

School Administrators and the Regulatory Framework: A Qualitative Analysis of Legal Competency Gaps

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the legal competence gaps among Colombian school administrators working in primary and secondary education institutions. Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four education professionals (two coordinators, a psychologist, and an English teacher with coordination experience) to understand their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of the legislation governing educational management. Thematic analysis identified patterns in the participants' conceptualizations of administrative law, labor regulations, student rights, and educational policy. The results indicate a significant gap in formal legal training. Although participants acknowledged its importance, there were substantial deficiencies in their training. All interviewees agreed that legal knowledge is important for effective school operation and management, but only one had completed specialized courses that provided formal legal training. The main themes that emerged were: (1) education was primarily experiential, based on direct knowledge rather than structured legal training; (2) they are aware of their legal responsibilities but lack a comprehensive understanding of the regulatory framework. This study reveals a considerable gap between legal obligations and the capacity of school leaders to fulfill them. Respondents indicated that a lack of knowledge of the law can lead to unintentional violations, expose educational institutions to legal liability, and jeopardize students' rights. They also perceive the principal as the institutional representative responsible for ensuring compliance with the law. The study concludes that mandatory legal competency training for administrators, as part of their professional development, should be integrated into mandatory educational governance to guarantee compliance with regulations, institutional integrity, ,

and the rights of the educational community. These findings expand our understanding of the professional development needs of Colombian educational leaders and support the implementation of legal training policies for school administrators.

Keywords: School administration, legal competency, regulatory framework, educational management, qualitative analysis, professional development.

Introduction

Educational administration in Colombia takes place in a multi-faceted regulatory system – which includes national constitution, laws, ministerial orders and local laws. The responsible agents for fulfilling these legal decrees in schools are school administrators, more generally, rector and coordinator. Educational leaders serve as representatives for their schools and have considerable legal duties, such as adherence to labor law, rights protection for students, use of resources for learning purposes, and quality assurance (Abunaser et al., 2025), (Mena, 2022), (Peláez, 2025). Yet, although legal knowledge is necessary in educational management, there is limited empirical research on the actual legal competencies held by Colombian school administrators and the space between law and their professional experience in this domain.

In the past decades, the Colombian education system has undergone considerable legislative reforms (the General Education Law (Ley 115 de 1994), the School Coexistence Law (Ley 1620 de 2013), which includes a series of ministerial decrees for inclusion, student rights, and quality of institutions (for example, Rojas, 2022; Durán et al., 2023)). As the legal environments of such developing structures often represent school principals need to have pedagogical knowledge as well as knowledge about principles, regulation and risk management (Yongo & Mwawasi, n.d.), (EJBARI, n.d.). International literature has found that school leadership is predicated on these legal competencies, and as such, it makes school leadership essential to school officials as effective practitioners. Research from different contexts reveals that principals and coordinators must be familiar with education law, labor regulations, protections for student rights, and administrative procedures in order to effectively carry out their duties (Singerin, 2024), (Nurhandayani et al., 2024).

Studies focusing on the legal competency gap in Colombian school administrators are remarkably scarce and do little to explain how these professionals function within the complicated regulatory environment (Mena, 2022) and legal practices (Peláez, 2025). Qualitative research methods are being used in this study investigating the legal knowledge, experience, and perceptions of school administrators who are providing basic and secondary education in Colombia. We carry out this via semi-structured interviews with coordinators, psychologists, and teachers engaging in administrative functions regarding (1) participants' awareness of the legal environment pertaining to educational management, (2) their experience of applying legal requirements in their daily practices, (3) the anticipated needs for legal training, and (4) recommendations offered to educational leaders to bolster legal literacy. Thereby, we see these findings as empirical evidence that can afford policy makers and potential policymakers the opportunity to explore formalisation of the professional development necessary for school administrators but also participate in wider discussions around educational leadership preparation in the Latin American context (Rojas, 2022), (Durán et al., 2023).

Background and Theoretical Foundations

The Regulatory Framework of Colombian Education

The Legal System of the Colombian Education in the Law is hierarchical, grounded in the Political Constitution of 1991, which enshrines education as one of the fundamental rights of all citizens, and sets standards for the state in ensuring access to quality, equity, and equity. The General Education Law (Ley 115 de 1994) provides the basic regulatory scaffolding that structures the system, defines institutional autonomy and clarifies educational administration (Rojas, 2022). Several later laws have broadened and developed this infrastructure such as the School Coexistence Law (Ley 1620 de 2013), which prescribes the need for a whole of system of measures to achieve peaceful coexistence and to prevent violence in schools, along with various decrees on inclusion, student rights, teacher evaluation, and quality in institutions (Durán et al., 2023).

A well trained school administrator in Colombia must navigate multiple layers of the regulatory system in Colombia; national laws, ministerial decrees, departmental ordinances and municipal agreements. Such a complex regulatory environment necessitates the administrators to know in terms of constitutional legal, administrative legal, labor legal, civil legal and disciplinary legal systems (Rojas, 2022). Being the legal representative of the institution, the rector has the most responsibility to ensure regulatory compliance and is open to administrative, civil or, in some cases, criminal liability for breaches (Peláez, 2025). Coordinators (not legal representatives) who take responsibility for the enforcement of policies and procedures to ensure compliance with legal mandates in their respective fields (Mena, 2022). The legal demands on school administrators have, and continue to be, increased due to recent legislative developments.

