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The role of the Physical Education teacher in school leadership: challenges and competences

El papel del profesor de Educación Física en el liderazgo escolar: retos y competencias

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Abstract

Historically, Physical Education (PE) has had an inferior status within the educational curriculum; however, some teachers have taken up leadership positions with outstanding results. This cross-sectional study analysed the perception of school principals specialised in PE on the relevance of the professional competences established by the educational administration for school leadership. For this purpose, an online survey of 76 principals with a background in PE was conducted using Google Forms, and the data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics based on gender, experience, educational level, socio-economic background and the stability of the teaching staff, in addition all statistical analyses were adjusted for confounding variables (age and gender). The results show that female principals specialising in PE prioritise organisation, coexistence and strategic planning, while less experienced principals focus on financial management. In disadvantaged contexts, pedagogical leadership and institutional strengthening are essential to meet the challenges of the context. In addition, the stability of the teaching staff favours innovation and staff development. In conclusion, PE-trained principals adopt a holistic approach, prioritising management, well-being and social development, demonstrating that PE not only promotes health but also values that are fundamental to the progress of educational institutions.

Keywords: school leadership; tasks; school principal; competences; Physical Education.

Resumen

Históricamente, la Educación Física (EF) ha tenido un estatus inferior dentro del currículo educativo; sin embargo, algunos profesores han asumido posiciones de liderazgo con resultados sobresalientes. Este estudio transversal analizó la percepción de los directores de centros escolares con especialidad en EF sobre la relevancia de las competencias profesionales establecidas por la administración educativa para el liderazgo escolar. Para ello, se realizó una encuesta online a 76 directores con especialidad en EF a través de Google Forms y los datos se analizaron de forma descriptiva e inferencial para examinar las diferencias según el género, la experiencia, el nivel educativo, el origen socioeconómico y la estabilidad del profesorado, además, todos los análisis estadísticos se ajustaron para tener en cuenta las variables de confusión (edad y sexo). Los resultados muestran que las directoras especialistas en EF priorizan la organización, la convivencia y la planificación estratégica, mientras que los directores con menos experiencia se centran en la gestión económica. En entornos desfavorecidos, el liderazgo pedagógico y el fortalecimiento institucional son esenciales para afrontar los retos del contexto. Además, la estabilidad del profesorado favorece la innovación y el desarrollo del

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personal. En conclusión, los directores formados en EF adoptan un enfoque holístico que prioriza la gestión, el bienestar y el desarrollo social, demostrando que la EF no sólo promueve la salud, sino también valores fundamentales para el progreso de las instituciones educativas.

Palabras clave: liderazgo escolar; tareas; dirección escolar; competencias; educación física.

Introduction

The establishment of school management in Spain dates back to 1896, coinciding with the creation of the graduate school model in Primary Education. In this period, the need arose to introduce a representative role in the institution with a defined function: coordinating teachers and assigning them various responsibilities (Murillo & Gómez, 2006). The first regulation referring to the management of schools was the Royal Order of 23 September 1898, which established the functioning of graduate schools. Subsequently, various regulations led to the enactment of the Graduate Schools Regulations of 9 March 1918, which introduced the figure of teacher-principals. These professionals combined administrative tasks with teaching responsibilities (Pérez et al., 2019).

From that period until 2008, a school headship model was developed in Spain with distinctive particularities compared to other European countries: the principal, selected by his or her colleagues, was an educator who, after four years in headship, returned to teaching duties (Montero, 2008). Likewise, school leadership in Spain has shaped the definition of professional identity (Iranzo-García et al., 2020). This professional identity is developed based on their experience, the context in which they work, and the expectations of the educational community (Mollá & Castelló, 2022). Their training is influenced by socio-political factors, which determine their status and competences; by the work environment, where internal dynamics and relationships among school members play a role; and by personal aspects, such as their background and vision of leadership. These elements not only condition their perception of the management role but also how they face challenges and exercise their leadership in different educational contexts.

In the Spanish context, the leadership role is largely conditioned by socio-cultural and political aspects (Ritacco & Ritacco, 2023). On the other hand, the principal plays a hybrid role, acting simultaneously as a representative of the administration, an enforcer

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of regulations, and a teacher delegated by the teaching staff as a whole (Bolívar, 2019). In addition, principals should embody the four attributes that contribute to improving educational quality: appreciation for diversity, collaborative leadership, recognition of teachers' professional knowledge, and support for staff (Carrington et al., 2022). In this sense, the principal's ability to face and overcome adverse situations has become a key element for institutional improvement. Recent research highlights that resilient leadership allows principals to transform challenges into opportunities, strengthening the cohesion of the school community and fostering educational success (Olmo-Extremuera et al., 2022).

