

Exploring the Lived Experience of Novice School Principals in Performing the Role of School Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aims to explore the lived experience of novice school principals in performing the role of school leadership.

Methods and Materials: This study employs a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. The participants were selected using purposive snowball sampling, and theoretical saturation was reached with ten school principals from Gilan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. To ensure the reliability of the study, the criteria of dependability, credibility, and confirmability were applied. The collected data were analyzed through coding after a thorough review of the interviews. During the open coding phase, researchers identified excerpts from the interviews that indicated how novice principals encountered their role as school leaders. Based on the findings, 54 open codes, 7 axial codes, and 3 selective codes were extracted, representing the leadership journey of novice school principals.

Findings: The results indicate that in the initial stages of performing the role of school leadership, novice principals face challenges related to "building trust" and "managing change."

Conclusion: This leadership journey consists of various stages, ranging from enthusiasm to confronting realities and making difficult choices, requiring flexibility and effective decision-making skills. Novice principals must serve as role models by demonstrating positive behaviors such as punctuality, respect for others' opinions, flexibility, and a focus on ethical values, which can encourage others to follow their lead.

Keywords: Leadership journey, novice school principals, lived experience

1. Introduction

Research in the field of leadership and educational management studies has demonstrated that the ability

of school principals to perform the role of school leadership is one of the key resources for school success (Alwaely et al., 2024; Blose et al., 2022; Zhang & He, 2024). Several scholars argue that leadership is not a statement but a journey

rather than a destination (Belmejdoub, 2015; Schaeffer, 2002). Exercising leadership is a profound and personal reflection on understanding who the school principal is and what they must be capable of accomplishing (Jerdborg, 2021, 2022). Reviewing the experiences of novice principals is crucial in developing leadership identity and providing opportunities for further learning (Jerdborg, 2023).

Managing a school as a novice principal is inherently a challenging issue, as it involves leading a complex and professional organization (Oplatka, 2012). Taking on school leadership, including interactions with teaching staff in interpersonal and professional contexts, enhancing their professional empowerment, and evaluating their job performance, requires more than administrative skills (Burwell, 2022; Studni & Oplatka, 2022). Moreover, transitioning into professional school management is an overwhelming experience (Arar, 2018; Crow, 2006), as it necessitates "role construction" through professional and organizational socialization (Crow & Møller, 2017; Crow, 2006). Professional socialization refers to initial preparation through participation in professional leadership development programs, whereas organizational socialization pertains to the understanding of management in practical settings (Crow, 2006).

Ideally, novice principals should simultaneously engage in their work while participating in mandatory educational training programs. This design can be considered an extended process of job introduction, specifically structured to establish connections between professional and organizational socialization. However, for such connections to emerge, learning must not only occur in educational program environments but also in practice. As Beattie and Manning-Ouellet (2022) stated, these experiences can play a significant role in fostering leadership identity development. Additionally, Wenger (1998) argues that experience must remain in dialogue with competence for learning to be possible. However, given that few studies have examined the relationship between principals' professional backgrounds and competencies with their leadership performance (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Hitt & Player, 2019; Murphy, 2020), this claim requires further investigation in the context of school leadership.

Although there is limited research on how school principal preparation programs contribute to enhancing their leadership practices (Bush, 2008, 2018), persistent weaknesses in how school principals lead teaching and learning processes have been identified. Consequently, there have been calls for improving principal training programs

(Kerrins & Cushing, 2000; Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021; Li et al., 2022; Neumerski, 2013).

Another claim is that professional readiness for school leadership can be enriched by understanding principals' career trajectories (Murphy, 2020). While information on principal career paths exists (Davis et al., 2017; Murphy, 2020; Sugrue, 2015), Murphy (2020) argues that the professional pathways leading to school leadership have been less studied across different domains. Since the preparation of principals for managerial responsibilities and the formal pathways for their appointment vary at the national level, studies in this area hold significant importance (Murphy, 2020).

