

# Dissident Leadership Action for Educational Equity

## Dissident Leadership Action for Educational Equity

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### DESCRIPTORES:

Privatización  
Equidad  
Dirección  
Enseñanza  
Desigualdades

### RESUMEN:

El propósito de esta investigación es conocer y comprender la acción directiva en contextos de desigualdad para promover la equidad educativa y la justicia social. La investigación se ha desarrollado en un centro en un contexto complejo marcado por las desigualdades y la marginación. Para ello, nos posicionamos en el método etnográfico concretado en el estudio de caso, recurriendo a técnicas de observación no participante, entrevistas en profundidad y análisis de documentos. Los resultados obtenidos evidencian la necesidad de considerar el contexto inmediato, su vida cotidiana y la del centro, en el que el director desarrolla su acción (no la mera función directiva) para hacer frente a las desigualdades y a la exclusión y para facilitar procesos educativos que garanticen, al máximo y en la medida de lo posible, la equidad y la justicia social. Se concluye que una acción directiva disidente, contextualizada y socio-crítica posibilita dichos propósitos. El estudio servirá de referencia para evidenciar que otras formas de entender la dirección hacen posible el cumplimiento de la equidad con la posibilidad de contrarrestar las medidas neoliberales de las políticas educativas actuales.

### KEYWORDS:

Privatization  
Equity  
Management  
Teaching  
Inequalities

### ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this research is to learn about and understand management action in contexts of inequality in order to promote educational equity and social justice. The research has been developed in a school in a complex context marked by inequalities and marginalization. To do this, we position ourselves in the ethnographic method specified in the case study, using non-participant observation techniques, in-depth interviews and document analysis. The results obtained show the need to consider the immediate context, his or her daily life and that of the school, in which the head teacher develops his or her action (not merely function) in order to confront inequalities and exclusion and to provide educational processes that guarantee, as far as possible, equity and social justice. It is concluded that dissident, contextualized and socio-critical managerial action makes such action possible. The research will be used as a reference to show that other ways of understanding management make it possible to achieve equity and to counteract the neoliberal measures of current education policies.

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## 1. Introduction

Education is a public and common good, in which the public refers to everyone, without exclusion. In this sense, inequalities will have little place in an education system that is supposed to guarantee inclusion, equity and justice.

Since the end of the 1990s, the emergence of neoliberal policies in the field of education has meant that these maxims of public education (inclusion, equity and justice) have been hindered in their development and practical expression. International and national educational policies have been redefined and shaped to respond to the needs and demands that neoliberalism and financial capitalism - along with its other forms, namely cognitive capitalism and affective capitalism - have created and continue to create for a market-driven society (Díez Gutiérrez, 2020a, 2020b; Orelus, 2023; Torres Santomé, 2017). The introduction of values appropriate to the world of production, once industrial and now economic, has weakened, if not redefined, the humanist and fundamental values necessary to build a citizenship of solidarity, criticism, democracy and justice. Neoliberalism has privatised the meaning of public, inclusive and democratic education, negatively and directly affecting the daily life of schools, their management and organisation.

Such policies are guided by powerful international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as by think tanks, which have come to exert great influence on those responsible for managing public policy, along with public opinion (Abelson, 2018, 2019; McGann and Whelan, 2020). Since the implementation of neoliberal policies, management approaches and practices from the private sector have been imported and applied to public education. This is what Ball and Youdell (2008) call “disguised privatisation”, which involves the commercialisation of public education in two ways: “endogenous” privatisation, where schools are conceived as production units (enterprises) and “exogenous” privatisation, which involves the incorporation of the private sector into public schools (2008, p. 18) or the outsourcing of services (e.g. the management of school canteens). Its techniques are applied through competition/competitiveness, choice/freedom, accountability, performance standards, decentralisation and autonomy in the pursuit and achievement of the maximum cost-effectiveness and efficiency, which in one way or another contributes to the reproduction of social and educational injustice (Skerritt and Salokangas, 2019).

This neoliberal and business logic requires a new form of management of educational institutions in order to respond to its objectives. In this form, leadership is central, while at the same time it is reduced to the one-person figure of the headmaster or headmistress as the manager/manager of the school, who must be effective, accountable and do what he or she can to achieve good academic results or performance. This has led to a shift in decision-making from the educational community to this figure (Verger et al., 2016). This emphasis on one-person leadership is a requirement imposed by 'New Public Management' (NPM) as applied to education and school governance (Hall, 2013; Sorensen et al., 2021). NPM is introduced as an alternative to traditional public management or traditional public administration, in the face of excessive centralisation resulting from the implementation of bureaucratic administration. Basically, NPM focuses on the implementation of management strategies and procedures from the private sector, the business sector, in public administration. The assumption is that by transferring concepts, strategies and

procedures from the private sector, the public sector can improve and become more efficient. The focus is on outcomes rather than processes and on citizens as customers (Hood and Dixon, 2015).