Currently, according to Organic Law 2/2006 on Education, as amended by Organic Law 3/2020, applicants for school leadership must meet requirements that include having at least five years' seniority as a teaching official, having taught directly in the school, being certified as having completed a training course on leadership, and submitting a leadership project covering objectives, lines of action, and evaluation.

The shared purpose of the leadership model and the development of pedagogical autonomy is to improve both school functioning and student learning (Rodríguez-Gallego et al., 2020). In terms of management and administration, national and international research highlights the essential importance and influence of school leaders in the improvement of schools and, ultimately, in the advancement of the educational system and quality (Silva et al., 2018). Therefore, leadership, linked to the field of innovation and improvement of educational processes, is a crucial element that is recognised as a determinant for school effectiveness (Kandemir, 2025).

Based on all of the above, it is essential to study school leadership in greater depth, since understanding its evolution and characteristics in the Spanish context will not only facilitate the improvement of management and leadership in schools, but will also promote the development of a solid professional identity among principals, positively impacting educational quality and student learning.

History of Physical Education (PE) in Spain

PE in Spain was institutionalised in 1806 with the foundation of the Royal Pestalozzian Military Institute in Madrid, where Francisco Amorós developed his gymnastic system (Torrebadella-Flix, 2016). Although gymnastics did not become

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compulsory in schools until 1894 (Royal Decree, 1894), the process had started earlier with Jovellanos and was reinforced by Manuel Becerra's 1881 speech (Aboy, 2009). The Gamazo Law, enacted on 9 March 1883 (Ministry of Development, 1883), was pivotal, as it led to the creation of the Central School of Gymnastics in 1887, supporting teacher training and the development of the public education system (Rodríguez, 2017).

During this period, PE was influenced by hygienist movements and incorporated military, Swedish, and Amorós-style gymnastics, as well as English sports (Zorrilla-Sanz, 2002). However, the rise of a conservative government in 1892 halted this progress due to non-compliance with educational laws (Doctor Fausto, 1892), leading to a shortage of qualified teachers. This was addressed with the founding of the Central School of Army Gymnastics in 1919, and later, in 1933, with the creation of a PE teacher training school at the University of Madrid, which offered a balanced curriculum combining pedagogical and scientific-medical training (Contreras, 1996; Vázquez-Gómez, 1989).

Under the Franco regime, Law 77/1961 made PE compulsory at all educational levels and established the need for a specific qualification from the National Institute of PE. This requirement was formally enacted through Decree 1321/1963, which defined the national PE statute (Contreras, 1996). Later, Law 13/1980 recognised these studies as equivalent to the first and second cycles of university education, although not granting access to the third cycle, and maintaining administrative dependence outside the university system.

In recent years, PE programmes have faced growing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness in preparing students for active, healthy, and successful lives (Cale, 2023). Consequently, teachers now undergo continuous training to offer engaging and adapted content that fosters cognitive, motor, and social skills (Cañabate et al., 2019).

Status of school PE

The recognition of PE has historically limited PE teachers' access to school leadership positions. PE continues to suffer from low educational status in schools, both in Spain and internationally, where it has traditionally been marginalised compared to other subjects (López Pastor, 2004; Ferry et al., 2022). Bradford et al. (2019) argue that PE is often placed at the bottom of academic priorities. In Spain, Salgado López (2022) highlights that legal treatment of PE remains unequal compared to other subjects, shaping

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the low perception of its status by the education community. Legal parity was only achieved recently: in 1984 for secondary education (López-Fernández, 2004), and in 1992 for higher education (López-Fernández, 2009). Despite these advances, full social and professional recognition is still ongoing.

This situation mirrors that of other countries. In Greece, for example, Athaniosis et al. (2013) noted that PE teachers were historically excluded from school leadership despite their prevalence in schools. Today, PE teachers can legally access leadership roles on equal terms with other specialists. However, little research has focused specifically on PE-specialist school heads. Athaniosis et al. (2013) studied staff perceptions of PE-trained principals' leadership capacities, while Bai et al. (2021) investigated whether having a PE-trained school leader affected student academic performance—finding no negative impact. Additionally, variables such as gender, age, and experience have been shown to influence how school leaders prioritise professional competences, potentially affecting their leadership style (Gil-Espinosa et al., 2024a). Yet, no research has directly explored how PE-specialist school leaders perceive their own professional competence. This study aims to address that gap by examining their views on the relevance of leadership competences defined by the Spanish education authorities, offering insight into how subject training and teaching experience might shape leadership in a hybrid educational model.

