



Unveiling Success: A Case Study Exploring the Shared Values, Characteristics, and Strategies of Principals in Schools with Extremely Challenging Circumstances

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the leadership values, characteristics, and strategies necessary for principals to be successful in schools that face extremely challenging circumstances. The research was conducted by performing a qualitative research study to explore the case of a Colombia-based school facing “extreme challenges”. Research methods employed include semi-structured interviews with five members of staff of the school in Villanueva, Colombia, and two external participants (both of them, successful principals in their schools). The results obtained by this research could prove that principals in successful schools suffering from extremely challenging circumstances share similar characteristics, values, and strategies, even when each school faces its own unique reality.

Keywords: Leadership, values, characteristics, strategies, challenging circumstances.

Findings: This paper explores the significance of professional values, ethics, and educational goals for principals in challenging environments. It identifies key values that guide successful leadership, such as equity, respect for diversity, and advocacy, emphasizing their role in fostering inclusive and supportive school communities. The findings underscore the importance of these values in addressing the diverse needs of students and promoting positive outcomes in schools facing difficult circumstances.

1. Introduction

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world (Mandela, 1990). According to the United Nations (2016), the acquisition of high-quality education provides the basis for improving people's lives and supporting sustainable development. From the above statement, it is important to highlight that the keyword is “quality”. According to recent research, high-quality education is more closely related to economic progress than the number of years a person spends studying (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008; Delgado et al.,

2013; Kingdon, 2013) in other words, high-quality education is needed to achieve a long-lasting and positive impact in society. The absence of high-quality education is largely responsible for the inequity between developed and developing countries. As stated by Gómez (2023), without well-educated human capital, there can be no creativity, entrepreneurship, productivity, or the ability of individuals to generate well-being. The access to quality education is perhaps the only option available to vulnerable communities to break the cycles of poverty, inequality, and violence that have surrounded them for many years (Agasisti & Bertoletti, 2022). To summarize, “education is a fundamental human right. It is the bedrock of societies, economies, and every person’s potential” (Guterres, 2023).

Within the diversified educational landscape, the position of school principals is crucial. Principals are not merely administrators; they are leaders who wield considerable influence over the educational experiences and outcomes of students. As a matter of fact, after teachers' instruction, the most important element impacting student achievement in the school is school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson & Gray, 2019). Moreover, experts acknowledge that excellent leadership has a particularly substantial impact when working under extremely challenging conditions such as poverty and unemployment (Harris et al., 2006; Robinson, 2011; Leithwood & Sun, 2018). While the challenges of educational leadership are manifold, some principals find themselves in exceptionally demanding environments – schools with extremely challenging circumstances. Such circumstances may encompass factors like child abuse, negligence, abandonment, violence, forced displacement, socio-economic disparities, familial dysfunction (Borman et al., 2000), high student and teacher mobility, limited resources, discrimination, diverse student populations with varying academic needs (Day, 2005; Levin, 2006; Sandberg, 2015), constant risk of child recruitment, and access to drugs. The accumulation of all these characteristics is what makes these schools to be considered as Schools with Extremely Challenging Circumstances (SECC). These challenges can vary widely depending on the geographical location, economic conditions, social factors, and political context of the region where the school is situated.

This dissertation embarks on a profound journey to explore the enigma of success within these uniquely challenging educational settings. Successful schools, within the context of this research, are not merely defined by standardized test scores or academic achievements; they encompass a holistic vision of educational excellence, including social, emotional, and academic growth for all students (Bush, 2016; Connolly et al., 2017; Reid, 2020).

According to Day et al. (2016), there are intricate connections among the values, behaviours, and strategies employed in successful and developing institutions that focus on a wide range of groups in several different contexts. That is why the central inquiry of this dissertation is rooted in the belief that beneath the surface of adversity and daunting circumstances, there are principals who defy the odds, inspiring transformative change and fostering environments where students thrive. These principals embody a rare combination of shared values, characteristics, and strategies that drive their remarkable accomplishments. Their stories are a testament to the enduring power of leadership and the unwavering belief in the potential of every student.

As a researcher, my interest in this subject derives from my own experience. I have witnessed the consequences of an uneducated society and the positive change that high-quality education can cause.

The overarching objective of this dissertation is to unveil the intricate structure of success within schools with extremely challenging circumstances. To achieve this, the study's research questions are:

- What shared values do successful principals demonstrate in schools with extremely challenging circumstances?
- What characteristics do successful principals in schools with difficult situations have in common?
- What strategies do successful principals employ to navigate and overcome challenges in schools with extremely challenging circumstances?

1.1 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation intends to provide a comprehensive exploration of the shared values, characteristics, and strategies of successful principals in SECCs. It will be divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature that has been written about the challenges that SECCs face and the values, characteristics, and strategies that principals in those contexts have. Chapter 3 explains and justifies the methodology employed in the research study and evaluates the use of the research approach. It also provides information on data-gathering procedures and an explanation of data analysis techniques. Furthermore, it highlights the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the case study. Chapter 5 has an analysis and discussion of the findings of the last-mentioned chapter concatenated with the information presented in Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 6 gives a conclusion and also discusses limitations and suggestions for further research.

In conclusion, this dissertation seeks to shed light on the remarkable stories of principals who thrive in adversity, highlighting their shared values, characteristics, and strategies in SECCs. Their narratives offer a profound understanding of what it takes to succeed in the most challenging of educational settings and inspire a collective commitment to ensure that every student, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity to excel. This study makes an effort to contribute to a more equitable and promising future in education, where success knows no boundaries.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

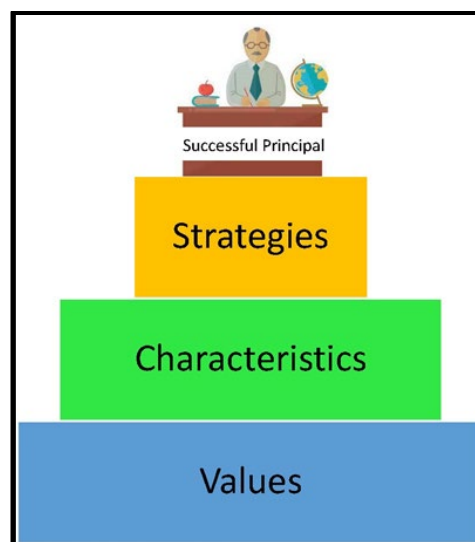
Sometimes it is believed that the outcomes of students' academic progress reflect the success of a school. However, quantitative results of students' academic development and accomplishment are important markers of a school's "effectiveness," but they are insufficient to define "successful" institutions (Day et al., 2016). Over the last two decades, leadership research in a variety of contexts has clearly demonstrated that "successful" schools strive to educate their students by promoting positive values (integrity, compassion, fairness, and a love for lifelong learning), as well as fostering citizenship, personal, economic, and social capabilities (Day & Leithwood, 2007). In other words, in extremely challenging circumstances it is not enough to be effective, schools need to be successful. Considering that:

successful heads strategically translate their values, beliefs and ethics into their visions,

purposes, strategies and practices, and that these are widely communicated, clearly understood and supported by staff, students and the external community. In other words, the organizational values and practices of more effective and improving schools essentially reflect the professional values of those (Day et al., 2011, p. 64)

