

CORRELACIÓN ENTRE LA AUTONOMÍA DE LOS CENTROS ESCOLARES Y LA INSPECCIÓN DE EDUCACIÓN (1ª parte)

CORRELATION BETWEEN SCHOOL AUTONOMY AND EDUCATIONAL INSPECTION (Part 1)

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Resumen

En la mayoría de los países de la OCDE desde finales del siglo XX, la autonomía escolar se ha convertido en tema de discusión para centros educativos, directores y Administraciones educativas; una nueva ola de modernización y reforma que ha levantado esperanzas fundadas para remodelar los sistemas educativos. En el proceso de implantación de la autonomía destaca la intervención de la Inspección de Educación (IE) como factor esencial. Su visión sistémica se considera importante para adecuarla al contexto y las políticas relativas al desarrollo del liderazgo, evaluación, rendición de cuentas o apoyo institucional darán paso al estudio de nuevas oportunidades de mejora. Dada la amplitud del estudio se ha considerado necesario su división en dos partes. La línea argumental que lleva el artículo pasa por abordar en primer lugar los conceptos que se consideran necesarios para el estudio de la autonomía, seguido de la evolución histórica normativa de su implantación en España y terminar identificando las variables y los fundamentos que definen la autonomía

de un centro educativo. En la segunda parte se completa con el estudio del núcleo central en el que se investigan las implicaciones y el cambio de roles que el proceso de autonomía tiene para la Inspección de educación.

Palabras clave: Autonomía escolar, eficiencia, rendición de cuentas, dirección, Inspección de educación, rendimiento educativo, evaluaciones internas y externas.

Abstract

In most OECD countries since the end of the 20th century, school autonomy has become a topic of discussion for educational centres, administrations and management teams; a new wave of modernisation and reform that has raised well-founded hopes for reshaping education systems. In the implementation process, the intervention of the Education Inspectorate (EI) stands out as an essential factor. Its systemic vision will be seen considered necessary to adapt it to the context, and policies relating to leadership development, evaluation, accountability or institutional support will give way to the exploration of new opportunities for improvement. Given the scope of the study, it has been considered necessary to divide it into two parts. The first part of the article dealt with the concepts considered necessary for the study of autonomy, together with the historical and regulatory evolution of its implementation in Spain and, finally, the variables and foundations that define the autonomy of an educational institution. The second part finished with the study of the central core, in which the implications and changes in roles that the process of autonomy has for the Education Inspectorate are investigated.

Keywords: School autonomy, efficiency, school accountability, leadership, Inspectorate of education, educational performance, internal and external evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

On an international level, all the studies conducted in recent years by organizations or agencies such as EURYDICE, OECD¹, McKinsey² or PISA confirm the positive correlation between school autonomy and improved outcomes. The OECD report *Education at a Glance* (2023) emphasizes the strong association between the two and highlights both the results and the parallel increase in responsibility:

[...] The results of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that when autonomy and accountability are properly combined, they tend to be associated with better student outcomes (OECD, 2016). In recent years, many schools have become more autonomous and decentralized, as well as more accountable to students, parents, and the general public for their result (p.318)

The strong commitment made by European educational institutions continues to be reflected in their writings. For school autonomy, the measures proposed in the Council of the European Union Recommendation of November 28, 2022, on pathways to school success³, are particularly relevant. In section five, aimed at promoting educational success for all students, the focus is on preventive measures in "comprehensive school approaches" where all members of the school community, as well as other actors with varying degrees of involvement in the schools, actively and collaboratively participate. For our study, the recommendations in this section are especially relevant:

a) Allowing a sufficient level of decision-making autonomy for school heads and governing boards, together with strong accountability.

1 Trends Shaping Education OECD 2013

2 World's Best Performing Education Systems, McKinsey Corporation 2007 and 2010.

³ Recomendación del Consejo de 28 de noviembre de 2022 sobre los caminos hacia el éxito escolar. Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea. C 469/13

c) Promote school success for all learners and well-being at school as part of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, as well as the inclusion of targets and indicators, including on issues such as learning climate, bullying and well-being. Ensure that external evaluation/inspection provides advice and support to inspected schools, contributes to school self-evaluation and promotes a culture of personal reflection and improvement of strategies and practices for inclusion and well-being.

Of the three models of school autonomy that can be considered depending on the different positions adopted by the education administration, Ortega (2022) places Spain in the intermediate model:

It represents a balance between centralisation and autonomy, which translates into less administrative intervention in schools (less control in bureaucratic procedures) in order to give schools more capacity to foster innovation internally and control in the evaluation of their efficiency, according to the objectives they aim to achieve. Spain and Belgium fall within this model. (p.14)

School autonomy should be seen as a factor of quality and as a step toward achieving the true common goal of improvement in all educational aspects. It is not a sufficient condition, as having autonomy is not essential to achieving objectives. It is also not a necessary condition, as many schools educate their students very efficiently and satisfactorily. Therefore, we can say that, while not a necessary nor sufficient condition, it is indeed a desirable one. The general regulatory framework is the handicap that must be considered, because if it is too strict, it will restrict real autonomy, making it merely nominal and, therefore, not real or practicable. As Gairín (2020, p.6) states, "Institutional autonomy, understood as the ability of educational institutions to make decisions, is inversely proportional to the degree of dependency they have." At the same time, autonomy must demonstrate that it leads to real improvements in outcomes, with the necessary transparency to show that the public resources involved have been used efficiently.