Material and method

Participants

In the context of the “KEY Project: School Leadership as a Value for Quality Education” (Reference number: PIV-030/22), this cross-sectional study sets out to examine the professional competences assigned to school principals in Spain, from the perspective of those who perform these roles. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: being over 18 years of age, holding a school leadership position, having at least one year of experience in school leadership and management, being employed in a public school, having signed an informed consent form, and being a teacher in the field of PE. A sample of 76 school principals in Spain (27.6% female) was recruited.

Data collection took place between January and February 2023. Information about the study was disseminated through official e-mails from primary, secondary and

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vocational schools located in Andalusia (southern Spain). To broaden the reach, specialised educational management forums were used. This approach sought to maximise participation through a purposive sampling strategy. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malaga, under protocol code 50-2022-H.

Participants were classified into different categories for analysis: age (young and old); school leadership experience (novice and experienced); school context (rural and urban); educational level (primary and secondary); socio-economic status (low and middle); staff stability (< 50% stable and \geq 50% stable); number of pupils (fewer than 300 and more than 300); and number of teachers (fewer than 29 and more than 29). This methodological design allows a detailed exploration of perceptions of professional competences from multiple angles, contributing significantly to the understanding of the challenges and expectations associated with school leadership in different educational contexts.

Instrument

An online survey was developed using Google Forms to collect the opinions of school principals specialising in PE on the importance they attached to the professional competences assigned to them. Organic Law 3/2020 (Ministry of Education 2020) sets out the following professional competences for school leaders: (Competence 1) exercising pedagogical leadership and promoting plans to achieve the objectives of the educational project; (Competence 2) fostering educational innovation and research; (Competence 3) promoting the training and qualification of the teaching staff; (Competence 4) promoting organisational forms and the school timetable for subjects or areas; (Competence 5) convening and chairing academic events and meetings of the school council and the teaching staff, ensuring the implementation of the agreements adopted; (Competence 6) designing the educational planning and organisation of the school, as detailed in the annual general programme; (Competence 7) awarding contracts for construction, services and materials; (Competence 8) authorising expenditure, organising payments and preparing the school budget; (Competence 9) endorsing certificates and official school documents; (Competence 10) exercising leadership over the school's teaching staff and proposing the appointment and dismissal of the

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management team; (Competence 11) supervising the school's non-teaching staff; (Competence 12) promoting coexistence, ensuring the mediation of conflicts and imposing corrective measures on students; (Competence 13) promoting internal school evaluations and participating in external and teacher evaluations; (Competence 14) acting as a representative of the educational administration in the school and as an intermediary with the educational and administrative community; and (Competence 15) fostering co-operation with families, institutions and organisations in the surrounding area.

Regarding the survey development process, initially the researchers, through a focus group, created a closed question that measured the importance given to each of the fifteen professional competences assigned to them, taking as a reference the Ministry of Education's Organic Law 3/2020 (2020). In addition, the online survey collected basic socio-demographic data, as well as contextual and human characteristics of the educational institution. A 7-point Likert scale was used where 1 was the lowest rating and 7 was the highest. Participants were asked to indicate the importance they attach to each competence to improve educational quality.

Subsequently, in order to make adjustments to the first version of the online survey, the researchers independently and qualitatively analysed the content of the questions. A consensus meeting was then held among the researchers to resolve minor discrepancies by making slight adjustments to the questions. A panel of six experts independently reviewed the question content, using a 5-point Likert scale to assess representativeness, clarity and comprehensibility. To gather evidence of content-based content and inter-rater reliability, the content validity coefficient and inter-rater agreement were estimated, with scores above .70 considered satisfactory (Lynn 1986). The content validity coefficient and inter-rater agreement had values of 1.00, indicating unanimous agreement among the experts regarding the representativeness, clarity and comprehensibility of each item analysed. Notably, the experts met the criteria suggested by Grant and Davis (1997): a) significant training in survey development, b) extensive experience as content experts, c) teaching experience in teacher education, and d) publications in peer-reviewed journals on the topic. In addition, the number of experts in our study met the recommended requirement of at least two experts per stage of survey development, as suggested by Lynn (1986). Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted

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with ten school principals who reported no problems with the comprehension and readability of the short survey developed.

Statistical analysis

The data were analysed with the statistical package SPSS v26.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, USA). The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ levels. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine the normality of the variables. Continuous variables were described by means of means and standard deviations, while categorical variables were described by percentages and frequencies. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine relationships among variables. In addition, all statistical analyses were adjusted for confounding variables (age and gender). Furthermore, a confidence level of 95% ($p < 0.05$) was used for the association between the dependent variables (15 competences) and the independent variables (staff stability and years of management).