This chapter attempts to establish a comprehensive understanding of the research context, by examining the challenges, characteristics, values, and importance of successful principals in SECCs. It was essential to look into the existing literature on the subject in order to identify what is known and written down that is relevant to the current investigation (Robson, 2011). Firstly, this section intends to examine the challenges that SECCs face and the role that successful principals have in the mentioned schools. Secondly, it also intends to explore the characteristics and values that successful principals in SECCs demonstrate. Additionally, this section hopes to provide valuable insights that inform leadership strategies to drive positive outcomes, empower school leaders, and create an environment conducive to the success of all students, even when terrible challenges are constantly present. To sum up, the problems faced by successful principals in SECCs are examined in this chapter along with a set of values, characteristics, and strategies that seem to be crucial to their success (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Successful school leaders



Source: Own elaboration

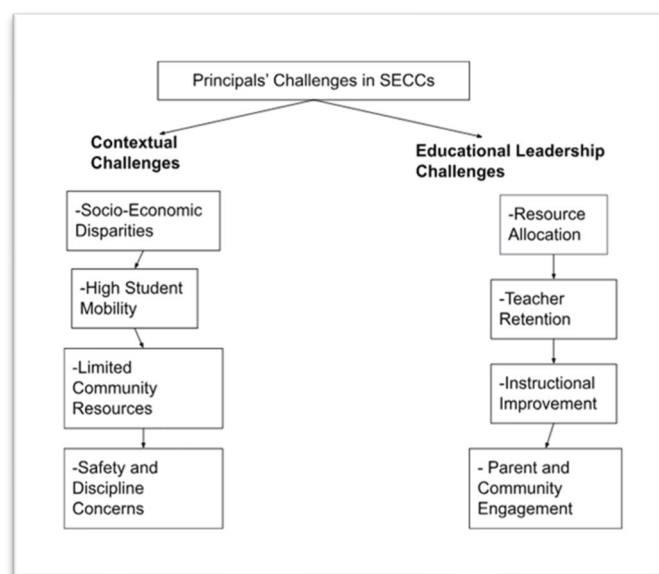
2.1 Challenges Faced by Schools with Extremely Challenging Circumstances

Educational leadership encompasses the multifaceted responsibilities and roles undertaken by school principals to drive positive change, foster successful teaching and learning, and create a conducive learning environment for students (Bush, 2016; Connolly et al., 2017; Reid, 2020). While educational leadership is challenging in itself, the complexity amplifies when principals operate within schools facing extremely challenging circumstances. As suggested in the introduction section, SECCs assist children with a huge range of backgrounds who struggle with issues including poverty, violence, extreme disengagement of their families, constant influence and risk of child recruitment by illegal groups, and restricted access to healthcare, among other socio-economic obstacles (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Petit, 2003; Cretton &

Méndez, 2022). These difficulties inevitably affect the job of principals, who must constantly learn to overcome them (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

Although the challenges faced by principals in these schools are many, they can be divided into two main groups (Figure 2). The first describes the challenges derived from the school context, and the second describes the ones that relate to leadership.

Figure 2: Principals' challenges in SEECs



Source: Own elaboration

2.1.1 Contextual Challenges

According to Hallinger (2016, p. 6), it is necessary “to bring ‘contexts for leadership’ out of the shadows by illuminating features often hidden in the background of leadership studies.” In SEECs, the socio-economic disparities take on a particularly tough form. These schools, which are located in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, grapple with a complex web of obstacles that interfere with students' access to and engagement with high-quality education and perpetuate cycles of inequality (López, 2012). Headteachers in extremely vulnerable schools face resource limitations, such as a lack of funds, obsolete infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials, and inadequate technology. Their capacity to deliver outstanding education and cater to the various needs of their students may be hampered by limited resources. This difficulty in schools facing exceedingly difficult circumstances is a common characteristic that has a significant impact on the quality of education and student outcomes (Miles, 1995). Students entering SEECs may already be behind academically due to limited access to early childhood education and enrichment experiences (Pantoja et al., 2015). In other words, in a house where there is no access to food on a daily basis, education ceases to be a priority and becomes a luxury. Another challenge that SEECs face is high student mobility. This phenomenon, characterised by a considerable number of students frequently entering or leaving the school, adds an extra layer of complexity to an already intricate educational reality (Palomer & Paredes, 2010). The impact of high student mobility is profound, shaping the experiences of students, educators, and the entire school community. In schools facing extreme challenges—ranging from economic disparities to community instability—high student mobility becomes a

common thread. Families in such circumstances may experience housing instability, economic volatility, or other factors that necessitate frequent relocations (Román & Perticara, 2012). As a result, students may find themselves changing schools multiple times within a single academic year, disrupting their continuity of education.

As previously stated, school leaders in SECCs deal with the difficulties that their communities confront as well as the lack of involvement of those communities in their schools. In this paper, that phenomenon is referred to as “limited community resources.” Limited community resources include an absence of external support and services that are essential for holistic student development and educational excellence. These resources encompass a broad spectrum, including access to healthcare, counselling services, extracurricular activities, and enrichment programmes (Rueda & Giné, 2016). In schools facing extreme challenges, such scarcity can exacerbate existing inequalities and compound the barriers students encounter. Finally, safety and discipline concerns represent one of the most significant contextual challenges for school leaders in SECCs. Within the context of schools facing extremely challenging circumstances, these concerns take on heightened significance and complexity. Schools struggling with safety and discipline challenges manage a delicate balance between providing a secure environment and addressing the broader societal issues that permeate their surroundings (Romero, 2010). Safety and discipline concerns involve a range of issues, including physical safety, emotional well-being, and maintaining order within the school community. These concerns are often intensified by factors such as community violence, socio-economic disparities, and familial instability (Council of Europe, 2003). Some experts consider that the violence children experience and witness outside of school (Figure 3) tends to be replicated within the school, posing a serious threat to other pupils as well as school staff (Prodócimo et al., 2014; Tillyer et al., 2017).

Figure 3: The reality of Colombian students



Source: This photo was taken in western Colombia, where children are exposed to war as they walk to school. Image retrieved from [International Crisis Group](#) (Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace," 2023).

2.1.2 Educational Leadership Challenges

Educational leadership in SECCs requires a dynamic and adaptable approach that extends beyond conventional management. Principals deal with resource constraints, diverse student needs, and complex community dynamics while developing a safe and positive learning environment. Principals at these schools have a unique set of educational leadership challenges. The first challenge that this paper identifies (based on the literature review) and that is related to most of the other challenges that school leaders face in SECCs is the resource allocation dilemma. Principals in such schools grapple with the challenge of allocating limited resources effectively. Balancing classroom supplies, infrastructure improvements, and student support services becomes an arduous act where decisions have far-reaching impacts on student outcomes (Cobb-Clark & Jha, 2016; Brunner et al., 2020). Executing this delicate task while maintaining a focus on equitable opportunities is a leadership challenge that requires astute budgeting skills. Additionally, the demanding nature of schools in challenging circumstances can lead to high teacher turnover rates. According to several experts, another significant difficulty that principals confront in these schools is teacher retention (Hughes, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2017) and development (He & Ho, 2016; Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2017; Adarkwah et al., 2021). Principals execute strategies to recruit and retain qualified educators who are committed to the school's mission. Offering meaningful professional development, mentorship programmes, and creating a positive workplace is vital to strengthen teacher growth and prevent burnout. On the other hand, since SECCs are characterised by diverse classrooms with a wide range of student needs, instructional improvement becomes complex (Bellei, 2013; Laleka, 2019). Principals guide teachers in adapting teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles, languages, and abilities. This involves promoting inclusive teaching practices, implementing differentiated instruction, and designing data-driven decision-making procedures that address the unique challenges presented by student diversity (Farrell, 2014). Successful principals in SECCs use data effectively to identify areas for improvement, track student progress, and adjust strategies accordingly, even in the face of resource limitations (James et al., 2007; Roegman et al., 2019). This requires a deep understanding of data interpretation and the ability to balance data with the nuanced realities of their schools. Finally, parent and community engagement represents another challenge for head teachers in SECCs. Building strong cooperation with parents and community members does positively impact student success (Hughes, 2012). Principals find ways to involve families in their children's education and engage the community in supporting the school. They bridge communication gaps, build trust, and involve parents in their children's education despite economic, cultural, or language barriers (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Creating meaningful partnerships with local organisations and community members helps establish a supportive network that uplifts the entire school community (Kane et al., 2021).