Given these established principles, we must address what is commonly understood as school autonomy. Among the many definitions of autonomy, one

of the most widely recognized is that of Caldwell and Spinks (1998, p.4-5): "where a significant amount of authority and responsibility has been decentralized to make decisions related to resource allocation within a centralized framework of objectives, policies, standards, and responsibilities." At the national level, this conceptual framework now requires greater specificity. Cuadrado (2019) defines it as the form of administrative management in which authority is delegated to educational institutions to make decisions on certain pedagogical, organizational, and management aspects, accompanied by the necessary resources for their execution (p.12). Other authors, such as Professor A. Bolívar, define it as:

the creation of mechanisms, skills, support and means to enable schools, in conjunction with their local environment, to build their own development space, based on collectively agreed objectives and a project contracted with the administration or the community.

Educational institutions, with autonomy, become co-participants alongside the state and regional governments (CC. AA.) in making the principle of equality of educational opportunities a reality, which is often unbalanced by the socio-economic and cultural influence of families, as well as geographical factors or those related to ethnic minorities. This is one of the problems that arise in the absence of a public organization of universal educational service provision, as happens when autonomy is viewed through market-oriented (neoliberal) perspectives that adopt private management forms for educational institutions, treat families as clients, and justify it all with the argument of the right to school choice and the application of supply and demand laws in a market economy. This is a highly relevant issue, and the LOMLOE has attempted to address it, as school choice is conditioned not only by information asymmetry but also by the availability of school places. It is an ambivalent situation because, on one hand, school autonomy facilitates the legal right to choose a school, but on the other (technical-practical), it is necessary to consider the obligation of public authorities to ensure a general education program.

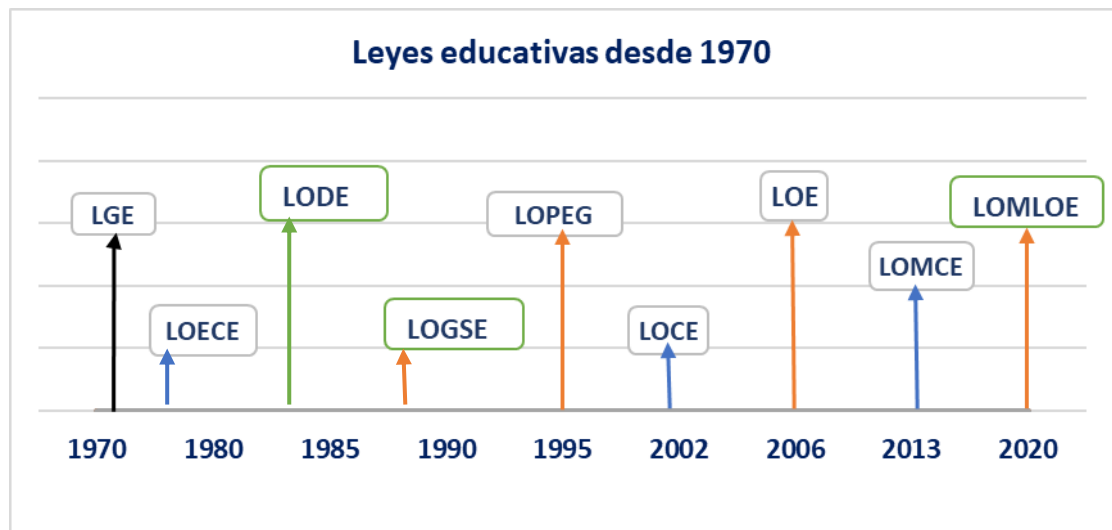
All these recommendations, studies, and realities drive educational administrations to continue focusing on improving education by considering one of the most direct paths to achieving this: gradually granting more autonomy to schools. This allows them, thanks to their closer proximity and knowledge of the socio-educational contexts of the families, to make the best decisions to achieve a positive increase in student learning outcomes, suitability rates, or competency-based training, among other goals.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that contrary to the widespread belief that schools request autonomy from the administration, the reality is that school autonomy extends as part of a downward decision-making process. This situation was pointed out by Sarramona (2011), who noted that "However, it is curious to observe that it is the laws that offer, if not impose, autonomy on schools, and not the schools that demand it." (p.8).

1. AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION LAWS

The policy of increasing the autonomy of schools has as its legal basis the educational law of the time. The conceptual basis on which it is based is the realisation that in order to contribute to the improvement of the system and of education in general, autonomy must ensure a free, dynamic and efficient education system.