Results

Descriptive characteristics of the participants

Table 1 presents the descriptive data of the participants. A total of 76 school principals specialising in PE (49.7 ± 5.9 years) participated in the present study. The vast majority of participants were male (72.4%). Descriptive data for the variables analysed in this study showed that competence 3 had the highest values (6.6 ± 0.7) and competence 7 the lowest (5 ± 1.9). The participants had between 2 and 20 years of experience in school leadership and management positions (6.4 ± 4 years). 43.3% of the teachers analysed in this study had more than 50% job stability, i.e. almost half of them are stable teachers. However, the figure of 13.2% with very low stability ($<25\%$) could be a matter of concern for institutions, as low stability may affect educational quality and teacher retention.

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Table 1. Descriptive data of the sample.

Characteristics		Total (n=76)		Male (n=55)		Female (n=21)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)		49.76	5.99	49.64	5.88	50.10	6.48
Years of school management		6.45	4.00	6.42	3.92	6.52	4.29
Competences*	Competence 1	6.41	0.80	6.36	0.87	6.52	0.60
	Competence 2	6.18	1.12	6.15	1.13	6.29	1.15
	Competence 3	6.63	0.70	6.58	0.79	6.76	0.44
	Competence 4	6.45	0.81	6.35	0.89	6.71	0.46
	Competence 5	6.29	1.01	6.15	1.16	6.67	0.58
	Competence 6	6.34	0.94	6.22	1.01	6.67	0.66
	Competence 7	5.01	1.95	5.07	1.86	4.86	2.20
	Competence 8	6.18	1.12	6.07	1.23	6.48	0.75
	Competence 9	5.68	1.50	5.55	1.59	6.05	1.24
	Competence 10	6.42	1.01	6.47	0.98	6.29	1.10
	Competence 11	5.80	1.53	5.67	1.56	6.14	1.42
	Competence 12	6.49	1.03	6.36	1.11	6.81	0.68
	Competence 13	6.25	0.95	6.22	0.98	6.10	0.91
	Competence 14	5.95	1.33	5.82	1.48	6.29	0.78
	Competence 15	6.51	0.84	6.51	0.86	6.52	0.81
Stability of teaching staff		Total	%	Male	%	Female	%
	- 25%	10	13.2	8	14.5	2	9.5
	25-30%	7	9.2	4	7.3	3	14.3
	31-50%	26	34.2	20	36.4	6	28.6
	51-75%	25	32.9	17	30.9	8	38.1
	+ 75%	8	10.5	6	10.9	2	9.5

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

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Importance of professional competences assigned to school leadership

The professional competences considered most important by school heads are 3) promoting the education and training of the teaching staff (6.63 ± 0.70) and 15) promoting co-operation with families, institutions and organisations in the surrounding community (6.51 ± 0.84). However, the competences perceived by principals as less important were 7) awarding contracts for construction, services and materials (5.01 ± 1.95) and 9) endorsing certificates and official school documents (5.60 ± 1.50). No significant differences were found by age, urban context of the school, number of pupils or number of teachers in the school (all p-values > 0.05).

Significant differences in the importance attributed to certain competences were identified between male and female principals ($p < 0.05$), as indicated in Table 2. In particular, female principals rated as more important the competences related to organisational forms and the school timetable for subjects (competence 4, $p = 0.037$), academic events and meetings (competence 5, $p = 0.027$), educational planning and school organisation (competence 6, $p = 0.032$) and coexistence, conflict mediation and corrective measures among students (competence 12, $p = 0.045$). Differences were also observed in the evaluation of expenditure, payments and school budget (competence 8, $p = 0.042$), depending on experience in school leadership, with novice principals (less than one term) rating this competence higher than senior principals (more than one term).

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Table 2. Importance given to professional competences in school leadership according to gender and experience in school leadership.