The new forms of management demand the professionalisation of management, which is justified in order to meet the demands of neoliberal capitalist policies; demands that are hidden behind the idea of the complexity and difficulty involved of exercising management (Barrios et al., 2013; Vázquez Toledo et al., 2016). In the Spanish context, professionalisation began with the discourse of quality management in the 1990s (Álvarez, 1998). What professionalisation points to is de-professionalisation, as on the one hand it is about acquiring techno-bureaucratic skills and a manager, and on the other hand its performance controlled through bureaucratic forms (Lee et al., 2019). When professionalisation is advocated, the focus is not on social justice and educational equity, but on increasing student success (as measured by academic outcomes). Rather than professionalisation being oriented towards pedagogical issues, inclusive and social justice policies and practices, it is a practice framed within a managerial, business and economic model (Longmuir, 2019). The result is a corporate school leadership that has a direct impact on pedagogical, social and community decisions. This managerial understanding of leadership is an attack on education professionals. It is a professionalisation tailored to the position (management), but it is far from the professionalism required to look after the common good and an inclusive, democratic and equitable educational project; a professionalism directed towards reflective and critical thinking and guided by an ethic of participation, recognition and presence with political, social and educational agency; it is far from social justice (Ball, 2021; Niesche, 2018).

Neoliberal policies devalue and undermine the capacity of principals, who find their autonomy and shared decision-making limited, contextualised and focused on the everyday life of schools and communities (Longmuir, 2019); policies that hinder the construction of inclusive schools with a culture and practice of social justice and equity (Llorent-Bedmar et al., 2017; Netolicky, 2019). As such, the development of contextualised inclusive and democratic leadership (Gurr and Drysdale, 2018; Niesche and Gowlett, 2019); community, pedagogical and conscientious leadership is challenging.

*Ultimately, managers have the potential to prevent or promote measures that work for inclusion. Therefore, good leadership requires knowing how to foster a culture of inclusion for social justice, based on assumptions, principles, beliefs and values that are linked to the school's pedagogical actions. In this way, inclusion should be expressed in the languages used, in the hidden curriculum and in the actions and behaviours of all school staff. (Murillo et al., 2010, p. 174).*

Education for inclusion and social justice requires contextualised management practices that promote practices of community participation (students, families and other social agents with educational implications in schools) based on equal opportunities, recognition, co-responsibility, listening, agency and commitment to social transformation. This understanding of leadership is constructed in schools in contexts marked by inequalities (DeMatthews and Mawhinney, 2014; Rodríguez Uribe et al., 2020).

The aim of our work is to know and understand management action in contexts of inequality, in order to promote educational equity and social justice<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Methods

This research was carried out as part of the R&D project “New education policies and their impact on equity: school management and teacher professional development (NUPE)”. A qualitative methodological approach was chosen because it allowed us, on the one hand, to gain in-depth knowledge of the exercise of school leadership and its impact on educational equity from a concrete reality, paying attention to the events, meanings and senses that the person holding the individual position gives to the facts. And, on the other hand, to understand the exercise of this position in terms of its complexity, allowing us to consider the multiple contexts that shape it: temporal, socio-historical, political, economic, cultural, educational and personal (Stake, 2020, p. 47).

On the other hand, the achievement of our research objective required a process of inductive enquiry, typical of this methodology (Espinoza, 2020), which would allow us to use descriptive data (the actions observed and the words of the people involved in the research, expressed orally or in writing) to generate explanations and interpretations for the understanding and production of situated knowledge, rather than collecting data to test a previously defined hypothesis or theory.

Within this methodological approach a case study was carried out. This is defined by Walker (1983, cited in Vázquez et al., 2021, p. 3) as

*examining an example in action. The study of specific incidents and events and the selective collection of biographical information, personality, intentions and values, which enables the practitioner to capture and reflect the elements of a situation that give it meaning.*

The case study was purposively selected using the potential of the case as a criterion, i.e. we maximised what we could learn (Stake, 2020). According to the classification made by Stake (2020), it is an intrinsic case, as a headteacher of a Primary and Infant School (CEIP) was chosen because his practice of school management, which he has been doing in the school for more than ten years, is of interest to the research being carried out.

The centre is public and is located in the old town of an Andalusian city of 111,811 inhabitants (INE, 2023), in a traditional neighbourhood where there are also university campuses and cultural spaces, although the centre has a medium-low value (0.20-0.40) according to the socio-economic and cultural index. The student body is made up of around 180 students and is characterised by its social diversity. There are 17 teachers, most of whom are permanent.