Table I. *Education laws: from the LGE to the LOMLOE*



Source: Own elaboration

The first reference to a law dealing with school autonomy is found in the Law 14/1970, of 4 August 1970, General Law on Education and Financing of Educational Reform (LGE), whose articles refer to the possibility of autonomy under certain conditions, and submission to the principle of prior authorisation. The idea of openness was a good one, and it placed in the foreground the need to allow educational centres a differentiated treatment, approaching their context, their physical and socio-economic environment, and adapting to the characteristics of the civil society in which they are located.

Article 56.

One. Within the provisions of this Law and the regulations that develop it, educational centres shall enjoy the necessary autonomy to establish optional subjects and activities, adapt programmes to the characteristics and needs of the environment in which they are located, try out and adopt new teaching methods and establish their own systems of government and administration.

The 1978 Constitution (EC) was a milestone in the history of Spain, an end point for a period and a starting point for most of the issues affecting Spanish society. From this point onwards, all laws will be based on it, with article 27 being

fundamental for education, from which we highlight the following sections for this work:

- 1. Everyone has the right to education. Freedom of education is recognised.*
- 5. The public authorities shall guarantee the right of all to education through general educational planning, with the effective participation of all sectors concerned, and the establishment of educational establishments.*
- 7. Teachers, parents and, where appropriate, pupils shall be involved in the control and management of all publicly funded centres supported by the Administration, under the terms established by law.*

After the Constitution was published, the first law related to education was the Organic Law 5/1980, of June 19, which regulates the Statute of Educational Centers (LOECE). Although it does not focus on the autonomy of schools, it goes beyond what was stated in the General Education Law (LGE) by adding autonomy for managing their budgetary resources.

An important milestone in educational legislation was the Organic Law 8/1985, of July 3, which regulates the Right to Education (LODE), as it represents a significant step forward in recognizing the right to education, which, since the 1978 Constitution, has been established as a fundamental right, with the state being responsible for its provision as a right for all.

It is therefore logical that the issue of school autonomy was not among its concerns. Instead, it focused on participatory democracy to address the right to education, participation, and social involvement. We highlight two articles for quick reference, though the second will prove to be more relevant over time:

Article 15.

Insofar as this does not constitute discrimination against any member of the educational community, and within the limits set by law, schools shall have the autonomy to establish optional subjects, to adapt programmes to the characteristics of the environment in which they are located, to adopt teaching methods and to organise school and out-of-school cultural activities.

Article 25.

Within the provisions of this Law and the regulations that develop it, private non-subsidised centres shall have the autonomy to establish their internal regime, select their teaching staff in accordance with the qualifications required by current legislation, draw up the educational project, organise the school day according to the social and educational needs of their pupils, extend the teaching timetable of areas or subjects, determine the procedure for the admission of pupils, establish the rules of coexistence and define their financial system.

The Organic Law 1/1990, of October 3, on the General Organization of the Educational System (LOGSE), dedicates few articles to the autonomy of schools. It highlights the formalization of the general concern for the efficiency of the management of administrations. The focus of interest for this work lies in showing the different areas involved:

Article 57.

4. The educational administrations shall foster the pedagogical and organisational autonomy of the centres and shall favour and stimulate teamwork among teachers.

Article 58.

1. Teaching centres shall be equipped with the educational, human and material resources necessary to guarantee quality teaching.

2. Public schools shall have autonomy in their financial management under the terms established by law.

In any study involving Institutional Autonomy (IE), the Organic Law 9/1995, of November 20, on the Participation, Evaluation, and Governance of Educational Centres (LOPEG), must be mentioned for the well-known reason. From its title, it is clear that its main objective is to promote the participation of different sectors of the educational community in decisions made in publicly funded schools. The treatment of pedagogical autonomy, organisational autonomy, and the management of school resources is specified in three articles:

Article 5. Management Autonomy of Educational Centres.

Educational centres will have autonomy to define their organisational and pedagogical management model, which must be specified, in each case, through the corresponding educational projects, curricular plans, and, where applicable, operational rules.

Article 6. Educational Project.

1. Educational centres will develop and approve an educational project in which they will set objectives, priorities, and action procedures, based on the guidelines of the School Council of the centre. In preparing these guidelines, the characteristics of the school environment and the specific educational needs of the students must be taken into account, considering the proposals made by the teaching staff. In any case, the principles and objectives established in the Organic Law 8/1985, of 3 July, regulating the Right to Education, will be guaranteed.

Article 7. Autonomy in the Management of Financial Resources in Public Centres.

1. Public educational centres offering teachings regulated by the Organic Law 1/1990, of 3 October, on the General Organisation of the Educational System, will have autonomy in their financial management in accordance with the provisions of this Law, as well as the regulations specific to each educational administration.

The so-called State of Autonomies began its journey in 1995, marking the start of a new historical phase in which both the State and the Autonomous Communities (CC.AA.) would legislate without encroaching on each other's educational competences. Both levels would need to align to guide educational activity. Initially, this would involve a transformation of the State Administration's executive actions, replacing management with general programming and coordination with the autonomies. In this fundamental aspect, it is necessary to refer to the restriction expressed by inspector Ramírez Aísa (2021, p.42): the "basic legislation" restricts the autonomy legislator in order to deploy a minimum common regulatory framework. These provisions have a basic nature because they affect essential matters, areas that exclusively belong to the State according to article 149 of the Spanish Constitution, and whose modification is not the responsibility of any regional law but requires another organic law.

