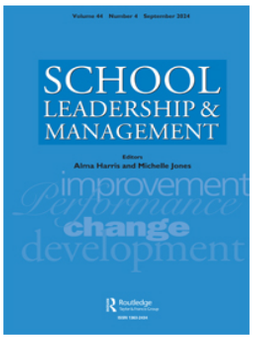

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Female leadership as a process of collective responsibility: the case of Chilean school principals

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the characteristics of leadership in schools where school principals are female, examining the voices and perceptions of the protagonists of female leadership. Employing a case-study methodology, data were collected through 12 in-depth interviews with female principals from the Santiago Metropolitan Region in Chile. The results show that female principals exercise leadership qualities associated with distributed and social justice leadership. This leadership is characterised by active listening and the generation of participatory spaces, the search for collective agreements and teamwork, and the construction of trust and co-responsibility. The findings suggest that female Chilean school principals understand their leadership as a process of accompaniment, which promotes collective responsibility and the well-being of the school community.

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Female principals; distributed leadership; social justice leadership; collective responsibility; schools

Introduction

Recent research has shown that leadership is a fundamental factor in the educational process since it promotes and mobilises the work of teachers and the school community, for the achievement of comprehensive learning for all students (Barber and Mourshed 2008; Bolivar 2012; 2019; Leithwood 2009). This has become evident in contexts of pandemic emergency, where leadership styles have been deployed in types of adaptive, caring, distributed and systemic leadership, which have made it possible to incorporate or develop leadership skills that allow the school to navigate against the new challenges posed (Bolivar et al. 2022).

The literature has shown that female leadership is characterised by the development and promotion of practices associated with empowering work teams, fostering collective work, collaboration, and a motivation to lead oriented towards social justice (Blackmore 2006; Fuller 2022; Kaiser and Wallace 2016). It is due to characteristics like these that being a woman has been identified as a determining factor for the professional performance of female principals (González, Rodríguez, and Segovia 2021; Weinstein et al. 2021).

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However, this situation is contradicted by the various gender gaps that still exist in the educational system, where school leadership is still closely linked to the masculine, which naturally appears as the figure in which to exercise this role, individually and heroically (Jones 2017; Netolicky 2020; Shah 2021).

In Chile, the female presence in the labour sphere has been increasing and has been accompanied by a favourable social assessment of paid work as it increases the economic autonomy and personal freedom of women (Ansoleaga and Godoy 2013). However, even though the growth of female participation is undeniable, for the year 2019, the labour participation rate in Chile was 49.3% (INE 2019).

In the school environment, female participation has been extensive since the teaching force has been strongly dominated by women (Camacho 2017). In Chile, there has been an increase in female participation in management positions (MINEDUC 2021), which currently leads to female principals representing 63.13% of all school principals in the country.[1]

From a gender perspective, a recent study in Chile has identified differences in the leadership practices of women and men, realising that the former perform to a greater extent than their male counterparts in those practices that are linked to improving the results of students, accounting for highly effective leadership (Weinstein et al. 2021). In addition, there are other personal characteristics such as a passion for education and experience and professional skills that act as facilitators of the exercise of female leadership in the school environment (Arroyo and Bush 2021).

This study aims to contribute to the recognition of women's leadership styles, which remained largely unexplored until the late 1980s when educational leadership studies began to focus on women, gender, and feminism (Fuller 2022). It seeks to understand the distinct characteristics of women's educational leadership.

The potential that female leadership has shown, added to the barriers that arise for them to exercise the position of principals, has led us as researchers to inquire about the leadership practices exercised by Chilean principals. For this reason, we ask ourselves: What are the characteristics of the leadership exercised by Chilean female school principals?

The results of this research are part of a 4-year study, which began in 2021 and ends in 2024 and is financed by the Associative Center for School Leadership (C-líder) which was created and financed by the Ministry of Education through decree 111 of 2020. The study seeks to analyse the trajectories of school principals from a gender equality perspective.

Female leadership: its background

An analysis of female leadership necessarily requires being located in the structure of male domination that has historically linked reproductive, care and home responsibilities to women (Cabrera 2005; Coronel, Carrasco, and Moreno 2012; Cubillo and Brown 2003). This has distanced women from

performing professional leadership positions, with greater responsibility or at a high level, because such work implies high levels of demand to make the exercise of mentioned positions and upbringing compatible, prioritising professional life over personal life (Carrasco and Barraza 2023; Coleman 2007).

