

Ethical educational leadership. Identity, interiority and ethics

**The future of schools depends on the integrity
and values of those who lead them**

by Impuls Educació

MARIA ROSA BUXARRAIS'S KEYNOTE

Pandemics, climate crises, artificial intelligence, and social polarization: the uncertainty of the present drives the search for technical solutions, measurable indicators, and managerial efficiency. Countering this impulse, Maria Rosa Buxarrais advocates for a less traveled path: the profound transformation of leadership itself. Three dimensions—identity, interiority, and ethics—articulate a proposal in which outward action begins with inward reflection. Leading is, above all, a way of being.

The present demands much more than technical management

We live in a time of profound uncertainty. The pandemic, climate crises, geopolitical tensions, growing inequality, and the technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence are transforming the context in which educational leadership is exercised. Schools

face unprecedented challenges: integrating artificial intelligence without losing the essence of education, guiding a generation immersed in information overload, responding to increasing diversity, and sustaining communities within a climate of social polarization. In this scenario, it is tempting to seek solely technical responses: efficient management, measurable indicators, and rigid protocols. However, the transformation of schools requires something prior to any protocol: the profound transformation of those who lead them. As William Foster noted, every administrative decision entails a restructuring of human life. Therefore, school administration is, in its most intimate essence, the resolution of moral dilemmas. Each decision unfolds consequences

that transcend the organization and affect students, families, and communities. There is a need for leadership that not only manages effectively but also acts with ethical consciousness. A leadership that understands its primary task is to educate, guide, and inspire. This ethical leadership is structured around three inseparable dimensions: identity, interiority, and ethics itself.

Identity: a process of becoming, not a heroic gift

Contemporary research demonstrates that identity is not fixed, but rather a process of becoming. It is a fluid and multiple identity, constructed at the intersection of various discourses, contexts, and

Every administrative decision restructures lives. School leadership is, in essence, the resolution of moral dilemmas



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experiences. Traditionally, it has been conceptualized from individualistic perspectives that privilege the figure of the heroic leader—a trend documented by authors such as Nietzsche and Heffernan. This vision is insufficient and, above all, detrimental to the challenges of the 21st century: it generates unrealistic expectations, isolates the leader, and hinders the development of distributed and collaborative leadership. Identity, far from descending from pedestals, is constructed in everyday practice and social relationships. This identity presents multiple interrelated dimensions. Personal identity—life history, core values, formative experiences—heightens sensitivity to environmental difficulties, an essential quality for maintaining an awareness of reality. Professional identity—how one conceives their educational task and the principles that guide it—is not acquired solely through degrees: it is reconstructed throughout a career via accumulated experiences and the resolution of value conflicts. Relational identity serves as a reminder that leading is a relational practice: as Martin Buber taught, ethical leadership requires building genuine "I-Thou" relationships, based on the recognition of the other, avoiding the "I-It" relationship in which the other is reduced to an instrument. Finally, contextual and intersectional identity indicates that context is constitutive, not accessory. Researchers such as Blackmore and Horsford highlight how these identities are constructed at the intersections of gender, social class, and ethnic origin: female leaders, for instance, navigate contradictory discourses regarding femininity and authority, while minority leaders face

challenges stemming from structural stereotypes.

Building a solid ethical identity requires four fundamental elements: self-knowledge, following Socrates' maxim, as a gateway to identifying one's own values and biases; critical reflexivity, with the necessary humility to question one's own assumptions; coherence among thinking, being, and acting, thereby reducing the distance between personal narrative and actual practice; and sensitivity toward diversity, expressed in a genuinely intercultural identity. As Kappers points out, leadership for equity demands profound personal transformation.

Interiority: an act of countercultural resilience

The concept of interiority may sound unusual in an educational context dominated by efficiency and measurable outcomes. In a world obsessed with metrics, speaking of interiority is an act of countercultural resilience—and yet, it is fundamental for sustaining authentic and enduring leadership. Interiority refers to the inner life: the deep values, motivations, purposes, and the capacity for reflection that enables the development of practical wisdom—what Aristotle called *phronesis*.

In an era that constantly pushes toward the exterior and hyperconnectivity, cultivating interiority is an act of freedom that prepares one to activate consciousness and depth of thought. Great educational figures such as Maria Montessori, Paulo Freire, and Nel Noddings worked extensively on this dimension. Leadership emanates from the deepest core of one's being: if the inner world is fragmented or saturated with unresolved anxiety,

these deficiencies will inevitably be projected onto professional decisions and relationships. Foucault, with his concept of technologies of the self, demonstrated how it is possible to consciously work on one's own subjective formation.