The educational decentralisation of the State has led to a recentralisation in the autonomous communities, some of which, as Puelles (2002, p.152) notes, implement educational policies that could even be considered more centralising than those previously carried out by the Ministry of Education itself.

For the Organic Law 10/2002, of 23 December, on the Quality of Education (LOCE), the principle of quality in the educational system, as reflected in its title, will focus on strengthening autonomy and enhancing the role of school management. Although the law addresses the three areas related to the autonomy of schools—pedagogical, organisational, and financial management autonomy—it does not require further elaboration given the brief administrative lifespan it had.

It is in the Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education (LOE), where autonomy is established as one of its guiding principles, dedicating Title V to Autonomy, Participation, and Governance of Schools. Continuing from the LOPEG, the LOE places particular emphasis on the participation of the educational community in the governance, organisation, functioning, and evaluation of schools. It highlights autonomy as an expression of the educational system's flexibility, consolidates and expands key concepts, and sets out articles that would endure over time, guiding the Administration, schools, and the entire educational community.

In its reference to the autonomy of schools, article 120 stands out, where, alongside the three areas of autonomy, it broadens the range of possibilities:

Article 120. *General provisions.*

- 1. Educational centres will have pedagogical, organisational, and management autonomy within the framework of current legislation and the terms set out in this Law and the regulations that develop it.*
- 2. Educational centres will have autonomy to develop, approve, and implement an educational project and a management project, as well as the organisational and operational rules of the centre.*
- 3. Educational administrations will promote the autonomy of centres so that their economic, material, and human resources can respond to and support the*

viability of the educational projects and organisational proposals they develop, once appropriately evaluated and assessed. Publicly funded schools will be required to account for the results they achieve.

4. In the exercise of their autonomy, schools may undertake experiments, pedagogical innovations, educational programmes, work plans, organisational structures, codes of conduct, or extend the school calendar or teaching hours for certain areas, subjects, or disciplines, in accordance with the terms set by educational administrations and within the limits of the applicable regulations, including labour laws, provided that these actions do not result in discrimination of any kind, nor impose contributions on families or additional requirements on educational administrations.

Article 121, which not only details the content of the School Education Project (PEC) but also deals with autonomy and takes into account the characteristics of the pupils and the social and cultural environments of the schools:

Article 121. Educational project.

1. The school's educational project will include the values, aims and priorities for action, will incorporate the curricula established by the educational administration, which must be set and approved by the school staff, and will promote and develop the principles, objectives and methodology of competent learning geared towards the exercise of active citizenship. It will also include a cross-cutting treatment of education in values, sustainable development, equality between women and men, equal treatment and non-discrimination and the prevention of violence against girls and women, bullying and cyber-bullying at school, as well as the culture of peace and human rights.

To conclude Title V, article 125 mandates that schools provide information and transparency about their activities through the Annual General Programme:

Article 125. Annual general programming.

At the beginning of each school year, schools shall draw up an annual general programme covering all aspects of the school's organisation and operation, including projects, curriculum, standards, and all agreed and approved action plans.

The Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE), continues to give the same attention and importance to the issue at hand as the LOE, although it places a greater emphasis on the concept that is most concerning in Europe and at the OECD: educational quality.

While the LOE focused on the 'participation' of all sectors involved in education, seeking joint solutions tailored to each moment and situation, the LOMCE shifts the focus towards school management. Although participation from various sectors remains important, it is relegated to a secondary role as the role of school leaders is strengthened. This shift places the school leadership at the heart of the organisational reform of the education system, embodied in the autonomy of schools.

The LOMCE proposes a new formulation of the LOE's articles, but in line with its title, it adds a new article 122 bis, with actions aimed at promoting the quality of educational centres. Among these actions is the enhancement of the role and competencies of the school principal:

1. Actions will be promoted to foster the quality of schools by reinforcing their autonomy and strengthening the management function, as established by the Government and the education administrations.

The new Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education (LOMLOE), does not make concessions or seek points of agreement to improve the existing law. Instead, it repeals it and takes a step back in time to return to the basics of the LOE.

It introduces modifications to articles 120 to 125, addressing concepts and realities such as non-discrimination, competency-based learning, and digital strategy, as well as protocols for dealing with signs of bullying, cyberbullying,

gender violence, or any other form of violence. The law also restores greater prominence to the School Council as a collegiate body for participation, control, and governance of publicly funded schools, diminishing the emphasis placed on the school principal in the previous law. As Esteban Frades (2024, p.25) expresses, "it shows a clear preference for social intervention over state control by giving prominence to the social oversight of education by the educational community, in the interest of greater transparency."

