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# Empowering Student Engagement: A Case Study of Transforming Schools Through Professional Learning Communities

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## ABSTRACT

Interest in studying student engagement arises from its predictive role in school success and its potential to address various classroom-related educational issues, such as school failure, low achievement, high dropout rates and student alienation. This article presents a case study set in a challenging Spanish school environment that actively promotes student engagement in learning. The study's goal is to gain a contextual understanding of educational change, exploring the school's educational project development, its journey as a professional learning community, and the foundational elements underpinning such engagement. The findings highlight the pivotal role of curriculum and middle management leadership, shifts in teaching methodologies, the cultivation of collaborative professionalism, the enhancement of professional capital and the establishment of supportive structures and dynamics for student engagement. Moreover, this research suggests that the school's achievements are the outcome of a prolonged and intricate process of institutional development led by effective leadership.

## 1 | Introduction

There is international pressure to enhance educational outcomes, but both national and international reports highlight persistent issues in the Spanish education system. The OECD's (2018a) report on *Equity in Education* reveals persistent low academic performance, which hinders efforts to break down social mobility barriers. This leads to schools inadvertently exacerbating social inequalities through segregation. Despite progress, problems in achieving expected levels of achievement, equity and inclusion persist. Low results contribute to social mobility barriers and reinforce social differences, as seen in reports like OECD (2018b), with special attention paid to Andalusia (20.07% dropout rate),

and the Report on Territorial Inequality in Education (Colino et al. 2019). This situation hinders meeting European education objectives (European Commission 2010).

Given the challenges brought about by the recent educational reform in Spain, there is a need to reconsider the organisational and pedagogical approaches of educational institutions. It is crucial to explore innovative approaches that extend beyond policy changes and focus on schools adopting a Community of Professional Practice model. These schools aim to address these challenges in a context-specific manner, striving to improve educational outcomes beyond what is expected based on socioeconomic and cultural factors (ISEC). The focus is on

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enhancing learning for everyone through a liberating learning perspective (Rincón-Gallardo 2019), considering various social, organisational and pedagogical factors. There is growing interest in studying student engagement due to its potential to tackle ongoing classroom issues like school failure, low performance, high dropout rates, student boredom and alienation (Fredricks et al. 2019; Williford and Pianta 2020). Additionally, student engagement serves as a predictor of academic success.

Therefore, investigating the elements behind heightened student engagement and improved educational outcomes in schools is essential. This involves comprehending the requisite organisational, professional and methodological prerequisites that promote such engagement. Furthermore, examining the evolution of schools from conventional models to innovative ones is critical. These inquiries hold particular significance in what Lupton (2005) describes as challenging contexts, as successful enhancements in such settings can provide valuable lessons for driving innovation across schools in general.

## 2 | Background

### 2.1 | Student Engagement With School and Learning

Over the past decade, there has been increasing interest in studying student engagement, with it being considered a pivotal factor in shaping policies, measures and various improvement programmes (Davis and McPartland 2012; Fredricks et al. 2019; Williford and Pianta 2020). While psychology has predominantly focused on this topic, there is a growing sociocritical perspective (González 2010; Macfarlane and Tomlinson 2017) that delves into the everyday operations of schools, school organisation and curriculum development.

Student engagement is a multifaceted concept that cannot be confined to a single definition (González 2010). Instead, it is viewed as a meta-construct comprising three key components (Fredricks et al. 2004): behavioural (attendance and participation), cognitive (setting goals or using metacognitive skills) and affective (feeling of belonging to school and positive emotions towards learning).

Student engagement is considered a powerful catalyst for enhancing educational practices, with a significant emphasis on improving student learning outcomes. To achieve better learning results and decrease early school dropout rates and failure, there is a requirement for policy changes, school restructuring and curriculum development, as highlighted by various scholars and organisations (Bolívar 2017; Elmore 2010; González 2010; OECD 2018a).

### 2.2 | Factors That Contribute to Promoting Student Engagement

The study conducted a systematic review to identify factors promoting student engagement and improving educational outcomes in primary and secondary schools. Factors related to school environment, classroom dynamics, teaching methods

and student attributes facilitating engagement were recognised. Data analysis categorised these significant factors based on existing literature.

At the school level, transformational *leadership* (Boberg and Bourgeois 2016; Zegarra 2019), shared responsibility (Beattie et al. 2015; Hardie 2015) and the empowerment of the teacher as a curriculum leader (Taylor et al. 2011) are among the main facilitators of student engagement in learning and education. There is also a need for a *collaborative culture* among faculty members (Boberg and Bourgeois 2016; Davis and McPartland 2012; Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018; Sammons et al. 2016), creating a *positive school climate* (Tschannen-Moran and Clemente 2018) and promoting increased *professional capital* (Hargreaves and Fullan 2014) and *school-community relationships* (Davis and McPartland 2012; Lawson and Lawson 2013).

In the classroom, it will be essential to implement an *active and motivating methodology* (Adelman and Taylor 2012; Luter et al. 2017), in which there is real student participation and a rich and enjoyable experience (Brackett 2018; Kramer et al. 2020) in which the benefits of *ICT* are optimised (Lynch, Patten, and Hennessy 2013). Furthermore, the teacher should develop various *performance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms* such as *feedback* (Beattie et al. 2015; Sammons et al. 2016) and a range of assessment, support, monitoring and reinforcement techniques and strategies for students (Davis and McPartland 2012). Finally, creating an optimal *classroom climate* for learning that fosters positive relationships is a prerequisite (Adelman and Taylor 2012; Sammons et al. 2016).

In terms of teaching roles and student attributes, the most significant factors include *teachers' professional development* and their capacity to engage students effectively (Sammons et al. 2016; Davis and McPartland 2012; Gil-Flores 2016). A *positive relationship* between teachers and students and support (Carrington et al. 2013; Moreira et al. 2019; Tao et al. 2022; Thornberg et al. 2022; Williford and Pianta 2020) and students themselves (Schroeter et al. 2015) is presented as one of the most relevant facilitators that will contribute to students' interest and participation in classroom activities or, on the contrary, disengagement. Another striking aspect is the need to introduce dynamics processes and strategies to *give a voice to students* (Carrington et al. 2013; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Clemente 2018) and to consider the *value and expectations* of the students themselves in any school activity (Adelman and Taylor 2012).

### 2.3 | Creating a School That Engages Students: Organisational Conditions

The literature review identified key organisational conditions for long-lasting school improvement, focusing on proactive measures to enhance student engagement through school organisation and educational practices. Research in Spain has shown that organisational conditions, which relate to the day-to-day operations of an educational institution, can influence whether students become engaged or disengaged. This process, as suggested by González (2015), can lead to disinterest, academic failure and dropout. This organisational conditions for engaging students

(González and Bernárdez-Gómez 2019) are as follows: (a) leadership; (b) teacher collaboration; (c) the curriculum and teaching-learning processes; (d) relationships and relationship climate in the school and (e) institutional support for students in their educational trajectory. These organisational conditions were regarded as emerging categories from the literature and were utilised in designing data collection techniques and instruments.