The inclusion of students with disabilities is governed by a legal provision from Decree 1421 of 2017 and requires that leaders comprehend what is required of them as to reasonable accommodations, the definition of an individualized educational program, and accessibility standards. Adherence to the School Coexistence Law requires teachers to be familiar with special due process procedures, conflict resolution actions and the means to deal with harassment, and violence. Affecting teacher contracts, evaluation systems, and working conditions through labor law reforms make it necessary for administrators to navigate complex employment regulations (Rojas, 2022), (Durán et al., 2023).

Legal Competencies in Educational Leadership

Legal Competencies in Educational Leadership are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for administrators to comprehend, interpret, and apply legal frameworks into their work field. International research has recognized legal knowledge as a key factor for effective school leadership as principals' understanding of education law, student rights, employment regulations and liability issues have previously been found to be important (Casale et al., 2021), (Yongo & Mwawasi, n.d.).

According to the school leader competency frameworks, legal knowledge is increasingly acknowledged as a core competency domain. Studies have shown that the competencies of principals include understanding education law, compliance protocols, risk management, and ethical decision-making (Abunaser et al., 2025), as well as regulatory knowledge (Vuuren et al., 2023), necessary to manage schools effectively. Research on school leadership development has shown a significant disparity between legal knowledge (necessary for practice) and the training required for aspiring heads of schools (Ardiansyah et al., 2024), (Lyonga, 2022).

The literature differentiates between dimensions of legal competences. Substantive legal knowledge is that of knowing the laws and regulations and policies that are used to regulate education. Procedural legal knowledge includes knowledge of administrative processes, due process requirements, and compliance mechanisms. Legal reasoning skills include the analytical capacity to interpret legal texts, develop their application to certain circumstances, and make decisions that incorporate legal requirements with educational objectives. Legal awareness includes a high level of awareness of legal consultative scenarios, how the legal landscape can be problematic or hazardous to a practitioner, as well as an inclination toward ethical conduct under given legislative structures (Casale et al., 2021; Yongo & Mwawasi, n.d.).

Professional Development and Legal Training for School Administrators

While the degree to which legal training is embedded in school administrators' preparation and continuing education has been explored, there exists considerable variability in the nature of this research. In some spaces, legal knowledge is addressed methodically via courses mandated in education law, administrative law, and regulatory compliance. In most other cases, the legal training is minimal or not provided, and administrators are assumed to educate themselves in regards to legal knowledge through their personal experiences or self-study (Sudsomboon, 2025), (Lyonga, 2022).

There are certain aspects, findings from research on effective legal training for school teachers have revealed in practice, of effective training in this domain. One, law training needs to be made to be embedded in the local environment that is the administrative sector and deal with the specific laws, regulations and policies they must implement. Second, training needs to focus on practice, employing case studies, scenarios, and problem-based learning to build administrators' capacity to put legal

principles into real world scenarios. Third, legal training should never take place one time only, since legal frameworks evolve and administrators will need to update regularly. Fourth, trainings must include substantive legal cognition but also legal reasoning skills, preparing administrators for independent analysis and application of legal principles (Sudsomboon, 2025), (Bergeron et al., 2023).

The literature also emphasizes the role of organizational commitment in ensuring legal compliance. A successful legal practice by school administrators should be based not only on the competence of individual school administrators, but also on the institutional systems, which includes access to legal consultation, clear policy, procedures, documentation mechanisms, organizational cultures around regulatory compliance and ethical conduct. It is suggested that administrators are more apt to foster and sustain legal competence when they are employed in places where ongoing support, resources, and responsibility for legal compliance are available (Bateyo, 2025), (EJBARI, n.d.).

The Colombian Context: Gaps in Legal Training for Educational Leaders

Studies focusing specifically on legal competencies and legal needs are scarce in Colombia for Colombian school administrators, evidence seems to show that there are large differences between legal needs and professional preparedness. Research on educational management in Colombia shows that the majority of staff managers have never been formal school leaders, they experience such issues through trial and error processes, consultations with peers and practical experience in how the education leadership becomes legally required (Mena, 2022), (Rojas, 2022). However, the Colombian system for preparing and certifying school administrators currently does not require comprehensive legal background training.

Since the Ministry of Education has formalized competency standards for school leaders that refer to regulatory knowledge, none of these standards are routinely operationalized into preparation programs or professional development initiatives. A lot of school administrators go into leadership and management roles with sound pedagogical foundations but low comprehension of the legal environments that govern their practice (Mena, 2022), (Peláez, 2025). The increasing complexity and scope of legal requirements facing Colombian school administrators can only worsen this gap. Recent legislative reforms have allowed administrators to expand their legal responsibilities under such areas as: inclusion and coexistence, student rights, and institutional quality, without also increasing their legal expertise support. With no standard legal education for school administrators the risk of unintentional violations, liability as an institution, and compromised protection of student/teacher rights (Rojas, 2022), (Durán et al., 2023) is particularly great.

Some Colombian institutions of higher education and professional organizations have recently begun to fill the aforementioned void through the development of special training modules, workshops and resources on legal elements of the management of education management in Colombia. But none of these programs have come under voluntary pressure and have only come in the hands of a minority of practicing administrators. Educational policymakers and researchers in the field are now increasingly interested in the incorporation of mandatory, comprehensive legal training at a high level within early preparation and continual professional development in school leaders (Mena, 2022), (Peláez, 2025).