Finally, it is important to highlight that once the education law was defined, and in accordance with the basic regulations, the autonomous communities have followed the general law by incorporating provisions for greater autonomy for educational centres in their efforts to improve the quality of the education system in their various areas of influence. For example, in Andalusia⁴, Catalonia⁵, Madrid⁶ or the Basque Country⁷, their education laws dedicate a section to "Autonomy of Educational Centres," with article 95.4 specifying the intended goal:

4. The autonomy of schools is, in all cases, aimed at ensuring coexistence, equity, inclusion, and excellence in the provision of educational services, as well as the full development of students' personalities, through the acquisition and exercise of educational competences, via knowledge, skills, the development of their abilities, and the encouragement of their attitude towards learning, fostering emotional balance and self-esteem, as well as a culture of effort.

2. AREAS OF AUTONOMY

Before delving into the areas of autonomy provided for schools, it is important to first consider why each of them is needed. The answer is always to improve. However, in order to improve student outcomes, it is essential to first

⁴ Ley 17/2007, de 10 de diciembre, de Educación de la Comunidad Autónoma de Andalucía.

⁵ Decreto 102/2010, de 3 de agosto, de autonomía de los centros educativos. Generalidad de Cataluña.

⁶ Orden 457/2023, de 17 de febrero, de la Vicepresidencia, Consejería de Educación y Universidades, por la que se concreta el procedimiento para el ejercicio de la autonomía de los centros docentes que imparten la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y el Bachillerato en la Comunidad de Madrid.

⁷ Ley 17/2023, de 21 de diciembre, de Educación de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco.

understand the students themselves, and this is a necessary step before addressing any reforms. School leadership teams must be aware of the sociocultural and demographic transformations that society has undergone in recent decades and their impact on family composition and internal relationships.

Embarking on such an important initiative as autonomy does not mean becoming independent and isolated; rather, it provides the opportunity to use autonomy to change and move towards a networked approach, collaborating with other institutions and advancing towards a system that improves educational quality.

There are three essential areas of autonomy that foster the optimal development of teaching and learning processes in a school:

a.- PEDAGOGICAL AUTONOMY

Pedagogical autonomy is distinguished from administrative autonomy (which pertains to responsibilities over administrative tasks, including the management of the resources available to the school) because it relates to responsibilities concerning the curriculum and its implementation. It enables schools to create their own pedagogical project by adapting curriculum content to make it suitable for the needs of students and their social and cultural context, ultimately improving learning processes and outcomes, and enhancing the quality of the teaching provided.

The LOMLOE grants schools autonomy to work on teaching plans, educational pathways, optional subjects designed by the school, extended hours, content sequencing, and methods of teaching. Specifically, it revises the basic elements of the curriculum and article 6 bis, which distributes responsibilities as follows: the first level corresponds to the national government, which establishes the minimum common curriculum for all; this is basic and therefore has a national scope (60% of school hours). The second level corresponds to the educational administrations of the autonomous communities, which have jurisdiction over their own regional curriculum. The

third level corresponds to schools, which can supplement the established curriculum and design and implement their own pedagogical and didactic methods.

Pedagogical autonomy will be concretized, in any case, through the Educational Project of the School (PEC), which will set the values, objectives to be achieved, and educational priorities. It highlights the uniqueness of the school, its identity, and is the tool that facilitates the use of its own pedagogical methods.

The Educational Project of the School, as an institutional document representing the highest expression of a school's autonomy and outlining its activities, must include the following:

- Pedagogical proposal (Early Childhood Education)
- Tutorial action plan
- Student diversity support plan
- Academic and career guidance plan
- Coexistence plan
- Reading promotion plan
- Didactic programmes
- ICT coordination plan
- Digital strategy of the institution
- Other projects
- Definition of the institution's distinctive character (for state-funded private schools).

b.- ORGANISATIONAL AUTONOMY

Autonomy to guarantee the participation of the educational community, to organise themselves according to their own criteria, to adopt different methodological criteria, to organise classes and groups, teaching times, teacher timetables, splitting and reinforcement groups, in short, to determine their internal structure. A distinction is made between "formal

organisation", which is determined by the public administration, which, by means of regulations, achieves uniformity in the organisation of schools: School Regulations, Organisation and Operation Orders or Instructions at the beginning of the school year. And the 'non-formal or informal organisation' which allows schools to organise their functioning with the participation of the different professional groups and users involved (management, teaching staff, parents of pupils, pupils, representatives of the Town Council in whose municipality the school is located, etc.).

According to article 120 of the LOMLOE, schools therefore have organisational autonomy which takes the form of three basic documents

- *Rules of organisation, operation and coexistence*
- *Annual General Programme*
- *Annual report*

The Faculty of Teachers and the School Council have the shared responsibility (articles 127 and 129 of the LOMLOE) to "Analyse and evaluate the overall functioning of the school, the evolution of academic performance, and the results of internal and external evaluations in which the school participates." To do this, as with any public or private organisation, the normal procedure is to base the analysis on the most relevant conclusions included in an Annual Report, which, although not mandatory for all types of schools, is highly recommended. Just as an Annual General Programme (annual specifications of the PEC and its elements) is created, the degree of its implementation should also be evaluated.

