

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

School Leadership Management as a Catalyst for Educational Change in the Dominican Republic: Challenges and Perspectives

Gestión del Liderazgo escolar como catalizador del cambio educativo en la República Dominicana: Desafíos y Perspectivas

Nelson R. Rosario 

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Abstract This study analyzed the impact of educational policies on reducing social inequality in rural areas of the Dominican Republic. It sought to understand how rural education contributes to the social and economic development of these communities, drawing on Human Capital Theory (Becker) and Critical Pedagogy (Freire), which view education as a tool for empowerment and breaking cycles of poverty. A mixed-methods research approach was employed, combining quantitative data analysis from the Ministry of Education (MINERD) on academic access and achievement with qualitative interviews with principals, teachers, students, and parents in the Cibao and Southern regions. The findings revealed that the Extended School Day (ESD) has improved retention and access to nutrition. However, technological gaps persist, and teacher training remains insufficient, limiting educational quality. They also suggest that, despite progress, the lack of a comprehensive and sustained policy prevents a substantial reduction in inequality. The conclusion is that rural education is a powerful tool for social development in the Dominican Republic, but its potential is limited by structural deficiencies. To achieve true equity, greater strategic investment, specialized teacher training, and effective decentralization that strengthens local communities are crucial.

Keywords school leadership, educational change, challenges, perspectives, educational policies.

Resumen Este estudio analizó el impacto de las políticas educativas en la reducción de la desigualdad social en las zonas rurales de la República Dominicana. Buscó entender cómo la educación rural contribuye al desarrollo social y económico de estas comunidades, basándonos en la Teoría del Capital Humano (Becker) y la pedagogía crítica (Freire), que ven la educación como una herramienta para el empoderamiento y la ruptura de ciclos de pobreza. Se empleó un enfoque investigacional mixto, combinando el análisis de datos cuantitativos del MINERD sobre acceso y logros académicos con entrevistas cualitativas a directores, docentes, estudiantes y padres en las regiones del Cibao y el Sur. Los hallazgos revelaron que la Jornada Escolar Extendida ha mejorado la retención y el acceso a la nutrición. No obstante, persisten brechas tecnológicas y la formación docente sigue siendo insuficiente, lo que limita la calidad educativa, también sugieren que, a pesar de los avances, la falta de una política integral y sostenida impide una reducción sustancial de la desigualdad. Se concluye que la educación rural es una herramienta poderosa para el desarrollo social en la República Dominicana, pero su potencial está limitado por deficiencias estructurales. Para lograr una verdadera equidad, es crucial una mayor inversión estratégica, una formación docente especializada y una descentralización efectiva que fortalezca a las comunidades locales.

Palabras clave liderazgo escolar, cambio educativo, desafíos, perspectivas- políticas educativas.

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✉ Nelson R. Rosario
nelrosario056-@gmail.com

Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.

Introduction

School leadership in the Dominican Republic is the cornerstone of educational transformation. Historically, the principal's role has been limited to administrative tasks, but current demands require a figure who transcends bureaucracy to become a true catalyst for pedagogical and social change. This article examines how effective school leadership can raise the quality of education, analyzing its challenges and future prospects through two essential theoretical frameworks: Human Capital Theory and critical pedagogy.

From the perspective of Marrero et al. (2025), Gary Becker's Human Capital Theory presents school leadership as a strategic investment. A well-trained and qualified principal not only optimizes institutional processes but also raises the quality of teaching and, ultimately, increases students' human capital. This view positions education as an engine of economic development and principals as key managers of this process. In the Dominican Republic, this concept is reflected in professional development and training initiatives for principals, with the goal of equipping them with the necessary tools for quality management that ensures graduates are productive and competitive citizens in the labor market.