Within this framework, the director develops a management committed to inclusion, justice and equity, aimed at creating social awareness and promoting solidarity in the face of prevailing individualism. Such a management would explain two characteristics of the school: its link with the community-neighbourhood and its openness to it, with the aim of offering quality education to all pupils.

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<sup>1</sup> The work is the result of the R+D+i research project entitled ‘New Educational Policies and their impact on equity: school management and teacher professional development’ (Ref. PGC2018-095238-B-I00).

The director in our case had previously held this position in a school with a medium to high socio-economic level, which he left to join the school where he is currently in charge. A public school with two lines, located in the capital of an Andalusian city, specifically in a densely populated historic working-class neighbourhood, with a medium-low socio-economic level, where social, cultural and economic inequalities are evident. These inequalities are reflected in the pupils attending the school, with a high proportion of students at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Another aspect to be highlighted in relation to the pupils is social diversity, family breakdown, etc.

The case study was developed in three phases (Martínez Bonafé, 1990), as detailed in Table 1, which provides an overview of the different stages of the research.

**Table 1**

*Phases of the case study*

Pre-active phase	Defining the theoretical foundations of the R&D project in which this research is being carried out.
	Formulation of objectives.
	Choice of case: a director.
	Case selection criteria: potentiality.
	Contextual study of the selected case.
	Decision on data collection techniques: non-participant observation, in-depth interview and documentary review.
	Drafting of the negotiation contract and the ethical commitments of the researchers.
Approximate time frame: three months of fieldwork.	
Interactive phase	Negotiation with the director.
	Field diary: non-participant observation and informal interviews.
	Research diary: questions, new aspects to observe, questions, etc., based on the reflections of the researchers' field notes.
	In-depth interviews. Recording and transcription.
	Negotiation with other management-related actors for semi-structured interviews.
	Semi-structured individual interviews with education inspectors and a CEP training counsellor. Recording and transcription.
Post-active phase	Documentary review.
	Pre-analysis: units of analysis.
	Analysis.
	Preparation of the research report.
	Negotiation of the report with the persons involved.

*Data collection instruments and participants*

In order to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of the case, three techniques were used to collect information: non-participant observation, interview and documentary review (Angrosino, 2023; Stake, 2020;). The non-participant observation allowed us to see and experience the reality alongside the director, to contrast his management practice with the way he thinks about it, to observe his activity, listen to his conversations and interact with him (Angrosino, 2023). The in-depth interview with the director and the semi-structured interview with other actors involved in the management allowed access to the system of conceptions, beliefs and evaluations, as well as past experiences. During the interviews, questions were asked and raised about professional careers; the application and influences of educational policies on school management, school planning and educational practices; the impact of educational policies on attention to diversity, on improving quality and equity in schools; and

knowledge and perceptions of the impact of new educational policies on initial and ongoing training, as well as on professional careers and teaching careers. Finally, the document review provided us with an insight not only into the content related to our object of study, but also into the thoughts of those involved about it. Table 2 lists the data collection instruments and the participants, with whom their involvement in the research and the research process was negotiated, in which the researchers made commitments to impartiality, anonymity, confidentiality, autonomy and fairness.

**Table 2**  
*Research participants and data collection techniques*

Participants	Data collection techniques			
	Fieldwork	In-depth interview	Semi-structured interview	Documentary review
Director	February-April 2020	3		
Head of Studies			1	Educational Project
Music Teacher			1	Internal materials of the Centre
Zone Inspector			1	
General Inspector			1	
CEP Advisor			1	

### *Data analysis*

The analysis of the data began as soon as it was collected, with the aim of making sense of the information and the relevant meanings in relation to our topic of study (Simons, 2011). This preliminary analysis was dominated by intuition (Cáceres, 2003), which helped us to establish two broad units of analysis with significant content, from which we could then extract the results. From this, a content analysis was carried out using the constant comparison method (Valles, 1999), starting with a careful reading of the information gathered through observations, interviews and document review, in order to classify it by establishing categories and subcategories (Table 3) and identifying their characteristics and dimensions. In other words, through a continuous comparison of specific incidents in the data, the concepts have been verified, their properties determined and relationships between categories established in order to integrate them into a coherent theory that explains and makes sense of the data.

**Table 3**  
*Units of analysis, categories and subcategories*

Units of analysis	Categories	Subcategories
(Macro) education policies and school management.	Technocratic curriculum.	Weakening of the public sector. Academic content: system maintenance vs critical citizenship for justice and equity. Innovative methodologies-teaching volunteerism. Evaluation: - Classification of the student body. - Element of differentiation of the centres/educational market. - Invisibility of social problems. Utilitarianism of students with SEN.

