. It does not seem reasonable to follow the pendulum's logic and make an anti-technology shift, but rather to warn of the need for a thoughtful reflection on the role of education in society. Perhaps the third challenge examined here allows for the introduction of this element of balance into the debate on educational leadership, by raising a controversial and even uncomfortable issue due to its complexity, but one that raises profound questions as necessary as those posed by the previous two.

Secondly, we have studied the emotional aspect of educational leadership as an essential task for generating a sense of belonging to a community among group members, as it promotes a deeper and more stable interpersonal commitment to the common good than strictly instrumental and utilitarian reasons. Considering this, two reflections can be raised. On the one hand, there is a risk of placing emotions at the centre of education as a priority reference in decision-making. There is no doubt that an emotionally safe and comfortable environment provides well-being and fosters the mental health of individuals, as well as the development of numerous capacities linked to creative thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Furthermore, attention to emotions allows for the complementing of other essentially intellectual capacities such as critical thinking, generating what has been called an extended reason, as an essential resource against current forms of indoctrination (Ibáñez-Martín, 2021). However, we have once again swung towards a context where emotions seem to be against academic rigour as two antagonistic poles, whose confrontation can lead to a clearly anti-pedagogical position, especially serious in childhood. Authors such as Kristjánsson (2015) warn of the consequences of what has been called The Vulnerable Child Paradigm, as an effect of an excessive psychologization and subjectivation of well-being and education. In his own words: 'The core rationale here turned on the need for schools to mend children's fragile emotional selves and boost their self-esteem – under the banners of efficiency and adaptability – thereby furnishing them with the requisite motivation and self-efficacy to behave pro-socially' (Kristjánsson 2015, p. 10). This shift has also been accompanied at the social level by a sen-

timentalist culture (Barrio Maestre, 2022) that has led to an emotivism where emotions serve as the perfect tool for political and social manipulation (Menéndez Álvarez-Hevia, 2018), as tragically reflected in the series of dystopian novels written by American author Suzanne Collins, The Hunger Games, where spectacle is elevated to the category of political weapon in the purest style of the man considered the founder of modern political theory, Niccolò Machiavelli. Namely, in his key work The Prince, where he collects his first-hand experiences as a diplomat and military commander in the Florentine Republic, he asserts that effective leaders must consider questions such as 'whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both' (2021, p. 77). His explanation consists of affirming that both are useful for governing and, as is his custom, he understands them to be necessary means justified by the end. Furthermore, he asserts that if he has to choose, it is better to be feared than loved, because (Machiavelli, 2014, p. 78):

> [M]en have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation, which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment, which never fails. Nevertheless, a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred because he can endure very well being feared while he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women.

It is worth noting in the language used by Machiavelli the primacy of emotions in the exercise of leadership, as well as the risk involved in considering them as tools for an end, which, however lofty, is not necessarily legitimized to fully justify the means.

On the other hand, human emotions cannot be described as mere factors or processes to be controlled by leaders, regardless of the educational, social, or political context. They are a constitutive part of human beings, defining us as people and differentiating us from other beings and even from machines with artificial intelligence. Without emotions, it would not be possible to explain fundamental human experiences such as gratitude or forgiveness, which lie beyond mere reason (Caro & Fuentes, 2021), nor would it be possible to live virtues such as optimism or experience the deep and renewing satisfaction of hope (González

Martín & Fuentes, 2012). This is why expressions widely used in the discourse of emotional intelligence, such as emotional management or emotional control, can lead us to become true emotional manipulators when they are not subject to some higher and less instrumental criterion than that of effectiveness. Nor can the criterion of subjective emotional well-being be sufficient insofar as it limits us to individuality that forgets the essential ties with others, not only to survive, but as Aristotle (1836) points out, to achieve plenitude, and that allow us to understand ourselves from a broader and shared perspective, far from self-absorption and selfishness.

In this sense, the Self-Determination Theory developed by Ryan and Deci in recent decades (2017), has made it possible to delve deeper into this idea in different cultural and interpersonal contexts such as business, sports, family, and education, at least in two different senses. It has allowed us to identify three basic anthropological needs shared by all human beings and which refer to autonomy, interrelation, and competence. In this way, such theory has overcome other subjectivist approaches and unites the contributions of two disciplines traditionally distant due to disagreement over what can be considered objective: psychology and philosophy. Thus, at the same time, the reality of the objective implies a limit beyond oneself, a goal to be oriented toward that implies ethical elements. Ethics is none other than the dam that allows us to establish a limit and a direction for emotions and their management.