This has generated inequalities that lead women to feel that they will be judged with higher levels of demand than their male peers, so they prefer to stay out of the competition for leadership positions because this implies very unequal and stressful conditions (Bird 2015). On the other hand, those women who do assume these positions will be required to learn to balance their personal and professional lives, in the context of their own professional career (Jones 2017; Moorsi 2007). Women face criticism for not being tough enough, or when they are, they're perceived as 'unfeminine,' creating tension between collective and personalist leadership based on 'masculine' or 'feminine' gender stereotypes (Arar and Shapira 2016; Eagly 2007).

One of the barriers that women principals must face is the social factors linked to the macho culture and 'hegemonic masculinity' that lead them to build their roles based on trajectories marked by highly masculinised contexts (Blackmore 2017). In the same sense, Jones (2017) points out that the perception of school leadership is still closely linked to the male figure and that the identity of female principals is also built concerning the masculine. An example of this is the finding of the research carried out by Arroyo and Bush (2021) with Chilean principals showing how the patriarchal and sexist culture continues to define the trajectories of women principals who move between the demands of a 'masculine leadership' and the search and practice of their own forms of a more democratic leadership.

Female leadership: its characteristics

Feminist perspectives on educational leadership have brought intersectionality into the debate by taking into account differences based on race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, all issues that have been neglected by conventional research that focused on white and male power, adding a commitment to gender justice and inclusion (Blackmore 2020; Fuller 2022). This is part of the search to reduce existing barriers for women to exercise leadership roles to move towards a fairer distribution of power, resources and representation in decision-making (Blackmore 2020).

However, female leaders have shown to be more effective in organisational structures based on teams and driven by consensus and inclusion in organisations that prevail in the current context (Appelbaum, Audet, and Miller 2003; Fuller 2022). Thus, female principals have been shown to exercise practices that are linked to the educational success of students to a greater extent, revealing a way of exercising leadership that is different from that of their male peers (Weinstein et al. 2021). For example, in vulnerable contexts, leading with others

and not over others has shown to be an effective strategy to achieve change, so female principals have developed distributed leadership styles that are oriented towards social justice to eradicate inequalities and discrimination in their schools (González, Rodríguez, and Segovia 2021).

Female leadership has been characterised by facilitating the empowerment of work teams, along with strengthening social interactions and promoting collective work (Blackmore 2006). Added to this are studies showing that women leaders tend to work better with other people because they develop environments of greater collaboration (Kaiser and Wallace 2016). It has also been shown that women leaders have skills to understand and manage their emotions (Esser et al. 2018), which allows them to have a basis for better recognising the emotions of others (Glass and Cook 2016). In this way, female leadership is connected to the collective experiences of emotionality (Blackmore 2013), to the extent that capacities are developed that allow, for example, listening and helping young people who make up the teams, enhancing interactions and empathy.

In their study of women managers in higher education institutions, Moncayo and Pinzón (2013) found divergences in female and male leadership styles. The first ones were characterised by being transformational and participatory, exercised from a high ethical and moral sense, in a visionary and inclusive way. While the latter is characterised by being transactional where what prevails is the leader-subordinate exchange. This is related to other studies that have defined the transformational inclusive and social justice nature of female leadership (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen 2003; Fuller 2022), hence the relevance of promoting spaces of power that do not devalue the feminine and that ensure the possibility that women can also access leadership positions (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen 2003), seeking that each individual's abilities are recognised without associating them with gender stereotypes (Moncayo and Pinzón 2013).

Women principals tend to emphasise interactions with other groups, both internal and external, as a central aspect of their management, reflecting a leadership that is based on collectivity and collaboration (Carrasco, Coronel, and Fernández 2003). Within the tasks they carry out, differences have also been found, since women tend to dedicate more time to pedagogical work, dedicating themselves to tasks related to teaching and the curriculum and meeting with teachers and families (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2015).

