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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The effect of teacher leadership on students' purposeful learning

Verónica Fernández Espinosa^{1*} and Jorge López González¹

Abstract: Teaching leadership is a key factor for students' learning and flourishing, and it occurs in an asymmetrical and interpersonal relationship. This research seeks to characterize the teaching leadership of high school teachers through the influence they exert on their students. It is not based on the teacher's self-perception but on the experience that the students have had. For this purpose, a qualitative study was carried out in Spain with 200 first-year university students in which they answered four questions about the teacher who most influenced them during their high school. The results point to five leadership traits or styles that are not mutually exclusive: empathetic leadership, comforting leadership, motivating leadership, exemplary leadership, and wise leadership. In addition, moments of weakness and vulnerability in students are those that most favour the influence of the teacher in their lives, encouraging vital learning in them. This study highlights the importance of teacher leadership for student character education.

Subjects: Leadership; School Leaders & Managers; Teachers & Teacher Education; Teacher Education & Training; Ethics and Values

Keywords: Character education; flourishing; high school students; teacher leadership; vulnerability

1. Teacher leadership

Since the early 1980's teacher leadership has become a topic of growing interest in education (Crowther et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2023; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). While traditionally the term "teacher" has been associated with classroom instruction, teacher leadership refers to the action of teachers to "lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners

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and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of that leadership" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 6).

According to the above definition, teacher leadership can be conceptualised as an intentional and relational action aimed to guide others towards a shared goal: to improve the educational practice (López & Ortiz de Montellano, 2021; López, 2022b). Teacher leadership is "ultimately an action that enhances teaching and learning" (Crowther et al., 2009, p. 17). Improving teaching and learning is the purpose and focus of teacher leadership, first and foremost for the benefit of the students (Contreras, 2016; York-Barr & Duke). Although the influence between teacher and learner is reciprocal, in the teaching-learning process it is the teacher, not the learner, who takes on the role of the leader, creating a relational asymmetry between the two. This personal relationship between the teacher and student can be seen as an educational alliance for learning, with the biblical alliance serving as a reference point (Fernández & López, 2022b).

Teacher leadership is related to job satisfaction, personal growth, professional development, student motivation and academic achievement (Nguyen et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2023; Schott et al., 2020; Sebastian et al., 2017; Tsai, 2015). Pedagogical leadership influences student learning mediated by teaching practice; learning not only cognitive but affective and linked to social behaviour and values (Bolívar, 2011). Teacher leadership in the classroom is associated with the formation of the value and character of the students (Susanto et al., 2019), with the student commitment to ethical goodness (Prickett, 2016).

According to Lumpkin et al. (2014), teaching leadership can be characterized by the teacher's ability to develop a good relationship in order to student learning. Similarly, Trigueros et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of teaching leadership in developing students' resilience and academic motivation. By adopting a teaching leadership approach, teachers can serve as positive role models for their students and help them to navigate life challenges with greater ease. The teacher's social skills, motivation and empathy favour the development of students' emotional and integral education (Talledo Villacís et al., 2023).

The teaching-learning process has a goal: the education of the student whose ultimate aim is the flourishing of the individual, his or her fulfilment, which includes the good of the community of which he or she is a part. The communion between people can be considered the ultimate expression of this flourishing or fullness (López González, 2022). This purpose guides and gives meaning to the teaching-learning process by linking teacher and student in a relationship that helps both to flourish (Fernández & López, 2021). Teacher-student relationships is critical for students' emotional well-being, motivation, and academic success (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Pekrun et al., 2017). As Kouzes and Posner (2017) points out, "leadership is about relationships, about credibility, about passion and conviction, and ultimately about what you do for others" (p. 295).

According to Ben-Shahar and Ridgeway (2017), the essence of effective leadership is personal flourishing... if the organisation has flourishing people (individuals who are the best versions of themselves and help others to become the best versions of themselves), then you have a leadership organisation that is ready to face today's world (p. 7).

Teacher leadership is also linked to the exercise of virtues (VanderWeele, 2017) and character education (Lickona, 1996). When teachers show interest, care, and concern for their students, engage with them and help them to find meaning and purpose in difficult moments, students have better moral development.

In this research we approached the study of teacher leadership from high school students' perspective and experience. Using an open-ended questionnaire, we asked Spanish students about certain characteristics of teachers that fit the description of teacher leadership described above.