Methods

Research Design

This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to determine the legal competency gaps faced by Colombian school administrators. The qualitative approach was chosen since it is most suitable for exploring participants' experience, ideas and interpretation of legal knowledge in education management. The interpretive paradigm based on which this study was based is one that acknowledges that knowledge of legal competencies is a social construct, context-dependent phenomenon, such that in-depth studies of participants' views are necessary, as opposed to quantitative measurement (Sunarya, 2021).

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The following research questions emerged to be addressed in this study: 1. What knowledge do school administrators possess regarding the regulatory framework governing Colombian education? 2. How do administrators experience and navigate legal requirements in their daily practice? 3. What are administrators' perceptions of their legal training needs? 4. What recommendations do administrators offer for strengthening legal competencies among educational leaders?

Participants and Sampling

This is a qualitative study using purposive sampling techniques to select participants capable of answering the question of the rich information on educational administration legal capabilities. Four educationists from Colombian basic and secondary education institutions enrolled in this survey:

Participant 1 (P1): Coordinator with 15 years of experience in educational administration

Participant 2 (P2): School psychologist with 8 years of experience supporting administrative functions

Participant 3 (P3): English teacher with 10 years of experience, including 3 years in coordination roles

Participant 4 (P4): Coordinator with 12 years of experience in educational leadership

All individuals served in urban educational institutions, which accommodated an array of student needs. The sample was comprised of educators with different administrative experience and with multiple functional roles, providing an opportunity to address legal competency challenges from various viewpoints within school leadership teams.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. The interview protocol facilitated the selection of information to better explore participants' legal knowledge, experiences, and perceptions, with the flexibility to explore emergent topics. Questions addressed in the protocol included:

Participants' understanding of the regulatory framework governing educational management

Specific legal knowledge areas (administrative law, labor law, student rights, educational policies)

Sources of legal knowledge and training experiences

Challenges and experiences navigating legal requirements

Perceptions of legal training needs and recommendations for professional development

Interviews took place in Spanish and length of each interview was 45-60 minutes, audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Interviewer had posed probing questions to support the response elaboration and expansion, that the data was being collected in a rich and detailed manner.

Data Analysis

Analysis of interviewing was fully transcribed and resulted in approximately 80 pages of document transcript. Thematic analysis design consisting of structured coding to search for patterns in the dataset was used for data analysis. Analysis steps included:

Familiarization: You read and reread the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data

Preliminary coding: Step 1: Systematic line-by-line coding to extract meaningful units of information.

Theme development: Categorizing codes under potential themes of patterns within participants

Theme synthesis: Finalizing themes for internal coherence and uniqueness

Definition of the theme: Presenting the final themes coherently, supported by evidence, with

naming.

For the inductive and deductive analysis, two methods were applied. They were the inductive analysis which used data to develop the themes and deductive analysis that utilized the concepts from the readings related to legal competencies and educational leadership. The combination offered a robust description of participant lived experiences and theory. This analysis employed a number of methods of quality assurance to ensure rigorous methodology. The data were reviewed carefully in depth and with different levels of data because it was immersed in the data due to multiple readings for each transcription made each piece of data immersed in being able to engage with the analysis fully comprehensively into multiple transcripts. Codes for systematic coding methods have helped ensure that data analysis results were consistent and consistent interpretation patterns were maintained throughout the systematic coding procedures. Themes were created by the way in which iterative change was made so that the themes reflected the data on its own. Representative quotations formed for each theme and connected interpretation to the raw material of data.

Ethical Considerations

This study fulfilled the ethical standards for qualitative studies involving human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants, who were provided with informed consent information about the objective and procedures of the study. Confidentiality was guaranteed for participants with identifying information removed from transcripts and reports. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Interview data were stored and accessed only by the research team.

Methodological Diagram

The following diagram illustrates the qualitative research methodology employed in this study:

Figure 1. Qualitative research methodology flowchart showing the progression from research design through data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Results

Thematic analysis of interviews produced 4 primary themes on gaps in legal competency among Colombian school administrators: 1) Limited Formal Legal Training Despite Recognition of its Importance; 2) experiential learning as a primary source of legal knowledge; 3) understanding of legal expectations but not comprehensive regulatory knowledge; and 4) the endorsement of mandatory legal training. Each of these is detailed below and supported by participant data from interviews.

Theme 1: Limited Formal Legal Training Despite Recognition of Importance

While all four showed a common consensus on the importance of legal knowledge in good (school) administration, only one person (P1) had obtained formal legal training from courses designed with that in mind. The gap between the perception of importance of such and the reality of the training and application of this has become a glaring disjunction in professional preparation for such pedagogical leadership.

P1 (Coordinator with formal legal training) spoke on the importance of such legal trainings:

"I took a diploma course that specialized in educational legislation such as the General Education Law, labor regulations, student rights and administrative procedures. The training was transformative for my practice; having the legal framework in my back pockets enabled me to have a proper step-by-step overview rather than simply piecemeal knowledge of regulations. Knowledge of legal principles allows me to interpret new decrees and policies better".

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In contrast, the school psychologist P2 acknowledged, despite recognizing the need for formal legal training:

"I have never really trained formally in educational law or administrative guidelines. Whether they are complicated cases about students' rights or disciplinary procedures, I feel like I'm not doing my job in the best way I could, or not doing so correctly, legally."

P3 (Coordination English teacher) lamented regarding the lack of legal education for teachers in prep programs:

"When I changed from teaching to coordination, all of a sudden I had all this legal baggage that I didn't know what I'm doing. My college education was centered around pedagogy and subject matter knowledge only. There were no lectures on education law, labor regulations, nor administrative processes and regulations that could help. I had to learn it all by doing it, which meant mistakes and learning from them."