Female leadership has given an account of the diversity of advantages in the educational environment (Blackmore 2006; Fuller 2022; Moncayo and Pinzón 2013; Sánchez-Moreno, López-Yáñez, and Toussaint-Banville 2021; Weinstein et al. 2021). Therefore, a change is required that makes visible the importance of women as a valuable human capital resource that should be promoted instead of being suppressed by sociocultural barriers, since the exercise of

effective leadership is not the exclusive domain of any gender (Appelbaum, Audet, and Miller 2003; Shah 2021).

Female leadership: the distributed and the search for social justice

From the perspective of feminist theories on leadership, the emphasis has been placed on issues related to agency, but also on how capacities are developed collectively (Blackmore 2020). In this context, the figure of leadership focused on an individual, the hierarchical and charismatic vision has been displaced by a new conception of educational leadership that is transversal and emphasises collective practices (Maureira 2017; Maureira, Moforte, and González 2013; Rincon-Gallardo 2020). This reveals the need to break with 'the myth of the complete leader', 'characterised as the perfect individual who is at the head of the organisation, and who has the intellectual capacity, knowledge, personal skills and abilities that allow him or her to have everything in order, controlled and resolved' (Maureira, Moforte, and González 2013, 140).

This is where distributed leadership emerges, promoting a collective perspective and decision-making that is shared by the different actors in the educational community (Gronn 2013; Harris 2012; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019; Spillane and Ortiz 2019). Knowledge is expected to be dispersed and shared by all members of the community, to generate fluid communication between teachers and principals (Blackmore 2013). Distributed leadership then refers to an integration of the actions and attributions of different groups or people who make a coordinated effort to improve student learning, which should not be confused with the bureaucratic distribution of tasks or functions of the school administration (Anderson 2010). In essence, it is about understanding how the processes of influence occur between the different actors of the school, leading to its study of the processes of interaction, more than to the attribution that a single person possesses in the exercise of his or her leadership, disaggregating the managerial roles pursuing the idea of leadership around the collective (Maureira 2017).

Thus, interactions take centre stage, aiming to foster the development of capacities and empower the educational community, rather than attempting to control or coerce it to achieve predefined objectives (Azorín, Harris, and Jones 2019). The focus is on promoting autonomy, creativity, dialogue, and deliberation within educational communities (Rincon-Gallardo 2020). In this sense, the definition of leader goes from being located in a single figure to extending to multiple leaders who influence the pedagogical practices of schools, creating shared meanings and values, together with a climate of trust, dialogue and support among teachers for involvement in a shared project (Maureira 2017).

In turn, certain values have been highlighted that enhance the distribution of leadership, such as trust, as it allows opening spaces for decision-making and the deployment of professional strengths present in the teams (Ahumada, Maureira, and Castro 2019). Trust has been understood as the expectation

that the other party will not act opportunistically and will make an effort to fulfil the acquired commitments (Smylie et al. 2007). It is expected that this type of leadership can help connect, share, learn, and network to solve community problems, as well as redesign workplaces, allowing for increased professionalism of teachers and a sense of community (Bolivar et al. 2022).

The foregoing involves the subjectivities of the people in the educational community, which is why the affective, personal and emotional aspects of trust within schools require the so-called soft skills on the part of managers and teachers to increase them (Peña, Weinstein, and Raczynski 2018). In this way, communication is an important element for building relationships of trust (Weinstein 2022). This construction will allow, for example, the introduction of fewer bureaucratic controls, expansion of autonomy, incorporation of collaborative processes and two-way communication, as well as joint problem-solving (Smylie et al. 2007).

On the other hand, among other styles of leadership associated with characteristics of female leadership, is the leadership for Social Justice which promotes the school space as an organisation that, based on daily activities, seeks to eliminate social differences (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014). This leadership is carried out collectively to the extent that teamwork is carried out and initiatives that build the daily life of the school centre are shared (Bolívar, López Yáñez, and Murillo 2014). By promoting leadership for Social Justice, principals, both male and female express their commitment to an educational system that promotes new forms of professionalism, efficiency indicators, and modes of accountability that are aligned to generate a fair community that does not discriminate but instead, takes into account the diversity of its students (Liasidou and Antoniou 2015).