	Simulation of willingness <i>vs.</i> goodwill.	Redistribution and concerns of the Education Administration.
	Expansion of the power of school management: administrative control mechanism.	Power: normative, figurative and real. Control scale: Admo.-direction-teaching staff. Technical <i>vs.</i> pedagogical leadership.
(Micro) education policies and school management.	Neighbourhood Director.	Socio-political management project for educational equity.
	Mastery of regulations.	New avenues for action.
	Resistance / Rebellion.	Confrontations with the Education Administration.
	A benchmark in attention to diversity.	Encouraging the participation of the educational community.

### *Credibility of research*

A number of strategies have been used to ensure the rigour of the research data, the research process itself and the research findings. One of these was theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, cited in Flick, 2023), whereby the field was abandoned when the data became repetitive and additional information did not yield any new insights.

Another strategy used was triangulation, understood as a procedure that not only validates findings but also increases methodological consistency and theoretical construction (Flick, 2023). Triangulation of data, methods and researchers was undertaken (Flick, 2023; Stake, 2020) with the aim of not simply accepting our impressions, correcting possible biases or distortions in the data, confronting accounts and having contrasting insights. Thus, data triangulation made it possible to study reality from information provided by different sources, accessing and contrasting different points of view to find convergent and divergent aspects (Flick, 2023; Santa Cruz et al., 2022). The triangulation of methods was carried out by comparing the information obtained through different data collection techniques (observation, interviews, documents) in order to approach the study of the object of research with greater reliability (Santa Cruz et al., 2022). Finally, researcher triangulation was carried out through systematic comparison throughout the process of data collection, analysis and the results obtained, in order to “detect or minimise deviations arising from the researcher as a person” (Flick, 2023, p. 244).

Finally, the negotiation with the people involved in the research report, which Simons (2011, p. 184) refers to as “respondent validation”, in order to check the analysis of the people involved with regard to the accuracy, adequacy and impartiality of the descriptions and interpretations made.

## 3. Results

Enrique<sup>2</sup>, the headmaster of CEIP Fernando Quiñones<sup>3</sup> in our case, describes himself as a “neighbourhood headmaster”: a representative of the administration of a school located in a socio-cultural and economic context that is his own, with many shortcomings and difficulties, in which he must manage to meet the needs of the pupils and their families, often seeking the loopholes offered by the regulations. This is

<sup>2</sup> The forms of expression of the participant have been respected.

<sup>3</sup> The names of the centre and the director are fictitious to ensure anonymity.

because their work is conditioned by technocratic and mercantile macro-policies in the field of education, aimed at devaluing public schools and disguising privatisation.

From Enrique's perspective, one of the aspects that most condition education is the increasingly technocratic and neoliberal curriculum that seeks to train human capital to adapt to and sustain the system. As this director rightly points out: "The model is not set by (...) professionals are really involved in the world of education, but by the OECD". He cites the introduction of financial education in schools as an example: "Everything is aimed at creating a student model that is consumerist".

Like the general inspector, the zone inspector and the CEP advisor, he denounces the fact that neoliberal education policies do nothing to promote the public education system, which is supposed to promote equity: "Equity? What the hell does that mean, that it's on paper? (...), but if I go to develop the curriculum from behind, they don't allow you to be fair". This is reflected in the fact that the only contents that are not specified in the school curriculum, with the corresponding indicators to be evaluated, are those related to social values that are not characteristic of the neoliberal ideology and that make it difficult to train critical and supportive people who contribute to the construction of a fairer society. Work in this area depends on the willingness of teachers, who sometimes have to be prepared to go beyond their working hours in order to carry it out.

It also points to *assessment* as a key aspect that limits inclusive educational practices and hinders equity. Assessment remains quantitative, summative and finalistic, relying almost exclusively on examinations that assess very specific competences and contribute to the ranking of students.

*Then comes, "Dude, so-and-so hasn't passed. What? He hasn't passed? His father's a drug addict father, his mother's an alcoholic, a gambling addict... It's enough isn't it, it's enough that he even comes to school and brings the books and is not lying on the street somewhere... Let's just take a look at where we are, shall we? A little perspective. If, on top of that, the education department doesn't help you, the family doesn't help, you don't help either... That you, for fuck's sake, want him to get the same results as Manolito, whose father is a lawyer and whose mother is an engineer. It can't be the same, because they don't see the same things at home.*

Educational policies, implemented by the administration with the argument of improving the quality of education, promote productivity and competitiveness. For Enrique, this fact is crucial. He is aware, and is always mindful of the fact that he is the representative of the administration in the school, and he knows that what the administration demands of him is to manage the (insufficient) resources provided to him in an efficient, productive and cost-effective manner.