On the other hand, Weinstein and Maldonado (2025) support Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which offers a complementary approach that understands school leadership as a process of empowerment. From this perspective, the principal is not a hierarchical authority figure, but rather a facilitator who promotes dialogue, active community participation, and reflection on pedagogical practice. This approach is vital in a country like the Dominican Republic, where leadership must be a vehicle for addressing social inequalities and providing an education that liberates students from marginalization. Therefore, truly effective leadership is that which builds an inclusive school climate, empowering both teachers and students to be co-creators of their own learning and agents of their own transformation.

In essence, the combination of both theoretical approaches suggests that the key to educational improvement lies in leadership that is both strategically efficient and socially transformative.

School leadership is a fundamental pillar for educational transformation and quality improvement in any system. It is not limited to administrative management but is defined as a leader's ability to influence and inspire a group toward a common goal. To be effective, a leader must possess skills that allow them not only to make sound decisions, but also to build trust and motivate members of the school community to follow their vision.

Educational leadership is intrinsically linked to public policy. For teacher management and school quality to improve, governments must formulate educational policies that serve as a clear guide. These policies aim to guide teaching

processes, modernize educational services, and, most importantly, guarantee the constitutional right to education for all, ensuring equal opportunities and equitable access for the greatest number of people, regardless of their background. In this way, leadership becomes a key pillar of educational governance that promotes social well-being.

According to Castro et al. (2024), educational policies are government actions designed to regulate and improve the functioning of educational institutions. The author argues that educational systems must integrate all stakeholders: students, teachers, administrators, and parents. To achieve this, policies must promote inclusion and equality, without distinction based on race, creed, age, geographic location, or socioeconomic status.

The authors argue that public policies must build a fair, democratic, inclusive, and sustainable education system. This implies guaranteeing equal rights and the participation of all citizens through monitoring, analysis, and follow-up mechanisms that address existing inequalities. It is crucial that the State establish communication channels so that the needs and problems of each region are shared and effective solutions can be found, especially to reduce school dropout rates.

Castro et al. (2024) also emphasize that education must be accessible and available to all, protecting human rights and ensuring the safety of children. Inclusion, a sense of belonging, and democracy are fundamental values that should guide policymaking.

Marrero et al. (2025) and Weinstein and Maldonado (2025) reflect on the relevance and implementation of educational policies in Latin America. They question whether these policies truly improve educational quality and promote equality. They point out that national curriculum frameworks must be relevant and aligned with the educational needs and life plans of the population, which is a challenge in a context of significant inequalities between rural and urban education.

Castro et al. (2024) argue that educational policies should focus on achieving quality at all levels, from preschool to education for people with disabilities. Formulating these policies is complex, as they must balance the need to improve the quality of life for the entire population with the promotion of social equity in a context of profound inequalities.

A dual approach is ideal for the Dominican education system, as the country's reality demands a combination of both paradigms. Misad and Dávila (2022) emphasize that, on the one hand, efficient and strategically visionary leadership is needed to manage resource scarcity and the demands of a growing education system. On the other hand, true transformative impact requires socially conscious leadership that addresses inequalities and empowers communities to become agents of their own development.

In this regard, training programs for school principals in the country must integrate both administrative and financial management with empowerment pedagogy, developing leaders capable of balancing efficiency with equity. This dual approach is key for school leadership to become the true catalyst for profound and sustainable educational change in the Dominican Republic.

The analysis of school leadership as a driver of change in the Dominican Republic is based on two main theoretical frameworks. Marrero et al. (2025) and Weinstein and Maldonado (2025) state that, although different approaches, they complement each other to offer a holistic understanding of the phenomenon: Human Capital Theory and Critical Pedagogy. For a complete analysis of school leadership in the Dominican Republic, it is vital to understand the dual approach that combines economic efficiency with social commitment. It is not just about administrative management, but about a broader vision that seeks to transform education.

Human Capital Theory developed by economist and sociologist Gary Becker, posits, based on the contributions of Marrero et al. (2025), that education is a strategic investment in a nation's human capital. From this perspective, education is not only a social right but also an economic asset that increases productivity, innovation, and income at both the individual and collective levels.