Redistribution and recognition are promoted, together with the representation and participation of people in matters that affect their lives (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014; Sarasola and Da Costa 2016). For this reason, the daily practice of principals turns to the transformation of different forms of discrimination and microaggressions that generate hostile learning environments for some students, showing how the participation of the community has allowed success in addressing existing inequalities and discrimination (Forde, Torrance, and Angelle 2021). Leadership for Social Justice pursues community participation in decision-making to transform and give new meaning to the school space, valuing diversity and overcoming exclusion and social inequalities (García and Moral 2015; León, Crisol, and Moreno 2018; Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014; Navarro-Granados 2017).

Methodology

This exploratory research produced knowledge from primary sources and was based on an instrumental case study (Stake 1999). Since the purpose of this

research was to understand the leadership practices exercised by Chilean female principals, it was of great importance to immerse ourselves in the phenomenon from a qualitative methodology, which would allow us to investigate first hand from the voices of the protagonists and capture the meanings constructed in their daily lives by these principals themselves (Creswell 2013; Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza 2018).

The question that guided the research was: ¿What are the characteristics of the leadership exercised by Chilean female principals?

To investigate the voices of the principals, we worked with the technique of in-depth interviews. The interview schedule was validated by a group of three experts with vast knowledge of school leadership and gender perspective issues. This validation was focused on ensuring the coherence, both internal and external, of the interview script. Twelve principals of primary and secondary schools in the Metropolitan Region of Chile participated in the research. The selection criteria for participants included the years of experience as a principal, the type of establishment in which they work and their previous position. This was done to ensure diversity in terms of school levels and leadership experiences (Table 1).

The analytical approach of this research consisted of looking for what is common and different in each of the set of principal stories. For this, a 'dialectical and progressive relationship between the production of data around the investigated phenomenon [and] the work of analysis and theorisation of the corpus' was established (Mucchielli 2001, 69). In addition, to give coherence to the analytical procedure, we worked with Atlas.ti software. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2017) was used for the analysis.

In this sense, we worked here from an open codification, which was later related to the deductive knowledge associated with the subject studied.

Table 1. Characterisation of the principals.

Participant	Experience as principal (years)	Previous role	Type of establishment
Principal 1	3	Head of PTU[2]	Primary school
Principal 2	2	Head of PTU	Primary school
Principal 3	6	Deputy Principal, General Inspector, Head of PTU, Counsellor	Primary school
Principal 4	6	Deputy Principal, Provincial Technical Chief	Secondary school
Principal 5	4	Head of PTU	Primary and secondary school
Principal 6	6	Head of PTU	Primary and secondary school
Principal 7	1	Head of PTU, Head of Community PTU in Council Educational Direction	Primary school
Principal 8	3	Head of PTU	Primary school
Principal 9	12	Principal	Primary school
Principal 10	6	Head of PTU, Academic Coordinator.	Primary and secondary school
Principal 11	4	Technical Manager, Principal.	Primary school
Principal 12	8	Technical Manager, Principal.	Primary and secondary school

From the above, the following categories were generated: listening and promoting participation, collective agreements and the promotion of teamwork and, building trust and co-responsibility.

Results and discussion

Listening and promoting participation

Regardless of the type of establishment and their experience in leadership, principals highlight their ability to listen and consider the opinions of the community, facilitating the decision-making and building environments of greater collaboration (Kaiser and Wallace 2016). This is how the principal's story indicates it below:

> If you have a team, you have to listen to it too, regardless of whether you disagree sometimes or end up deciding over another, but you do give that space that assures the other that at least you did consider their point despite that maybe it won't be that way. That you are not blind or deaf. This has also allowed me to make the right decisions because, well, two heads are better than one. (Principal 1)

This ability to listen, as reported by participants, makes it possible to generate close relationships in the community through recognition of the other, which facilitates the construction of a better coexistence and a basis for better recognising the emotions of others (Glass and Cook 2016). The ability to listen and help people, while forming teams, enhances interactions and empathy in the educational community.

> I think it has been a good relationship from the point of view that it is a very close relationship, either from dialogue, from empathy; recognizing (…) the important thing is to be able to generate dialogues in terms of respect to build a healthy coexistence. (Principal 5)

Listening, dialoguing and taking into account a diversity of perspectives are characteristics of the leadership of these principals, which allow them to facilitate the direction of the school and the empowerment of the educational community, instead of controlling and coercing it to achieve the school objectives (Azorín, Harris, and Jones 2019; Fuller 2022). In this way, the diversity of experiences present in the school is valued, opening spaces for conversation and the search for solutions.