Given that transitioning into school leadership requires changes in professional identity while undertaking managerial responsibilities (Crow & Møller, 2017), exploring novice principals' lived experiences may provide critical insights into their evolving professional identities. Professional learning is considered an activity wherein an individual enters a social landscape of practice. Therefore, revisiting experiences can be seen as a personal journey through the social landscape of practice, where professional identity reflects an individual's pathway through that landscape (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

The review of the literature highlights various dimensions of school leadership, focusing on the challenges and experiences of school principals in different contexts. Ghasemi et al. (2023) explored the characteristics of successful multi-grade school principals, identifying key challenges in organizational, educational, and cultural aspects while outlining essential leadership qualities (Ghasemi et al., 2023). Izan and Ahmadi Aliabadi (2022) examined principals' and teachers' lived experiences with the "KarAmand" plan, identifying five major categories of opportunities and challenges, including teacher professional development and school identity reinforcement (Eizan & Ahmadi Aliabadi, 2022). Beyrami Pour and Acharsh (2022) investigated the challenges of virtual school leadership, emphasizing issues such as financial constraints, time management, and parental involvement (Beyrami Pour & Acharsh, 2022). Abbasi Choubtarash et al. (2022) analyzed the lived experiences of educational leaders in curriculum leadership, identifying seven key themes, including parental and staff communication and reflective teaching practices (Abbasi Choubtarash et al., 2022). Hajipour Abaei et al. (2021) explored the occupational challenges of rural school principals, categorizing them into personal, organizational, and external institutional barriers (Hajipour Abaei et al.,

2021). Mohammadi Pouya et al. (2021) investigated teachers' lived experiences with educational leadership policies, identifying four major themes, including psychological concerns, weaknesses in leadership programs, and professional ethics (Mohammadi Pouya et al., 2021). Sheikh Mohammadi and Khalkhali (2018) studied the role of principals in curriculum leadership, emphasizing its overlooked significance in educational leadership research (Sheikh Mohammadi & Kholkhali, 2018). Internationally, Boholano (2023) examined school leaders' experiences during remote learning, highlighting challenges such as uncertainty, teacher well-being, and resource accessibility (Boholano, 2023). Panibon (2023) explored the experiences of public school leaders in 21st-century leadership, identifying key obstacles related to staff, financial management, and stakeholder engagement (Panibon, 2023). Burwell (2022) analyzed the lived experiences of school leaders in inclusive and special education, revealing a lack of formal training as a major barrier (Burwell, 2022). Lawson (2022) investigated trauma-informed school leadership, emphasizing the need for paradigm shifts in school environments (Lawson, 2022). Li et al. (2022) examined school leadership in rural China, demonstrating that teacher commitment and collaborative culture mediate student achievement (Li et al., 2022). Ezwaghi (2020) studied Libyan public school leadership, revealing satisfaction with leadership roles but challenges in identifying exemplary schools (Ezwaghi, 2020). These studies underline the complexities of school leadership, the necessity of professional training, and the role of organizational, cultural, and socio-economic factors in shaping educational leadership outcomes.

The current state of schools presents challenges such as low efficiency due to a lack of resources and assessment tools, economic difficulties stemming from inequitable budget allocation and financial pressures on parents, dissatisfaction among principals, parents, and students due to a lack of transparency and neglect of needs, and poor-quality education resulting from reliance on traditional teaching methods. Disseminating lived experiences can contribute to increased efficiency, improved resource management, enhanced stakeholder engagement and satisfaction, and the introduction of innovative models to improve educational quality, ultimately paving the way for the sustainable development of schools. The present study focuses on the lived experiences of novice school principals in performing the role of school leadership in Gilan schools. The objective of this study is to describe and deepen the

understanding of novice principals' experiences in educational leadership and how these experiences relate to their professional trajectories toward leadership in Gilan schools. This research seeks to explore the fundamental question: What leadership actions can be identified in the narratives derived from the lived experiences of participating novice principals? Additionally, what major challenges did these novice principals encounter in the initial stages of performing the role of school leadership?