Competences	Gender					School leadership experience				
	Male	Female	<i>t</i> -tests			Novice	Experienced	<i>t</i> -tests		
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (74)	<i>p</i> -value	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (74)	<i>p</i> -value	<i>d</i>
Competence 1	6.36 (0.87)	6.52 (0.60)	0.78	.220	0.19	6.34 (0.83)	6.49 (0.78)	0.78	.219	0.18
Competence 2	6.15 (1.13)	6.29 (1.15)	0.48	.316	0.12	6.12 (1.12)	6.26 (1.15)	0.52	.303	0.19
Competence 3	6.58 (0.79)	6.76 (0.44)	0.99	.163	0.25	6.61 (0.67)	6.66 (0.77)	0.29	.387	0.07
Competence 4	6.35 (0.89)	6.71 (0.46)	1.81	.037	0.46	6.39 (0.77)	6.51 (0.85)	0.67	.254	0.15
Competence 5	6.15 (1.16)	6.67 (0.58)	1.96	.027	0.50	6.17 (1.14)	6.43 (0.95)	1.06	.146	0.24
Competence 6	6.22 (1.01)	6.67 (0.66)	1.88	.032	0.48	6.29 (0.93)	6.40 (0.98)	0.49	.313	0.11
Competence 7	5.07 (1.86)	4.86 (2.20)	0.43	.335	0.11	5.29 (1.76)	4.69 (2.13)	1.36	.089	0.31
Competence 8	6.07 (1.23)	6.48 (0.75)	1.40	.082	0.36	6.39 (1.00)	5.94 (1.23)	1.75	.042	0.40
Competence 9	5.55 (1.59)	6.05 (1.24)	1.31	.098	0.34	5.73 (1.64)	5.63 (1.35)	0.30	.384	0.07
Competence 10	6.47 (0.98)	6.29 (1.10)	0.72	.237	0.19	6.51 (0.90)	6.31 (1.13)	0.85	.199	0.20
Competence 11	5.67 (1.56)	6.14 (1.42)	1.20	.117	0.30	5.88 (1.45)	5.71 (1.64)	0.46	.323	0.11
Competence 12	6.36 (1.11)	6.81 (0.68)	1.72	.045	0.44	6.34 (1.18)	6.66 (0.80)	1.34	.092	0.31
Competence 13	6.22 (0.98)	6.10 (0.91)	0.47	.321	0.12	6.10 (0.97)	6.43 (0.92)	1.52	.066	0.35
Competence 14	5.82 (1.48)	6.29 (0.78)	1.37	.087	0.35	5.88 (1.40)	6.03 (1.27)	0.49	.314	0.11
Competence 15	6.51 (0.86)	6.52 (0.81)	0.07	.472	0.02	6.63 (0.77)	6.37 (0.91)	1.37	.088	0.31

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

As shown in Table 3, school leaders in Secondary schools rated competences (10) related to leadership, appointment and dismissal of management ($p = 0.005$), (11) supervision of non-teaching staff ($p = 0.013$) and (13) internal, external and teacher evaluations ($p = 0.05$) significantly higher than school leaders in Primary schools.

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Likewise, the competence (1) of pedagogical leadership and the fulfilment of the objectives of the educational project was more highly valued ($p = 0.041$) by those who lead schools located in low socio-economic contexts.

On the other hand, it was observed that the competences related to educational innovation and research (competence 2, $p = 0.033$), the training of the teaching staff (competence 3, $p = 0.046$), educational planning and school organisation (competence 6, $p = 0.016$), and the leadership, appointment and dismissal of the management team (competence 10, $p = 0.018$) received a significantly higher rating from school heads in schools with a stable teaching staff of more than 50%.

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Table 3. Importance given to the professional competences of school management according to school level, socio-economic status and teacher stability in the school.