> I like that people participate. I like the debate, I like to see other perspectives. I think that is characterised by my type of leadership. Many times, the look that the management team has is very biased because they are not where the teachers are, they are not in the classroom. In fact, the professors have told me several times that they really appreciate the fact that I listen and not only listen, but that I take the corresponding measures, but quickly. (Principal 9)

This is how the listening spaces become spaces for participation and coming together between the differences and the different members of the educational

community (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014; Navarro-Granados 2017), with leadership that emphasises collective practices (Maureira 2017; Maureira, Moforte, and González 2013; Rincon-Gallardo 2020).

> (Teachers) themselves must validate a space for participation, transformation, and decision-making. For that to happen, principals must not be afraid. (Principal 12)

The principals promote getting out of the classroom, looking for the community outside the school and the community becoming involved in school affairs. Along with this, they also seek to link up with other schools to improve their practices, for example, through the generation of networks of schools to face common problems. This is consistent with the literature that indicates that female principals include interactions with other groups, which can be both internal and external, in their leadership style, developing leadership that is based on collaboration (Carrasco, Coronel, and Fernández 2003).

What is sought here is to generate spaces for real participation, not just advisory ones, spaces in which to reflect together and reach agreements. However, the construction of these spaces for participation also finds resistance within their teams. In this way, the construction of distributed leadership can also face difficulties because this perspective does not necessarily develop naturally (Torrance 2013), it requires time and understanding of the environment, as indicated by the following principals:

> It has taken me a bit, a bit, for the management team to understand that it is important to listen. Suddenly they criticise that it is too much democracy [LAUGHS]. I have a colleague who is the coordinator here and she tells me 'Principal! Enough of so much democracy! Why does everyone have to ask for an opinion and why does everyone have to have an opinion?' Do you realise? [LAUGHS] And I tell her 'Because if they don't, they won't commit to the task'. (Principal 9)

> Look, I generate or install a type of distributed leadership. My team knows this and each one has assumed the role and the tasks that that role implies. It has not been easy for the teachers to accept me as principal and with the leadership that I want to install. (Principal 8)

Despite the difficulties that can be found to install a distributed leadership, the principals have broken with the 'myth of the complete leader' and situate their leadership as one that extends to multiple actors, who contribute with their voices and diverse experiences to the improvement of their institutions (Maureira, Moforte, and González 2013). Although this process also encounters resistance, once the educational community builds the dialogue and participation practices that allow it to sustain distributed leadership, collaboration gains ground and overthrows initial fears or resistance, the acceptance of differences and the search for unity transformation (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014; Navarro-Granados 2017; Rincon-Gallardo 2020).

Collective agreements and the promotion of teamwork to achieve institutional goals

Another common characteristic of the principals of the study is the ability to generate teamwork, a capacity that is typical of types of distributed leadership. This allows them to search for joint knowledge, and seek answers collectively e inclusive, to generate fluid communication between teachers and principals (Blackmore 2013; Blackmore 2020).

> In general, I am very honest with teachers or anyone when there is something that I don´t know. I say that I am going to find out the answer, that I am going to ask. I don´t try to feel like the one that should always solve everything. I always tell my team and teachers that we must build together the answers and work a lot as a team. I develop a lot of more collaborative leadership. (Principal 5)

The principals, through the listening, dialogue and participation, manage to reach collective agreements. Recognising oneself as a principal who listens and who promotes collective goals are fundamental characteristics of decision-making shared by the different actors in the educational community (Fuller 2022; Gronn 2013; Harris 2012; Spillane 2005), even going so far as to redo things considering the community opinion.

> Although it is true, we meet with the management team, when we want to do something, we draw lines, but we always present it to the teachers and the people involved, more or less guiding what we want, but always consulting. So, something is always presented and then the rest contributes, contributes. Sometimes, we have had to destroy things to do something new, but the condition or willingness to do that is there. (Principal 2)

Thus, the agreements are generated collectively through dialogue with both students and teachers, which for the principals also generates a greater commitment to comply with the agreements reached, so that others are influenced and mobilised towards the achievement of shared goals (Leithwood 2009), achieving improvements in their schools.