2.2 Values of Successful Leaders

According to Day et al. (2011), principals in effective educational environments are triumphant in ameliorating students' outcomes both personally and functionally. These experts affirm that their professional principles, ethics, and educational ideals are fundamental to what they do, why they do it, and how they adjust their practices to the specific characteristics of the policy, organisational, and human context in which they operate (Day et al., 2011). In other words, the organisational ideals and practices of successful and improving schools largely mirror the professional values of the people who run them. This paper examines five of the

most important values that school leaders in SECCs have. However, it is important to recognise that these values need to be extensively conveyed, understood, and supported by staff, students, and the broader community. Because this is how successful school leaders integrate their values, beliefs, and ethics into their visions, purposes, strategies, and practices in the schools. According to the literature review, among some of the values practiced the most by principals in SECCs the following stand out:

2.2.1 Equity

Equity stands as a foundational value embraced by principals who have the responsibility of guiding their schools through the complex reality of providing education in an environment filled with extremely challenging circumstances. In schools where disparities are pronounced, the value of equity becomes a moral compass that leads principals in their pursuit of fair and just outcomes for all (Day et al., 2011). Principals who are committed to practise equity in their work see every student as a unique individual deserving of an equal opportunity to succeed (Brooks et al., 2007). They actively work to eliminate barriers that stem from socio-economic backgrounds, diverse inabilities, or other factors, ensuring that each student can access quality education. These school leaders champion fairness in resource allocation. They strategically distribute limited resources to address the specific needs of students, guaranteeing that no group is disadvantaged (Evans, 2009). Their upholding of equity guides them in prioritising interventions that close gaps and promote academic growth. Equity also informs these principals' policies and practices. They construct inclusive learning environments where diversity is celebrated and individual differences are accommodated (Kelly, 2012). By fostering an atmosphere of respect and understanding, they empower students to become successful individuals regardless of their circumstances. Moreover, equity drives a commitment to advocacy. Principals who value equity amplify the voices of marginalized students and their families, advocating for necessary resources, support systems, and policy changes (Brooks et al., 2007). They hold themselves accountable for dismantling systems that perpetuate inequalities. In SECCs, principals who embrace equity become agents of change. Their dedication to ensuring that every student receives a fair chance at success transforms their role from mere administration to an innovative force that shapes a brighter, more equitable future for their students and their community.

2.2.2 Student-Centredness

Another value successful principals in SECCs embrace is student-centredness. This value cherishes the individual and collective strengths of a school's student body and seeks to obtain the best results by empowering each individual student in order to benefit the collective structure of the school. Therefore, such centredness on students inevitably becomes a main propulsor that ensures the holistic growth and success of each individual learner (Munif et al., 2022). Principals who prioritise student-centredness place the needs, aspirations, and well-being of students at the heart of their decision-making. They craft policies, allocate resources, and shape the educational experience with the goal of motivating every student to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Bromley et al., 2011). These principals recognise that each student is a distinct individual with unique strengths and challenges. They build a setting in their school that celebrates diversity, honours cultural backgrounds and accommodates various learning styles and abilities (Stroupe, 2023). By tailoring instruction and support to individual needs, they build an inclusive atmosphere where all students feel valued. Student-

centred principals forge strong relationships with their students. They listen attentively to their concerns, aspirations, and struggles, and open a space where the school community can express itself freely (Robinson, 2011). This connection builds trust and enables principals to provide targeted support that addresses specific barriers to success. Furthermore, this value drives a commitment to collaboration. Principals who focus on student-centredness collaborate closely with teachers, parents, and community members to ensure that the educational experience aligns with students' needs and aspirations (Stroupe, 2023). Their collective efforts create a cohesive support network that allows students to overcome challenges and reach their full potential. In schools confronting extreme challenges, student-centred principals become a beacon of change. Their commitment to placing students' growth and well-being at the forefront of their leadership redefines education as an incentive for positive change, enabling students to not only overcome adversity but also flourish in the face of it (Serin, 2018).

2.2.3 Respect for Diversity

In a scenario characterized by a multitude of backgrounds and experiences, this value aids principals in creating an inclusive and harmonious school community (Fuller, 2018). Principals who give importance to respect for diversity cultivate an environment where every individual is celebrated for their identity (De Albuquerque et al., 2021). They contribute to setting an atmosphere of mutual understanding and appreciation, where students, teachers, and staff from various cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds feel respected and embraced. These principals go beyond mere tolerance; they actively seek to understand and honour the perspectives of all members of the school community (Donnelly, 2004). By recognising the richness that diversity brings, they create an environment where differences are seen as strengths that contribute to collective growth and learning (Keenan et al., 2016). Respect for diversity informs principals' policies and practices. Principals ensure that curricula reflect a wide range of perspectives, histories, and voices, fostering a more inclusive school (Fuller, 2018). They also provide cultural sensitivity training to teachers, promoting an awareness of the unique challenges and strengths of diverse students (Messiou et al., 2016). Furthermore, this value drives principals to confront bias and discrimination. By addressing issues of inequality, principals model how differences can be bridges to deeper understanding. In schools facing extreme challenges, principals who support respect for diversity foster a community that transcends boundaries. Their dedication to inclusivity empowers students to thrive in a world that celebrates differences and values the contributions of all individuals (Batallan & Campanini, 2007).

2.2.4 Advocacy

Since SECCs operate in contexts where barriers and disparities are pronounced, advocacy becomes a much-needed tool that seeks to amplify the voices of students, teachers, and the community, and ultimately drives systemic change (Smith et al., 2006). Principals who practise advocacy actively champion the rights and needs of their school community. They serve as vocal advocates, leveraging their position to raise awareness about the challenges their students face and the resources required to overcome them (Thompson & Mockler, 2015). Their advocacy extends to securing equitable funding, essential services, and support systems that bridge gaps in access and opportunity. These principals motivate students to become advocates themselves. They build platforms for student voices to be heard, cultivating a sense of agency that propels positive change (Thompson & Mockler, 2015b). By involving students in decision-

making processes, principals forge a culture of shared responsibility and ownership of their educational journey. Advocacy informs policy initiatives that address systemic inequalities. Principals work with policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders to influence policies that impact their school community (Williams & Richardson, 2010; Murakami et al., 2015; Lochmiller, 2017). Their allegiance to advocacy drives a movement toward equitable educational practices and resources. Moreover, advocacy extends to collaboration with families and the wider community. Principals encourage parents and community members to be advocates for their children's education, by forging partnerships that strengthen the school's impact and ensure a unified approach to tackling challenges (Khalifa, 2012; McGhee & Haynes, 2022). To summarize, principals' dedication to amplifying voices, demanding equity, and fostering collective action reshapes the educational scenario, demonstrating that advocacy is not just a value, but a path to reach changes that will benefit the reality of their school.