The administration pushes for a redistribution of resources according to neoliberal approaches, i.e. hiding or avoiding problems and shifting them on to the school principals.

*They call you: Enrique, listen to me, I have a problem in such and such a school, six complaints to the headmistress, you take them, right? That's how it is. What do you do? You open the doors to these children, whether or not I have children, whether I increase the ratio, it doesn't matter.*

Enrique thinks that the administration is spreading the politically correct discourse and expressing its will to promote equity among students. In reality, however, this is a *simulated will* that is not backed up by effective resources and measures. In practice, this means that attention to students' needs is once again dependent on their *goodwill* and that of the school's teaching staff: "It's one thing for it to come from the school,



because... for an initiative to take care of this, to take care of... but there are no guarantees, right? Because you need it [money].

He believes that it is not really in the interest of the state to eliminate inequalities, including those between public schools; this is the way to make a difference in a society governed by supply and demand. In a neoliberal, profit-driven society, investing in the most disadvantaged children is perceived as “throwing money away”; and this neoliberal management of student marginalisation justifies school rankings.

For Enrique, one of the most degrading examples of this management model is reflected in the INEAE, an index that increases the score of schools in the rankings: the more students with specific educational needs are accommodated, the more they are compensated in the evaluation, instead of being provided with the resources they need to adequately address diversity. It is also reflected in the regulation of grade repetition, which is given priority over the provision of extraordinary resources. And it is also seen in the itineraries that are supposedly set up to cater for diversity; as the zone inspector points out, in practice they do not succeed in reintegrating the students into the mainstream education system, and they end up dropping out of school.

In line with the administration’s style of education management, the administration has increased its control over schools. Although the General Inspector argues that those in charge should feel accompanied and not supervised, Enrique sees a supervisory control that demands accountability, but only for the aspects that are of interest, since the administration is far removed from the real problems of the school: “There are things that cannot be controlled, if they really controlled me, after three months of being here I would have been fired”. In this respect, the director acknowledges that it is necessary to be accountable for what is done, because we are talking about the public sector, but the accountability that is demanded is not inspired by this idea of the public sector, but rather by neoliberal approaches.

One of the measures introduced by the administration to exercise its control has been to increase the power of the *management* (not in the broad sense of a management team, but as a single-person position), reducing the participation of the educational community (through the school staff and the school council) in decision-making. According to the area inspector, this is the tendency when conservative parties are in power. In this way, the person in charge has unquestioned power, but is also solely responsible for what is done and, above all, for what is not done.

*You are responsible, you have all the power, that is, I approve the school plan, man, except for the educational points which are... the educational project has 16 sections and it seems to me that there are 6 or 7 where the faculty has the power. The school board has nothing, zilch. I say this afternoon [at] the school council and for fuck’s sake I approve the school plan and people say: OK.*

Enrique sees his increased power as principal as a mechanism for the administration to control the management of the school and the work of the teachers through him.

*People think they have the power to... what power, you idiot? If they’re doing it to control you, I’m the last one responsible for everything. It’s this “how cool, what power” ... what power? What I have is a tension all day long, shitting bricks.*

On the other hand, he feels that this increased power does not allow him to exercise the pedagogical leadership he would like, but rather prevents him from doing so, because, as the zone inspector remarked, “the director is a nursemaid for everything”. Finally, their power is largely translated into an increase in the technical-bureaucratic management tasks that take up much of their time.

*Management nowadays is not to be taken, it is not to be taken, it is a bureaucratic, ugly job, you have very little room for manoeuvre to do things... of course the room for manoeuvre you have is very small, because (...) the obstacles that the inspection does not put in your way, the rules put them in your way or the colleagues themselves put them in your way.*

Given the role of management, the selection process in practice makes enforcement a matter *sui generis*. Enrique explains that the selection process is a technical matter with political interests.

*You play dirty and say I'm not interested in this one, I'm interested in this one, inflate the score, reduce the score, even though they deserve a higher score, but as this one can be a public danger...*

Within this macro-political framework, Enrique talks about the relevance of professional profiles for the development of the management practice of one school or another, depending on the socio-cultural and economic context of the area in which it is located, as these circumstances condition the micro-policy that must be developed in each school.

However, his case is that of a “neighbourhood manager” with a genuine managerial profile. His managerial style is the result of several aspects: his personal background, his professional career, which has been shaped by teaching and managerial experience, and his vision of education. Enrique could have started as a director in a medium-high level centre, but he decided against it, resigned, and his destination was the current centre.