As P4 (Coordinator) highlighted, there is often a disconnect between what is demanded in terms of legal demands and in terms of professional learning:

"In recent years, school administrators' legal responsibilities have developed at a massive speed with new laws governing inclusion, coexistence and the rights of students. But our professional preparedness hasn't kept up. Coordinators and even rectors generally have very little formal legal training. We're expected to carry out complex legal mandates unprepared, and that's stressful and risky for us."

This area represents a serious systemic gap: while educational professionals understand that legal knowledge is key to their work, formal legal education is not systematically integrated into preparatory programs or continuing professional development. One of the persons had received specific training in the legal field, and thus it was voluntary and he initiated his training, not mandatory.

Theme 2: Experiential Learning as Primary Source of Legal Knowledge

According to participants, due to the lack of formal legal training, and with regard to legal knowledge, experiential learning was their mainstay, involving experience, learning by doing, error, discussion with colleagues, and reactively addressing legal challenges. Experiential learning gave participants some "real-life knowledge," but they recognized its lack of comparative quality, in comparison to systematic legal training.

P1 (Coordinator who had formal legal training) compared experiential and formal learning:

"Prior to taking the legal training course, I approached regulations in a reactive manner — when there was a situation that needed to be addressed with legal knowledge, I would look up facts, interview my fellow workers or see the rector. This proved inefficient and stressful. I now have a system to make sense of legal obligations before they become burdensome — after formal training. I'm able to foresee legal issues, to solve in advance before they become issues."

It's what the school psychologist P2 called challenges to learning through experience:

"Most of what I will say about legal requirements has come through experience — by seeing things in reality that need to be legally understood, then understanding what the law requires. For instance, I got educated about due process for discipline in student cases and feedback when I made procedural errors. This type of learning is stressful and risky because you're learning in the risk of breaking regulations."

P3 (coordination teacher with English training) focused on the idea of peer consultation:

"When I come across something with legal implications, I normally turn to a more experienced coordinator or to the rector. I say, 'What's acceptable to do here according to the regulations?' This peer support is beneficial, but it has drawbacks. Sometimes, the colleagues even don't know the right answer, or may also offer some information based on incomplete knowledge of their own. It is like the

blind leading the blind.”

Experiential learning is reactive, as P4 (Coordinator) stated:

“Most of my legal learnings have been reactive; studying the regulations once I need to implement them instead of having a high-level understanding ahead of time. In one example, I was only informed about the particular requirements in documenting student disciplinary cases when I received feedback that I’m not effectively documenting it. This is an ineffective reactive learning approach which also unnecessarily places the institution at risk.”

Participants also explained that experiential learning frequently leads to piecemeal, location-dependent knowledge rather than holistic comprehension of the legal framework. P2 explained:

“Through experience, I have learned certain things — how to document a certain type of incident, what forms are required for a particular procedure, which regulations apply to certain situations. Unfortunately, I lack an organized grasp of the legal framework. I could see pieces together, but I didn’t understand the basic tenets that would help me apply my legal judgment to novel situations.”

This theme suggests that administrators acquire legal knowledge through practice-level learning in the void of formal legal training. While this practice knowledge is applicable, participants acknowledged its inadequacies: it’s reactive, not preemptive; it’s piecemeal rather than systematic; and it’s learned through potentially hazardous trial and error.

Theme 3: Understanding of Legal Responsibilities Without Comprehensive Regulatory Knowledge

Respondents were aware of their legal obligations, the necessity for regulatory compliance, but admitted that they were not fully aware of the specific legal frameworks governing their work. This discrepancy between knowledge regarding the responsibilities and an in-depth mastery of the regulatory framework also leaves them vulnerable to unintentional breaches and confines the decision-making power of the administrators. All participants acknowledged that the rector is the legal representative of the school, as well as bearing primary legal accountability. P1 explained:

“The rector is the legal representative of the school and is responsible, in the end, for making sure that everything is conducted in compliance with all the regulations. In cases of any violations — whether they stem from labor law, student rights, financial management, or any related area — the rector can be subject to administrative sanctions, civil liability or even criminal charges in the most serious of cases. This legal liability is a heavy burden that takes comprehensive legal knowledge.”

P3 expanded on the implications of the rector’s legal liability:

“The rector’s signature on official documents carries legal weight. When the rector signs a contract, a disciplinary decision, or a financial authorization, they are legally committing the institution and assuming personal liability. This means the rector must understand the legal implications of every decision and document they approve. It’s a great responsibility that needs strong legal knowledge.”

The coordinators and other administrators were also aware that in their jurisdiction, they were responsible for compliance with regulations. P4 stated:

“While the legal representative is the rector, coordinators are responsible for implementing policies and procedures in their areas. Without following sound procedures in student discipline, including inclusion and academic management, I’m creating problems not just for the institution or organization but also potentially violating students’ rights or legal obligations, and can be running afoul of that. And I’m responsible. And while I’m not the legal representative, I help to make sure we are all accountable for compliance.”

But there were obvious areas of deficiency in granular knowledge of particular regulations to be found among the participants. P2 admitted:

“I understand that I need to protect student rights and follow due process in disciplinary matters, but I know little about all the legal requirements per se. What I want to know is the general principles

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— students have rights to education, due process and protection from discrimination — but I often lose my way in the little specifics of what it means to do something legally required to do so. I follow institutional guidelines and guidance provided by supervisors, but I wish I knew more about the law.”