2.2.5 Integrity

Ultimately, integrity as a value present in the principal's work in a SECC, becomes a guarantee for principled leadership, accountability, and ethical decision-making (Al-Momani et al., 2021). Principals who uphold integrity prioritise honesty, transparency, and ethical behaviour in all their interactions (Setiyaningtiyas & Hartutik, 2022). They lead by example by demonstrating a decided commitment to the highest standards of conduct. Their integrity builds trust within the school community, ensuring that their actions align with their values and the best interests of their students and staff (Kupzyk & Shriver, 2016). These principals confront challenges with integrity, making decisions based on what is right rather than what is expedient. They do not shy away from difficult choices, even when they require sacrifice, because their commitment to ethical leadership prevails over short-term gains (Al-Momani et al., 2021). Principals take responsibility for their decisions and their consequences, setting a precedent for a culture of responsibility and ownership within the school (Cochrane & Laux, 2007). They also hold themselves accountable for creating and maintaining a safe and inclusive space where everyone is treated with respect. Principals ensure that policies, resource allocations, and disciplinary actions are carried out equitably, regardless of background or circumstance. Their adherence to fairness shapes a school reality where individuals are treated justly and impartially (Sanetti et al., 2012). To sum up, principals who embrace integrity as a value in SECCs become pillars of trust and ethical leadership.

2.3 Characteristics of Successful Principals

Navigating these challenges in SECCs requires principals to possess a unique set of qualities and skills. They are adaptable, resilient, empathetic, and excellent communicators. They inspire and motivate their teams, encourage collaboration, and drive innovation. Furthermore, they align their leadership practices with the shared values of integrity, equity, and a deep commitment to the well-being and academic success of every student. After examining the available literature on this subject, the following characteristics seemed to be the common thread influencing on successful principals' work:

2.3.1 Resilience

Resilience emerges as a defining and indispensable characteristic of principals who steer schools through the tumultuous waters of extremely challenging circumstances. In these

demanding settings, where obstacles seem unrelenting, resilience becomes a beacon that guides principals through adversity with steadfast determination and fierce commitment (Chen, 2023). Principals embodying resilience exhibit a remarkable capacity to bounce back from setbacks, demonstrating an unyielding spirit that remains unshaken even when they work against daunting challenges. They absorb the blows of resource constraints, student needs, and societal pressures, yet emerge stronger and more determined to effect positive change (Peters & Pearce, 2011b). Resilient principals approach obstacles as opportunities for growth. Instead of succumbing to defeat, they channel setbacks into catalysts for innovation and support for the teaching staff (Day & Hong, 2016). They use failures as stepping stones, learning from each experience to refine their strategies and enhance their leadership effectiveness. Moreover, these principals –and teachers– serve as role models for their school community. Their resilience fosters a culture of determination and tenacity, inspiring teachers, students, and parents alike to tackle difficulties with renewed vigour (Peters & Pearce, 2011; Gu & Day, 2011; Day & Gu 2013). Their firm commitment reassures the school community that challenges are surmountable through collective effort. In other words, in an educational context marked by adversity, resilient principals are the architects of transformation. Their ability to weather storms, remain undeterred by setbacks, and lead with unwavering resolve fuels positive change. They epitomize the adage that challenges are not insurmountable barriers but rather stepping stones to progress (Peters & Pearce, 2011b).

2.3.2 Adaptability

Adaptability allows principals to pivot, innovate, and forge new paths to educate their pupils (Fernandes et al., 2023). Principals adept in adaptability thrive amidst uncertainty, recognising that ever-evolving challenges demand flexible responses. They understand that one-size-fits-all solutions fall short in these complex settings (Krishnannair & Krishnannair, 2021). Instead, they adjust their strategies to meet the unique needs of their students, teachers, and community, even if it means departing from traditional approaches (Collie & Martin, 2017; Niemeyer-Rens, 2022). These principals approach adversity with a growth-oriented mind-set. They creatively repurpose resources, seek partnerships with community organizations, and harness technology to bridge educational gaps (Tomasik et al., 2010). This flexibility ensures that students receive the support they require despite resource constraints. Moreover, adaptability allows these principals to remain responsive to the ever-changing needs of their students. They remain attuned to shifts in student demographics, societal issues, and educational trends, adapting their approaches to ensure relevancy and effectiveness (Martin et al., 2012). Principals' ability to adapt positions them as individuals capable of reshaping their school's educational context even in the face of extreme challenges.

2.3.3 Empathy

Principals who work empathically possess a deep understanding of the realities their school community faces. They actively listen to the concerns, hopes, and struggles of students, teachers, and parents, creating a safe space where individuals are heard and valued (Hoerr, 2022). These principals go further than just acknowledging challenges; they internalize them. By placing themselves in the shoes of students and educators, they develop a genuine connection that guides their decision-making and leadership approach (Oplatka, 2017b). This empathetic understanding informs strategies that resonate with the unique needs of their community. They recognise that the challenges their students face extend outside of the

classroom and create a setting that offers emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging (Swerdlow, 2016). In addition, empathy drives an inclusive approach to leadership (Reid et al., 2012). Principals who lead with empathy ensure that marginalized voices are heard and represented. They work diligently to reduce disparities and promote a feeling of empowerment and acceptance for all individuals.

2.3.4 Collaborative Spirit

Additionally, a collaborative spirit has shown to be a defining and essential characteristic of principals in SECCs. In these convoluted educational landscapes, a principal's ability to cultivate collaboration becomes a powerful tool to achieve constructive collective changes (De Jong et al., 2023). Principals with a strong collaborative spirit know that the challenges faced by their schools cannot be overcome in isolation. They actively seek out opportunities to work alongside teachers, students, parents, community members, and external partners to co-create solutions that address the multifaceted needs of their students (Day et al., 2021; Oehrtman & Dollarhide, 2022). By encouraging open communication and a willingness to embrace diverse perspectives, they establish an environment where all stakeholders feel appreciated and empowered to contribute with their insights and expertise. Moreover, this collaborative spirit reaches outside of the school's walls. Principals and teachers who excel in collaboration build external alliances that expand the school's reach, enabling access to additional resources, mentorship, and support for their students. In summary, in SECCs with principals that have a collaborative spirit, they rally diverse voices towards a common goal, resulting in sustainable solutions that transcend the limits of individual efforts.

2.3.5 Visionary Thinking

Finally, when extreme challenges are present in an educational institution, it is the principal's visionary thinking that opens doors for transformation and progress. According to Berkovich and Grinshtain (2018), the promotion of vision is a great tool when overcoming leadership crises in SECCs. Principals who uphold visionary thinking have the remarkable ability to see past immediate challenges and envision a brighter future for their schools. They articulate a clear and compelling vision that resonates with the aspirations of students, teachers, and parents (Chen & Yuan, 2021). These school leaders transcend the limitations of the present. Their foresight permits them to anticipate shifts in educational trends, societal dynamics, and student needs, ensuring that the school remains responsive and relevant (Berson et al., 2001). Their ability to articulate a future where students thrive despite adversity instils a sense of purpose that unites the school community. This shared vision serves as a powerful motivator, sparking the innovation and determination needed to overcome challenges (Hemingway, 2005). Moreover, visionary thinking enables leaders to challenge the status quo (Crossan & Mazutis, 2008). They are unafraid to question conventional practices, experiment with innovative approaches, and lead their school on a path of continuous improvement. In conclusion, their forward-looking perspective encourages a proactive stance in addressing challenges rather than reacting to them (Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010).