2. Methods and Materials

The present study employs a qualitative methodology with a lived experience analysis approach. The aim of the study was to explore the lived experience of novice school principals in performing the role of school leadership. The selected research process allows participants to share their narratives regarding their lived experiences in assuming school leadership roles.

The target population consisted of novice principals of public schools in Gilan. Novice school principals refer to individuals who have recently been officially appointed as principals and are experiencing their first independent school management role. In this study, based on purposive snowball sampling and until reaching theoretical saturation, ten novice school principals from the target population were invited to participate in the research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed through coding after a thorough review of the interviews. During the open coding phase, the researchers sought excerpts from the interviews that indicated how novice principals encountered their role as school leaders. To ensure the reliability of the study, the criteria of dependability, credibility, and confirmability were applied.

3. Findings and Results

The analysis was conducted in multiple stages. All interview transcripts were read multiple times, and in the first stage of analysis, data reduction was performed by preparing case reports for each novice principal and all schools. The second stage focused on the school leadership experiences and a descriptive analysis related to the research objective. Accordingly, the challenges were identified from the empirical data. The primary focus of the data analysis was on the interaction between the experiences and competencies of the principals, as well as the challenges associated with implementing school leadership. In this study, relationships between components were identified

and interpreted based on their aligned variations. Additionally, direct quotations were incorporated into the findings to reflect the key challenges experienced by novice

principals. In the interviews with selected participants, excerpts that indicated their encounters with school leadership roles were extracted as open codes.

Table 1

Final Extracted Codes from Interviews with Participating Novice Principals

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes	Participant Code
Transformational Leadership	Self-empowered Identity	Studying the activities of successful principals	(1, 2, 4)
		Having relevant academic qualifications	(2, 3)
		Studying	(2)
		Ability to motivate others	(3)
		Sense of humor	(3)
		Presentation skills	(3)
		Active listening skills	(3, 6)
	Task-oriented Identity	Enjoyment of effort and perseverance	(1)
		Emotional regulation skills	(3)
		Planning ability	(1)
		Necessary managerial training	(1)
		Complete mastery of regulations	(2, 6, 10, 7)
		Sense of responsibility and accountability	(3)
		Optimism and avoidance of strictness	(3)
		Interaction with higher educational authorities	(2, 5, 7, 9)
	Developmental Leadership	Spiritual and religious growth	(1)
		Interaction with external organizations	(1)
		Interaction with the Department of Education	(1)
		Collaboration with colleagues	(2, 5, 8)
		Identifying opportunities and skills	(3)
		Timely and effective decision-making	(3)
Organizational Challenges	Structural Barriers	Lack of high-level goals	(1)
		Absence of proper planning	(1)
		Inadequate educational facilities	(1, 4, 9)
		Shortage of necessary resources and equipment	(1, 3, 4, 9)
		High student population	(1, 5, 7, 10)
		Bureaucratic and restrictive regulations in education	(2)
		Administrative bureaucracy	(2)
		Resistance to change from parents and staff	(2, 9)
		Sabotage and obstruction by some parents or even staff members	(3, 6)
		Pressure and threats from lobbying groups	(4)
		Insufficient school funding	(4, 8, 9)
		Socioeconomic disparities among families	(9, 10)
		Presence of disruptive students	(4, 5)
		Raising community donations	(1)
Analytical and Capacity-Building Approach	Expanding Social Support	Establishing a charitable association	(2)
		School planning aligned with set objectives	(3)
		Conflict resolution	(3, 5)
		Staff participation in decision-making	(4, 5, 8, 9, 10)
		Close and friendly relationships with staff, parents, and stakeholders	(3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10)
		Strong Parent-Teacher Association	(1)
	Problem-Solving Mindset	Adherence to legal regulations	(2)
		Effective resource utilization	(3)
		Maintaining staff motivation	(3, 6)
		Understanding the emotional state of staff and teachers and supporting them	(7, 10)