Competences	Educational level					Socioeconomic level					Teacher stability				
	Primary	Secondary	<i>t</i> -tests			Low	Medium	<i>t</i> -tests			Less 50%	More 50%	<i>t</i> -tests		
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>74</i>)	<i>p</i> -value	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>74</i>)	<i>p</i> -value	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>74</i>)	<i>p</i> -value	<i>d</i>
Competence 1	6.34(0.85)	6.57(0.66)	1.13	.132	0.28	6.56(0.79)	6.24(0.80)	1.77	.041	0.40	6.42(0.91)	6.39(0.66)	0.13	.448	0.03
Competence 2	6.15(1.15)	6.26(1.10)	0.38	.350	0.10	6.21(1.11)	6.16(1.17)	0.17	.435	0.04	5.98(1.26)	6.45(0.87)	1.86	.033	0.43
Competence 3	6.58(0.77)	6.74(0.54)	0.87	.194	0.22	6.64(0.78)	6.62(0.64)	0.12	.453	0.03	6.51(0.86)	6.79(0.42)	1.71	.046	0.40
Competence 4	6.42(0.87)	6.52(0.67)	0.52	.300	0.13	6.56(0.85)	6.32(0.75)	1.30	.099	0.30	6.35(0.95)	6.58(0.56)	1.22	.113	0.28
Competence 5	6.30(1.07)	6.26(1.05)	0.16	.439	0.04	6.26(1.09)	6.32(1.03)	0.28	.391	0.06	6.12(1.14)	6.52(0.91)	1.65	.052	0.38
Competence 6	6.25(0.98)	6.57(0.84)	1.36	.089	0.34	6.33(0.96)	6.35(0.65)	0.08	.467	0.02	6.14(1.10)	6.61(0.61)	2.18	.016	0.51
Competence 7	4.91(1.97)	5.26(1.91)	0.73	.235	0.18	5.03(1.89)	5.00(2.04)	0.06	.477	0.01	4.77(2.00)	5.33(1.87)	1.26	.106	0.29
Competence 8	6.13(1.13)	6.30(1.15)	0.61	.272	0.15	6.23(1.01)	6.14(1.25)	0.37	.357	0.08	6.05(1.15)	6.36(1.08)	1.22	.113	0.28
Competence 9	5.57(1.59)	5.96(1.30)	1.04	.151	0.26	5.74(1.48)	5.62(1.55)	0.35	.363	0.08	5.84(1.36)	5.48(1.68)	1.01	.158	0.23
Competence 10	6.23(1.14)	6.87(0.34)	2.65	.005	0.66	6.44(1.02)	6.41(1.03)	0.13	.448	0.03	6.21(1.13)	6.70(0.77)	2.14	.018	0.49
Competence 11	5.55(1.69)	6.39(0.84)	2.27	.013	0.57	5.87(1.56)	5.73(1.52)	0.40	.344	0.09	5.74(1.50)	5.88(1.60)	0.38	.353	0.09
Competence 12	6.42(0.91)	6.65(1.27)	0.92	.179	0.23	6.41(1.21)	6.57(0.80)	0.67	.254	0.15	6.33(1.27)	6.70(0.53)	1.58	.059	0.37

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Competence 13	6.13(1.02)	6.52(0.73)	1.66	.05	0.41	6.28(1.00)	6.22(0.92)	0.30	.383	0.07	6.21(1.06)	6.30(0.81)	0.42	.337	0.10
Competence 14	5.83(1.50)	6.22(0.80)	1.16	.124	0.29	5.92(1.48)	5.97(1.19)	0.16	.436	0.04	5.84(1.31)	6.09(1.38)	0.82	.208	0.19
Competence 15	6.43(0.91)	6.70(0.64)	1.25	.107	0.30	6.51(0.89)	6.51(0.80)	<0.01	.499	<0.01	6.40(0.98)	6.67(0.60)	1.40	.082	0.33

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

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Importance given to professional competences as a function of the evaluation of the contribution of the subject of PE to the quality of education

School leaders, being teachers of the subject of PE, who consider the contribution of the subject of PE to educational quality in the education system to be high, rate the importance of competences 1, 3, 4, 6, 10, 14 and 15 higher than those who rate the contribution of the subject of PE to educational quality as low.

Specifically, competences 3 and 15 stand out because they are highly significant ($p < .001$), indicating a greater importance given in the groups that consider PE very important.

Table 4. Importance given to the professional competences of school management according to the importance given to the subject of Physical Education.

Competences	Low(*) n=7	Medium(*) n=18	High(*) n=51	Analysis of variance		
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	F ₂	p-value	η^2_p
Competence 1	5.71(1.60) ³	6.33(0.69)	6.53(1.64) ¹	3.49	.036	.09
Competence 2	5.43(1.51)	6.00(0.91)	6.35(1.10)	2.48	.091	.06
Competence 3	5.71(1.60) ^{2,3}	6.56(0.51) ¹	6.78(0.46) ¹	8.60	<.001	.19
Competence 4	6.00(1.73) ³	6.17(0.71)	6.61(0.60) ¹	3.38	.040	.09
Competence 5	5.86(1.68)	6.28(0.90)	6.35(1.02)	0.67	.513	.02
Competence 6	5.86(1.67) ³	6.00(0.91)	6.53(0.78) ¹	3.29	.043	.08
Competence 7	4.43(1.40)	5.06(2.04)	5.08(2.00)	0.34	.712	.01
Competence 8	5.43(1.40)	6.00(1.19)	6.35(1.04)	2.48	.091	.06
Competence 9	5.14(1.22)	5.56(1.54)	5.80(1.54)	0.67	.514	.02
Competence 10	5.57(1.62) ³	6.22(1.11)	6.61(0.90) ¹	3.99	.023	.10
Competence 11	5.14(1.57)	5.50(1.62)	6.00(1.48)	1.44	.224	.04
Competence 12	5.71(1.70)	6.50(0.79)	6.59(0.96)	2.31	.106	.06
Competence 13	5.86(1.68)	5.89(1.08)	6.43(0.73)	2.95	.059	.08
Competence 14	5.29(1.38) ³	5.44(1.82) ³	6.22(1.03) ^{1,2}	3.36	.040	.08
Competence 15	6.39(0.85) ^{2,3}	6.71(0.61) ^{1,3}	6.51(0.84) ^{1,2}	8.92	<.001	.20

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Numbers in superscript show significantly different groups (Bonferroni correction: $p = .0167$).