2.4 Role of Principals in SECCs

Principals in schools facing extremely challenging circumstances assume a multifaceted and crucial role in fostering positive educational outcomes despite the multiple challenges present. Their responsibilities surpass performing traditional administrative tasks, as they play a vital role in shaping the school's culture, driving academic improvement, and serving as advocates for students, families, and communities (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Stringer & Hourani, 2015). Principals in these circumstances end up taking on responsibility for the sake of improving society. As noted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2015), children require a well-rounded set of cognitive, social, and emotional abilities in order to attain great life outcomes and, as a result, contribute to a society of decent citizens (OECD, 2015). In other words, the role of a principal extends far beyond managing administrative tasks; they stand as the driving force behind successful practices. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools struggling with extremely challenging circumstances. In these educational settings, principals take on a deep commitment to overcoming obstacles and nurturing an environment of academic excellence despite adversity.

Principals in schools facing extreme challenges are like captains navigating uncharted waters. Their leadership takes on a metamorphic dimension, focusing on equipping teachers and students with the tools necessary to triumph over adversity (Berkovich, 2018).

These leaders understand that conventional teaching methods might not suffice in contexts where socio-economic disparities, violence, cultural diversity, and limited resources, among others, are daily realities.

One of the main responsibilities of principals in SECCs is to tailor the curriculum to the unique needs of their students. They collaborate with educators to craft a curriculum that not only adheres to educational standards but also resonates with the life experiences of their students (Bogotch et al., 2017). By doing so, they create a bridge between the classroom and the students' worlds, encouraging engagement and relevance in the learning process. Additionally, professional development becomes an essential component of their leadership (Brauckmann et al., 2020). These principals recognise the importance of providing teachers with the tools they need to meet the diverse needs of their students. Workshops, seminars, and collaborative sessions are meticulously organised to ensure that teachers are equipped with a repertoire of strategies (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2019) to meet the challenges head-on. Through ongoing training, they build a community of educators who are adaptable, innovative, and committed to making a difference. Likewise, the data becomes a guiding light for principals in SECCs throughout their leadership journey. They master the use of data to identify areas for improvement and make decisions. This data-driven approach allows them to recognise the strategies that are making a positive impact and adjust those that need refining, ensuring that resources are utilised most effectively (James et al., 2008). Nevertheless, perhaps the most remarkable trait of these principals is their unwavering dedication to fostering a culture of continuous learning. Day et al. (2016) argue that during various stages of schools' growth, principals alter the culture and work of their institutions by strengthening teachers' commitment and capacities. They intend to lead by example, embracing a growth mind-set and showing teachers and students alike that obstacles are opportunities for growth (Oltman & Bautista,

2021). In environments where challenges might seem overwhelming, they are able to ignite a spark of optimism that encourages everyone to persevere.

In SECCs, the role of principals extends over the confines of the classroom. These educational leaders emerge as the fundamental link connecting the school with its broader community and the families it serves (Lac & Diaz, 2022). Their dedication to create a meaningful community and strengthening family engagement becomes a transformative force that transcends obstacles (Day, 2005) and sustains a collaborative ecosystem.

Principals in such schools understand that the partnership between the school and its community is not just desirable but imperative (Gelsthorpe & West-Burnham, 2003). They recognise that the challenges their students face—economic hardships, cultural diversity, or social vulnerabilities—are more effectively addressed when schools and communities work hand in hand. Thus, community and family engagement become integral parts of their leadership approach. One of the key strategies these principals intend to employ is building bridges of communication (Hargreaves & Harris, 2015). Their aim is to ensure that lines of dialogue remain open between the school and parents or guardians. Regular meetings, workshops, and events are organised to facilitate conversations about student progress, educational goals, and strategies for support (Prier, 2017). Involving families in the educational journey sends a powerful message: education is a collaborative effort, and success is a shared achievement. In schools with extremely challenging circumstances, principals' community and family engagement is not a mere initiative—it is a philosophy that drives educational excellence (Hargreaves & Harris, 2015). Their leadership demonstrates that education is not just about textbooks and lessons; it is about nurturing a community where each individual's potential is recognised, celebrated, and nurtured (Chapman, 2008).

3. Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter explains the rationale for using a qualitative case study approach and goes over the research techniques that were utilised to carry out the study. Along with describing the school context and participant selection, it also outlines the data collection and analysis process. The following question served as a guideline for the research process:

What are the shared values, qualities, and strategies of principals in schools with extremely challenging circumstances?

3.1 Research Paradigm

The definition of paradigm in the context of research methodology is a set of philosophical assumptions which relate to the phenomena being studied and that have an impact on the researcher's knowledge as well as the objectives and outcomes of the study (Hammersley, 2005). In other words, the research paradigm is the guide for the investigation. This research is guided by an interpretive paradigm.

Interpretivism emphasises understanding human behaviour, experiences, and social phenomena in their natural context. It seeks to explore the meanings and interpretations that individuals give to their experiences rather than aiming for generalizable laws or predictions (Denscombe, 2014). It enables a comprehensive understanding of complex and multifaceted

issues, especially when exploring topics involving human emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, studies that use this paradigm are inevitably subjective and heavily influenced by the researcher's viewpoint (Briggs et al., 2012). When carrying out this interpretivism research study on principals in schools with extremely challenging circumstances, the goal of the research is to comprehend the subjective experiences and meanings related to the qualities, challenges, and values of principals in situations like these.

However, interpretivism holds that because human behaviour is so complex, it cannot be studied by probabilistic models such as those used under positivist paradigms. This paradigm acknowledges that it can only be created by interpreting the meanings that people put on behaviours and events. It is important to recognise that, due to the nature of interpretivism studies, their findings are only applicable in the context of the study and are rarely generalizable (Lofrida et al., 2016).

Overall, this interpretive approach to studying successful school leaders in SECCs is focused on understanding the subjective experiences and meanings attached to their roles. It investigates the school's specific context and applies qualitative approaches to collect rich and detailed data, which is then processed inductively to create understandable interpretations.

3.2 Research Strategy - Case Study

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1997), a case study is an in-depth examination of one context, a single issue, or one specific event. In the context of education, the instance in question could be one involving a student, a class, a lesson, a subject, a school, a network, and so on (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2012). A case study approach was chosen in this paper to obtain further in-depth information on the experiences, perspectives, and actions of SECC leaders. It provides an opportunity to go deeper into the issues, qualities, values, and tactics employed by head teachers (Denscombe, 2014), resulting in a thorough and profound understanding of their leadership practices. Nevertheless, this study technique creates certain concerns due to the lack of properly defined boundaries (Given, 2008).

According to the features of the school, the community, and the available resources, the duties and challenges faced by principals can differ significantly (Extremera et al., 2022). By concentrating on one particular scenario, this research aims to capture the contextual elements that influence school leaders' decision-making, problem-solving, values, characteristics, and leadership techniques in challenging situations. Therefore, this approach also allowed the researcher to preserve the relevant and comprehensive aspects of real-life events (Yin, 2009), such as the qualities, values, and strategies observed in SECCs.

Case study critics claim that it lacks generalizability due to its individualised nature and small sample size. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the case study is not meant to be a sample (Bryman, 2012) thus the goal of this technique is not statistical generalisation. As a matter of fact, the advantage of this strategy is that each example only speaks for itself. According to Simons' (2009b) insightful assertion, by carefully examining all aspects of the case, in all of its particularity, the public is able to comprehend the general. Consequently, case studies may offer valuable analysis into other comparable events or circumstances and so contribute to their interpretation. Another prevalent critique is that case studies are vulnerable to the subjectivism, prejudice, and selectivity of researchers (Cohen et al., 2017). However, it

should be highlighted that this represents a risk for practically every other type of research hence, it is not a solid justification against a case study in particular.