Previous research (Bolívar 2014; Hargreaves and Fink 2002) highlight that creating organisational and cultural conditions, particularly those context-specific, requires complex, time-consuming institutional development. This process ultimately establishes a sustainable shared purpose. Given the challenges of Spain's current educational reform, reevaluating educational institutions' organisational and pedagogical models is imperative.

## 2.4 | Transforming Schools Through Professional Learning Communities

The evolution of schools towards professional learning communities involves a series of significant changes in how the educational community works and collaborates to enhance student learning (Dufour and Eaker 2008; Stoll and Louis 2007).

Several studies have focused its interest on identifying the key aspects of this transformation to comprehend its attributes (Admiraal et al. 2021; Bolívar and Bolívar-Ruano 2016; Dufour and Eaker 2008; Stoll and Kools 2017; Stoll and Louis 2007), which encompass: distributed leadership, teacher collaboration, student-focused learning, professional development, data-driven decision-making, evidence-based practices, a culture of trust and learning and engagement with families and the community. These elements aim to establish a culture of continuous improvement within the school, making it more responsive to evolving student and community needs while fostering adaptability and flexibility.

Therefore, it is crucial to reorganise and revitalise schools in order to foster a shared professional competence both internally and through partnerships with external networks (Hargreaves 2016). The driving forces of change should be collaboration, mutual support and trust among the staff, constituting what is termed 'collaborative professionalism' (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018). Moving towards professional learning communities requires a sustained commitment and a dedication to ongoing enhancement. These changes can profoundly influence the quality of education and the achievements of students (Fullan et al. 2018; Quinn et al. 2020).

## 3 | Purpose

This research aims to investigate: how the engagement of students is created, developed, dynamised and made sustainable in a successful educational centre in a challenging context? Five objectives are formulated to achieve this:

1. To Identify school's organisational conditions for enhancing school engagement.

2. To Identify and describe classroom teaching practices that encourage student engagement.
3. To Explore teachers' challenges in implementing student engagement methods.
4. To Define the teacher profile successful in engaging students, from students' viewpoint.
5. To Analyse teachers' perceptions of student engagement and its connection to classroom methodology.

This study, conducted within a Professional Learning Community, investigates school improvement by focusing on organisational conditions for lasting change. It analyses the school, classroom and individuals (teachers and students) to assess the influence of these conditions on the school's model, educational activities and teaching practices. The research explores their role in improving educational outcomes and addresses current challenges.

## 4 | Method

### 4.1 | Research Design

This research investigates student engagement in a successful school facing challenging circumstances, utilising a qualitative approach. An intrinsic case study (Stake 2016) approach, combining ethnographic, (auto)biographical and participatory/community-based research (Bolívar and Domingo 2019), was employed to comprehend school dynamics. This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of the school's transformation and its impact on student engagement.

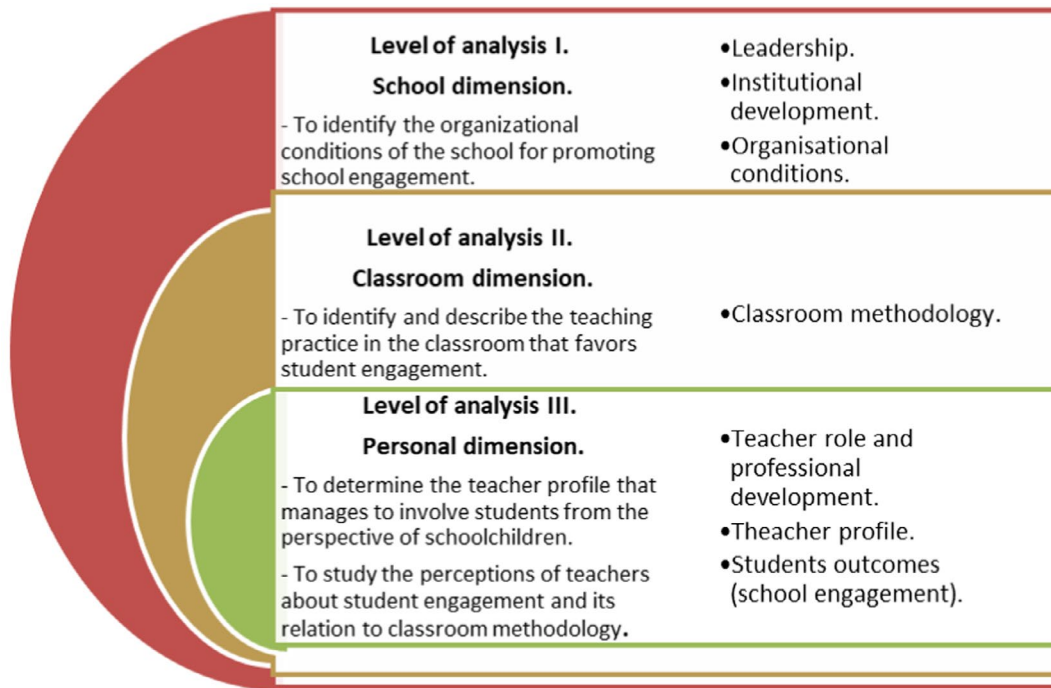
To comprehensively address research questions, the study thoroughly examines pedagogical aspects related to student engagement development. It delineates three dimensions of inquiry, moving from a broader perspective to the specific dimension of 'engagement' (see Figure 1).

Data collection involved input from both school staff and students, enhancing the school's perspective with external feedback. However, the primary data gathering method involved the researcher actively participating in school and classroom activities, effectively taking on the role of a school ethnographer.

### 4.2 | Case Study

This case study aims to uncover the factors contributing to student engagement, including personal, methodological and organisational aspects. The selection of this particular case was intentional and based on three key criteria:

1. Convenience: to ensure easy access and willingness to participate in the research.
2. Contextual: the school is situated in vulnerable areas at risk of educational and social exclusion, according to official categorisations.



**FIGURE 1** | Study dimensions and associated thematic cores.

3. Thematic focus: the school prioritises educational innovation projects and school transformation centred on students' active participation and engagement in their learning process.

#### 4.3 | Context: The Study Setting and the School Improvement Process

This research delves into the challenges faced by Spanish schools and focuses on a school currently undergoing transformation to improve its educational practices and enhance student engagement. The selected school serves students from early childhood to the first cycle of compulsory secondary education (3–14 years). It operates in a rural area with around 2000 residents and faces socioeconomic challenges below the regional and national averages. Despite these challenges, the school serves around 300 students, with 5% belonging to the Roma ethnic group and 6% having special educational needs. Many students benefit from the solidarity and food guarantees plan provided by the Andalusian Government, offering meals and extracurricular activities.

The school's transformative journey began four school years ago when a new management team was elected. The chosen candidate, a teacher from the school, brought an innovative perspective with a strong focus on student engagement and a passion for learning. This principal's educational project is built on four core pillars: participatory and democratic principles, fostering personal relationships and coexistence, nurturing students' potential and employing a dynamic and innovative pedagogical approach.