(*) A score of 5 or less on the 7-point scale is classified as a 'low' rating of Physical Education. A score of 6 is considered a 'medium' rating, while a score of 7 is interpreted as 'high'.

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Discussion

The aim of this research was to analyse the perceptions of school principals specialising in PE regarding the professional competences assigned by the educational administration to school management in Spain, differentiating according to gender, experience in school leadership positions, professional teaching speciality, educational level of the school and the socio-economic context of the school. In addition, the relationship between the importance assigned to these competences and the evaluation of the subject of PE was investigated.

The findings show that principals specialising in PE highly value competences related to teacher education (competence 3) and co-operation with the educational community (competence 15). These competences, considered essential for educational management, are in line with previous research highlighting their positive impact on school quality (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson, 2019). The results highlight the complexity of the professional competences required for school leaders, particularly in the field of PE. Significant variability is observed in the perception of these competences, influenced by factors such as gender, experience and educational context. This finding shows that the valuation of professional competences in school leadership is not homogeneous, as there is no universally prioritised set of competences. Rather, each school leader adjusts their priorities according to their experiences, their beliefs about the impact of areas such as PE, and the particular challenges of their educational environment. Similarly, the importance of a flexible management approach is highlighted, which allows for adapting management practices to the real needs of each school community, optimising the use of resources and focus on the most relevant professional competences for each situation (Johnson, 2025).

The difference in the importance given to various competences according to gender, experience, and educational context indicates a varied perception of the essential responsibilities of school leadership. The tendency to place greater value on competences related to pedagogical leadership and educational innovation (competences 1 and 2) by principals with more experience and in contexts of higher socio-economic status highlights the importance of adapting professional development to the specific needs of each setting. Furthermore, the contrast in competence ratings by school size and level of

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teacher stability suggests that leadership strategies need to be flexible and take into account the unique characteristics of each institution.

Importance of professional competences by gender and experience

Both male and female principals highly valued Competence 3 (teacher training), consistent with Arar (2017), Robinson (2019), and Huang et al. (2023). The least valued competence across genders was Competence 7 (contracting services), as noted by Gil-Espinosa et al. (2024b). However, gender-based differences emerged: female principals prioritised more competences, especially 4 (school organisation), 5 (academic coordination), 6 (planning), and 12 (coexistence and conflict resolution), reflecting a leadership approach that integrates strategic planning, collaboration, and student well-being (Carli & Eagly, 2011; Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; Kim, 2016; Shaked et al., 2018). While Abonyi et al. (2024) found no gender gap in Ghana, their study stressed the importance of socio-cultural context in shaping leadership roles.

Importance of professional competences according to school level, socio-economic status and teacher stability in the school

Significant differences were found in the valuation of competences based on experience in school management. Competence 8 (authorising expenditure, organising payments, and preparing the school budget) was rated as more important by novice principals, likely due to their limited initial training in school administration, a finding consistent with Sandoval-Estupiñán et al. (2020) in Latin American contexts. Conversely, competence 7 (awarding contracts for construction, services, and materials) was the least valued by both novice and experienced principals, aligning with Gil-Espinosa et al. (2024b).

Regarding educational level, secondary school principals placed greater importance on competences 10 (leadership of teaching staff), 11 (promoting innovation projects), and 13 (evaluation and assessment). This reflects a leadership style focused on collaboration and evaluation, as noted by De Jong et al., (2020). Differences also arise from the distinct professional profiles: Primary PE teachers typically teach multiple subjects, whereas Secondary PE teachers specialise exclusively in PE, with different training requirements (Miñana-Signes & Monfort-Pañego, 2020).

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The socio-economic context of schools significantly influenced competences assessment. Competence 1 (pedagogical leadership and achievement of educational project objectives) was more highly valued by principals in low socio-economic status schools, highlighting the need for strong leadership to ensure effective teaching and learning processes. This aligns with Ayvar-Bazán (2016), who emphasises the importance of pedagogical leadership in vulnerable contexts.