3.3 Research Method - Semi-Structured Interviews

When a case study is selected as a research strategy in an investigation, interviews are regarded as one of the primary procedures or methods to gather information (Bassey, 1999b). Svensson (1997) claims that human ideas may be communicated in a variety of ways, but they are most accessible through language. Therefore, the interview was selected as the best approach for capturing genuine voices (Day et al., 2000). This semi-structured interview with one head teacher, two mid-level leaders and two teachers in a school with extremely challenging circumstances has the purpose of identifying the characteristics, values, and strategies that school leaders apply to overcome the difficulties that their roles involve. It is important to mention that one-on-one interviews prevailed over joint interviews due to their advantages of fostering a more intimate environment (Zartler, 2010). The semi-structured interview is the particular method used in this article since it allows participants to respond in their own unique way. It gave the respondents a sense of control over the dialogue, while still allowing the researcher to address the questions that were most pertinent to the study (Seale, 2004) thereby maintaining the subject's main focus. The interviewees contributed to the development of the dialogue, distinguishing such interviews from structured procedures. As a consequence, their perspectives are given similar weight as the researcher's inquiries (Briggs et al., 2012). This method enabled the researcher to comprehend and identify the subjective experiences, beliefs, values, and motivations of school leaders.

3.4 Introducing School

Given the purpose of the research, which is to explore the shared values, characteristics, and strategies of principals in successful schools with extremely challenging circumstances, it was essential to determine whether or not the school was succeeding in an exceptionally challenging context. An additional problem involved the definition of “successful schools” and “extremely challenging circumstances”. The first concept was determined by the outcomes of national examinations (ICFES, 2023) that confirm a student's preparation to attend university. In Colombia, this outcome is measured by the student's score of the “Saber 11” national examination. This exam has a range of 0 to 500, with 500 being the best score. The national average for this exam in 2022 was 251 (Portafolio, 2023), whereas the middle school's average for that year was 377. The institution's growth and development, the national and international recognitions, and participations in relevant educational programs (Premio Nacional al Talento Joven in 2019; One Young World Forum in 2019; Young Ambassadors 2019, 2023; Crossculture Programme, 2020; Global Competitiveness Leadership, 2022) and the number of foreign exams (IELTS; HSK 1,2,3; SAT) taken by its students were other factors that proved its success.

3.5 Introducing Participants

The participants of this case study include a diverse array of individuals whose stories and experiences contribute to a comprehensive understanding of their unique and complex educational context. These participants offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by the school community and shed light on the successful strategies

employed to overcome them. It is important to note that, due to the complexities of this paper's content and to ensure confidentiality, the participants will be referred to by the use of pseudonyms.

Seven people were invited to take part in this study. The first two interviewees were experimental. These interviews were made for the purpose of measuring the time and manner in which these should be conducted. Even though the participation of the two first interviewees was experimental, they also are two successful principals in schools with exceptionally challenging circumstances. These two individuals provided an outside perspective that was quite valuable in the information analysis process of this case study. The first experimental interviewee is a principal in Washington, D.C., in the United States. In this study, he will be abbreviated as "PW". His school is located in the southeast part of the city, an area with a large population of vulnerable African Americans and a high rate of criminality. For over 20 years, PW has been a social entrepreneur at the crossroads of education research, policy, and practice, combining commercial and political expertise with a reformer's sense of urgency about the repercussions of America's failure to provide high-quality education to all children equally. He was inducted into the District of Columbia's Public Charter Schools Hall of Fame in 2018 for his outstanding work. He founded an innovative tuition-free laboratory preschool in southeast D.C. Under PW's leadership, the non-profit initiative has expanded in effect and scale to a \$28 million enterprise with 300 employees, several locations in challenging contexts, and a rising impact on early learning, research, policy, and practice both in the nation's capital and at a national level.

The second experimental participant is the principal of a small school in Vichada, Colombia, a state in the Amazonia region. This region of the country is notorious for its violence, child recruitment, government negligence, and illicit crop cultivation. This school leader has a broader view of education in his region because he was also the Secretary of Education in his state. He is in his late 50s, and his journey began when he chose to teach at a school situated in a socio-economically disadvantaged area. From his position as leader of that school, he had to deal with challenges such as economic inequities, restricted access to resources, and safety issues that pervade the classroom. Undeterred by these challenges, he saw an opportunity to make a meaningful impact and be a source of inspiration for his students. He started as a teacher but gradually rose through the ranks to become the rector of his school. After ten years in that role, he was appointed to the highest position in the education system of his state. He will be referred to as "PV" in this paper.

The following five participants are from School M, where this case study is taking place. The first one is the principal of the school, then there are two mid-level managers, and finally two teachers. The principal of School M is a resolute and passionate educator who stands as a central participant in this case study examining SECCs. As a leader in one such school, he embodies the spirit of resilience, innovation, and unwavering commitment to his students, despite the formidable obstacles he encounters. His participation in the case study offers invaluable insights into the realities of SECCs. His experiences, strategies, and perspectives are an example of the transformative power of dedicated leaders who become beacons of empowerment within their communities. Through his story, the broader educational landscape could gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and opportunities found in these unique educational environments. This school leader will be referred to as "P" in this paper. On a personal level, P describes himself as passionate about high-quality education, and while his

undergraduate degree was not in the subject of teaching, his extensive academic experience taught him the value of education. He was one of the co-founders of School M.

In the intricate web of educational leadership within this SEEC, stands a dedicated mid-level manager who embodies a vital pillar that bridges the gap between upper administration and the teachers on the frontlines of the classroom. The position within the School M of the first manager (M1) is in the high school section. She is in her twenties, and her training is in engineering. Her main responsibility is to function as coordinator; however, she also teaches math. This mid-level manager affirms that her role as a teacher and part of the leading team gives her a broad perspective of the school and its strengths and necessities. M1's role is dynamic and multifaceted. Juggling administrative responsibilities with a keen understanding of the unique challenges their school community faces, M1's presence is a source of stability in the midst of turbulence.

Similarly, the second mid-level manager (M2) is another woman in her twenties who works in the elementary section of the school. M2's role as a mid-level manager is instrumental in maintaining a positive school culture. Her efforts uplift the morale of teachers and staff, ensuring that their dedication is recognised and appreciated. In an environment where challenges may seem overwhelming, M2's leadership provides hope, a steady hand, and a constant reminder that transformative change is possible, even in the most trying circumstances. With limited resources and students navigating complex backgrounds, M2's leadership shines through in her ability to adapt and innovate. She works tirelessly to find creative solutions that stretch these limited resources to their fullest potential, ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed academically and emotionally.

The last two participants are two teachers who are an example of devotion and compassion emerging from the halls of School M. The first teacher (T1) is in his early twenties, teaches biology, and has been teaching for three years. Despite his young age and little experience, T1's class is a small-scale illustration of hope, where he channels his energy and creativity to inspire students facing formidable obstacles. His role extends beyond instruction; he becomes a mentor, advocate, and even surrogate parent to many. His dedication to his students' success is palpable in the extra hours he spends offering tutoring, guidance, and a listening ear. With scarce resources, he employs creative strategies to engage students, making the curriculum relevant to their lives. His lessons transcend textbooks, weaving in life skills, values, and the importance of perseverance.

On the other hand, the second teacher (T2) is a woman in her twenties who considers collaboration a cornerstone of her mission. T2 works closely with colleagues to share insights and strategies, believing that collective efforts are more potent than individual actions. She also collaborates with the community, partnering with local organisations to provide additional resources and opportunities for her students. Adapting her teaching methods to the various needs of her students, T2 embodies innovation.