P3 discussed ambiguity regarding the application of labor law:

“As coordinator I understand that it is necessary to adhere to labor compliance when providing management for teachers, however, my knowledge of labor law rules is limited. I know those basic concepts — educators’ rights to fairness, due process in disciplinary cases, safe working conditions — but I am unfamiliar with the Labor Code, collective bargaining agreements, or how the specific procedures follow given an employee’s actions in terms of employment. I’m very unclear if the legal terms relate to personnel matters that I’m involved with.”

P4 referred to learning gaps in comprehending administrative law:

“I understand school administration has to align themselves with the principles of administrative law — transparency, due process, legality, accountability — but I’m not systematically educated in approaches to administrative law frameworks. I know we’re supposed to document decisions, process things and respect people’s rights, but I am still quite confused as to what is required by law for administrative action. It creates stress and risk — the unknown.”

This theme reflects an important vacuum in practice: “Administrators already have a vague understanding of legal responsibilities and reasons for compliance, but this is not the information we have in place in our regulatory environment to allow them to take risk-managed, safe, or intelligent actions.” There is a “silence” gap through which accidental breaches are possible and that prevents administrators’ ability to assume a proactive role in compliance.

Theme 4: Strong Support for Mandatory Legal Training

Everyone in the survey said they are enthusiastic about the need for legal training for school administrators to be required and wanted this training to be as preparatory training and continuous professional learning. The type of content, implementation, and format of legal training activities that the practitioners were asked to offer were not all identified in the reports, although it was noted that one or more recommendations appeared to make more of the opinions than the other. P1—a participant with formal legal training—voted strongly on behalf of mandatory legal training, and on a personal level:

“Legal training should be required of every school administrator — from rectors and coordinators to anybody with administrative responsibility. My legal training was a voluntary exercise; many administrators never receive this indispensable knowledge. Legal training will ensure the basic legal knowledge every educational leader needs to do the work they do. This would enhance compliance, reduce institutional risk and better protect the rights of all students and teachers.”

To handle this, P2 claimed we must offer practical, situated legal training:

“Legal training for administrators should be targeted and tied strongly to what is actually happening in our daily work. It should be precisely set out — the laws and regulations by which we can achieve these objectives: General Education Law, the School Coexistence Law, the inclusion laws, the fundamentals of labor law, the procedures of administration and what to look for in the workplace. Training should use case studies and scenarios from actual school situations so that we might see how our legal principles are applied to the real dilemmas we encounter in practice.”

P3 argued for the introduction of legal training into university preparatory programs:

“First, legal training must be developed at university programs. Then graduates will start to develop a whole tradition of education that takes their own unique way of thinking, acting and learning. For now, most of the college education programs are limited to pedagogy and subject matter knowledge to the extent that there is no education law or administration regulations coursework. That means that teachers transitioning into administrative roles are completely unprepared for legal

challenges within the realm of leadership. This would include a required course at universities on matters related to educational law, regulatory compliance and/or legal issues of managing a school."

P4 sought continued legal education throughout administrators' careers:

"Legal training cannot be a one-time event, since legal frameworks are fluid."

New rules are issued and precedents are set based on court decisions. To keep themselves abreast of legal changes, administrators must undergo ongoing professional development. There should be recurring professional training — say, every year or whenever significant legal changes occur — so that administrators come into contact with legal knowledge. Participants also insisted that substantive legal knowledge and legal reasoning skills should be part of legal training. P1 argued that, if legal training is to train in specific laws and regulations then legal reasoning skills such as interpreting legal texts, applying legal principles to new situations, knowing when one needs to consult a lawyer and knowing when making decisions involving balancing the needs of law with its educational purpose need to be a part of legal training. These reasoning skills can be as or more valuable to administrators than simply knowledge of specific regulations — they ensure administrators' ability to work through legal problems themselves. P2 stressed the importance of education in legal risk management: Educate administrators in identifying, mitigating and managing legal risks. We have to recognize and resolve cases where we are not law-abiding; we must know how to document a decision to protect our institutional authority; but we also should be able to act decisively and get instructions in order to maintain ongoing compliance.

From a risk management perspective, we need help transitioning from reactive risk management to proactive legal compliance. Training on the ethical aspects of legal compliance: P3 suggested training for compliance with the code. Legal training should not only provide instruction in compliance-related tasks but also on the ethical dimensions of fulfilling legal duties. The focus of compliance should be on how we can protect and uphold the law. Administrators must remember that their legal obligations exist to protect rights, promote fairness and procedural fairness, and work in the interest of the community at large. Training should remind us that compliance with the law goes beyond merely avoiding penalties; it is our moral obligation as parents, students, families, and academia. Initially, this theme indicates strong participants' support for a standard, mandatory, integrated holistic legal education system for school officials. Participants made strong recommendations on types of training content (depth in legal knowledge, skills in legal argumentation, risk management), as well as format (real-world, case-based and situated) and requirements for applicability (required for university courseware, mandatory for staff to be administrative staff, including continuing professional development programs).

Visual Representations of Findings

The qualitative analysis yielded several visualizations to illustrate main trends identified in our interview data:

Word Cloud Analysis

Figure 2. Word cloud displaying most frequently mentioned terms for all four interviews, with size indicating frequency of use.