Finally, teacher stability above 50% correlated with higher valuations of competences 2, 3, 6, and 10, which include educational innovation, teacher training, overall planning, and staff leadership. In contrast, job instability hinders team cohesion, understanding of pupils, and communication with families, due to a lack of trust-based relationships (Peniche-Cetzal et al., 2020).

Importance of professional competences according to value given to the subject of PE

Most school principals in the study highly value PE. While some earlier studies with unspecified principal specializations align with this view (Urtel and Vogel, 2011; Zeng and Wang, 2015), much prior research positions PE as a secondary, accessory subject in the curriculum (George and Curtner-Smith, 2017; Stevens-Smith et al., 2006). The present findings suggest that principals' specific training in PE influences their greater appreciation of the subject.

Principals who consider PE as a fundamental activity emphasise key competences in leadership and staff development (Competences 1, 3, and 10), focusing on pedagogical leadership, continuous teacher training, and staff leadership, which are essential skills for effective PE provision (Stevenson, 2021). Additionally, according to Kim & Cruz (2024), transformational leadership and support for PE teachers' autonomy significantly improve teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and student engagement.

Regarding school organisation and planning (Competences 4 and 6), these principals highlight the critical need for effective timetable management and educational planning, given PE's requirement for coordinating specific spaces and times (Hernández-Beltrán et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of efficient organisation to support all subjects' proper delivery.

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Finally, in community and environmental engagement (Competences 14 and 15), PE often involves connecting the school with families and external organisations. Principals who value PE highly therefore prioritise collaboration with the community and school representation before external bodies, viewing these competences as essential to fostering comprehensive education and strengthening community ties (Castanedo & Capllonch, 2018).

Theoretical and practical implications

This study points towards the need for a more personalised approach in the training of principals, which recognises the complexity of their role and fosters competences that respond effectively to the specific challenges of their working environment.

By analysing the relationship of various variables with the perception of key skills for school leadership and management, a broad framework is provided to understand the factors that influence the effective performance of principals and their teams in different educational realities. Overall, the main finding and conclusion of this research underlines that PE is not only an area that promotes physical activity but also has a cross-cutting impact on psychological, social and managerial aspects (Bai et al., 2021). This holistic approach reinforces the potential of PE teachers as school leaders, as their unique experience and skills can contribute to the holistic development of students and the strengthening of cohesion in the educational environment. According to Sánchez-García et al. (2024), these teachers not only promote academic achievement without adverse effects, but also excel in creating a positive, inclusive and collaborative environment. Therefore, their specific initial training in PE not only influences their school management perspective but also enables them to implement innovative leadership strategies that prioritise both the well-being of the educational community and the achievement of academic and social goals.

Limitations and future lines of research

Although this study provides relevant results on the professional competences of school principals specialising in PE, it has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the small sample size and the non-probabilistic selection limit the generalizability

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of the results to other educational contexts. This could be addressed by using larger and more representative samples in future research, which would allow for validation and extension of the findings. Second, self-reported responses to questionnaires may be subject to social desirability bias, affecting the accuracy of the data collected (Tan et al., 2021). To mitigate this problem, it would be valuable to include additional data collection instruments, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups.

On the other hand, the research has focused on a specific educational context, limiting the exploration of how these competences might vary in other education systems or regions with different socio-cultural characteristics. Future lines of research could compare the relevance and perception of these competences in different international contexts, exploring similarities and differences. Finally, considering the results of Bai et al. (2021), future research could analyse not only the impact of PE principals on academic performance, but also their influence on the holistic development of students, including psychological, social and coexistence aspects. This would reinforce the role of PE principals as holistic school leaders, able to address the challenges of modern education from a cross-curricular perspective.

Conclusions

The assessment of professional competences in school leadership is influenced by factors such as gender, experience, educational level, socio-economic context and the stability of teaching teams. Female principals specialising in PE tend to prioritise aspects related to organisation, coexistence and strategic planning, while less experienced principals tend to focus on financial management. In schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic environments, pedagogical leadership and institutional strengthening are essential to face the challenges of the context, highlighting the need for context-sensitive strategies. Likewise, the stability of teaching teams has a significant impact on competences such as innovation, staff training and planning, underlining the importance of strong working contexts to optimise educational management.

Principals who attach greater importance to PE emphasise leadership, educational planning and community collaboration, highlighting the integrative role of this subject in the overall development of students. In general terms, PE teachers in leadership positions promote a holistic approach by prioritising transversal competences such as management,

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well-being and social development, showing that this area promotes not only health and sport, but also fundamental values for the progress of educational institutions.

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