Analytical Mindset	Interpersonal skills	(5)
	Expanding educational facilities	(1)
	Educating law-abiding students	(2, 7)
	Encouraging creativity	(3, 8)
	Resource allocation	(3, 8)
	Problem-solving ability	(3, 7)
	Providing feedback	(5, 7)
	Gathering opinions from students and teachers	(6)
	Appreciating staff members	(5, 6, 10)

Based on the findings, 54 open codes, 7 axial codes (self-empowered identity, task-oriented identity, developmental leadership, structural barriers, expanding social support, problem-solving mindset, analytical mindset), and 3 selective codes (transformational leadership, organizational challenges, analytical and capacity-building approach) were extracted, representing the leadership journey of novice school principals.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

After analyzing the data using the lived experience method and conducting interviews with ten novice principals from public schools in Gilan, seven axial codes were extracted within three selective codes. The following sections discuss and conclude each of these dimensions.

Based on the study conducted with novice school principals in performing the role of school leadership, transformational leadership includes three axial codes: self-empowered identity, task-oriented identity, and developmental leadership. In self-empowered identity, participants one, two, and four recognized from the beginning that for success in this new role, they needed to learn from the experiences of successful principals. They studied the activities of top-performing school leaders and carefully observed their practices. From organizing regular meetings to creating a vibrant and creative atmosphere, these insights inspired them. Given their educational background, participants one and three were aware of the significance of academic knowledge in educational management. Participant two dedicated a specific portion of his daily schedule to reading new books and academic articles, which helped him make informed decisions in educational planning. In the early days of his tenure, participant three faced numerous challenges as students lacked motivation due to personal and social problems. He decided to introduce engaging and motivational activities such as academic and artistic competitions to rekindle enthusiasm in classrooms. Participant three also took pride in his sense of humor, understanding that smiles and humor could transform the

school environment. On difficult days, he used light-hearted jokes and kindness to uplift the classroom atmosphere. Another strength of participant three was his presentation skills. He communicated confidently and clearly in meetings with teachers and parents, effectively conveying his ideas. Additionally, participants three and six emphasized the importance of active listening, attentively engaging with teachers and parents to find solutions to their concerns.

In task-oriented identity, the results showed that after several months in the role, participant one not only found satisfaction in his relentless efforts but also witnessed their positive outcomes. Students perceived him as a compassionate and responsible principal, while teachers confidently followed his well-organized plans. One of the biggest challenges for participant three was emotional regulation. The stress and excitement of managing a school were overwhelming, yet he committed to managing his emotions effectively. From the outset, participant one chose to advance methodically with precise planning. He structured his daily schedule carefully, ensuring each decision was guided by a clear strategy. This approach enabled him to be better prepared for upcoming challenges. Before assuming his position, participant one had completed several management training courses, familiarizing himself with concepts such as planning, time management, and leadership. These trainings helped him adopt a broader perspective on problems. In his first meeting with teachers, rather than imposing his views, he encouraged them to share their ideas, fostering collaboration and mutual support within the team. Participants two, six, seven, and ten concluded that a complete mastery of educational laws and regulations was essential for success as a principal. However, participant three emphasized that the most critical factor was a strong sense of responsibility, recognizing that every decision could profoundly impact students and school staff. He adopted a positive approach to mistakes, reminding teachers that errors were part of the learning process. Participants two, five, seven, and nine actively engaged with higher educational authorities, effectively communicating their schools' needs to district administrators and requesting

support. These interactions not only secured additional financial and educational resources but also enhanced their school's reputation within the region.

In developmental leadership, the findings showed that one of participant one's primary goals was promoting spiritual and moral values in the school. He organized weekly prayer and Quran reading sessions, creating a spiritual environment that reinforced core ethical and human values among students. He believed that spiritual development would enhance academic achievement. Recognizing the importance of collaborating with external organizations, participant one partnered with social and cultural institutions to design joint programs for students, including cultural trips and social activities aimed at strengthening their interpersonal and cultural skills.