The word cloud reveals that participants' significant words in their discussions are "education", "knowledge", "law", "administrator", "institution", "norm/regulation", "teacher", and "legal". This fits well with the general focus points on which the participants' concern are centered, namely where educational practice, legal literacy, and institutional administration are concerned. "Knowledge" was prominent in the interviews. The prominence of "knowledge" makes sense as knowledge (and legal knowledge) was a theme that ran throughout the interviews.

Figure 3. Sankey diagram demonstrating the progression from deficiencies in legal knowledge identified to training needs and desired benefits.

The Sankey diagram shows participants' identified gaps in legal knowledge, what they need training in, and what benefits they want when a legal system becomes more developed. How does the visual convey gaps in knowledge relating to administrative law, labor regulation, students' rights or educational policies which create the need to be trained in both these areas, to then produce better compliance, lower risk to institutions, more protection for the rights of stakeholders and more efficient governance?

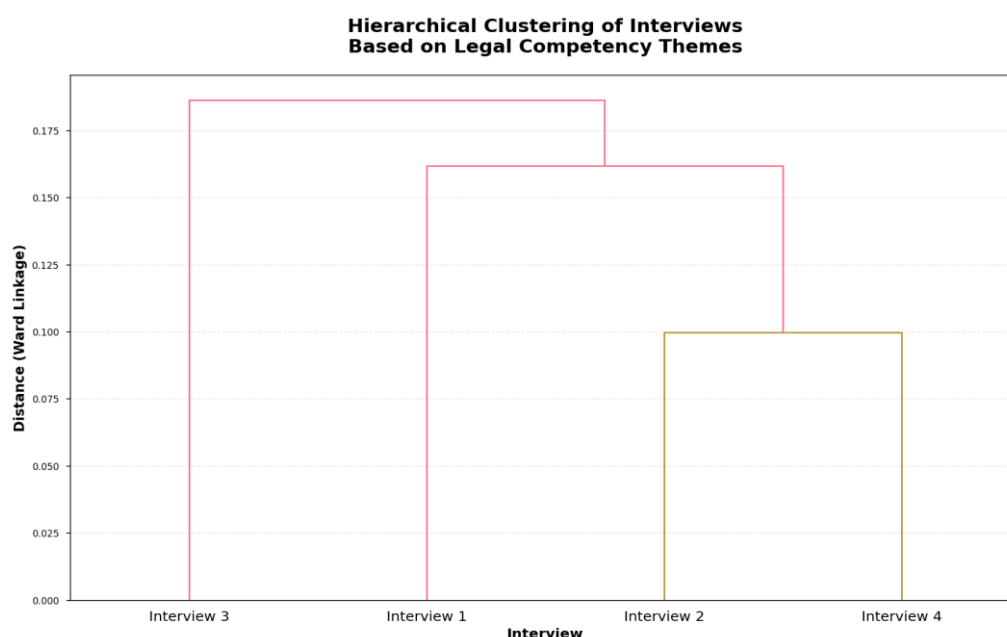


Figure 4. Hierarchical cluster dendrogram showing groupings of related themes and concepts from the interview data.

The cluster analysis shows how the many themes and ideas come together in the participants' statements. We will present different clusters on dendrogram: (1) legal knowledge and training requirements; (2) institutional responsibilities and accountability; (3) experiential learning and professional development; (4) regulatory framework and compliance. This hierarchical structure highlights both the associations among the clusters; with legal literacy and institutional duties as closely related clusters and experiential learning and legal frameworks as another related cluster.

Figure 5. The coding structure and relationships between major themes, derived from the qualitative analysis.

The concept model presents a good representation of the thematic analysis coding outline. It captures five significant themes (Limited Formal Legal Training, Experiential Learning, Recognition of Legal Responsibility, Perceived Necessity of Legal Competencies and Support for Mandatory Training) along with their sub-themes. And the model also provides a succinct description of how themes are interconnected with arrows indicating whether there exist interconnections and/or influences among them. The pictorial illustration serves to illustrate the coherence of the analytical framework as well as the logical links among several strands of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Among the four participants there was an unchanging trend through job, industry-experience or educational levels. Key findings are:

Limited legal learning: None of the participants even had a legal education, not even at level of possibly relevant legal employment.

Dependence on experience-based instruction: The legal education participants received was not focused primarily on formal learning of the law, but on knowledge gained from work experience and internships or placements and at a higher education program focusing on educational administration only.

Legal accountability was clearly defined: As all the participants mentioned in every answer the legal duty of directors (as representative/authorities of the institution) to respond to acts violating the regulation.

Unanimous acceptance of indispensability: To successfully conduct educational management it is necessary to also have legal competence thus providing evidence to support their necessity, the included participants stated.

Best support for mandatory training: All participants also recommended adding mandatory legal training from staff on a professional development level, such as as a standard for school manager/superintendents. Others extended the suggestion to all teachers.

Worries that ignorance might lead to accidental legal violations: Most of the participants stated that the majority of these legal violations occur when individuals are not aware of the law and would have profited immensely from a legal education.

Acceptance of a changing legal landscape: Participants learned that with the law in Colombia evolving, if you want to succeed you always need knowledge.

Sector learnings: A participant pointed out that private institutions may not have access to, or support for, such training as public institutions, which can affect disparities.

These findings offer real-life validation of the acute legal competence deficits among Colombian school administrators, and for those who try to address the deficiency through systematic training program design.

