

project

A woman with dark, wavy hair and brown-rimmed glasses is speaking at a conference. She is wearing a blue and purple patterned sweater over a red and white striped shirt. A small yellow microphone is clipped to her sweater. The background is a light-colored wall with large, faint text in Spanish, including "más social", "verita", "ce", "a", "perso", and "verita".

Gloria Gratacós Casacuberta holds a PhD in Education and is a Full Professor in the Faculty of Education at Villanueva University (Madrid), where she has served as Dean of both the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Psychology. Currently, she directs the Master's Degree in School Leadership and Management, aimed at training national and international school leaders. A specialist in school governance, her research focuses on the impact of school leadership on teacher leadership, instructional quality, and school climate. She is the author of numerous publications on school leadership and actively collaborates in international networks and forums, such as the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL). Furthermore, she coordinates the CEAFAF Research Group (Educational Quality, Effective Learning, and Teacher Professional Development) at Villanueva University.

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When school leadership sows, teacher leadership blooms

by Impuls Educació

ARTICLE BY GLORIA GRATACÓS AND PEDRO-LEÓN VIVAS

In 2019, the arrival of a new principal at an early childhood and kindergarten school in Madrid triggered far more than a routine leadership handover: it unlocked the latent potential of the faculty and fundamentally transformed the institution's professional culture. Documented by the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL), this case provides a concrete operational roadmap demonstrating how teacher leadership can revitalize an educational institution when administration chooses to cultivate capacity before demanding raw results.

The ISTL research collective (www.mru.ca/istl) unites international scholars to investigate teacher leadership across diverse cultural landscapes. Their foundational

premise posits that contemporary societal shifts require educational institutions to move beyond legacy models centered exclusively on the principal. The 2020 global health crisis vividly illustrated this reality: the schools that successfully maintained instructional continuity did so not because of physical infrastructure or material wealth, but through the professional commitment of an adaptable faculty capable of mobilizing individual strengths to scaffold students under extraordinary constraints. The ISTL group concentrates on three core imperatives: how teacher leadership is conceptualized, how it is intentionally fostered, and how it is sustainably maintained within distinct cultural frameworks. Relying on case study methodology to extract insights from the daily clinical realities of schools, their findings were featured at the 1st

Impuls Educació Congress, "Leading the School of the Future," where Gloria Gratacós presented this field-anchored research alongside global experts.

This specific case documents how a Madrid-based early childhood center catalyzed teacher leadership in 2019 through the strategic deployment of "expert groups." The following analysis dissects the administrative practices that facilitated the initiative, the resulting pedagogical shifts, and the downstream impact on student learning. Because this study examines an early childhood setting, the teaching staff was entirely female, which governs the gendered focus of the primary field data.

Where to begin? A clear diagnosis and a guiding question

The intervention initiated with a rigorous baseline diagnosis: a contraction in student enrollment

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dialogs

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driven by regional demographic declines, intensifying local competition, and an urgent need to modernize instructional workflows. In response, the leadership team formulated a strategic question to guide the entire transformation: how can we accelerate academic outcomes while simultaneously elevating teacher motivation and professional commitment? The framing of this query served as an explicit statement of intent, rejecting the premise that accountability and educator well-being are mutually exclusive, and positioning them instead as inherently symbiotic. The administration recognized that superficial procedural compliance would not suffice. True optimization demanded a profound cultural shift that repositioned classroom teachers as the primary architects of school improvement. This required migrating from a centralized, principal-centric hierarchy toward a highly distributed model, where pedagogical decision-making was deprivatized and grassroots professional initiative was actively incentivized. The operational strategy materialized by identifying and leveraging the pre-existing assets of the faculty. As the principal noted: *"True leadership development begins by identifying the unique strengths and pedagogical passions of the faculty, using their intrinsic interests as the structural foundation for specialized expert teams."*

The decisions that ignited the engine of teaching innovation

Expert groups were engineered as lean, agile teams of educators organized around specific curricular domains. Rather than serving as bureaucratic committees, these groups functioned as autonomous pedagogical laboratories tasked with researching, trialing, designing, executing, and evaluating novel methodological frameworks before scaling them across the entire institution. In this school, they

catalyzed targeted innovations in English phonetics, mathematics instruction, socio-emotional learning, psychomotor education, and project-based learning. Successful implementation required pairing logistical adjustments with a deliberate shift in administrative disposition. The principal first conducted individualized clinical interviews to map the specific motivations, aptitudes, and vocational interests of every educator. This granular diagnostic profile formed the bedrock of the school's professional development architecture. Central authorities then aligned the school's macro-curricular priorities with the individual passions of the staff. Researchers isolate this specific intersection as the primary catalyst for the project's success: teams configured around authentic professional affinity operate from a deep intrinsic motivation that no external compliance mandate or financial incentive could replicate. To sustain these laboratories, the administration structurally protected dedicated collaboration time within the school week, provisioned teams with material resources and specialized training, and established a non-negotiable cultural baseline: honest instructional mistakes would not be penalized. This psychological safety and institutional backing turned expert groups into a powerful engine for innovation and professional capital.