> I am a principal who listens and who sets collective goals, not individual ones. That we are all responsible for what we want, but also responsible for what we achieve: in the results. (Principal 9)

The ability to reach collective agreements and how teamwork is achieved, generating commitment for the fulfilment of collective goals of the principals interviewed is consistent with the literature, confirming that women leaders tend to work better with others since they develop collaborative environments. This is where distributed leadership emerges, promoting a collective perspective and decision-making shared by the different actors in the educational community (Gronn 2013; Harris 2012; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, 2019; Spillane 2005).

Building trust and co-responsibility

Another characteristic of the discourse that stands out, regardless of the type of establishment and the leadership experience, is the ability to generate and offer trust, an ability that, according to the principals' reports, is a construction that requires time and support, but that, without a doubt, create opening spaces for decision-making and the deployment of professional strengths present in the teams (Ahumada, Maureira, and Castro 2019). It implies a process that requires time and also accepting the mistakes of others and seeking a solution:

> I think that there are teachers who feel absolutely confident to talk to me about the difficulties they are having, but I also understand that there are others who still find it difficult to take the step of saying 'I can't do this' or 'I don't know how to do this or I need help'. (Principal 7)

In this process, the subjective, personal, affective and emotional dimensions also play an important role in generating trust within the school (Peña, Weinstein, and Raczynski 2018). It is then a question of the teams trusting the principals, but they are the ones who also show trust to their teams, promoting the empowerment of the educational community (Carrasco and Barraza 2020). Thus, showing/displaying trust implies working on that capacity with the other to whom it is granted, accompanying this process and taking joint responsibility, within the framework of leadership with collective commitments.

> Yesterday I had an issue with the coordinator because she is a young person, who lacks experience, she may have made certain mistakes in her team as well, so we still had a meeting yesterday and I told her that. In other words, I prefer that you tell me that you were wrong, that you recognise a mistake that we can solve together. (Principal 4)

As indicated by the principal of the following story, trust goes from decision-making, carried out collectively e inclusive, to results, which undoubtedly allow for the development of capacities and the empowerment of the educational community (Azorín, Harris, and Jones 2019; Blackmore 2020).

> Look, the trust and taking charge of who do I give the trust to. That one thing is to give confidence and the other thing is to take charge. The deputy principal always told me 'you are giving a lot of confidence (…) No. It won't work for you. That teacher is here, that teacher is irresponsible, that teacher … '. I have to give him confidence and I have to take care of the person to whom I gave confidence. If the person whom I trusted is wrong first, it is because I did not accompany her enough; I also have to take care of when I gave him and at what moment I gave him the confidence. But I have to give it to them (…) It comes with a more comprehensive trust: a trust that goes from decision-making to results. (Principal 9)

There is a collective sense of building trust here, and it is generated two-fold; In the first place, it is trust to generate dialogues because trust requires the existence of good communication and, secondly, trust is the favourable expectation that in order to carry out certain tasks (Weinstein 2022) and which forms a

fundamental part of the creation and sustainability of a school culture of trust. The latter could tend to develop individually or isolated, however, the participating principals point out that they also take this as a responsibility and accompany the processes to carry out tasks. The foregoing accounts for the relevant role played by trust in the development of distributed leadership to the extent that it allows for their teams to carry out tasks with greater autonomy, incorporating collaborative processes and open communication (Smylie et al. 2007).

In this way, the principals are generating trust that allows them to delegate tasks while taking responsibility for what is being delegated. This is done with a desire to distribute power and it is done through a professional exercise in which the principals identify the existing capacities in their teams to 'polish' people. This is not delegated then to just anyone so easily, instead it is delegated to strengthen individualities seeking empowerment and the development of skills in the educational community (Azorín, Harris, and Jones 2019). In this way, leadership for social justice, of collective practices, is promoted and new forms of professionalism are sought (Liasidou and Antoniou 2015; Rincon-Gallardo 2020).

> In other words, we are all there and the other thing is that I give the possibility for my management team and delegate to grow professionally a lot. I delegate a lot when I see that they have the skills. I supervise, observe, evaluate, but at the same time I let my management team and also the teachers grow a lot. (Principal 6)

> So that process of learning to delegate, learning to let go and, deep down, empowering others to take charge of different things, was very nice. That was very nice learning. And how to make it shine to the maximum, that is, how to look for what people are good at so that in that they give them a lot of homework, something that starts to feel good. (Principal 10)

Although it has been shown that principals play an important role in attracting well-performing teachers to their schools, the principals in this study have given an account of how they enhance existing capacities in their schools. In this sense, female principals have shown a greater tendency than their male peers in providing support to improve pedagogical practices, as well as retain those teachers who perform well (Weinstein et al. 2021).