Discussion

The Legal Competency Gap: Implications for Educational Leadership

Results show that the gap between Colombian school administrators' legal obligations and their preparation to meet them is large. Though all participants acknowledged the significance of being aware of legal regulations for school administration, only one actually had received formal training to manage legal issues in schools. This void has significant ramifications on educational leadership, institutional compliance, and safeguarding rights of educational agents.

The use of experiential learning as the major source of legal knowledge is problematic in many ways. First, experiential learning is reactive, rather than proactive; administrators learn about legal requirements when things happen instead of being armed with broad knowledge prior to any such events. This reactive model puts organizations at higher risk of accidental infringement and prevents administrators from taking the initiative to anticipate and avert legal issues (Yongo and Mwawasi, n.d.), (Casale et al., 2021). Second, experiential learning leads to fragmented knowledge of particular regulations, not systematic knowledge of legal frameworks. Administrators lacking full legal knowledge will have difficulty implementing legal concepts in new circumstances or be unfamiliar with the interactions of many regulations (Sudsomboon, 2025), (Lyonga, 2022).

There is perhaps much more worrying than awareness of legal obligations — a gap between information about the legal obligations and actual regulatory knowledge. Participants recognized they have legal obligations and that compliance is required and made informed decisions, but admitted to

an absence of the particular legal awareness necessary for confident judgments. This situation imposes a burden on administrators who in turn bear the legal liabilities arising out of lack of preparation; a threat also poses to institutions where an administrator unintentionally is liable (Bateyo, 2025), (Peláez, 2025).

Comparison with International Research

The results of this study are consistent with international studies reporting a lack of legal training for school leaders. Research studies in different contexts have shown that most principals and coordinators are not formally trained in legal literacy, despite crucial relevance of legal knowledge for their work (Casale et al., 2021), (Lyonga, 2022), (Sudsomboon, 2025). Studies on school leadership preparation programs have reported that legal education is either minimal or absent and that school principals are encouraged to learn about the law either from experience or personal learning (Ardiansyah et al., 2024), (Bergeron et al., 2023).

The complexities and dimensions of legal provisions faced by Colombian school administrators — extending from constitutional law to administrative law and labor law, to law of education, and to specialized legislation addressing inclusion, coexistence, and student rights — engender particularly demanding legal knowledge requirements (Rojas, 2022), (Durán et al., 2023). Without mandated legal training, it is particularly problematic in this context, given the broad scope of legal responsibilities that administrators must meet (Mena, 2022), (Peláez, 2025).

International research also lends strong support to participants' recommendations around mandatory legal training. For example, studies on effective professional development for school leaders have also shown that systematic legal training enhances administrators' knowledge, confidence, and regulation compliance (Sudsomboon, 2025), (Bergeron et al., 2023). Studies in school principals' competency frameworks confirm that legal knowledge is a key area in need of active effort to be focused upon by preparation and professional development programs (Abunaser et al., 2025), (Vuuren et al., 2023).

Policy Implications and Practice Implications.

The findings have important policy and practice implications for Colombian education management:

There should be law training in courses about law and specific laws of administrative guidelines for a school administration that the university will be preparing students to enter in the school program. This training should cover substantive legal knowledge (specific laws and regulations), procedural knowledge (compliance mechanisms and administrative processes), and legal reasoning skills (interpretation and application of legal principles). Integrating legal training with early preparation could not only ensure that educators who will enter into administrative positions will have a legal underpinning, but this will also include their own legal knowledge and understanding (Ardiansyah et al., 2024), it can help to embed law, in the educational environment, at all levels of the curriculum (Bergeron et al., 2023).

Mandatory legal training requirements which enable practicing school administrators to be trained or prepared for practice should be made compulsory by the Ministry of Education, potentially by means of required professional development courses, certification programs, or competency assessments involving legal knowledge of school administrators. Law education has been shown to be beneficial to many organizations, with many of the school administrators that are required to have legal training in their positions having the knowledge of the laws to perform (Sudsomboon, 2025) (Lyonga, 2022). In an evolving environment, administrators need to constantly undergo professional development to stay updated on legislation changes.

The educational authorities also, therefore, should implement regular training sessions whenever such policies and legal changes become pivotal and assist the administrative professionals in becoming informed on them and keeping them well-informed about changes that arise in their mandate and ensuring their implementation. The professional development provided must be

consistent with real life scenarios and case studies of daily administrative activities (Bergeron et al., 2023), (Bateyo, 2025). Institutional support systems: Not only individual legal training. It is the access to legal advice, well structured procedures and organizational cultures, clear policies and legal and procedural policy-based policies or procedures, documentation systems, and a culture that is also characterized by regulatory compliance. Education authorities should prepare universities by designing frameworks to furnish institutions with resources and guidance for supporting them to help in building these systems of support for these systems (EJBARI, n.d.), (Bateyo, 2025).