Improving the quality of a public or private school requires implementing the necessary autonomy to organise suitable schedules that provide rational responses to the specific needs across the different levels and subjects offered. This task requires the participation of teaching staff in at least two areas: first, their specific training to identify students' difficulties and form support groups in certain subjects; and second, their competence in applying

appropriate methodologies in each case, working collaboratively to improve teaching-learning processes, and enhancing the quality of the educational service provided at the school.

c.- MANAGEMENT AUTONOMY (Public centres only. Art. 123 LOE)

Autonomy to manage its economic and material resources to cover operational expenses, improve and expand equipment, and make investments that contribute to the optimal fulfilment of its educational project. This is reflected in the Management Project.

The principal becomes once again the key figure, as they are responsible for the acquisition of goods, the contracting of works, services, and supplies for the school, as well as the authorisation of expenditures and the management of payments in accordance with Law 9/2017, on Public Sector Contracts.

By breaking down the data provided by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training year after year, it is observed that different autonomous communities show variations in their students' results, despite the same educational law being in place. This suggests that they are managing the resources available within their territories with varying levels of efficiency. A similar conclusion can be drawn at a more local level, as, in the absence of homogeneous factors, it is the autonomy in management that emerges as a differentiating factor between schools. As Bolívar (2013, p.83) expresses, the reality shows that, with the same bureaucratic regulations, schools make a difference.

A novel aspect of management autonomy is the ability to obtain complementary economic resources, especially for those schools that are located in particular geographic areas, have better available spaces, or possess special facilities. The approval to obtain these resources lies with the School Council of each institution, subject to the conditions established by the

educational administration in its authorisation, either general or specific to each situation.

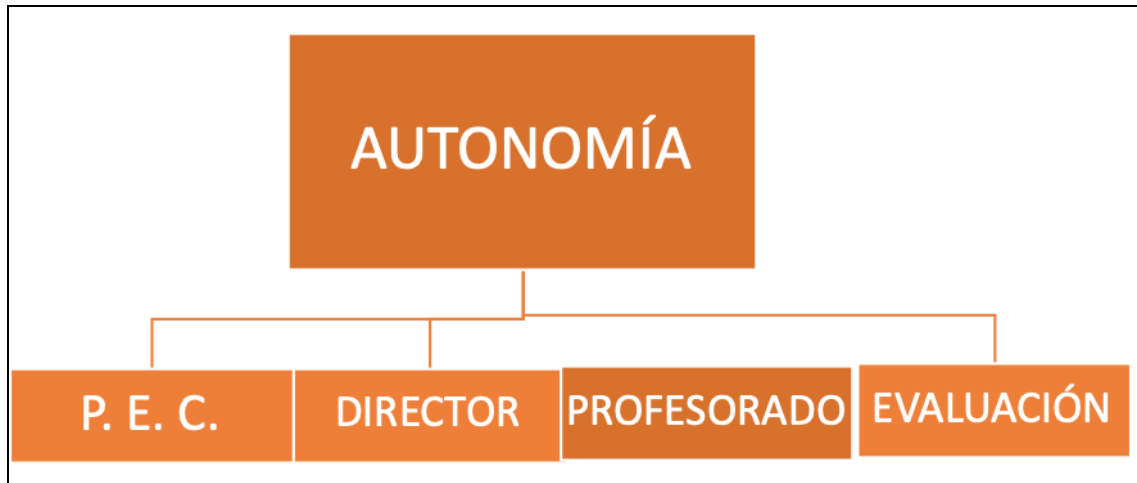
4. FOUNDATIONS THAT GIVE CONCRETE EXPRESSION TO THE AUTONOMY OF THE INSTITUTIONS

The quality of the educational system is a constant aspiration of the entire educational community. Ordinary teaching and learning processes are not enough; they must be offered with the highest possible quality. The LOE (Organic Law of Education) acknowledges this need and, in its article 2, identifies the factors that promote teaching quality, with the essential trinity clearly included: school autonomy, the leadership role, and the school evaluation process (IE).

It is therefore necessary to observe the reality of educational centres and analyze the options, interventions, and responsibilities of the actors involved in each of the elements that constitute the fundamental basis supporting the autonomy of a school, regardless of its ownership. Thus, it is essential to address the sections related to these aspects:

- A.- The educational project that identifies the school and its vision.
- B.- A professional management with defined leadership.
- C.- A teaching staff involved in improvement and in the project.
- D.- A system of evaluation and accountability.

TABLE II. Factors influencing the autonomy of schools.



Source: Own elaboration

A.- PEC

Numerous teachers in many schools teach their subjects to students, prepare them for various tests—whether internal or external, formative or summative, regional or national—and consider the PEC (School Educational Project) merely as another document for the educational administration with no real commitment. However, when a shared purpose or vision is embraced—a project that unites the school and organizes the work of everyone in the educational community around it—then we can talk about the necessity of autonomy to develop it.

Normatively, the LOE-LOMLOE provides an extensive treatment of the PEC as an institutional element that embodies pedagogical autonomy. Its defining features are outlined in articles 120 and 121.