Participant one also maintained constant engagement with the regional Department of Education, holding regular meetings and providing detailed reports on school conditions to secure additional support and resources for improving education quality. Participants two, five, and eight were highly aware of the importance of collegial interactions. They held weekly meetings with teachers, consistently expressing appreciation for their input and ideas. Over time, participant three identified the unique talents and skills of each teacher, recognizing that one was particularly skilled in teaching science while another excelled in arts. He organized specialized workshops focusing on these strengths.

One day, participant three faced a serious challenge when a student, due to lack of attention in class, caused disruption. Teachers were concerned about the potential impact on other students. These findings align with previous studies ([Abbasi Choubtarash et al., 2022](#); [Beyrami Pour & Acharsh, 2022](#); [Bloose et al., 2022](#); [Boholano, 2023](#); [Burwell, 2022](#); [Eizan & Ahmadi Aliabadi, 2022](#); [Ghasemi et al., 2023](#); [Heidari et al., 2023](#); [Jerdborg, 2022, 2023](#); [Lawson, 2022](#); [Li et al., 2022](#); [Panibon, 2023](#); [Studni & Oplatka, 2022](#)).

Regarding organizational challenges, structural barriers emerged as a major concern. The study revealed that from the beginning, participant one realized that the school he managed lacked clear objectives and a long-term vision. During meetings, he discovered that school programs lacked strategic direction, with many activities conducted merely for routine purposes. One of his biggest challenges was the absence of proper planning for school operations, such as exam scheduling, remedial classes, and extracurricular activities, which were carried out without clear objectives, leading to confusion among teachers and students. Schools managed by participants one, four, and nine suffered from

inadequate infrastructure, including small and overcrowded classrooms and a lack of sufficient sports and recreational spaces.

A major issue for participants one, three, four, and nine was a severe shortage of educational resources and equipment. Classrooms lacked modern teaching tools, and the school library had insufficient books. Many students complained about the lack of access to technological learning aids such as computers and projectors. Participants one, five, seven, and ten managed some of the most overcrowded schools in the region, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention to students.

Participant two encountered bureaucratic barriers, needing multiple approvals for even minor curriculum changes or school maintenance requests. The bureaucratic complexity not only delayed progress but also reduced his motivation and energy. Participants two and nine faced resistance to change from experienced colleagues who were accustomed to traditional methods and reluctant to adopt modern approaches. Some parents also preferred schools to maintain conventional teaching practices, fearing that changes might negatively affect their children.

Participant four realized that beyond internal challenges, external lobbying groups also sought to exert influence and pressure on school management. Participants four, eight, and nine struggled with insufficient school funding, as government allocations were inadequate to meet the school's needs. Additionally, participants nine and ten noted socioeconomic disparities among families, with some parents demanding specialized programs for their children while others lacked the financial means to support such initiatives.

Based on the study findings, novice principals are advised to hold regular meetings with teachers and staff to create a platform for sharing perspectives, ideas, and concerns. These meetings should facilitate discussions on educational challenges, suggest improvement strategies, and foster team synergy. Transparency and active listening can strengthen trust and collaboration.

Novice principals should also promote a culture of continuous learning by encouraging teachers to participate in training programs, explore new educational resources, and engage in online or in-person professional development opportunities. Additionally, they should support teachers in adopting student-centered teaching methods tailored to students' needs, interests, and abilities. Establishing student councils and encouraging student participation in decision-

making can enhance their sense of responsibility and confidence.

Creating a safe and supportive learning environment is crucial. This includes ensuring proper facilities, fostering positive teacher-student interactions, and guaranteeing equal learning opportunities for all students. Novice principals should effectively manage conflicts among teachers, students, and parents by organizing conflict resolution and mediation workshops. Constructive problem-solving can strengthen relationships and reduce tensions in the school environment.

As role models, novice principals must exhibit positive behaviors such as punctuality, respect for others' opinions, flexibility, and adherence to ethical values. By embodying these qualities, they can inspire others to follow their lead and set positive standards for the school community. Additionally, novice principals should establish connections with other schools, sharing successful experiences, educational resources, and collaborative activities. These networks of cooperation can help address common challenges and improve overall educational performance.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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