*I came here and I stayed here and I'm still here, as I always say, I started as a teacher.*

He has the neighbourhood and its casuistry in his blood, he understands the language of need, of the risk of social exclusion, of the underground economy, of drugs and their consequences.

*I was given my definitive post in a shanty town (...) and there I was forged as a teacher of shanty towns, students with drug-dependent parents (...) it brought me very close to this type of person, and since then I have not stopped being part of centres where... well... as the shanty towns are marginal, and the people are much closer to what I have lived and what I have been as a person.*

This director makes management a constant struggle to educate and guarantee the well-being of his students; he makes management a socio-political project. In order to do this, he believes it is essential to speak the same language as the families, which allows him to empathise with them and understand the neighbourhood. To be close, to listen, to be sensitive to the reality of the school and the reality that surrounds it, is fundamental to the implementation of the educational project: “because the idiosyncrasies of the neighbourhood condition you a lot”.

*Every morning at 9am, Rosa, I'm outside the school gate smoking a cigarette, I know it's not allowed, but it's my way of relating and interacting with my parents, and at that gate every other day there are 3 or 4 families who tell me that they don't have money for their children's breakfast, that I should give them breakfast and I give them breakfast; I can't, but I do, I don't care, I don't care, they can throw me out.*

In order to be able to develop the (micro) policies that he considers to be the fairest for his students, Enrique has become *very knowledgeable* about the regulations. He knows them in depth and knows how to read “between the lines”, which allows him to find legal loopholes to fulfil his educational (and social) project, and to seek solutions to the (not only academic) problems that the school and its educational community face on a daily basis.

*So we try, we try within our possibilities, to cheat, which, it must be said, ... to look for that legal loophole, don't we? (...) to always be on the edge, on the razor's edge, to try to comply with what the regulations say, but (...) also to know the regulations very well in order to be able to get around them and to find a solution to this issue, the issue of food, the SYGA plan, for example.*

He does not adapt to the norm, but takes it to the terrain that he considers relevant for the good of the centre and the neighbourhood, that is, it is the norm that he adapts to the limit, to the point of bordering on the illegal, knowing that “I'm taking a gamble”. However, Enrique understands that implementing an inclusive and equitable education project responds to a commitment to social justice and the common good, not to a rule. In this way, he makes leadership a humanising practice that takes place in the daily life of the school.

*We have had classes with multiple deficiencies since before the issue of inclusion, which is also included in the regulation, in some instructions, in the instructions of 8 March. What does that mean, that it is already in the regulation and now it can be done, that it could not be done before? I've been doing it all my life.*

His *rebellious and dissident attitude* towards rules and practices that perpetuate injustices and do not contribute to the improvement of education and the well-being of students has led him to clash with the inspectorate, the Education Delegation, various organisations and institutions, and even the collective of headmasters and headmistresses.

*I don't talk to 85% of the people in the management, why, because I keep defending that this is bullshit (...) Today we have the problems we have because accountability is the English term for establishment.*

In the light of the above, it is striking that no action has been taken against him, that he has not been reprimanded. But that may be because Enrique is solving the problems of his school, a school in a “stigmatised” neighbourhood, where not many people would want to be in charge, and that suits the administration.

Nevertheless, he recognises himself as the administrator in the centre, and admits that his position is not easy and that he cannot always act according to his convictions, which leads to conflicts. This internal struggle has led him to resign several times.

*You often get into contradictions, conflicts with yourself, to say, am I taking a gamble? It's that I'm from here... You know what I mean, I've had problems (...) I've tendered my resignation several times for political reasons, political thinking, personal beliefs, to say, “I can't cope with this”, although the law allows me to do so, I can't look the other way, you know what I mean, I can't. I can't do it.*

Another aspect of the regulations<sup>4</sup> that he does not accept, is the (already mentioned) reduction in the involvement of the educational community in decision-making through the school staff and the school council. He argues that the school, as a public school, should respond to democratic principles and that he has done everything possible to maintain a *policy of encouraging participation* since he took up the post of director.

*So (...) does it go against what the rule says? Yes, but you have to take a gamble, because I continue to make a consensus in a hidden way, even if later, when the minutes are signed, I say: “the director by resolution approves...”*

In line with the above, and with the way he sees himself and symbolises himself, Enrique prefers to be unnoticed and “behind the scenes”; he does not want the

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<sup>4</sup>The Interviews were conducted during the transit period in the implementation of the LOMLOE.

position to become a show of power, to represent what he does not believe in. He prefers anonymity.