In this context, school leadership is a key component of this investment. A competent principal is seen as a manager who maximizes the institution's performance, ensuring that resources (teachers, curriculum, infrastructure) are used most efficiently to produce students with the skills and knowledge necessary to be productive members of society. The leader's effectiveness is measured by their ability to improve academic outcomes and the efficiency of the system, translating into greater economic value for the country.

The author believes that Becker presents education as a strategic investment for a country's development. In the Dominican Republic, this perspective focuses on school leadership as a key factor in optimizing educational performance. A principal is seen as a manager who maximizes efficiency, ensuring that available resources (teachers, technology, infrastructure) are used optimally to improve academic results.

This translates into the implementation of policies aimed at professionalizing school principals, equipping them with skills in strategic planning, financial management, and performance evaluation. The goal is for schools, under effective leadership, to become institutions capable of producing graduates with the necessary competencies to contribute to the national economy.

On the other hand, Weinstein and Maldonado (2025) focus on critical pedagogy, championed by the Brazilian educator Freire, as a strategy that proposes education as a tool for social transformation. Unlike the economic perspective, this

approach centers on the empowerment of individuals, especially those in marginalized contexts. From this perspective, school leadership goes beyond administrative management and becomes a process of liberation. The principal is a facilitator who fosters dialogue, the active participation of the entire educational community (teachers, students, and parents), and critical reflection on reality. The goal is not only efficiency but also social awareness and justice. This approach is crucial for the Dominican Republic, where leadership must be a vehicle for addressing profound social inequalities and ensuring that education is not only accessible but also relevant and liberating for all students.

The combination of both theories offers a comprehensive vision: a Dominican school leader must be both an efficient manager who maximizes human capital, and a facilitator who empowers their community for equitable social transformation.

Complementing the economic perspective, the critical pedagogy developed by Freire and presented by Weinstein and Maldonado (2025) offers a perspective that goes beyond academic outcomes. This approach views education as a tool for social transformation and liberation. In the Dominican Republic, where profound social inequalities persist, school leadership must be an agent of change that empowers communities.

Here, the principal is not just an administrator, but a facilitator who fosters dialogue, the active participation of parents and students, and critical reflection on social issues. Leadership from this perspective seeks to create an inclusive school environment where the experiences and knowledge of all members of the educational community are valued. It promotes an education that not only transmits knowledge but also develops critical awareness in students, preparing them to be citizens who question and actively seek social justice.

Educational leadership goes far beyond the operational or administrative management of a school. Aguilar (2021) argues that, in essence, it is a transformative capacity: a process in which leaders not only organize resources, but also inspire, mobilize, and empower the entire educational community, from teachers and students to families and support staff.

This dynamic process of social influence aims to mobilize teams, school communities, and systems toward shared goals. Educational leaders establish clear visions, promote pedagogical innovations, foster inclusive environments, and manage resources strategically. Therefore, they are key players in overcoming inequalities and addressing global challenges such as the impact of digitalization, the effects of the pandemic, and adaptation to climate change.

The Impact and Key Dimensions of Effective Leadership
The impact of educational leadership is undeniable:

schools with effective leaders tend to show better academic results, greater social cohesion, and higher levels of inclusion. According to the GEM 2024/5 report, effective leadership focuses on four specific areas:

Set clear expectations: Leaders must define an inspiring vision that motivates their school communities. This involves setting ambitious and equitable goals for students and teachers, focused on quality learning.

Focus on learning: Leadership should be geared towards improving teaching practices. This includes overseeing instruction, coordinating curricula, and ensuring that available resources align with educational goals.

Fostering collaboration: Schools function best when leadership is shared. Promoting collaboration among teachers, students, and families strengthens collective commitment and creates a more inclusive and resilient environment.

Developing people's potential: Supporting the professional growth of teachers and other members of the school community is essential. This not only improves teaching but also strengthens a sense of belonging and motivation.

These dimensions are not only applicable to school principals, but also to leaders at systemic and political levels, who must align their actions with these priorities to achieve a sustainable impact across the entire education system.