Conclusions

In the first place, it seems relevant to us to mention that the results and conclusions of this research correspond to a case study based on the discourse of twelve Chilean principals. We do not intend to generalise, but rather, from the stories of the participating principals, contribute to the discussion regarding the characteristics of school leadership in Chile from a female perspective.

In this regard, it can be noted that the characteristics of the principals, such as their years of experience in the position, type of school, and previous roles, do not lead to significant differences in leadership styles. On the contrary,

similarities are observed in their narratives. This makes it possible to confirm that the principals of this study have leadership styles or practices that are typical of the gender and that can be defined from the feminine point of view.

Despite existing barriers for women to exercise leadership positions (Blackmore 2020), the principals of this study enact leadership based on three characteristics (Figure 1).

In the first place, the principals have managed to move towards a fairer distribution of power, resources, and representation in decision-making through listening and promoting participation (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014; Navarro-Granados 2017). Secondly, the understanding of the exercise of the leadership of these principals is conceived from the construction of collective agreements and the achievement of the goals of their teams (Leithwood 2009). Thirdly, the characteristic of the exercise of leadership is highlighted from a particular definition of trust, which promotes communication and the delegation of tasks for the deployment of the professional strengths present in the teams (Ahumada, Maureira, and Castro 2019; Smylie et al. 2007; Weinstein 2022).

Based on the above, we conclude that the principals of this study define their leadership as a *process of collective responsibility* that, as such, implies listening, participation, collective agreements, dialogues, commitments and accompaniment to carry out tasks. In this context, they have developed their type of leadership, which is beneficial for the school and which has many attributes linked to distributed leadership (Gronn 2013; Harris 2012; Maureira 2017; Rincon-Gallardo 2020; Spillane 2005). Adding to this, is the construction from a female leadership perspective, associated with a collective perspective, teamwork and the search for community transformation (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla 2014).

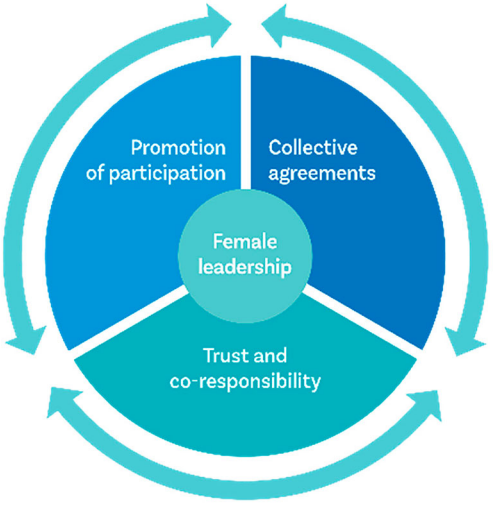

Figure 1. Leadership of Chilean female principals.

This study contributes to making the leadership style of women visible, emphasising their characteristics, and demonstrating that they are developing leadership styles that diverge from traditional vertical and centralised models associated with men. In this sense, there is a need to make women's leadership visible and position it, even more, giving an account of their attributes and characteristics when it comes to exercising their role. The characteristics surfaced in this study, add to the knowledge base highlighting the advantage or potential of the leadership of Chilean female principals (Arroyo and Bush 2021; Carrasco and Barraza 2020; Spillane 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to continue deepening this field, especially at a subjective level, and to develop comparative research that investigates the differences between female and male leadership in schools.

In addition, it is also necessary to advance in a deconstruction of school leadership and begin to build leadership with feminine traits that permeate male principals, seeking to overcome the binary logic of who holds the position of principal. It can contribute to moving towards distributed leadership practices and for social justice that promotes collective practices and the well-being of educational communities regardless of the gender of the leader.

Notes

1. Own elaboration based on the data of 'Teaching Positions 2021' of the Study Center of the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).
2. Head of Pedagogical Technical Unit (PTU) is a middle leadership role, part of the management team and responsible of monitoring and providing feedback to teachers' practices with a focus on student learning.

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