*Well, in fact, when they come to meet the school management, they may think that any of their colleagues is the headmaster. In fact, it has happened to me on several occasions, that they see me and say “hey, please tell the director”.*

The development of Enrique’s socio-political project has led the centre to become a reference in the attention to diversity, by adopting an intersectional perspective of this diversity and a responsible attitude to the needs that arise from it: “This is inclusion, everyone, equality, for everyone: gender, economic, disability, different abilities, whatever you want to call it.”

However, he complains that it is not easy for them to do this work in the most inclusive way possible, because they would need more professionals to accompany pupils with specific educational support needs in their mainstream classrooms or perhaps in an “open classroom”.

But he does not renounce the implementation of the maximum number of educational strategies that promote equity. For example, coordination between cycles, which sometimes involves coordination between schools.

*A nursery school has absolutely nothing to do with me, my colleague’s school, Marta’s school, has nothing to do with me? What’s going on? Since I don’t believe in that, we establish links and make a real transit programme. I call her, I invite her to participate in my activities, she calls me, I participate... why? Because, hell, she and I are 25 metres away, it’s just across the street, it’s in my neighbourhood and they are my future students (...) if not, ask the other school that’s across the street; they don’t know because it’s a charter school: John Paul I or II (...), this one who is from Opus, this one who is here; they don’t know anyone.*

It also encourages the sharing of the most valuable aspects of each stage, such as the assembly. Enrique has made it compulsory in Primary Education to devote part of the timetable to this activity, which promotes the development of much-needed oral expression, allows reflection on social issues and work on values, and also facilitates the pupils’ knowledge of the social context.

His tireless work for the equity of his students even led him to completely reorganise the school in terms of space, time, content and methodology. Until Covid’s arrival in 2020, every Friday for the past few years they have been working on the basis of the neighbourhood’s own music, flamenco and carnival, taking advantage of the fact that, alongside the abundance of poverty and marginalisation, there is an abundance of art and artists in the neighbourhood. Enrique’s aim was to motivate his students through activities that are close to their hearts and that they love, and to provide them with positive role models so that they do not disengage from the education system. Despite the very positive aims of this project, this time it also encountered obstacles on the part of the administration, which was more concerned with bureaucratic aspects.

*Do you think that the choice of music, of theatre, is arbitrary? We (because it’s not my thing, it was the work of a colleague of mine, Jesús, the music teacher), the music teacher and I, the light bulb went on when we saw that a former pupil of this school, who was a guaranteed failure in all respects; our fault, we didn’t know how to deal with the talent he had; the family, the inspectorate, he was expelled from school.... He’s a great percussionist and he came here to see us and, boy, is he a guy who makes a living (...) he’s crazy happy and he’s a percussionist.*

Because of the social inequalities experienced by the families at the centre, Enrique demands more freedom to intervene with them. He does not want to use his authority to sanction, to expel: He wants to be able to work with them to improve their situation.

*The director demands freedom to develop his socio-political project in favour of equity: “This is the administration itself, we’re back to the same thing, if you give me freedom in some things, apparently I don’t want them; give me freedom so that I can intervene with the family”.*

He feels the need to have this freedom to intervene because of the lack of resources offered by the administration in Social Services. He explains that they used to have a person who acted as a mediator between the school and the families and who intervened with the families, but that service was discontinued, allegedly due to a lack of resources in the administration. He is therefore outraged that public money is being wasted and not being properly managed (either by the Junta de Andalucía or by the city council). He demands to be able to take care of it himself, to save money.

However, Enrique does not hesitate to go beyond his duties as headteacher if he can help families and improve the lives of his students. When it comes to removing children from their parents, he also demands greater efficiency, but as we know, he does what he feels is his responsibility, regardless of what the rules say.

*I have had nine child withdrawals, which is the worst thing for me. Then it is true that there are rewards. I have managed (...) to recover some of those who were removed, at the age of seven; three siblings were taken away from here: at the age of seven, four and three, I took them away from a father and a mother. Hard (...). And eight months later, I have taken a mother on my motorbike to the Provincial Centre for Drug Addiction to do a urine test. Are you clean, are we going to fight to get the children back? (...) Come with me! Let’s give you a heroin test! And I have taken her on my bike. And I am the director, I am not paid for that, but I have to do that, because that is my job in this school (...) and we have recovered children (...) others have been lost along the way, but I know we have done the right thing.*

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The case of Fernando Quiñones, CEIP principal, helps us to understand the negative impact of neoliberal education policies, which are characteristic of current education systems (Torres Santomé, 2017), by showing how they hinder the promotion of equity in a school context where many problematic situations of inequality and exclusion are concentrated. In the face of these policies and in the context of the desire to achieve social justice and equity, leadership is shaped and defined by action in everyday life and not only by the managerial function (Vázquez, 2019). Such action, always contextualised and embodied in the reality of the school and its territory, becomes dissident (Netolicky, 2019), and the development of practices according to the needs of the context contributes to equity, as Leithwood et al. point out. (2020) In our case, this equity-focused dissident action means that the principal is constantly walking a “tightrope”, in order to be able to implement a socio-political project that improves the lives of the students and their families and contributes to social justice in a neighbourhood that suffers from vulnerability, a condition that is “socially produced and that affects above all the most precarious people” (Butler, 2018, p. 13).