The questions sought to find out not only what teacher leaders are like, but also when, how and why they exercise this leadership role or influence in their students. This research is part of a broader research on the education of freedom as self-determination in high school students (Fernández, 2023). This is not only theoretical but also empirical research, in line with the recommendations of Wenner and Campbell (2017).

2. Objectives

This research seeks to explore the essence of teacher leadership by examining the traits and styles that resonate most with high school students, as they reflect on their experiences upon entering university. The overarching goal is to understand not only what qualities make for effective teacher leadership, but also when, how, and why these traits have a meaningful impact on students. Specifically, the research aims to shed light on the following aspects of teacher leadership: the specific traits that students identify as hallmarks of great teachers; the most impactful moments in which teachers demonstrate their leadership; the styles and approaches that successful teachers employ; and the key takeaways that students glean from their high school experiences.

3. Material and methods

A qualitative methodology based on Denzin and Lincoln (2011) was used to carry out the research. A questionnaire with 4 open questions was applied to 200 first-year Spanish university students.

These students are of particular interest because they have completed high school and have made a significant decision in choosing their university degree. As a result, they can provide an objective assessment of the teachers who have supported them throughout their studies.

A list of the 2.210 students that were enrolled in the first year at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria was taken, and a simple random probability sampling was carried out. Ethical standards of data privacy and academic rigour were respected as part of the research (Fernández, 2023). A survey was designed for the purposes of the research, it was applied in an electronic format (JotForm) and sent to the students database inviting for free responses. Were chosen the first 200 hundred students that answered the questionnaire.

The questions of the questionnaire aimed:

- To elicit three traits or characteristics of the chosen teacher that would have helped them the most.
- To answer when the chosen teacher influenced him/her.
- To answer why/how the teacher influenced him/her.
- Mention two lessons learned from this teacher.

To analyse the data obtained, the stages indicated by Taylor and Bogdan (1987) were followed, namely: progressive discovery phase; data coding phase and refinement in the understanding of the research topic; and understanding of the data in the context in which they were collected.

For the coding of the data, the answers given by the students were extracted from the JotForm platform and entered an Excel table. An Excel sheet was made for each of the questions with the 200 responses obtained. The answers given to each of the questions were read one by one to identify emerging themes, develop typologies and code the data, as recommended by Taylor and Bogdan (1987).

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of the sample

Of the teachers selected by the students in the questionnaire, 51% were female and 49% male. The age range of teachers aged 36-45 years was 40.2%; 46-55 years 36%; 25-35 years 19.1%; 56-



Table 1. Main traits of the most influential teachers				
Way of teaching (of doing their teaching job)	Way of relating (being) with the pupil	Way of being (personality traits and values)		
Demanding, strong, strict, tough, disciplined, energetic, serious (37)	Kindness, goodness, good, caring (48)	Charisma, leader, vision, inspiring (9)		
Motivation (20)	Approachable, interested in the student, attentive, concerned, committed, dedicated, generous, involved, helpful (121)	Consistent, integrity, honest, fair, objective (20)		
Passion and pleasure in teaching. Professionalism, enthusiasm (20)	Confident, understanding, positive 76)	Wise, intelligent, profound (19)		
Patient (18)	Empathetic, listening (39)	Humble, compassionate (8)		
Clear, organised, rigorous (13)	Sincerity, feedback (25)	Hard-working, persevering, determined, responsible, constant (33)		
Dynamic, innovative, active (16)	Polite (3)	Cheerful, friendly, good humour, funny, humorous, optimistic (30)		

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times this word was used.

65 years 4%, and under 25 years 0.7%. According to the study findings, there were no notable distinctions observed in students' preference for teachers based on gender, implying that the impact of teachers on their students is not affected by gender. Notably, the age group of 36–55 was identified by the students as having the most significant impact on them. In contrast, teachers aged 25–35 and 56–65 were not considered as influential by the students. No significant correlation was found between these variables and the responses obtained from the survey.

4.2. Results of the first question

The first question asked respondents to name three traits or characteristics of their chosen teacher that have helped them the most. Responses were classified according to three different, but related, ways: the way of doing (teaching), the way of being (relating to the student in the classroom) and the way of being (values and personality traits). The way of doing refers to the way in which the teacher teaches; the way of being refers to a way of relating to the learner; and the way of being refers to the teacher's personality traits and values.