The PEC must be made public before families formalize enrollment so that, by knowing it, they can make an informed choice regarding the fundamental characteristics of the education offered, such as the school's values, goals, and priorities for action, along with other factors like its ownership—whether public, state-funded, private, religious, bilingual, or

cooperatively governed, etc. Regarding the school's operation, its organization, proposed teaching methods, extracurricular activities, community life, and the degree of involvement in common activities and decisions must also be made clear. Education for students is a serious matter, and therefore, parents not only need to know in advance the characteristics of the education their children will receive, but they must also demonstrate direct or implicit commitment to the educational project.

Key elements like the School Coexistence Plan, Teaching Programmes, and the Tutoring Action Plan must be dynamic, part of an ongoing process of adaptation to the times. In this way, their regulations should be adjusted to address issues, foster community coexistence, and align with the objectives of the school.

Attention to coexistence has always been an essential element in the life of all educational institutions, regardless of ownership. It is crucial not only for effective classroom work but also because it plays a formative role in students' personalities, helping them integrate into a peaceful and democratic society. However, the approach to coexistence cannot be reactive or punitive—it must be proactive, with educational measures set in place beforehand, particularly through continuous training. Indirectly, this is continuously carried out at the micro-level, as perfectly expressed by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Óscar Arias, who stated:

We must intervene to prevent conflict because not doing so is the best way to make things worse. Edmund Burke warned us more than two centuries ago: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing". It is time for action. We cannot sit back and wait to see the result of collective inertia, as if we were spectators in a Shakespearean tragedy. We must fight tirelessly.

The act of educating, not just teaching, children and adolescents means that the Tutoring Action Plan must be given significant consideration in all educational institutions, especially those that offer early childhood, primary, and secondary education. At no point should we forget that students are minors, and that in the absence of their parents, the role of tutors must be carried out. This means not only attending to their needs but also ensuring their best interests, with special care given to their stages of personal formation and development. Therefore, as holders of rights, they are subject to greater dedication, supervision, and support from their teachers, professors, and especially their tutors.

It is important to emphasize that schools are not isolated institutions; rather, a good internal organization helps develop teamwork, a sense of belonging, and commitment, leading to the assumption of autonomy with clear objectives and implications. This fosters a collective effort that, with its drive and dedication, creates a "plus" that adds intrinsic value and motivation.

B.- LEADER-PRINCIPAL OF AN EDUCATIONAL CENTRE

Developing an autonomy initiative involves, among other things, a different model of school leadership, one that concentrates the ability to develop the educational project and engages and motivates the teaching staff and, by extension, the entire educational community.

The LOE's commitment to school autonomy and support for school leaders is evident: Educational administrations will promote the exercise of the leadership role in schools [...]. (Art. 131.6). In this regard, the LOMLOE advocates for a professional leadership model that maintains a balanced proportion between administrative tasks and the more important pedagogical ones; while also strengthening the leadership that the director and the management team exercise over the educational community.

However, it is important to note that the appointment of the school principal in public schools is directly influenced by the administration (which decisively participates in the selection, training, supervision, and evaluation for continuation in the role), which increases dependence and therefore weakens autonomy. (Teixidó, J., 2015).

The increasing responsibilities assigned to the director require improvements in aspects such as transparency in management and communication, and especially the strengthening of their 'leadership role,' which will extend both within the school and outward, developing the dimensions of pedagogical leadership outlined by Gento (2015): Charismatic, Emotional, Anticipatory, Professional, Participatory, Cultural, Formative, and Administrative.

The concept of leadership must be understood in a broad sense, as it must be exercised by the director with a staff composed of graduates and postgraduates, each specializing in their subject and grouped into teaching departments. This is a fundamental role for the director, which is not innate but must be learned and cultivated. Equally important is knowing how to delegate authority, trust teachers, heads of departments, and members of the management team. Motivating and supporting, but not interfering.

Authors such as Scheerens, J. and Ehern, M. (2016, p.19) in their study *The Evidence Base for School Inspection Frameworks* break down key factors for effective education, highlighting, among others, the strengthening of the director's roles and strong cohesion within the management team. This is a recurring theme due to its importance, as Sancho Gargallo (2023, p.74) states, school leaders "must be pedagogical leaders, deeply involved in student learning, oriented towards teachers, and committed to the entire educational community, rather than limiting themselves to administrative tasks".

Like the teaching section, continuous professional development is one of the key features of the profession in general and of school leadership in particular. It is not only essential for personal intellectual growth or for staying up to date with scientific and cultural advancements, but also for acquiring tools to foster and develop the hard and soft skills necessary for leadership, such as teamwork, defining win-win strategies, working on empathy, or the measurable improvement of ethical practices across all educational activities.

The relationship between Educational Leadership (EL) and school directors has always been constant. One of the authors who has stood out in this area is inspector Montero, A. (2012), who in his works studies the group (traditionally, it was sufficient to be a good manager to be a good director), their challenges (the increasing complexity of educational institutions), the need to acquire competencies (directors who are better trained and have greater analytical, comprehension, and material and human resource management skills, dynamism, pedagogical leadership, etc.), and he constantly emphasizes the need for greater professionalization of the leadership role.