Upon taking office, the new principal initiated a series of actions aimed at transitioning the school to this new pedagogical

model. These actions impacted the school's organisational and pedagogical aspects, as well as students' academic performance, with a particular emphasis on student engagement.

Currently, the school is moving towards the model of an expanded community of professional practice. This shift involves increased professional and social support from the community to enhance student participation and engagement in their learning processes. The transformation has garnered recognition from educational authorities, the teaching profession and the local community, establishing it as a notable example to follow in the pursuit of improved educational outcomes for all students.

#### 4.4 | Participants

Table 1 shows the attributes of the key informants who participated in this study. Although all the teachers at the school have a long professional career, two groups can be distinguished: experts in project-based learning (from now on PBL) and service-learning (from now on SL) and those who are new to using this type of methodology in the classroom. The voice of primary (10–12 years) and secondary school students (12–14 years) was also collected from their narratives ( $n = 90$ ).

#### 4.5 | Collect Data: Instruments and Techniques

In this study, a range of research tools and techniques were employed to complement each other. The researcher conducted fieldwork over two school years, which allowed them to become deeply familiar with the school environment. The research instruments are succinctly described in Figure 2.

**TABLE 1** | Key informants in the case study.

Informant	Genre	Teaching experience	Years in school	Functions	PBL expert	Subcase	Interview
PRINCIPAL	M	20–25	5–10	Principal ESO teacher PPC	Yes	Yes	8
HS	F	< 25	5–10	Head of studies ESO teacher	No	No	2
TCH2	F	15–20	5–10	Secretary Primary tutor	No	No	2
TCHPBL1	F	15–20	1–5	Primary tutor PPC Mentor	Yes	Yes	1
TCHPBL2	F	15–20	1–5	Primary tutor PPC Mentor	Yes	Yes	5
TCH1	F	< 25	10–15	Primary tutor PPC	No	Yes	1
TCH3	F	15–20	1–5	Primary tutor	No	No	1
TCH4	F	15–20	10–15	Primary tutor cycle coordinator	No	No	1
TCH5	M	15–20	10–15	Primary tutor PPC	No	No	1
SETCH	M	< 25	10–15	Special education Teacher	No	No	1
TCHR6	F	15–20	1–5	ESO teacher and tutor ESO Coordinator PPC	No	No	1
LCE	F	—	—	Local councillor for Education	No	No	1

Note: Selected subcases are highlighted in grey; ESO (secondary education stage); PPC (plans and projects coordinator); TCHPBL (expert teacher in project-based learning).

#### 4.6 | Data Analysis

Data analysis involved iterative reflection, dialectical validation and reaching collective consensus (Figure 3). Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was employed, constructing themes and categories from literature and emerging data categories (as shown in Figure 4), including interviews and discussions between the researcher and participants. N-Vivo 11 software facilitated data management and analysis.

#### 4.7 | Quality Criteria and Ethical Considerations

Interpretive methods used validation techniques (Flick 2014) as triangulation of data from different perspectives leading to the coding, analysis and interpretation of the data is

noteworthy. Transferability was considered to provide detailed descriptions of participants' experiences, contexts and behaviours. To ensure reliability and conformity, persistent observation was carried out along with various checks with the documents and participants, as well as the consistency of the research through its continuity over time. Ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA] 2018) were followed for validity, reliability and data privacy.

#### 5 | Results

This section presents research findings, integrating them across school, classroom and staff (teachers and students) levels for a holistic view.

<b>Participant observation</b>	<p>Systematise school and classroom observation and focus attention on aspects to be investigated.</p> <p>Observation script for school level of analysis</p> <p>Development of an <b>observation guide</b>: adapted from Classroom Instrument AIMS (atmosphere, instruction and content, classroom management and student participation) (Roehrig &amp; Christesen, 2010).</p> <p><b>Personal research diary</b>: record observations.</p>
<b>Interview</b>	<p>Collect the voice of the different informants who participated in the study.</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews (interview script).</p> <p>Audio-recorded, duration 30-60 minutes.</p> <p><b>The life story</b> (Bolívar &amp; Domingo, 2019): principal and institutional development of the school.</p>
<b>Documentary recording and analysis</b>	<p><b>Variety of documentary sources</b>: school reports and programmes, management project, news media, teachers' blogs, school website, photographic and video recordings.</p> <p><b>Audiovisual recording</b>: to be able to re-watch the different classroom sessions afterwards and document moments or situations that illustrate the everyday reality of the researched reality (Cruz, 2007).</p> <p><b>Student narratives</b>: To obtain a teacher profile from a student perspective (n=90)</p>

FIGURE 2 | Research instruments and purpose.

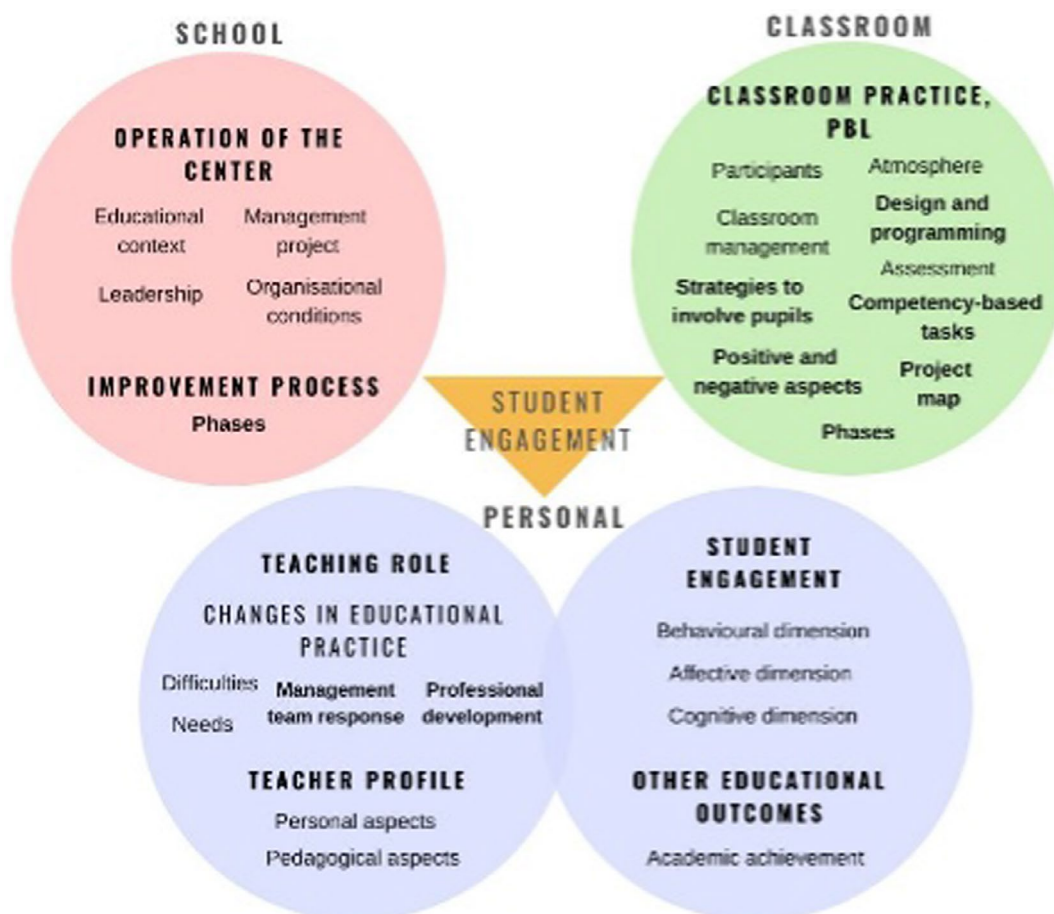


FIGURE 3 | Study dimensions and categories of analysis.