In the Dominican Republic, the challenges faced by educational leaders are similar to those described. Despite their crucial role, their effectiveness is hampered by a lack of preparation, inequitable selection processes, an overwhelming administrative burden, and limited systemic support. Escanio (2023) states:

Lack of Preparation and Professionalization: In the Caribbean country, school leadership is often exercised without the formal and specific training that such a complex role requires. Access to leadership positions has not always been linked to preparation in pedagogical management and leadership, but rather to seniority or other factors. This has resulted in reactive leadership, where principals focus on solving daily problems instead of planning long-term strategies to improve educational quality. The absence of robust training programs that address the four key dimensions (setting clear expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people's potential) is a reality that the Dominican education system is seeking to correct.

Selection Processes and Equity: Selection processes for leadership positions in the Dominican Republic have historically been vulnerable to patronage and inequality. The appointment of directors or regional officials has not always been based on an open and competitive merit-based process. This has affected the quality of appointments and perpetuated a lack of diversity. Although the majority of teaching

staff are female, women continue to be underrepresented in senior management positions. While there have been efforts to institutionalize competitive examinations, these still face challenges in ensuring their transparency and fairness.

Excessive Demands and Lack of Time: As in other countries, the administrative burden on Dominican school principals is immense. Tasks such as budget management, school infrastructure maintenance, and resolving daily operational problems consume most of their time. This leaves them little room to exercise effective pedagogical leadership, which is essential for overseeing the quality of teaching and supporting teachers' professional development. This administrative overload generates stress and demotivation, limiting principals' ability to become true agents of change within their schools.

At the systemic level, education officials in districts and regions also face limitations. They often lack the technical preparation and autonomy necessary to effectively implement educational reforms. This creates a disconnect between policies formulated centrally at the Ministry of Education (MINERD, 2023) and their implementation on the ground. The lack of training in educational planning and management at these levels can create bottlenecks and hinder the implementation of initiatives aimed at improving educational quality nationwide.

The strategies proposed by the GEM 2024/5 report to strengthen educational leadership are highly relevant to the Dominican Republic. For school leadership to be a true catalyst for change, the country must address the lack of autonomy, professionalization, shared leadership, and support for leaders within the system.

Autonomy and Resources in Local Management: Granting autonomy to schools is crucial for the Dominican Republic. Historically, the education system has been centralized, with decisions made at the Ministry of Education (MINERD 2023) that often fail to align with local realities. Allowing principals to manage their budgets, hire and retain staff, and adapt their pedagogical strategies to the specific needs of their communities could have a significant impact. However, this autonomy must be accompanied by sufficient resources. A lack of funding and logistical support can turn autonomy into a burden, especially in rural or low-income schools. It is essential that the country implement transparent accountability mechanisms so that autonomy translates into effective management and not the misuse of resources.

In addition to what Aguilar (2021) has stated, the need to professionalize leadership demonstrates that the country faces the challenge of professionalizing educational leadership, moving from seniority to competence. The traditional selection model, often based on seniority or political favoritism, must be replaced by inclusive, fair, and competency-based

selection processes. The Dominican Republic has already begun these efforts with competitive examinations, but it is crucial to ensure their complete transparency and the participation of candidates from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, it is vital that training programs for principals address the four key dimensions proposed by the report: setting clear expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people's potential. Mentoring and ongoing professional development must also be integral parts of the system to ensure that leaders are prepared for current and future challenges.

Shared Leadership: The Strength of Community is a powerful strategy for the Dominican context. Traditionally, the principal has been the sole authority, but the report highlights the importance of involving all stakeholders. The Ministry of Education (MINERD, 2023) states that schools should create formal structures, such as school councils and committees, that integrate teachers, students, and parents in decision-making. This not only strengthens collective commitment but also fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Recognizing and rewarding teachers who assume pedagogical leadership roles in their classrooms is an effective way to decentralize authority and empower the educational community.