Continuing Montero's line of thought, Jean Hindriks et al. (2010) reach the shared conclusion that the training of school management teams clearly boosts educational outcomes:

"This positive effect of increased autonomy is greater in schools with more disadvantaged students and is found in both public and private schools. This is clear evidence of the theory that increasing school autonomy, when applied properly, has the potential to produce better educational outcomes".

C.- TEACHING STAFF

An educational institution has a solid foundation in its fixed capital: facilities, classrooms, library, or laboratories. However, when observed more abstractly, what defines and distinguishes it from others is its "human capital"—teachers, administrative staff, non-teaching personnel—who, day after day and with a forward-looking vision, work in the institution towards its educational project and the formation of students.

Since Pythagoras, it has been recognised that teachers are a determining factor in the quality of education, which is why it is essential to care for their qualifications and training. Society values them, and families entrust their children to them for the challenging task of their education. Consequently, educational laws grant them competencies and authority, all of which helps teachers become aware of their enormous responsibility. Staff with a positive view of teamwork to select and improve the most appropriate methodology for the moment and the place, as ultimately, the aim is not for students to learn more (nor to learn less), but for them to learn better, differently, and the responsibility for this change lies in their hands.

And if it is reiterated that the most fundamental aspect of an educational institution is its human capital, it becomes clear that the management of human resources is considered absolutely necessary. In public schools, teaching and non-teaching staff are assigned by the administration, and the difficulty in managing them arises from their status as public servants, whether on permanent assignment, secondment, or as temporary staff. In any case, they are not subject to selection by the principal, but belong to the faculty of a centre, independent of the management team or the educational project. Private subsidised schools have greater autonomy in managing their teaching staff, as hiring and contract termination, although subject to certain conditions and guarantees, is not restricted by the civil service regulations governing public schools.

In this regard, a good personnel policy that would support and strengthen the autonomy of schools would involve considering that, at a

minimum, teachers could remain and commit to the school's educational project for the duration of the leadership team's term, which would be approved with their participation. Without the required autonomy in personnel management, autonomy will progress, but pedagogical leadership will remain at a minimum level. Perhaps the true autonomy is being missed, and the institution may end up with a pseudo-autonomy.

D.- AUTONOMY IMPLIES EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Special section that can be seen as a consequence of the Latin aphorism *do ut des*. If, for an educational institution, autonomy entails a series of qualitative concessions as well as the management of material and human resources, it seems logical that such advantages should come with a set of obligations for which institutions are held accountable. Both the educational authorities and society at large must be informed of the results achieved under such authorisation, as granting autonomy without yielding improved outcomes is hardly a viable option.

Evaluation and accountability thus become the ideal tools for assessing two key objectives: the first, to improve the processes employed and the results obtained; the second, to ensure accountability to the educational community. At present, as Cuadrado (2024, p. 15) asserts, it seems clear that in Spain, "autonomy with accountability has been established as the cornerstone of educational governance, becoming a benchmark model for school management, widely adopted in most countries with well-established educational systems."

In education, evaluation is carried out to foster improvement, never to classify or select. The concept of evaluation must be viewed positively: to help students learn, to support teachers in their teaching, to assess the quality of an institution, or to enhance processes.

The current educational legislation cannot disregard the advantages of evaluation in all areas. Consequently, article 122 bis of the LOE-LOMLOE amends section 2 to categorically state that: "Educational authorities shall promote actions aimed at educational quality" by strengthening institutional autonomy and enhancing leadership roles. To this end, institutions must present a strategic plan outlining the objectives pursued, the management to be undertaken with corresponding measures to achieve the expected results, as well as a timeline and activity schedule. This strategic planning acknowledges the reality that all evaluations directly influence what is learned and how it is learned (consider, for instance, the second year of *Bachillerato*, shaped by the EvAU exams). Thus, evaluation can either promote learning in a specific direction or limit it in scope or possible domains.

An evaluation process necessarily prompts reflection on what is being done and how it is being done, whether it enhances institutional processes, and how, if at all, the stated objectives are being achieved. This evaluation involves the stakeholders: the educational institutions themselves and the administration. Thus, there are two evaluations which, in addition to being necessary, are also complementary. Educational institutions are responsible for conducting internal evaluations. With the Educational Project serving as the essential reference point for an institution, it is evident that internal evaluation will focus on analysing and supervising the objectives that have been planned. Through this process, pertinent data can be obtained to help develop and implement solutions for improvement (self-assessment must be carried out on three levels: the institution as a whole, departments or cycles, and individual teaching staff). Similarly, the educational administration is tasked with promoting, directing, and analysing external evaluation processes. These evaluations, in addition to focusing on accountability, make a solid contribution to improving the overall education system.

Obligations arise in both cases. For internal evaluation, the management team must plan, execute, and analyse it. For external evaluation, it is the responsibility of the educational administration to provide guidelines for its implementation, analyse the data, and propose improvements. Additionally, two socially sensitive aspects are associated with these external evaluations. On the one hand, the results obtained must not be used to create league tables of institutions. On the other hand, final analyses must consider the context of each institution, including its urban or rural location, ownership, among others.

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