20% of the responses considered that the main characteristics of the teacher are related to the way he/she teaches, 22% to the way of being and 58% to the way of relating to the student. Table 1 shows what these traits were and how we have classified them according to the triple typology mentioned above.

When it comes to teaching, students prioritize teachers who exhibit high levels of demand and motivation, with a passion for their field and a professional and clear delivery. Furthermore, students value educators who utilize dynamic and active teaching methods to engage learners in the educational process.

Regarding the teacher-student relationship, the research suggests that certain teacher qualities are particularly valued by students. Among these, kindness and empathy were often highlighted as critical components. Furthermore, students valued teachers who shown an interest in them beyond their academic performance. This includes teachers who demonstrated care, love, and trust, and who were committed to supporting their students in achieving personal fulfilment.

Concerning to the way of being, students hold in high regard a set of qualities that they deem desirable in their teachers. These include a cheerful and humorous disposition, as well as a strong sense of dedication or commitment and responsible work ethic. Furthermore, students value teachers who embody the principles of integrity and wisdom.



Table 2. Spheres of influence of the teacher on the student				
The teacher influenced me:				
When there were moments of vulnerability/weakness	'when I had personal problems; when I had the worst time' 'when I was in the chaotic stage of adolescence' 'when I was in the chaotic stage of adolescence' 'when I was in the chaotic stage of adolescence'. 'when I was in a slump and had no motivation'. 'when my bad exam grades were influencing all the environments in my life'. 'when I felt vulnerable' 'when everyone was insulting me, very hard times' 'when I felt lost in everything in general, I was marginalised in class'. 'when my home situation was influencing my life'. 'when I had a lot of personal problems and instead of ignoring me, he helped me at school and in my personal life' 'when I had a lot of personal problems and instead of ignoring me, he helped me at school and in my personal life'.			
When they touched on questions of meaning and took an interest in the student	'when he left the syllabus to always go beyond it' 'when he explained something to us about the subject of the lesson and he helped me in my school and personal life 'when he explained something about life to us before the class started'. 'when he was concerned about our problems and put himself in our shoes, and if he saw us sad he would talk to us after class to see if something was going on in our lives and if he could help us'. 'the fact that he was so good to us and treated us as equals, plus all the things I learned in his subject about truth and goodness have influenced me a lot.' 'when he encouraged me to follow my passion, even though none of my other teachers thought that was what I should be doing'. 'when I saw that he wanted me to bring out the best in me'. 'when he gave us advice' 'when I raised doubts about my existence and my religion'. 'because I was always the typical annoying pupil who failed and missed classes, but in spite of everything he always treated me differently'.			
Because of the way they taught the classes	'because of the way he taught the classes'. 'because I admired him a lot in the sense that he delivered everything he promised and was extremely organised, and he was very dedicated to teaching his subject in a 'cool' way' 'because of the way he taught us'. 'the way he taught us' 'because of how she taught us and how she was enthusiastic and therefore passed that enthusiasm on to us'.			

4.3. Results of the second question

The second question inquired the respondents to reflect on the influence of the teacher they selected. The respondents' answers shed light on three instances or areas of influence: when the student is in a moment of weakness or vulnerability, when the student is searching for meaning or a solution to a life problem, and when the student is engaged in the lesson being taught by the teacher. These instances can transpire simultaneously, where the student is attending class and concurrently undergoing a moment of vulnerability or seeking answers to an existential problem. Under such circumstances, the teacher's mere word or gesture can have a profound impact on the student and facilitate valuable learning. The outcomes of the survey imply that the moment in



which the teacher most significantly impacted the student's life was not a solitary moment but a culmination of experiences over time.

According to the survey results, the moment of vulnerability or weakness appears to be the most significant among the three identified moments of influence. This is followed by the teacher's impact through teachings that are linked to the meaning of life, and finally, the teacher's influence through their way of teaching that relates to learning about life. Table 2 presents a selection of responses obtained from participants of the survey regarding the moments when teachers had the greatest influence on their lives.

4.4. Results of the third question

With regard to the third question, which asked why the teacher had influenced the learner, the responses were classified into five patterns or types of teacher leadership practice.