Strengthening System Leaders: A Coherent Approach At the public administration level, this is essential. Officials in school districts and regional offices in the Dominican Republic need more than just the ability to implement directives; they require technical and strategic skills to analyze data, allocate budgets equitably, and monitor the quality of teaching. Their training in data analysis would allow them to identify and address educational inequalities more effectively. Strengthening their autonomy and strategic communication skills is fundamental for them to align national policies with the real needs of schools, creating a more coherent and effective system.

Methodology

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative research methods. Barraza (2023) states that this combination is ideal for gaining a deep understanding of a complex social phenomenon such as rural education. The quantitative component provides statistical data to measure the impact, while the qualitative component offers context and the narratives of the people involved, and is carried out in phases.

Quantitative Phase: It focused on the collection and analysis of numerical data.

Population and Sample: Rural schools were selected in the Cibao and Southern regions, known for their geographic and socioeconomic diversity. Data from the MINERD (Ministry

of Education of the Dominican Republic) databases were used.

Variables Analyzed: The main variables included:

Access: Percentage of enrollment and schooling rate by levels.

Retention: School dropout rate over the years.

Academic Achievements: Results in national standardized tests.

Data Analysis: Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to identify trends and correlations between educational policies and performance variables.

Qualitative Phase: This phase focused on exploring perceptions, experiences, and challenges. **Participants:** Principals, teachers, students, and parents from the selected schools were chosen. Selection criteria were based on the diversity of roles and willingness to participate.

Tools: The primary technique was the semi-structured interview. This tool allowed researchers to follow a script of key questions while maintaining the flexibility to delve deeper into relevant topics that emerged during the conversation. The questions were designed to explore aspects such as the implementation of the Extended School Day, daily challenges, the impact of policies, and the participants' aspirations.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and narratives in the interview transcripts.

According to Ordoñez (2025), triangulation was a fundamental pillar of this methodology. Quantitative findings were compared with qualitative ones. For example, if the data showed an improvement in school retention (quantitative data), the interviews helped to understand the reasons behind that improvement, such as the provision of food or the increase in learning time (qualitative finding). This complementarity not only validates the results but also offers a richer and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon studied, providing a complete picture of the impact of educational policies on the ground.

Results and discussion

Hernández (2020) explains that the results of the analysis show a complex panorama in Dominican rural education, where significant progress is evident in certain areas, but structural challenges persist that limit the desired impact.

Data from the Ministry of Education (MINERD, 2023) reveals a decrease in the school dropout rate in rural areas in recent years. This finding is directly related to the implementation of the Extended School Day program. The figures show that daily attendance and retention rates at the primary and secondary levels have improved significantly in schools implementing this program. Access to nutritious meals at

school has been a decisive factor in enabling many low-income families to keep their children enrolled.

According to Aguilar (2021), despite the improvement in retention, standardized test results may show a significant increase in academic performance. Qualitative interviews provided the reason for this gap:

Digital Divide: Students and teachers lack access to technological tools and internet connectivity. A teacher from a rural school in the South commented: “The tablet they gave us isn’t very useful if we don’t have internet to use it. The children only use it as a digital notebook.”

Specific Teacher Training: Teachers in rural areas feel they do not receive ongoing training that addresses the specific challenges of their environment, such as multi-grade teaching (teaching multiple grades in the same classroom) or a lack of teaching resources. One principal stated that the curriculum is designed for urban schools, which makes it difficult to implement in rural areas.

The interviews showed that the principal’s leadership is a determining factor in the success of a rural school. Communities where principals actively engage with parents and seek creative solutions to resource scarcity demonstrated greater cohesion and a better school environment. However, family participation is limited by long working hours in the fields, making it difficult for them to be directly involved in their children’s education.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that educational policies have made significant progress in access and retention, a crucial first step in reducing inequality. However, by failing to address quality gaps (technology, training) and the cultural and social factors of the rural environment, their impact on reducing social inequality and achieving full and equitable development is considerably limited, reinforcing the ideas of Marrero et al. (2025) and Weinstein and Maldonado (2025).