Cultivating this interiority involves several concrete practices. First, self-reflection through tools such as a reflective journal, dedicating time to analyze the experiences and decisions of each day. Second, emotional awareness: researchers like Shapiro and Stefkovich and neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio have demonstrated that rational decisions incorporate essential emotional dimensions—something that transcends Kohlberg's classic dichotomy. Third, self-care: in caregiving professions such as education, establishing healthy boundaries and maintaining personal balance is not a private whim; it is an ethical responsibility to prevent professional burnout.

This interiority enables a more authentic relationship with others. It translates into a quality of presence, deep listening aimed at genuinely understanding the interlocutor, and a response from the core of one's being, which avoids the automatic reactions so often triggered by conflict. Authors such as Deborah Netolicky have documented how this exercise transforms the way one relates to others. Furthermore, it implies recognizing one's own vulnerability and abandoning the model of the invulnerable leader to become a more human, accessible, and therefore, more credible figure.

Four paradigms for an ethics of leadership

The ethics of educational leadership is approached through four fundamental paradigms that should be recognized and combined. The first is the ethic of justice, rooted in the liberal democratic thought of authors such as Kant, Rawls, and

The myth of the heroic leader belongs to the 20th century. Ethical identity is forged in everyday practice



Without a cultivated inner life, there is neither practical wisdom nor leadership that can be sustained over time

Kohlberg. It focuses on rights, laws, and principles of equity: it asks whether rules are applied fairly and proportionally to all. The second is the ethic of critique, grounded in authors such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Michael Apple. This paradigm invites the questioning of power structures and systemic inequalities. It compels one to ask who benefits from a particular policy, whose voices are silenced, and in what ways school practices might be reproducing classism or racism. It serves as a reminder that education is not neutral and that leading means transforming the dynamics that perpetuate inequality. The third is the ethic of care, advanced by authors such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Virginia Held. It places the focus on responsibility toward others, empathy, and the concrete consequences of decisions on the individuals involved. In the face of conflict, it prioritizes understanding the student's needs and seeking restorative options that promote their growth. The fourth is the ethic of the profession: it integrates formal professional codes with personal values. It demands always prioritizing the well-being and best interests

Authentic ethical leadership doesn't choose: it orchestrates the four paradigms—justice, critique, care, and profession

of the student, even when this may conflict with deeply held personal beliefs. True ethical leadership does not consist of adopting one paradigm or another exclusively; it consists of integrating all four, recognizing the tensions among them, and applying Aristotelian *phronesis* to make balanced decisions in each specific situation.

Daily dilemmas and collective deliberation

Numerous ethical dilemmas emerge in daily practice. Among the most common are: the tension between individual rights and community standards—limits on freedom of expression or dress codes, for example; the dissonance between the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum, that is, between what is proclaimed and the implicit messages in spatial organization or conflict management; the conflict between personal and professional codes; and the balance between privacy and security—a particularly delicate issue today, given the massive presence of social media and artificial intelligence in school life. To address these dilemmas with rigor, a systematic process is proposed: clearly identifying the underlying dilemma, gathering information and solid theoretical foundations, analyzing the situation from the four paradigms, evaluating the available options and their consequences, and, finally, making and reviewing the decision. This process should never be a solitary exercise: it calls for spaces of democratic deliberation with the leadership team, the teaching staff, and the community. The constant discussion of dilemmas is, in fact, a powerful engine for elevating the

moral reasoning capacity of the entire institution.

Leading from who you are

Identity, interiority, and ethics form an inseparable unity. Ethical leadership is not exercised from a position: it is exercised by a person of integrity who maintains coherence among being, thinking, and acting. Such a leader cultivates their inner world as a source of wisdom, makes decisions by considering multiple ethical perspectives, recognizes their own vulnerability, and builds communities based on care, justice, and equity—always keeping the student at the center.

As practical guidelines, it is advisable to develop a personal and professional ethical code that serves as a compass in moments of uncertainty, and to establish stable routines of reflection: personal journaling, mentoring, or mindfulness are accessible and provenly effective tools. New generations need models of integrity, spaces of genuine care, and real opportunities to develop critical thinking. They can only be offered what is, in some way, already embodied. One leads from who one is: therefore, the most important work of all is the inward work—one's own formation as an ethical and integral person.

The constant discussion of ethical dilemmas elevates moral reasoning. Deciding well is a democratic practice



JUSTICE

CRITIQUE

CARE

PROFESSION



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41

dialegs

SPOTLIGHT