- (a) The first type, which we refer to as empathetic leadership, involves the establishment of an empathetic bond between the teacher and the learner. The teacher demonstrates a genuine interest in the learner, values their unique qualities and actively engages with them beyond the academic realm. Some of the responses that exemplify this style of leadership include:
 - · "He connected with me".
 - "Because he showed me that he knows how to listen and understand".
 - · 'He listened to my situation and always accompanied me.
 - "He helped me personally. He showed concern for me".
 - 'We had a strong personal bond.
 - "I needed someone to listen to me and help me in an objective way".
 - 'Because I found a point of support and someone I could talk to without being judged.
 - · 'She focused more on the student than just giving the syllabus.
 - · 'She knew how to contact and connect with the students.
 - "He treated me with care".
- (b) The second style, referred to as comforting leadership, pertains to instances where the teacher provided the necessary support and encouragement to help the student believe in themselves during moments of self-doubt. The following are some examples of responses that characterise this style:
 - · "He taught me that I was worthwhile".
 - 'He influenced me because he always knew how to see my personal value, apart from my academic value.
 - "He helped me a lot and gave me a lot of confidence when I needed it most".
 - "She made me see that I was intelligent".
 - "She was aware of all my effort and despite my grades she always encouraged me not to give up".
 - "I was able to lean on him and tell him about my problems".
 - "He influenced me when he sent a paper and thanks to the daily work, I presented him with something that I really felt I appreciated."
 - 'He was able to encourage me, talk to me and gain my trust and later on he was able to make me not give up in certain aspects.
 - "He was able to see something in me that no other teacher saw".
 - "The way he treated us in class, talked to us about everything and trusted us, showed the faith he had in us".



- (c) The third style is motivational leadership, which is characterized by teachers who inspire and motivate their students to reach their full potential and find meaning in their actions. Some of the responses from the students that exemplify this style include:
 - Because in class she said things that made me think and reflect on how I acted, and I realised that there were things about me that I really didn't like, and she helped me to change them. Thanks to her I got what I wanted, and I changed for the better.
 - "She helped me in a way that no one else had ever helped me before, pushing me to achieve what I could achieve".
 - "She helped me to understand my surroundings better".
 - "She kept me going when the going got tough by telling me that it wasn't enough to settle for the easy things, but to strive for the harder things, if that's what we wanted to achieve".
 - "He helped me to give meaning to what I was doing. He cared and tried to make me see life in a different way".
 - "He taught me to be a better partner and a better person".
- (d) The fourth leadership style can be classified as exemplar leadership. This leadership style is characterized by the teacher serving as a role model for the student and inspiring admiration for their way of being. The teacher's actions and behaviours serve as an example for the student to follow. Some of the responses that exemplify this leadership style are as follows:
 - "He is an incredible example of a person".
 - · "I admired him".
 - "By his example, everything he said he demonstrated, and what didn't work out wasn't because he hadn't tried".
 - "He was the best at what he did".
 - "He was a clear example of how to go forward with strength in difficult situations and of organisation and perseverance".
 - · "His way of being and personality".
 - "I liked the way he was as a person. His judgement, intellect and motivation for his work were inspiring".
 - "He is an example to follow".

Figure 1. Main learning outcomes of the student.

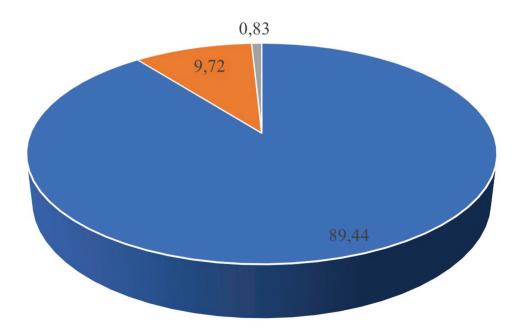
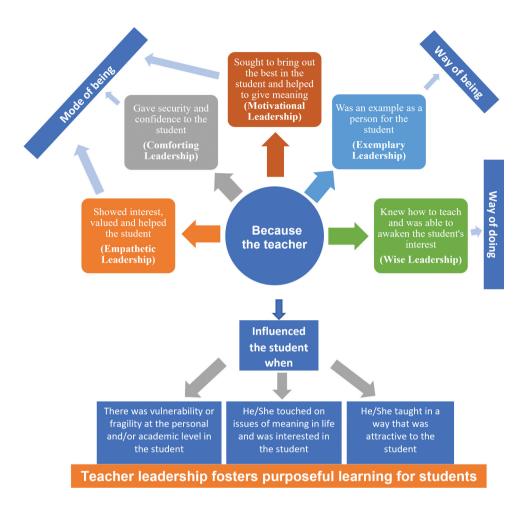




Figure 2. Teacher leadership fosters vital learning for students.