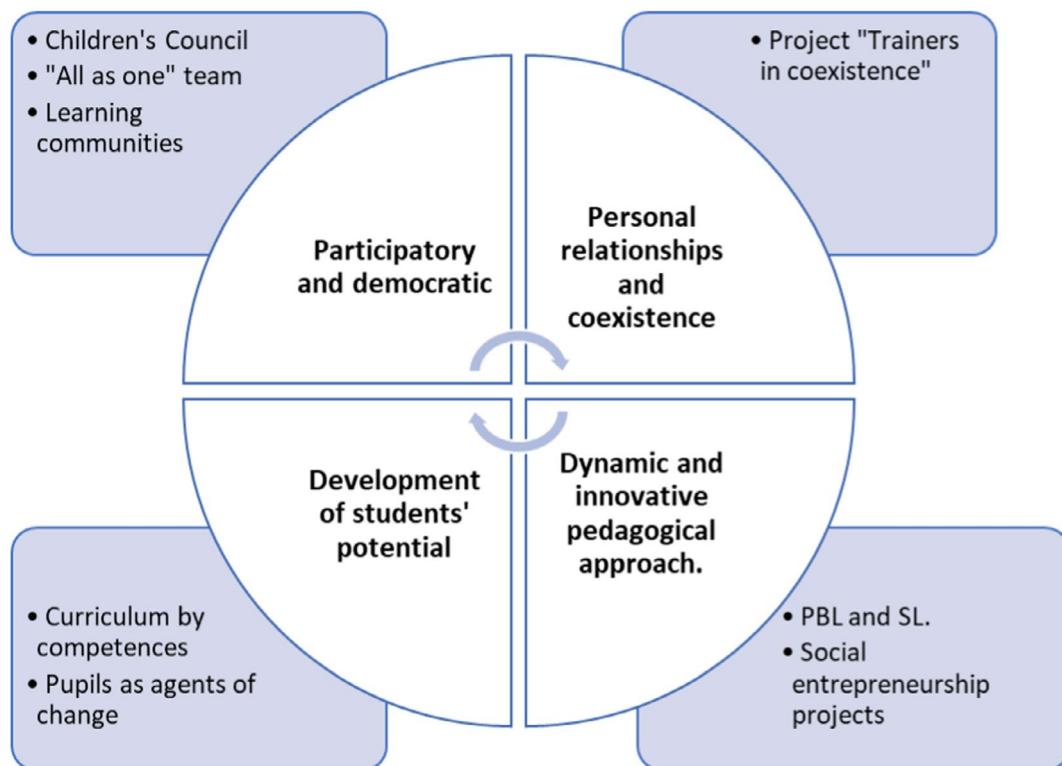


FIGURE 4 | New school model based on children's participation in school.

## 5.1 | Analysis Level I: The School Dimension. Organisational Conditions Fostering Student Engagement

### 5.1.1 | Management Purpose and Educational Project of the School: Future Vision

Under a new principal's leadership, the school has initiated a mission-driven project focused on advocating for an educational centre model that aims to:

form free, critical, responsible, and respectful persons, taking care of the physical, psychological, and social aspects that allow them to intervene in an autonomous manner, fostering changes and transformations on social, political, economic, and cultural levels of the environment that surrounds them.

(Management Project, p. 5)

Figure 4 schematically presents the four pillars of the new educational model, each illustrating the educational initiatives implemented at the school, collectively shaping the development of this innovative school model.

The study's results highlight the importance of two essential factors for school transformation: educational role models and organisational conditions. Additionally, the role of leadership, particularly the principal's pedagogical leadership, is emphasised. The key findings for each thematic analysis are summarised below.

The principal's strong belief in education as a second chance for those facing sociocultural challenges drove the school's vision.

However, obstacles in school administration (autonomy and resources) and teacher resistance to change hindered its implementation. This belief is exemplified in the following sample of analysed discourses:

When people are not willing to engage in that distribution of power and shared leadership, it becomes very challenging. [...] In this lack of initiative, perhaps the previous leadership may have influenced, as the process was slower, and they didn't take that initiative because they were coming from a very authoritarian model. So, people get comfortable, they become completely passive.

(PRINCIPAL)

Working with people has been challenging because what you see now as a great team working together wasn't like this initially. Many colleagues had a tough time adapting to the new way of working. We had worked for many years in a traditional manner, and with this new project, the methodological change was essential. Not all teachers were on board, and we had to push them quite a bit.

(HE)

### 5.1.2 | Pedagogical Leadership

The principal has played a vital role in fostering conditions for a student-participation-focused school. Most key informants

recognise a change in leadership style from the previous administration to the current one. The current principal's leadership is characterised as distributed and transformational (Figure 5), emphasising principles like equity, integration, inclusion, participation, democracy and commitment to the school and children on a daily basis. These principles not only shape the management model but also form the basis of the school's pedagogical approach.

The leadership dynamics of the management team primarily aimed at creating coherence and coordination between the curriculum and teaching methods while establishing a conducive working and learning environment for both teachers and students.

When I arrived at the school, the structure was entirely hierarchical. The principal took on multiple roles, including that of secretary and head of studies, among others. This left her with little time and created a dictatorial atmosphere. My goal was to change this dynamic and establish a more horizontal educational community, where everyone was essential to the project. Clearly, the most significant part of this community was the largest one, the children. Therefore, I couldn't develop an educational project without considering their involvement.

(PRINCIPAL)

With this principal, I see another model of leadership. The principal is a colleague, a friend, a leader I admire; for me, they are a role model in the school and in education.

(TCH2)

**5.1.3 | Educational Referents: Reflection on Educational Practice**

The study identified key motivations behind the school's re-evaluation of its educational practices. These motivations include:

- The school as an agent of transformation.
- Dedication to high-quality public education.

- Empowerment of teachers as curriculum leaders.
- Focus on student learning: exploration of alternative pedagogical methods emphasising holistic personal development.
- Development of formative assessment and authentic assessment.
- Involvement of the entire educational community.
- Diversity as a source of enrichment.
- Ongoing reflection with an emphasis on equity.