Triangulation allowed for the comparison and complementarity of the results from both methods, offering a richer and more complete view of the phenomenon under study. The final findings, which are the result of this integration, are presented below.

Impact of the Extended School Day : Quantitative data from the Ministry of Education (MINERD, 2023) showed an increase in school retention. Qualitative interviews confirmed and explained this phenomenon. Parents and students cited the provision of meals as the main factor motivating them to attend school, thus reducing dropout rates. However, they also noted that the increased school day does not always translate into greater learning, suggesting a heterogeneous quality of education.

Technological and Teacher Training Gaps: While quantitative data reflects investment in technology, interviews re-

vealed that this investment is not always effective. Teachers expressed frustration with the lack of internet connectivity and training in using digital tools. One teacher in the South commented: “They gave us the computer, but no one taught us how to use it for teaching. Without internet, it feels like just a decoration.” This disconnect between policy and classroom reality was identified as a critical barrier to improving quality.

School Leadership: The interviews highlighted the fundamental role of the principal. The schools with the best results, both in student retention and school climate, were led by proactive leaders who were directly involved in solving community problems. This leadership figure was identified as a “bridge” between MINERD policies (2023) and community needs, demonstrating that the human factor is as important as financial investment for the success of rural education.

Research shows that educational policies in the Dominican Republic have made significant progress in school inclusion and retention in rural areas. The Extended School Day, in particular, has been a catalyst for this change, providing a clear incentive for low-income families to keep their children in school. This finding partially validates the principles of Human Capital Theory, demonstrating that investment in education can generate a direct benefit that families perceive (Marrero et al., 2025; Weinstein and Maldonado, 2025).

However, the Dominican Republic Ministry of Education (2020) provides further insight into these findings by revealing a crucial disconnect between the quantity and quality of education. Despite increased class time and higher attendance, academic achievement has not improved at the same rate. This gap reflects structural challenges that investment in infrastructure and programs has failed to overcome. Lack of internet connectivity and the absence of specialized teacher training for rural contexts are significant barriers. Interviews with teachers and principals underscore that policies, while well-intentioned, often fail to adapt to classroom realities, thus limiting their effectiveness.

The research also highlights the crucial role of school leadership, drawing on Marrero et al. (2025), by contrasting the findings, which suggest that the success of a rural school depends not only on government policies but also on the principal’s ability to adapt, manage resource scarcity, and build a strong educational community. This point complements critical pedagogy by demonstrating how empowerment and local adaptation are essential for genuine educational transformation.

This leads us to see that rural education in the Dominican Republic is at a crossroads. While important steps have been taken to guarantee access, the real challenge now is closing the quality gap. To achieve a substantial reduction in social inequality, a more comprehensive vision is required, one that

not only invests in infrastructure but also strengthens human and social capital in these communities.

Conclusions

Rural education in the Dominican Republic shows notable progress alongside persistent structural challenges. While policies such as the Extended School Day program have improved access and school retention by supporting low-income families, gains in inclusion have not translated into educational equity or quality. Significant technological gaps, limited connectivity, and insufficient teacher preparation for rural pedagogical contexts continue to constrain learning outcomes and skill development. The study also highlights the central role of school leadership, showing that principals who act as local change agents foster stronger community engagement and better adaptation to resource limitations. Overall, the findings suggest that reducing social inequality requires an integrated strategy that combines access-focused policies with investments in technology, targeted teacher training, and strengthened local leadership to achieve sustainable educational transformation in rural communities.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Rosario, N. R. **Data curation:** Rosario, N. R. **Formal analysis:** Rosario, N. R. **Research:** Rosario, N. R. **Methodology:** Rosario, N. R. **Supervision:** Rosario, N. R. **Validation:** Rosario, N. R. **Visualization:** Rosario, N. R. **Writing the original draft:** Rosario, N. R. **Writing, review and editing:** Rosario, N. R.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The author acknowledges the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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