- "He is a person who fights for what he believes in and fights for his dreams".
- "Enthusiastic about life, she lives trying not to harm others. She influenced me because I saw in her someone I aspired to be".
- (e) The fifth leadership style is that of wise leadership, which is characterized by the teacher's ability to not only teach but also make the subject interesting and captivating. It involves providing students with knowledge and insight that can help them make sense of complex subjects and situations of life. This style of leadership can be classified as sapiential as the teacher inspires the student to have a thirst for knowledge and learning. Some of the responses that exemplify this style of leadership are as follows:
 - "The way he teaches and makes you interested in the subject is unique".
 - "Because of the way he teaches. He taught me that you can learn while enjoying it".
 - 'He wasn't the typical teacher who gives classes without any enthusiasm.
 - 'He created a very dynamic and participative atmosphere, so that, for the most part, it was the favourite subject of the whole high school.
 - "He was very attentive and reasoned when I asked him questions in his subject".
 - 'He helped me to cope with mathematics in a very effective and attractive way.
 - "Because he captured my attention and made me understand and be interested in the subject".



4.5. Results of the fourth question

Regarding the final question posed to the students about their main learning experiences with the chosen teacher, their responses were categorized into two types: life learning and school/academic learning. The results indicate that most students (89.44%) identified life learning as their primary source of learning, surpassing academic learning. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The learning that students value most highly is vital and purposeful learning, i.e., linked to the meaning of their lives and the resolution of existential problems. Specifically, many of the answers indicate that the main learning experiences were in the field of interpersonal relationships (48), effort, perseverance, and self-control to achieve their goals (114), but above all in terms of knowledge and responsibility regarding the meaning of life (146). Other vital learning mentioned has to do with personal security and self-esteem (41). As far as school learning is concerned, there is no one learning that stands out above the others. Figure 2 shows a summary of all the findings.

5. Discussion

The result of our research offers an understanding of teacher leadership from the student's point of view. For students, the most valued learning is vital and purposeful learning: learning that helps them to give meaning to their existence and to live it with excellence. This finding leads us to think that teachers must include these learning objectives in their teaching work. Moreover, they must conceive that their teaching work is linked to an ultimate goal that consists of teaching, above all, to live, and to the flourishing and fulfilment of the students. This learning has to do with "learning to be" without detriment to technical learning or knowledge of the sciences and disciplines that make up the curriculum (Fernández & López, 2022a).

According to the results of the research, there is evidence that meaningful and purposeful learning takes place in moments of vulnerability, or weakness of the student, when the teacher, consciously or not, goes beyond the syllabus to offer a word or gesture that helps the student to respond to his or her problems. This may be during a lesson in any given subject, with no way of scheduling when it will occur. Vulnerability is an intrinsic human quality (Melina et al., 2001). It is important that the teacher learns to see these moments of vulnerability as a possibility to student 's flourishing. Vulnerability is not an imperfection or deprivation but a condition for communion (López González, 2022).

Among the traits most appreciated by students in their teachers, and which have influenced them, are personal traits: virtues and values. Teachers act as role models for pupils in the way they behave, often without their own knowledge. This finding confirms other research on teacher behaviour and character education (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berkowitz, 2002). The importance of role models in character education is well know (Brooks et al., 2019; Kristjànsson, 2006; Lamb et al., 2021). Our research points in the same direction. At the same time, we observe that for students, their teacher leaders are not extraordinary or perfect people, but people with limitations, but capable of guiding towards the good: they are credible witnesses rather than perfect role models.

We have identified five patterns of configuration (following the terminology of Harris et al., 2007) or styles of teacher leadership: empathetic, comforting, motivational, exemplary and wise. The style of teacher leadership depends on the teacher's way of being (mainly virtues and values) and the situation and circumstances in which leadership is exercised. These five patterns, styles or ways of exercising leadership have to be integrated by the teacher in his or her work. Some of these patterns appear in the dimensions or roles associated with teacher leadership identified by Harris (2003): brokering, participative, mediating, relationships, and by Gento et al. (2020): charismatic, affective, anticipatory, professional, administrative, participative, cultural and formative.