A sample of the analysed discourses:

Each member of the faculty feels important and knows that their opinions and proposals will be listened to. This is a way of creating a great team, and everyone feels important and valued within the team (TCH1)

What started as a purpose for the school has now evolved into a shared project vision. In other words, the purpose now is called Valderrubio, a community of agents of change for social justice. What we want is for everyone to get involved in the transformation projects to improve the town.

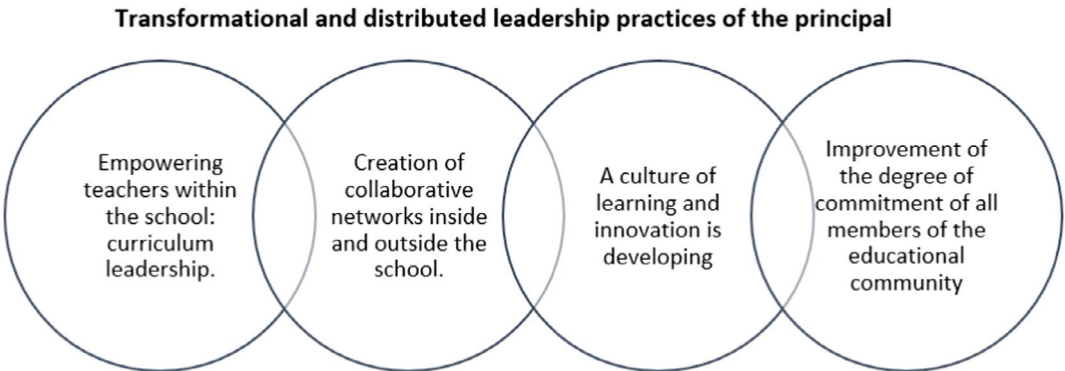
(TCHPBL2)

**5.1.4 | Institutional Development of the School: Advancing Towards a Professional Learning Community**

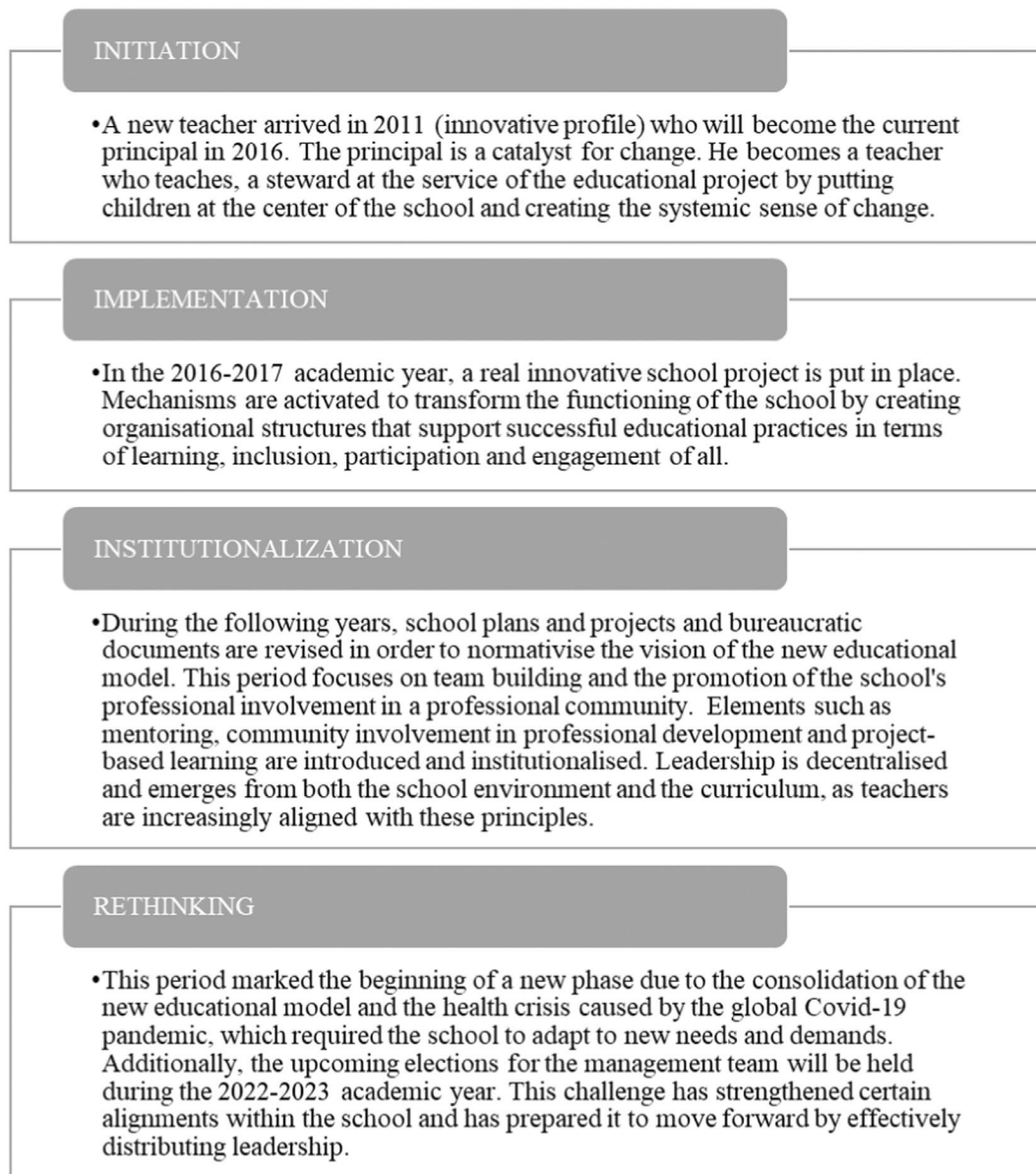
Through an examination of the school's life history and discussions with informants, we've gained descriptive insights into the school's evolution. This data has allowed us to pinpoint significant milestones in its development, aiding in the portrayal of the school's developmental cycle. In summary, this cycle of change is characterised by four major phases (three already experienced and a fourth presently underway), as illustrated in Figure 6.

**5.1.5 | Organisational Conditions**

The school's history is influenced by seven vital organisational conditions effectively implemented through diverse strategies.



**FIGURE 5** | Characteristics of leadership exercised by the principal.



**FIGURE 6** | Phases of institutional development of the school.

These conditions encompass pedagogical leadership, collaboration, teacher training, relationship climate, curriculum, teaching methods, student support and community engagement. They played a pivotal role in propelling the transformation towards a new school model. Fieldwork demonstrated how these conditions facilitated changes, nurturing a student-centred learning environment. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of these conditions and operational dynamics that promote active student participation in their education and development.

We have achieved many things. We are one of the few schools that I know of that has a Children's Council, an advisory and participatory body composed solely of children, which allows them to lead their improvement proposals.

(PRINCIPAL)

Previously it was a very vertical organisation and management, where every proposal had to pass through the approval and consent of the headmistress. (SETCH)

Relations between the city hall and the school are very good. The relationship is very fluid and that makes it much easier for us to work together.