It is important to mention that both the two mid-level managers and the two teachers began their engagement with School M as students before becoming employees. As mentioned before, this study has an immense advantage because these participants can share their student perspective too. Finally, the participants in this case study collectively paint a vivid picture of a school community managing challenges with resilience, innovation, and a collaborative

spirit. Their stories form a mosaic that aims to highlight the interconnectedness of all stakeholders in the pursuit of transformative change, offering valuable lessons for educators, policymakers, and communities facing similar circumstances.

4. Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter intends to present an examination of the findings of the five staff members at School M, including the principal, from their own different perspectives. Additionally, the two experimental participants will be briefly mentioned to give a broader context, considering their valuable experience in SECCs. However, it is important to clarify that this case study focuses on School M. The findings will be presented in the way that has been specified as “effective for reporting qualitative” data (Thomas, 2006, p. 245), that is, with a classification label, the authors' definition of the category's meaning, and a citation to offer an extended account of the category's meaning. The findings respond to this paper's research question:

What shared values, characteristics, and strategies do successful principals employ to navigate and overcome challenges in schools with challenging circumstances?

4.1 Identifying Values

Professional values, ethics, and educational goals are important to what and why principals undertake their jobs, and how they adapt their practices to the unique policy, organisational, and human setting in which they function (Day et al., 2011). Several core values emerge as central to the study's exploration of successful educational leadership in challenging environments. These values not only guide the actions and decisions of the principals under investigation but also serve as ethical foundations upon which their leadership is built. However, the identification and justification of the most important values is an arduous task. The participants mentioned an extensive range of values that they consider essential in a principal. There were three that were present more than twice in the answers of at least three participants. That is why those values receive a special analysis and could be considered as key elements for school leaders in SECCs.

Even though values are being overvalued today and may have different interpretations depending on culture or religion, when you are a professional, when you work with children, and when your role in the community is to change the future of highly vulnerable children, there are values that need to be present to ensure success in school. To be perfectly honest, the most important values are difficult to choose (P).

The values present at the school are guided by an explicit and strong vision of what the school leader wants the school to become. According to the comments of some participants, both formally and informally, values were largely promoted by the school head. It was clear from all the interviews that teachers and mid-level managers saw the school leader as the vision keeper. At the beginning, it was initiated and mentioned by the mid-level manager (M1) in an informal way. Consequently, the concept was expressed in a written, official statement of values and their importance, which serve as pillars for the success of this school.

Without a doubt, the values of the principal are the ones that are promoted in the school, and in my opinion, that is not wrong. However, I would strengthen some of them and pay less

attention to others. On the other hand, I recognise that there are some values that cannot be negotiated in this type of school (M1).

Equity in education is a fundamental notion that underpins this research. In challenging circumstances, successful leaders are deeply committed to ensuring that every student, regardless of their background or personal issues, has an equal opportunity to succeed. This commitment to equalising levels of competition drives the principal's leadership. In other words, equity becomes a moral compass that leads principals in their search for equitable and just results for all (Day et al., 2011). Supporting the last statement, the following comment from one of the teachers was afterwards practically word for word echoed by other members of the school's staff.

One of the pillars of the principal's personality is equity, that sensitivity for others is what motivates him to lead this school. The most important thing is that this value is shared with all the staff and that our purpose is to transmit it to the students (T1).

Additionally, all the participants mentioned the particular importance that the students have in SECCs. Being student-centred was considered as a highly relevant value that helps principals forge strong relationships with students. According to Robinson (2011), school leaders pay close attention to their students' worries, hopes, and challenges, fostering a secure environment in which kids may freely express themselves. This bond builds trust and allows principals to give tailored assistance that tackles particular hurdles to achievement. The question "What specific characteristics or values do you think are crucial for principals working in schools with difficult circumstances?" revealed the following answers:

These children are our future, and they are facing great challenges, climate crises, migration, and many more. For these reasons, it is crucial to try to foster a friendly environment, adapt to their world, and provide them with a safe place where they can express themselves and generate their own ideals. It is necessary to make them feel that they are valuable and that they can overcome any challenge, generating confidence and hope for the future (T2).

You must be tactful so that you can gradually find the best way to reach the students. I have always considered that a child, especially in such a particular life situation, is a totally different world. For this reason, it is all the more important to be empathetic but also convincing. For a positive and inclusive environment, children need to be taught moral values and how to apply them in their daily life. In this way, they will form excellent human beings and citizens. We cannot forget that they are the ones who must have the attention, they are the ones who need it (M2).

Respect for diversity is a core value supported by leaders working in the complex terrain of schools experiencing exceptionally difficult conditions. This principle guides principals in developing an inclusive and harmonious school community in these convoluted educational contexts, which are marked by a diverse range of origins and experiences. (Fuller, 2018). Further analysis of the data reveals that the respect for diversity was mentioned only for the participants who have a leadership position in the school (P, M1, M2).

In this school the diversity is impressive. As a rector I have to promote respect for diversity. A clear example I can mention is the interaction between Colombian children and Venezuelan

migrant children. This is a very delicate issue as society in general has xenophobic behaviour that cannot be repeated in schools (P).

After all the conflicts that this region of our country has gone through, it is the school where the historical wounds of society begin to heal. That is possible only when you respect diversity (M1).

One key word is diversity and it is the school leadership team that sets standards and instils diversity-friendly behaviours in both teaching staff and students (M2).

Another significant finding was the fact that advocacy was mentioned several times by the two experimental interviewees (PW, PV) who, as mentioned in Chapter 3, have a long time of experience and their expertise have made their schools grow successfully. That is why this value could be considered as the key to successful growth in SECCs. The claims of PV and PW could be contrasted with P's views and the relatively slow growth of School M.

Sadly, working with local and national government is almost impossible. I have always worked for my school with my staff, and we don't need or depend on anyone. So far it has worked very well for me, my goal is not to grow, it is to make things right with the children I have in my school today (P).

It is well-known and documented that principals who collaborate with lawmakers, community leaders, and stakeholders to shape policies affecting their school community have greater positive impact in their institutions (Williams & Richardson, 2010; Murakami et al., 2015; Lochmiller, 2017). This implies that P may require a sense of advocacy if he wants his school to grow more rapidly and successfully.

Advocacy, respect for diversity, and equity were the most often mentioned values in participant responses. However, a variety of values were identified by participants as essential in SECC's school leaders. Despite the fact that some of them were only cited once or twice, they appear to have a significant beneficial influence on these schools. The following comments represent values that were referred to in more than two interviews:

....parents and often students do not want to face academic challenges. I have known of several cases where they have wanted to bribe the principal for good grades, so honesty is a value to have (T1).

Principals who have integrity make certain that policies, resource allocations, and disciplinary measures are applied fairly, regardless of background or circumstance (M2).

Humility is a value that school leaders need to have. They must be aware of their own limitations or weaknesses (T2).

Solidarity is a value that is present from the very first moment a person starts working as a principal in a SECC (M1).

4.2 Understanding successful principals

Leading SECCs requires principals who possess a unique set of characteristics or skills. These characteristics manifest themselves in the form of certain behaviours that allow school leaders to act in accordance with the values that guide them. One very interesting fact revealed by this study is that while discussing characteristics, none of the participants mentioned the intellectual, socio-economic, or physical characteristics of the principals. Participants, instead, clarified and emphasised the traits that make up school leaders as persons.

You cannot expect there to be a guide to be a principal in this kind of school; you cannot go to a university to prepare for this. There is no mould that makes people brave and love their work. Moreover, no school is the same, and even less so in difficult contexts. Therefore, I believe that important and indispensable characteristics or skills are forged while working in this kind of environment (P).