It seems clear that teacher leaders are those who possess a relational style, capable of connecting with the student, both in what they communicate (that is meaningful to the student)



and in the way they communicate (that they are perceived as trustworthy). It is from this relationship that trust in the leadership of others emerges (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Teacher leadership requires an interpersonal relationship and an encounter with the student that leads him or her to flourish, to grow. This growth is likely to be mutual as the teacher also grows in these encounters. The influence is reciprocal (Lambert, 2003).

Triangulating the evidence we find that teacher leaders who are empathetic, comforting, and motivational, as it has been mentioned, can help to establish these kinds of relationships by connecting with students' emotions and needs and providing meaningful learning, motivation, and support. Teachers who can empathise with students can better understand when students are going through a particularly vulnerable time. At such times, it is key that the teacher knows how to comfort, motivate and offer wisely a teaching, or offer a testimony that serves to model the student's behaviour. The asymmetry of the relationship between pupils and teachers is not an obstacle to a fruitful relationship, quite the contrary. Pupils expect more from their teachers than a friend (they certainly do not expect them to be an enemy): they expect to find help from someone who is ahead of them on the path of life, who is a guide and a reference. The teacher has to be a pedagogue and even a mystagogue who guides the students towards the encounter with the inner teacher in the interpretation of the meaning of life (López, 2022a). The teacher's role is not and cannot be neutral, as he/she must intentionally seek a good for the student, even if the student does not always seek it for the teacher.

Students particularly appreciate teacher leadership that helps them to grow as individuals. The most valuable ways of exercising leadership, according to students, are those that favour the learning of life experiences. Teachers should see it as their mission to educate in virtues and values as well as to teach. Students' vital and purposeful learning does not take place through great speeches by teachers but through their witness and closeness, especially in moments of weakness. The best teachers exercise their leadership through passionate teaching, respectful demands, and a commitment to the students' success without conformism. They know how to empathise, motivate, comfort, model, and demand with wisdom.

6. Conclusions

The research allows us to reach the following conclusions:

Students consider their teachers to be leaders because of the way they teach in the classroom, because of the way they relate to them and because of their personality or way of being. These are three interrelated characterisations of teacher leadership. Of the three characterisations, the most relevant for the student seems to be the teacher's way of relating to the students.

Teacher leadership is versatile, it can adopt different ways to lead or styles. We have identified the following patterns of leadership practice (cf. Harris et al., 2007) based on student responses:

- Empathetic leadership: able to connect with the student.
- · Comforting leadership: able to encourage students in need.
- Motivational leadership: able to offer meaning, purpose, and motivation to learners in the face of their challenges.
- Exemplary leadership: able to provide a role model for learners.
- Wise leadership: able to provide answers and engage students in the subject.

An effective teacher adapts and applies the five key styles or patterns of good leadership based on the situation and context in order to benefit their students. The integration and wise application of these five styles or patterns contributes to teacher leadership. In summary, the teacher-leader knows how to empathise, motivate, comfort, model, and demand with wisdom.

The learning that students value most is the learning that is vital and purposeful, valuable for giving meaning to their lives, learning that enables them to "learn to be" and develop virtues. This learning is not linked to a particular subject or to the curriculum, but occurs at unpredictable moments, especially when the student is in a difficult or vulnerable situation in which he/she needs help. In such situations, the teacher can exercise positive leadership to help the learner find answers or meaning to their questions. Sometimes the teacher exercises leadership without perceiving it. In any case, it seems that when the teacher has a good relationship with the student—and the student recognises the teacher's commitment and passion for his or her educational task—this can have a greater impact on the student's life.

Our study, although only exploratory due to its methodology and sample size, clearly points to the importance of teachers considering that their teaching work involves the exercise of leadership. Leadership understood as an alliance with the student that requires teachers to consider that their educational mission includes meaningful learning and personal competences that help students learn to be. Students expect their teachers to help them in their moral education. It is necessary to revalue teacher leadership in the moral sphere and for teachers to see their own teaching work as a path to their own personal flourishing, not just that of the pupil. Teaching is a moral activity (Prickett, 2016). Leadership is "primarily moral i.e. dedicated to the welfare of staff and students, with the latter at the centre" (Harris, 2002, p. 8).

Teachers need to be aware of this and be trained in teacher leadership in this sense. Teacher training programmes need to take this into account. The organisation and culture of the school must be such that teachers have the time and conditions to build meaningful relationships with other teachers and with pupils. A learning community, a community of practice (Bolívar, 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Ávalos, 2011), helps students and teachers to flourish. Management styles, the allocation of tasks and the curriculum itself should be conducive to this.

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