How expert groups revitalized teaching and activated teacher leadership

The introduction of expert groups fundamentally disrupted the school's legacy operational logic. Educators shifted from passive executors of top-down administrative directives to authentic co-authors of the school's curricular and pedagogical design. They took full ownership of methodology engineering, content synthesis, and active instructional

Groups established under this paradigm operate driven by an intrinsic motivation that is impossible to achieve through external incentives

decision-making. This paradigm shift was sustained through systematic, disciplined collaborative professionalism. Teachers engaged in continuous, data-informed dialogue regarding their daily practice, deprivatizing their classrooms and co-calibrating didactic strategies. This collaborative workflow enhanced vertical and horizontal curricular alignment across grade levels while cultivating a professional climate rooted in deep relational trust. Internal knowledge-transfer symposia served as the primary mechanism for scaling these insights: each expert group systematically presented its action-research findings, provided practical toolkits, and scaffolded colleagues in adopting the new methodologies, thereby turning individual expertise into collective institutional capital. As a teacher said: *"Professional development and applying what you learn significantly boost confidence and self-esteem. This, in turn, makes you a better teacher"*. Throughout this iterative process, specific educators naturally emerged as pedagogical experts in their respective fields. They assumed these roles not via formal administrative appointment, but through organic peer recognition of their clinical expertise, commitment, and capacity to mobilize colleagues. This organic evolution represents the precise profile of teacher leadership investigated by the ISTL: informal in its origin, yet exceptionally potent in its systemic scope and influence. By actively designing the innovations they deployed, teachers developed



deep psychological ownership over the school's evolving charter. Integrating personal strengths into institutional goals infused their daily labor with elevated professional meaning.

The Impact of expert groups on student learning

The sophisticated collaboration within the expert groups translated into measurable, observable progress across all target developmental domains. In mathematics, the integration of hands-on, conceptually rich methodologies empowered students to master cognitive milestones that exceeded the faculty's baseline expectations, unlocking advanced capacities for mathematical abstraction and numerical reasoning rarely documented in early childhood

cohorts under traditional frameworks. In English, a strategic pivot toward systemic phonology, targeted listening comprehension, and proactive verbal expression generated a noticeable surge in student communicative competence, ensuring a seamless, high-attaining transition into

**More integrated,
feeling as though
the school is a part
of you, because you
are contributing
something of your
own to educational
growth and
development**

primary education. Concurrently, the socio-emotional learning laboratory established early affective awareness and self-regulation protocols, significantly reducing behavioral friction and optimizing the classroom learning climate. Finally, the widespread deployment of project-based learning boosted intrinsic motivation, positioning young learners as active protagonists in their own inquiries. This accelerated development caught the attention of families, who reported significant, unexpected cognitive and social progress in their children. Ultimately, the expert group model demonstrates that sustained, job-embedded professional collaboration—when structurally supported by executive leadership—serves as a high-leverage mechanism for maximizing student learning growth.

Leading together: when administration and teachers form a single team

This case study confirms that navigating complex institutional challenges demands a leadership style that rejects centralization in favor of strategic distribution. The school administration did not abdicate its executive authority; rather, it reconfigured it. Management transitioned from top-down monitoring to engineering an ecosystem where frontline educators could execute high-level initiatives grounded in their localized expertise. Executive leadership, viewed through this lens, exerts its greatest impact not through direct command, but by cultivating the structural conditions and psychological safety that activate the collective capacity of the team. Administrative management alone is fundamentally insufficient to navigate the complexity of contemporary educational demands. Conversely, grassroots teacher leadership lacking institutional scaffolding, structural resources, or alignment with a unified vision quickly leads to widespread professional frustration. Sustainable school improvement requires the deliberate articulation of both leadership vectors working in lockstep. For executives and practitioners committed to authentic

school improvement, the takeaways from this case are highly actionable: audit and identify the latent strengths of the faculty, build the structural conditions required for deep collaborative professionalism, and design explicit mechanisms to convert individualized expertise into shared institutional capital aligned with a common educational vision. While expert groups are not a rigid, universal template, they offer a replicable blueprint of how integrated leadership—where administrative authority and teacher leadership operate as complementary forces—can fundamentally transform an educational institution from within.

Lessons learned from practice

The ISTL research cohort strongly champions the value of an educational science that originates within live school environments and returns directly to them. When academic research engages deeply with local practitioners, respects school ecology, and seeks to understand the nuanced dynamics of daily routines, it establishes a powerful virtuous cycle: field practice informs theory, and refined theory returns to the classroom to optimize practice. At the 1st Impuls Educació Congress, international authority Andy Hargreaves emphasized the vital importance of deciphering

clinical practice from an internal perspective. This case study mirrors that philosophy, making visible an integrated leadership framework that yields concrete dividends for both educator capital and student learning trajectories. The core takeaway is straightforward: if a school house contains teachers with unmapped talents and untapped interests, the first executive imperative is to actively listen to them. The subsequent step is to provide the structural scaffolding required to translate that latent capacity into collective, institutionalized practice. What began as small, localized teams of educators ultimately altered the organizational DNA of an entire school. This is the true promise of integrated educational leadership.

School leadership exerts its influence both through its direct actions and through the conditions and capacities it fosters within its team