(LCE)

We had already worked on projects a few times, but they were not done on a large scale like now. They were smaller projects and only a few teachers did them [...] looking at what we do now, we have come a long way

(TCH2)

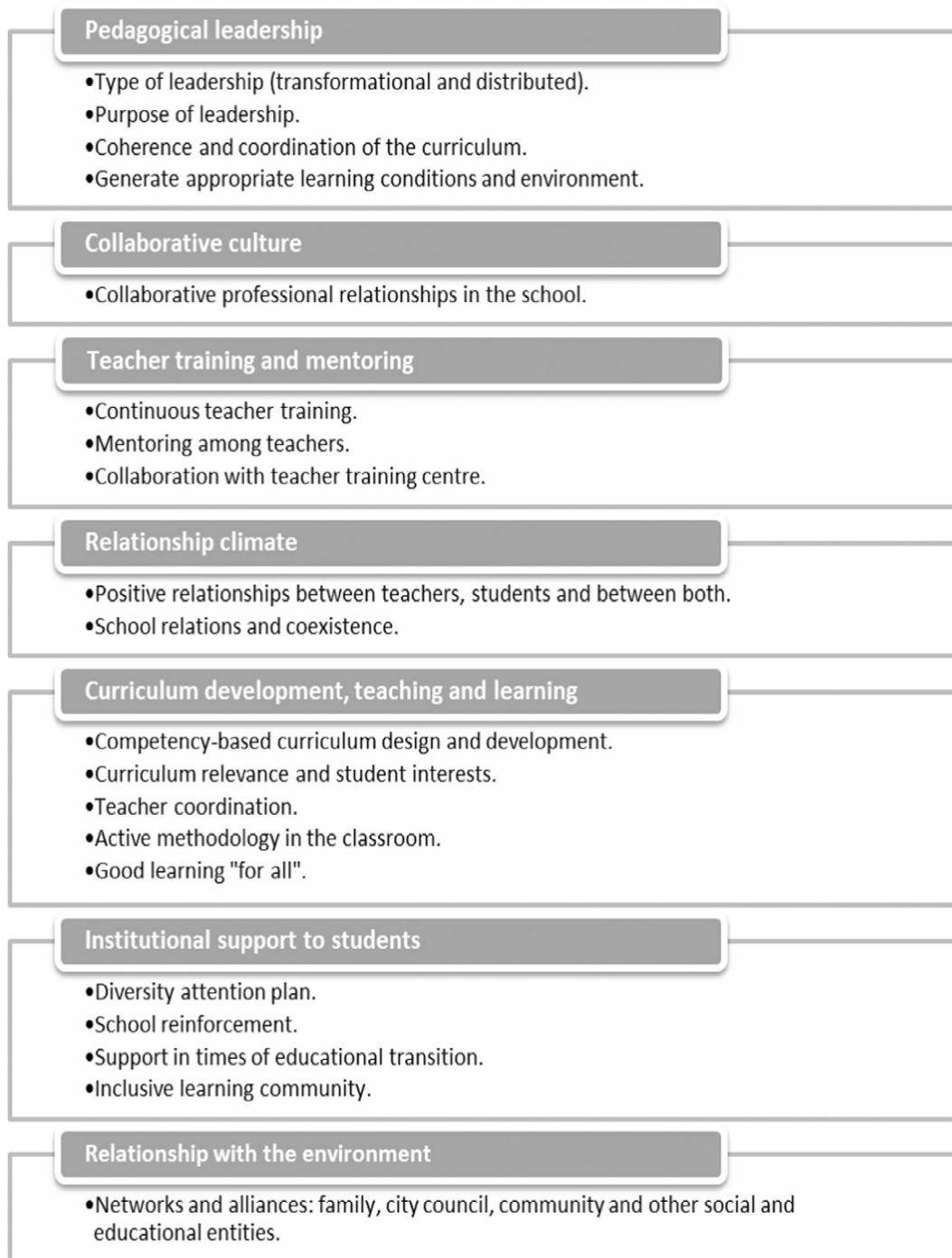


FIGURE 7 | Organisational conditions and operation dynamics in the school.

## 5.2 | Analysis Level II: Classroom Context. Classroom Teaching Practices That Promote Student Engagement

### 5.2.1 | Educational Practices for Involving Students

The emerging theme revealed that PBL and SL methodologies have been effective in enhancing student engagement in the classroom. Three distinct project phases and their respective purposes were identified, shedding light on the structure of project work in the school, as elucidated by an experienced PBL teacher.

This school develops PBL in three phases distinguished by their intention and the activities to be carried out, which make up the architecture of the project: ‘we start’, ‘we discover’, and ‘we get it’. In the phase where we start, the challenge is presented, and it is planned how it will be done, building the project map. In the second phase, the tasks are developed. Finally, the results are shared, and the evaluation is carried out.

(TCHPBL2)

PBL allows the teacher to create learning opportunities in the classroom where students can engage in planning the project map and performing various competency-based tasks that comprise it. It also enables changing learning environments and not confining them to the classroom, extending into the surrounding environment.

(TCHPBL1)

Three teachers (referred to as TCH1, TCHPBL1 and TCHPBL2) were observed using the Classroom Instrument AIMS (Roehrig and Christesen 2010) to document their strategies for engaging students. Each project lasted approximately 1 month, and class sizes ranged from 17 to 20 students. Frequency calculations were used to determine how often each strategy was observed in each subcase, and the totals were obtained by combining frequencies across subcases. Figure 8 provides a summary of the most frequently used strategies by the observed teachers. It's worth noting that the teachers actively involved their students in project planning using a project map, a critical element that facilitated student participation in project decision-making.

HN (Hardly ever or never, 0-5); R (Rarely 6-10); ST (Sometimes 11-15); F (Frequently, 16-20); N (Normally, < 20).

### 5.2.2 | Curricular Coherence and Teaching Coordination: Shared Spaces and Time

An important outcome to highlight is the collaborative planning and scheduling of project work within the classroom. Teachers generally consider collaborative planning as a crucial factor for project success. The programme served as a roadmap for project management, aiding teachers in understanding what students would learn, how they would do it, and how assessment would be conducted. To facilitate this, they increased the number of cycles, levels and coordination meetings.

Now you see that people are like an open library. Everybody helps you. So, there are less problems among teachers

(HS)

TEACHING STRATEGIES TO INVOLVE PUPILS IN THE CLASSROOM USED BY TEACHERS (SUB-CASES) DURING PBL			
DIMENSION	PURPOSE	STRATEGIES OBSERVED	Freq.
Pleasant atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fostering student interest.</li> <li>A sense of choice.</li> <li>A sense of community.</li> <li>Planning the Project.</li> </ul>	- Motivate the students through motivational pathway and launch the challenge.	F
		- Constructing the project map.	N
		- Give students a voice in project management.	N
		- Encourage cooperative work among students.	F
		- Sharing the project with the educational community (social networks, educational events, collaboration with the city council).	N
Instructional design and engaging content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop strategies aimed at modeling thinking, whilst providing scaffolding and academic monitoring.</li> </ul>	- Facilitate information processing by learners (visual aids, mind maps, instructions).	F
		- Promote meaningful learning (competency-based tasks).	F
		- Attention to diversity (Universal Learning Design).	F
		- Use feedback and provide comments on their progress.	ST
		- Uso variado de recursos materiales y digitales (lego, computer, tablets, digital blackboard).	F
		- Use a variety of assessment methods, strategies and techniques.	N
Classroom management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is focused on strategies for self-regulating and monitoring student behavior</li> </ul>	- Establish work routines in the classroom.	ST
		- Teach them to work in a group.	F
		- Re-capture the attention of the student who disconnects or does not meet class rules.	F
		- Presence of a second teacher in the classroom.	R

FIGURE 8 | Pedagogical strategies to engage the learner in the learning process.