It is widely known that the resilience of a principal develops a culture of commitment and tenacity, motivating teachers, students, and parents alike to face challenges with growing determination (Peters & Pearce, 2011; Gu & Day, 2011; Day & Gu, 2013). That statement was corroborated by the majority of participants, who agreed that the most significant characteristic of principals in SECCs is resilience. They mentioned this characteristic as essential for the leading team and therefore for the school's functionality and future.

Without resilience, I would have quit this job. [...] the adversities I experience on a daily basis are so unexpected, complicated, and even dangerous that I would not be able to handle them without the resilience I have built (P).

I call that strength that drives us to keep fighting for these children “resilience”, because as school leaders, we don't just face the problems of the school. We also get involved in the problems of our students and teachers (M1).

[Resilience] is one of the things that our principal mentions to us the most [...] to find strength in adversity, to feel stronger after every defeat (T2).

His [the principal's] capacity to adjust to difficult situations and achieve positive results is critical to his work. This resilience is what keeps this school alive (M2).

Adaptability was another characteristic that was identified in the collected data. The school leader's adaptability is seen as a quality that encourages a culture of constant development. It is important to mention that some of the participants did not use the word “adaptability” exactly. They used words like “flexibility” and “versatility” that could be interpreted as “adaptability”. This term was also considered fundamental by PW and PV. They claim that learning to operate in the midst of lacking basic needs and making the most use of the limited assets available is critical for the success of their schools. It is necessary to be creative and adapt resources, establish collaborations with communities and organisations, and use technology to bridge gaps (Tomasik et al., 2010).

My school is the only school that teaches Chinese Mandarin in the whole eastern region of my country, and I don't have the budget to have a native teacher. However, I have access to the internet and, through it, to hundreds of pedagogical sources that help me in my purpose. We can have no excuses; we must adapt to our low budget and conditions (P).0

His [School M's principal's] versatility and creativity make us undertake extraordinary projects that often seem impossible (T1).

To be successful at running this sort of school, you must think outside the box. I believe that characteristic is flexibility; you must learn to be adaptable (M2).

The use of combined expertise and resources to develop creative tactics (Day et al., 2021) and the ability to make partnerships with universities or private organisations that are relevant to their school's specific setting, were considered by several interviewees as inseparable characteristics. In other words, adaptability was closely related to a sense of collaboration.

Another example I like to give is the fact that I do not have, nor can I afford, to hire computer and programming teachers. However, I have an agreement with Microsoft and the Javeriana University of Colombia, and this is how my students in this small town learn these subjects with tutors of the highest quality (P).

Finally, most of the participants agreed that principals need to communicate a clear and compelling vision that connects with students', instructors', and parents' goals, driving collaborative effort towards a shared objective. Visionary thinking allows them to predict changes in educational trends, societal dynamics, and student requirements, allowing the school to stay responsive and relevant (Berson et al., 2001).

For any member of our community, it is crazy that our school teaches programming. However, the vision of our principal is to have the quality of education that a child can have in a developed country (T2).

Long-term goals are what keep us up to date as an educational institution (M1).

Vision is essential, [...], that's why my school is constantly being evaluated by external agents. because we need our children to be competent in the world (P).

4.3 How to be Successful?

Principals in SECCs design different strategies to face the vast field of obstacles that their contexts have. As mentioned in Chapter 3, their responsibilities go beyond standard administrative work, as they help shape the school's culture, drive academic improvement, and serve as advocates for students, families, and communities (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Stringer & Hourani, 2015). One of the most interesting outcomes of the data collected in this study could be the interpretation of School M's principal. He affirms that:

I consider that the union of the values that I have and the characteristics or skills that I have forged, is what makes me design and create new ways to face the problems that my school has every day (P).

This statement has a positive correlation with the purpose of this paper, which is to explore the importance of values and characteristics in the strategies that principals in SECCs apply to overcome challenges. However, none of the other interviewees mentioned a link among those subjects. The adaptation of the curriculum was highlighted by six of the seven participants as

a strategy. They affirm that one of the primary roles of principals in SECCs is to adjust the curriculum to the specific requirements of their pupils.

I cannot teach the same curriculum to a Colombian child who has had access to school as I can to a migrant child who is 10 years old and doesn't know how to read (T1).

That is one of the country's mistakes in public education. The government is convinced that the same curriculum applies to the entire country. I considered that the greater flexibility a principal has in selecting his curriculum, the greater his chances of success (P).

Principals are able to construct a curriculum that is both acceptable for their students and required for the community in which they work in these settings (M2).

Even though the term "professional development" was not mentioned by any of the Colombian participants. Teachers and mid-level managers consider this a vital issue in their working lives, and they greatly appreciate the opportunity to be able to work and grow academically and personally at the same time. Principals who promote a learning environment for their staff with workshops, seminars, and collaborative sessions ensure that instructors have a repertory of tactics at their disposal (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2019) and a sense of belonging to the school.

One of the biggest challenges I have is maintaining a stable, happy, and competitive staff. That is why I am constantly designing academic activities that make them grow as people and professionals (P).

I continue working here because I am always learning (M2).

As indicated in Chapter 2, principals in SECCs acknowledge that when schools, families, and communities work together, the issues that their children face—economic hardships, cultural diversity, or social vulnerabilities—are more successfully handled. However, four of the participants described the implementation of this strategy as impossible.

Is a strategy that we have only recently begun to explore [...] but when a family's primary concern is providing food for their children, commitment to schooling is essentially non-existent (P).

It is probably the lack of experience in this field that has not allowed this strategy to be successfully developed by P. Nonetheless, it is well known that every SECC has its own set of difficulties and challenges.

While these findings provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The research focused on one case, and the findings may not be universally applicable to all schools facing extreme challenges. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which could introduce potential biases. In summary, the findings of this dissertation shed light on the shared values, qualities, and strategies of principals who have achieved success in schools with extremely challenging circumstances. These findings hope to have implications for educational leadership development, policy formulation, and the improvement of educational outcomes in SECCs. By understanding and harnessing these

insights, we could work towards creating more equitable and successful educational environments for all students.

5. Conclusion

As educational leaders continue to face unprecedented challenges, the insights from this paper intend to offer a roadmap for aspiring and current principals, policymakers, and educators alike. By recognizing the importance of shared values and characteristics while embracing successful strategies, this study hopes to show the way for improved educational outcomes in schools with extremely challenging circumstances. Ultimately, this paper serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of those who tirelessly work to ensure that every student, regardless of their circumstances, has the opportunity to succeed.

Some of the most significant findings to emerge from this study are that firstly, there is a lack of literature about schools with “extremely challenging circumstances”. A small percentage of the research on this subject features schools with extremely serious challenges; the majority of them concentrate on schools with challenging circumstances. Secondly, the discovery of similar values among successful principals could imply that values-based leadership can have a major influence on school achievement in extremely difficult conditions. Thirdly, the facts examined in this study imply that if principals want to be successful in SECCs, they should refine the characteristics and strategies mentioned in this paper. Additionally, this paper suggests that the values and characteristics are the foundation for principals’ abilities to develop successful strategies for SECCs. This suggestion also serves as an invitation for further research. Finally, it is crucial to note that this case study is too small, and more research that compares other locations and situations is recommended to offer more insights into the universality of these findings.

In closing, this dissertation hopes to illuminate the extraordinary capacities of principled and resilient leaders to make a profound difference in the lives of students, even in the direst educational settings. The principals, mid-level managers, and teachers in this study stand as exemplars of what can be achieved when leadership is rooted in values, fortified by characteristics, and guided by strategic wisdom. Their success stories may inspire others to continue their journey towards a more equitable and promising future in education.

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