Along with the emotional dimension of educational leadership, in this chapter we have analysed the challenge of cultural diversity. Many issues arise in this regard that cannot be fully addressed here, so we will highlight two. Beyond the necessary respect that citizens of a democratic society must have for everyone's right to choose their own culture, concern for the treatment of diversity in schools implies promoting the idea that educational institutions have the responsibility to generate opportunities for their students to advance their social standing. In other words, to open new and higher horizons in which individuals, regardless of their cultural background, have opportunities not only to access greater levels of well-being and higher economic income than their families of origin, but also to access life prospects in which they could develop their full capabilities and providing meaningful purpose to their existence. This implies perceiving society as an open space for participation, in which the individual possesses the autonomy to inter-

vene, overcoming basic limitations and granting a more genuine meaning to freedom of choice. Furthermore, the development of this capacity also implies an ethical development on the path to human fulfillment or flourishing, in that one not only attends to one's own affairs, but is also capable of assuming shared responsibilities of a political nature, based on the central axis of the common good (Aristotle, 1894).

The second idea we wish to emphasize relates to the fact that the educational treatment of cultural diversity does not necessarily imply a relativization of the pillars of any culturally grounded approach to life, but rather their recognition and consideration as contributions to the discovery of a more fulfilling way of life in common, that is receptive to different sensibilities (Fuentes, 2014). Indeed, it would be a contradiction if, when we speak of educational inclusion, we meant the explicit or implicit exclusion of the principles and values of members of the educational community, which includes not only students but also their families and local communities of reference. This does not, however, mean renouncing the school's potential to contribute to this idea of good. In other words, the school and its members are not excluded from intercultural dialogue about the cultural elements that enable the best forms of human cultivation. A cultivation that is precisely part of the word culture, which comes from the Latin *cultus* and derives from the verb *colere,* meaning 'to cultivate.' And like all crops, it can be diverse, but not infinite, since not all fruits or products of the field are beneficial to humans.

Finally, we have identified the ethical character of the educator as a challenge for educational leadership. There is no doubt that from Socrates to Korczak, our history is shaped by figures of extraordinary worth who, for various reasons, have guided and continue to guide our existence. Their ways of living, and even dying, have shaped our cultures and have served as a reference for our decision-making, both in matters of everyday life and in more profound ones that help us answer the big questions. We not only remember their ideas or their words, but we also remember the people who said them. Thus, idealism is not only a system of thought or philosophical theory; it is also Plato, Kant, and Hegel, whose names and texts remain alive after centuries or millennia. The educational relevance of these exemplars remains alive today, among other reasons because they embody ideas that are brought to a level of understanding accessible by their similarity to other human beings.

Dewey pointed out that 'The task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons' (1930, p. 9), among which, in our view, could be the leadership of people. More specifically, exemplarism is linked to educational leadership, in that leaders are likely to provoke admiration and desires for emulation in others, due to their excellent characteristics in different domains. However, at the same time, there are a series of associated risks derived from the capacity for imitation of negative exemplars. In other words, exemplarism can become a process that reproduces evil in that it exposes profiles with at least one of its pernicious characteristics to groups of individuals, provoking desires for imitation in some of them and, therefore, causing the continuation of evil. This is especially worrying in the educational field, where teachers are role models who act in a setting that, in most cases, involves children, adolescents, and young people. Therefore, their capacity to influence others in their training process is very high (Ibáñez-Martín, 2017). It is worth asking what motivates individuals to admire figures whose lives are far from being completely exemplary. To this end, Carr (2024) and Croce and Vacarezza (2017) respond that the complexity of the figures, the combination of factors, or mixed traits are aspects that attract others, to the extent that the exemplary figures are perceived as closer to their own reality. However, their explanation and normalization do not exempt them from the obvious educational risks and draws attention once again to the educational leader of reference, to the ethical character of the educator, as they constitute the closest reference figure.

It is obvious that planting a seed is not enough to grow a plant. With it, a plant sprouts, sometimes with significant initial strength, but the task of cultivation continues afterward. In this sense, the classic metaphor of education as cultivation and school as a garden, which is still preserved in the names of educational institutions in some languages, takes on renewed meaning regarding educational leadership, which requires a permanent responsibility over time. Such stability can be rooted in its ethical foundation, which, as we have seen in this chapter, is present in some of the most important challenges facing educational leadership today. This leads us to understand that leading people and communities in our field of knowledge is more than a technical matter, reduced to the acquisition of practical skills. While these are obviously relevant, the humanity inherent in educational action and its purposes deeply permeates the nature of leadership today.

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