The ongoing meetings we held to plan, both in faculty meetings and grade-level meetings. We constantly monitored what we were doing, the issues we encountered, and whether we needed more support. This made things much easier because you have your colleagues to help you, especially the teachers experienced in projects.

(TCH2)

Despite the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the school's management successfully addressed the needs of both students and teachers in transitioning to online teaching and implementing a competency-based pedagogical model in the virtual setting. Collaboration and weekly coordination meetings among teachers played a pivotal role in this achievement.

### 5.3 | Level of Analysis III: Personal Dimension

#### 5.3.1 | Difficulties of Teachers in Implementing Classroom Methodologies That Facilitate Student Engagement

**5.3.1.1 | Introducing the Novice Teacher to Project Work.** The transformation in classrooms did not occur abruptly but followed a gradual approach guided by experienced teachers. This approach involved transitioning from traditional teaching to competency-based tasks, project-based learning and service-learning. Interviews highlighted the effectiveness of this gradual and sustainable strategy, ensuring the change was not isolated. Novice teachers particularly benefited from mentorship by PBL experts, emphasizing the successful implementation of the methodological shift.

In my case, we started by commissioned projects the year came to the school (course 2018/2019). The programming was already done, and with the level partner, we met to agree on what we would work on each week and how we would do it (she refers to the mentor). She would come into the classroom with me and develop each phase of the project, and I would observe her to see how it was done [...] Then in the second term, I started to do the projects with less help

from her, until now when I work on the complete projects in the classroom.

(TCH1)

#### 5.3.1.2 | Teachers' Difficulties in Implementing Project Work in the Classroom: Response of the School.

Both novice teachers and project experts faced challenges related to a lack of knowledge and understanding of school projects. Issues included difficulties in project planning, classroom management, map development, handling diversity and the evaluation process. Novices also felt fear, resistance to change, frustration and a need for more training in these methodologies.

Well-developed, project-based learning guarantees great results. But, if this methodology is not applied correctly, the problems of teachers and students will only increase.

(TCHPBL2)

Any process of change brings with it fears of what you don't know or don't master.

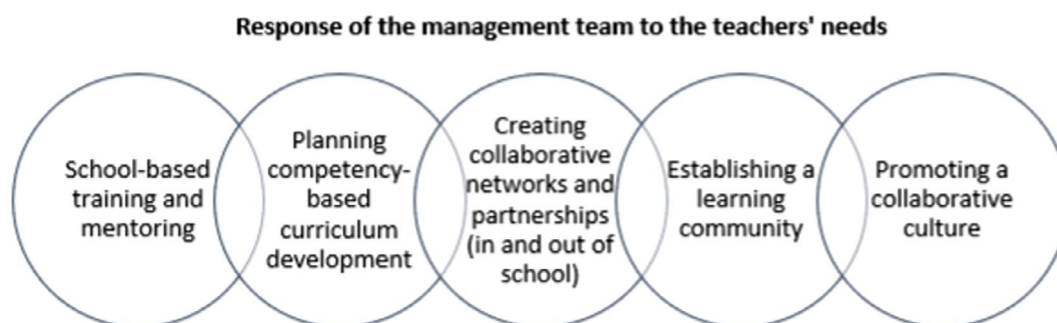
(TCH5)

To address challenges, the management team implemented strategies to improve classroom teaching practices and student engagement, supported by organisational conditions. See Figure 9 for details.

The operational dynamics positively affected teachers' professional development, enhancing their personal and social capital and advancing the school's transformation into a Professional Learning Community.

#### 5.3.2 | Profile of a Teacher Who Successfully Engages Students as Seen From the Students' Perspective

Students ( $n = 90$ ) were asked to create an attractive teacher profile. They identified personal and pedagogical traits that make a good teacher. Engaging teachers were seen as dedicated, emotionally competent and skilled in using active, interactive and project-based teaching methods. Students believe these traits contribute to their participation and engagement in classroom activities, as illustrated in Figure 10.



**FIGURE 9** | Response of the management team to the challenges and needs of teachers in the school.

Profile of a teacher who "engages" students		
<b>Personal Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cheerful, good-humoured and fun-loving.</li> <li>Pleasant, kind, friendly and affectionate, who does not behave in an authoritarian manner and does not get angry all the time.</li> <li>Approachable, respectful and has a good relationship with the students.</li> <li>Cares about them and shows interest in everything that happens to them inside and outside the classroom.</li> <li>Is empathetic and conveys confidence.</li> <li>Calm, serene and very patient.</li> <li>They are motivated and show enthusiasm for their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>He had a good sense of humor and explained so that you could understand him. He was cheerful, and it was hard to make him angry (PR34)</i></li> <li><i>I liked a teacher who influenced me in good things like pursuing my dreams. I also liked that he sent little homework and taught us to learn and research through project work (SEC13)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses diverse methodologies, with all kinds of resources (including ICT and games) and both individual and group activities.</li> <li>She gives clear explanations and solves any doubts.</li> <li>His classes are enjoyable, entertaining, fun and dynamic.</li> <li>Encouraging useful and interesting learning, with a lot of application of theory to practice and using examples from everyday life.</li> </ul>	

FIGURE 10 | Student perceptions of the profile of the teacher who engages students in the classroom.

### 5.3.3 | Teachers' Perceptions of Student Engagement and Its Relationship With Classroom Methodology

Most teachers found that project-based learning positively influenced student outcomes, especially in terms of school engagement and learning. They observed improvements in various aspects of school engagement, detailed in Figure 11.

Teachers observed improved academic performance, higher grades and increased student engagement when using project-based learning methods. They attributed these positive outcomes to skill assessment, fewer exams, a shift towards final project outcomes and a task-oriented learning approach.

## 6 | Discussion

In the discussion section, we will analyse the key findings and their implications.

### 6.1 | Influence of Organisational Conditions on Student Engagement

The study affirms that school operations strongly affect student engagement, with the school's functioning and educational practices either promoting or impeding engagement, consistent with prior research (González 2015; González and San Fabián 2018; Rincón-Gallardo 2019, 2021).