This dissident, engaged and critical action necessarily coexists with what defines the techno-bureaucratic managerial function prescribed by regulation and demanded by the administration (Newton, 2019). The findings are in line with the approaches advocated by Torres Santomé (2017) and Díez Gutiérrez (2020a). They show that education policies aim to achieve results in schools similar to those expected in private companies: quality, productivity and competitiveness. In this sense, although the administration disseminates a politically correct discourse and expresses its will to promote equity, this is not accompanied by the necessary resources to make it possible.

The case shows that, from the dominant neoliberal perspective, it is not convenient to invest in the most disadvantaged children and families, or to end inequality; it is in the interest of maintaining the rankings between schools, including public schools, in a society where everything, including education, is considered a consumer good, another commodity to be played with in the cost-benefit framework (Díez Gutiérrez, 2020b).

A fundamental aspect of these policies that hinders equity is the curriculum, which is technocratic and also neoliberal, as prescribed by economic (non-educational) organisations such as the OECD, the WB or the IMF. The current curriculum, with the introduction of the subject of economics, the reduction of subjects such as philosophy and the arts, etc., forms a human capital of subjects that adapt to the system and maintain it (Torres Santomé, 2017). It is also significant that it is only the content related to values, other than those of neoliberal ideology, that does not have evaluation indicators that allow them to be assessed and taken into account in qualifications. In the same vein, equity is hindered by the fact that evaluation is not continuous, qualitative and inclusive, but summative, finalistic and quantitative, as the results show.

In this case we can see that the neoliberal economic-educational project is materialised through the people in charge (not the whole management team), according to the “New Public Management” model. The professionalisation of school management is necessary because it is through this figure that the administration exercises its control over schools (Barrios et al., 2013). The manager now has more decision-making power, but also the duty to manage the (usually insufficient) resources of the institution efficiently and profitably (as in business), and to be accountable for this management, as Lee et al. point out. (2019); the same is not true for equity (Niesche, 2018). This means that the administration imposes a techno-bureaucratic management function that leaves little time for the exercise of pedagogical leadership. Obviously, this situation leads to another of the main consequences of this model of leadership, which is the reduction of participation and therefore of school democracy. This also complicates the development of inclusive and contextualised democratic leadership (Gurr and Drysdale, 2018; Niesche and Gowlett, 2019).

Enrique’s case shows that, within the framework of neoliberal education policies, it is possible to respond to the demands of the administration with dissident management actions, while at the same time implementing the necessary measures to promote educational equity in schools and social justice outside of schools, using the legal loopholes in the regulations, in line with the proposal of Murillo et al. (2010). To do this, it is essential to know the regulations in depth, so as not to contradict them, but to find the loopholes in order to implement actions that seek the common good and the well-being of children. This also means accepting that conflicts with other representatives of the administration, as well as ethical conflicts, are inevitable when it is not possible to provide what are considered necessary social justice interventions (Newton, 2019) for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners (Llorent-Bedmar et al., 2017).

Attention to diversity, from an intersectional perspective, is the priority of the dissident managerial action model. The case shows that even when essential resources (human, material and financial) are lacking, successful teaching strategies can be implemented and the curricula, timetables, spaces, etc. can be reorganised to carry out projects that motivate students (Longmuir, 2019). However, in order to take diversity into account, it is also important to work with families (Longás Mayayo et al., 2019), listening to them, getting to know them and being aware of their needs, not only through officially regulated group and individual meetings, but also through informal conversations in

community spaces and in places that are not a priori intended for this purpose, such as at the school gate, in the street, etc.

In this way, an inclusive school is constituted, a school in which diversity is valued and which tries to give each person the attention they need to develop to their full potential, and for this it is very important to have the participation of the entire educational community (even if this is not stipulated in the regulations) and to take care of the (school) democracy that should be inherent in all public institutions.

The research also shows that if there is a commitment to the most disadvantaged and to public education as a guarantor of rights, it is necessary to adopt and implement a socio-political project in favour of educational equity and social justice (Torres Santomé, 2017). This is the only way to have the tools to confront an administration and educational policy that seeks education for all, without exclusion or inequality, but which remains a simulation because it does not really provide the means to do so.

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