The Ministry of Education's Competency Framework for school leaders should formally declare a competence towards legal knowledge as part of a subject area for certain administrative positions. The implementation of these competencies through preparedness projects, professional development, and performance evaluation systems are (Abunaser et al., 2025), (Vuuren et al., 2023). Constraints: Limitations of this study are: First, the sample size (4 subjects) is limited to generalization. Firstly, the qualitative approach gives priority to depth over breadth, although greater, more diverse pools should be utilized for more depth of analysis, or be combined with other research, to identify variation in the legal competency gaps by context, institutional type and administrator's role. Second, all data obtained in the study was self-report, which relied on interviews. The subjects' beliefs of their own legal knowledge do not always match their actual skill levels. Further research may incorporate a range of other data sources such as the tracking of administrators legal decision making, institutional compliance records, and legal issues knowledge to expand understanding of gaps in legal competencies. Third, the perspective of participants was included in the study while leaving out other voices from the participating parties, including rectors, teachers, students and families. Future research should then examine what gaps in legal competency in those stakeholders suggest to them that their administrators know the law and apply its rules in the real world. Hence the study was restricted to urban Colombian institutions and should not be considered representative of realities for administrators working in rural and remote areas, where access to legal training and support may be even more dire than in urban centers. More research exploring geo-location and institution differences in legal competences. However, is a valuable addition to findings in the literature of knowledge gaps in legal competency and also an opportunity for policy and practice alternatives with potential general applicability to narrowing the knowledge gap among Colombian school administrators.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without several shortcomings which need to be recognized. First, this study had a small sample size (four participants), restricting the generalizability of findings. Although the qualitative nature gives priority to depth over breadth, more prospective research will need to include larger sample sizes and diverse samples to examine differences in legal-related competency gaps between various settings, types of institution, or roles as an administrator. Second, the investigation was entirely self-reported and based on interviews.

Participants' accounts of their understanding of the law may not be sufficiently representative of their legal competence. Future research must expand on this perspective through such data sources as observations of administrators' legal decision-making, examination of institutional compliance records or assessments of legal knowledge to shed light on legal competency gaps. Third, the study was concerned only with administrators' points of view and did not consider other stakeholders – such as their rectors, teachers, students, or families. Further study needs to examine how legal competency gaps impact these stakeholders and how they perceive the legal knowledge and compliance of administrators. Fourth, the study was carried out in urban Colombian institutions and probably not representative of the experience of administrators who work in rural or remote settings, where their access to legal training and support may even be less comprehensive.

Future studies should further investigate the gap in legal competency across multiple territorial and institutional arenas. This study not only provides valuable insights into the legal competency gaps of Colombian school administrators, but also offers evidence-based recommendations regarding policy and practice reforms related to those gaps.

Conclusions

This qualitative study examined legal competency gaps at Colombian school administrators through four semi-structured interviews, among them four practitioners in Colombian schools. It demonstrates an important discrepancy between school leaders' legal expectations of their school and their preparation for those expectations. While it was argued that legal knowledge is essential for the school administration only one of the respondents did have a formal legal education. Those who participated said they were primarily on experiential learning - the idea they learn by doing things, failing at them, talking to other people in a meeting - not on formal legal training.

Four major themes emerged from the study: (1) Limited training on formal legal training, although one understood that legal training was important; (2) Learned by doing (as a primary source of legal knowledge); (3) Knowledge of legal requirements, but no understanding of legislative requirements; and (4) Heavy support for compulsory legal education. These considerations reveal the disparity between administration capacity to comprehend various legal duties and being thoroughly conversant with regulatory structures, allowing them to be liable to inadvertent violations and limiting the information they can find in making appropriate decisions.

Participants endorsed mandatory legal education for school leaders and provided specific recommendations (eg. requiring legal training in training programs on students), providing continuing professional education on legal requirements, and institutional mechanisms for the support of compliance. These recommendations are consistent with international research on effective professional development for school leaders, as well as competency frameworks that identify legal knowledge as a core domain of educational leadership (Abunaser et al., 2025), (Sudsomboon, 2025), (Vuuren et al., 2023). The results are of high relevance to Colombian educational policy and practice.

Essential education on the law is just one avenue of achieving regulatory adherence, protects institutional integrity, and protects students, teachers, and families through the incorporation of mandatory legal training of school administrators in the professional development program. All universities preparing educational leaders need to include curricula in educational law and administrative regulations. It mandates that all practicing administrators must undergo mandatory legal training, as well as professional development on matters related to various legal proceedings. It is thus imperative that educational institutions implement supportive systems that address factors associated with legal, organizational and organizational culture that facilitate legal consultation (Rojas, 2022), (Durán et al., 2023), and (Peláez, 2025).

The study contributes to knowledge regarding the need for professional development in Colombian educational leadership and provides empirical evidence supporting recommendations for policy on the legal training requirements governing educational management in Colombia. The examination reveals that the gaps in legal competency are not private and professional deficiencies but are structural issues that need to be addressed on a larger scale by public policy, the research indicates. Bridging these gaps with compulsory, systematic, and legal mandatory legal training will support educational leadership, reinforce compliance with the law, and support the rights and interests of the people in the educational sector as a whole.

Future research might need to investigate and narrow gaps in legal competencies with larger and more diverse samples, use a greater variety of data sources other than self-report, investigate stakeholders' opinions of administrators' knowledge of law, and examine the effects of different approaches for legal training. Further research on such issues should guide the evidence-based development of policy and practice that empirically validates the legal competence of Colombian school administrators vis-à-vis the practice of good, ethical, and legal educational leadership.

Ethical considerations

This study did not involve, human tissue, animals, or clinical intervention. It was based exclusively on the analysis of anonymous perceptions of participants. Therefore, ethical approval and just informed consent were required for this study.

Data availability*

The bibliographic dataset underlying this study, including the final corpus of records analysed, is available in Mendeley Data at: doi: 10.17632/th29z5yd4w.1. Extended data supporting this study, including supplementary tables and analytical outputs, are available here. No specific reporting guideline checklist was required for this study.

Reporting guidelines*

No study-design-specific reporting guideline was strictly applicable to this study.

Competing interests*

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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