### 6.2 | Importance of Leadership in School Change Capacity

This case highlights the need for a novel approach to leadership in school transformation. The principal's pivotal role in driving overall improvement is emphasised. Embracing a broader perspective of school leadership, as advocated by Bolívar (2021) and Fullan (2015), is deemed crucial for transitioning to distributed and transformative leadership models. Collaborative leadership, including curricular leadership by other teachers, as proposed by Harris et al. (2020), is essential. Effective leadership is confirmed as a critical element in implementing a new school model that actively engages students, consistent with prior studies (Boberg and Bourgeois 2016; Gurr et al. 2018; Rincón-Gallardo 2021).

### 6.3 | Transitional Phases and Challenges in Schools Undergoing Improvement

This study emphasises that schools undergoing improvement face challenging transitional stages and need support in collaboration, resources, training and robust organisational structures. To ensure an effective and sustainable process, the management team should establish favourable organisational conditions. This highlights the significance of creating engaging learning environments that actively involve students (González and Bernárdez-Gómez 2019) and implementing educational initiatives to address and prevent disengagement

Dimension of student engagement	Teacher perception of improving educational outcomes	Teacher perceptions
<b>Behavioral dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improvements in their autonomy and responsibility in project development.</li> <li>Improvements in the ability to regulate their behavior.</li> <li>Higher levels of active participation.</li> <li>Regular attendance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Now they work more and work better. Teamwork has improved a lot and they have learnt how to behave in class if they want the project to work (TCHR1).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Affective dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional management.</li> <li>Better relations between students and with the teacher.</li> <li>Increased sense of relevance to the class-group and school.</li> <li>They are more animated in class and enjoy what they are doing. Less feeling of boredom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The relationship between the students has also changed, it is now more fluid (TCHR4).</i></li> <li><i>Working on a project basis has allowed me to get to know them better, to know what they think and their interests (TCHR1).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improvements in competence of learning to learn.</li> <li>More initiative, more ability to plan, to decide what they want to do and how they want to do it.</li> <li>Increased motivation and interest in what they are learning</li> <li>They are more creative. They have richer and more powerful ideas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Their motivation in carrying out the tasks, their involvement and their creativity in solving the challenges and producing the final product is encouraged (SETCHR).</i></li> <li><i>Students learn for themselves by investigating the new content proposed in the projects, building on what they already know (TCHR5).</i></li> </ul>

**FIGURE 11** | Teachers' perceptions of the impact of methodological change in the classroom on schoolchildren's engagement.

(Fredricks et al. 2019; González and San Fabián 2018; González and Cutanda-López 2020).

#### 6.4 | Value of Granting Students a Voice

A noteworthy finding emphasises that giving students a voice values their interests, motivations and active participation in decision-making, contributing to shared responsibility for school improvement, aligning with prior research (Lucena et al. 2021; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan 2019).

#### 6.5 | Challenges and Controversies in the Process of Engaging Students

The process of transforming education is intricate and comes with its set of challenges and debates. One significant hurdle for teachers is captivating and maintaining students' involvement in daily learning activities. The findings suggest that PBL and SL methods disrupt traditional classroom dynamics and emerge as 'engaging methodologies', aligning with prior research (César and Oliveira 2005; Davis and McPartland 2012; Havik and Westergård 2020; Luter et al. 2017; Sammons et al. 2016; Rigo 2017).

This particular school embraces active learning through didactic strategies rooted in students' real-life experiences. In

challenging educational settings, advocating for collaborative efforts between teachers and students through action research is proposed to bridge the gap in perceptions (Beattie et al. 2015). When provided with the opportunity, young individuals can adeptly identify issues and envision themselves as change agents, showcasing the flexibility of school engagement in response to shifts in teaching approaches and school environments (Carrington et al. 2013; Schroeter et al. 2015).

#### 6.6 | Challenges in Introducing Methodological Changes in the Classroom

The results highlight the challenges teachers face when implementing classroom methodological changes, consistent with previous research (Gil-Flores 2016; González and Cutanda-López 2020; Reeve et al. 2019). However, this study shows that investing in teachers' professional development and providing in-school training has increased their confidence and effectiveness in implementing projects in the classroom, facilitating successful change management.

#### 6.7 | Qualities of a Teacher Who Engages

Our findings regarding the qualities of a teacher who engages align with prior research (González 2015; Sammons et al. 2016).

They indicate that teachers should possess certain personal qualities and pedagogical competencies, along with professional commitment, a willingness to learn from and with students and a spirit of collaborative professionalism (Elmore 2010; Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018).

## 6.8 | Positive Impact of Project-Based Learning on Student Engagement in Primary School

PBL in elementary education positively impacts student engagement, consistent with prior research (Liem and Chong 2017; Hofkens and Ruzek 2019). Teachers note improvements in behaviour, emotion and cognition and students involved in projects report higher engagement in the affective and cognitive aspects of school engagement. The results affirm that school engagement is adaptable and reacts to alterations in teaching practices and school contexts (Fredricks et al. 2016; Moreira et al. 2019).

## 7 | Limitations and Future Research

Before presenting the study's conclusions, it is important to acknowledge both its limitations and strengths. This research is an intrinsic case study, meaning its findings cannot be generalised to other schools, and some teachers were less involved in the research. However, there are several notable strengths to take into account when examining school engagement: (a) the selection of the case study, using a mixed research approach; (b) the unique and research-rich nature of the chosen school, characterised by improved outcomes and a systemic perspective on engagement; (c) thorough data collection, analysis, description and discussion, with the researcher closely integrated into the school community, ensuring data saturation.

Effective educational reforms must prioritise enhancing student engagement and reducing dropout rates. Future research should delve into classroom dynamics and the impact of organisational factors on educational improvements. This case study's results open avenues for further investigation. Similar cases should be explored to identify consistent patterns in organisational conditions and teaching methods or assess context-specific factors from mixed research approaches.

Examining successful experiences and best practices can aid in re-engaging students with the education system. Comparative studies between schools aiming to boost student engagement and reduce dropout rates can yield valuable real-world insights, informing educational reforms, policies and school organisation.

## 8 | Conclusions

This research aimed to investigate: how student engagement is created, developed, energised and sustained in a successful educational centre in a challenging context? This case provides a set of lessons that may help other schools wishing to improve student engagement. Based on the findings of this study, we offer the following recommendations:

- Establish distributed and transformative leadership.

- Cultivate a culture of collaboration.
- Offer continuous in-school teacher training with interactive professionalism and mentoring.
- Enhance the curriculum and implement competency-based teaching and learning.
- Cultivate a positive school climate.
- Foster opportunities and spaces for student engagement.
- Address diversity.
- Maintain an open relationship with the community.

The results reveal that the school's transformative educational approach has established it as a professional learning community, characterised by effective educational practices that define its identity and school culture. This suggests a transition towards a Professional Learning Community model, aligning with a fresh perspective on teaching professionalism advocated by Hargreaves and Fullan (2014) and Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018).

From the lessons learned in this case study, the importance of fostering a collective approach to promoting student participation is highlighted. This involves not only teachers, but also the education community as a whole, actively collaborating to create an environment conducive to student learning and engagement. These findings support the notion that the transformation to PLC is a valuable and effective process for improving the educational experience and student participation in school life.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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