



Phenomenological Exploration of School Principals' Experiences with Educational Policy Changes

Muhammad Amin

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

muhamin2525@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received 27-02-2025

Revised 29-03-2025

Accepted 17-04-2025

Keyword:

Educational Leadership,
Phenomenology, Policy
Implementation, School
Principals, Decision-
Making, Educational
Challenges

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership is a critical factor in the successful implementation of educational policies. While much research has focused on administrative outcomes and policy impacts, little attention has been given to the subjective experiences of school principals navigating these changes. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how school principals perceive and respond to the challenges of implementing new educational policies. Using a phenomenological approach, the study investigates the lived experiences of school principals, focusing on their decision-making processes, emotional responses, and strategies for managing policy changes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 school principals, and thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes related to leadership challenges. The findings reveal that principals experience emotional and cognitive struggles when adapting to new policies, requiring not only managerial skills but also emotional intelligence and effective communication. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of educational leadership and suggest that professional development for school leaders should focus on building both administrative and emotional competencies. This study contributes to the broader field of educational leadership by highlighting the personal and social dimensions of leadership in policy implementation and opens avenues for future research on leadership development and policy adaptation. However, the study's findings are specific to the experiences of the sampled school principals and may not be easily generalizable to all educational contexts. Future research could explore the perspectives of principals in diverse educational settings or examine longitudinal changes in leadership strategies in response to policy shifts.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of schools, influencing how educational policies are implemented and experienced within schools (Alsaleh, 2019). The phenomenon of leadership in education has become increasingly complex in response to rapid global changes, technological advancements, and evolving educational policies. In many parts of the world, including Indonesia, educational leaders, particularly school principals, face unprecedented challenges as they navigate these changes. The context of this study centers around the implementation of new educational policies, which often bring about significant shifts in school management and teaching practices. These changes are not merely technical adjustments but deeply affect the social dynamics, relationships, and decision-making processes within schools.

The relevance of understanding the experiences of school principals in managing these educational challenges lies in the profound impact that leadership decisions have on both the educational system and the students it serves (Bailey & Gibson, 2020). School principals are at the forefront of these policy changes, and their perceptions, decisions, and actions shape how these

changes manifest in everyday practice. However, little is known about the subjective, lived experiences of principals as they cope with the complexities of policy implementation. The nuances of their experiences—ranging from resistance to policy adaptation—are often overlooked in conventional studies that focus solely on administrative outcomes or quantitative measures of success.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the meanings behind the experiences of school leaders. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the aim is to uncover the lived experiences and perceptions of school principals, particularly how they make sense of the challenges they encounter in their roles. Understanding these experiences is crucial for providing a more holistic view of educational leadership that goes beyond surface-level outcomes and delves into the personal, subjective realities of those who are directly involved in the educational process. This exploration is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how principals navigate the intersection of policy, practice, and personal experience, which in turn can inform future educational reforms and leadership training.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals has increasingly become a significant field within educational leadership, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective realities that shape the decisions and actions of leaders. Particularly in the context of school principals, such research provides insights into how they perceive and respond to the dynamic challenges of policy implementation, teacher management, and student outcomes (Benoliel, 2021). The phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited for this type of exploration, as it prioritizes the subjective experiences of individuals and seeks to uncover the meanings behind their actions. This perspective is crucial in understanding how principals interpret their roles, navigate complex social contexts, and manage change.

This study's contribution lies in its focus on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of leadership in the context of policy changes, offering new insights that complement existing research predominantly focused on external outcomes. However, exploring these deep, personal experiences is not without its challenges. One significant issue is the methodological difficulty in capturing the full depth of human experience through traditional quantitative methods. While quantitative approaches can provide valuable data on outcomes and trends, they often fail to address the nuanced, personal meanings individuals attach to their experiences. For example, in studying school leadership, surveys or statistical analysis might reveal trends in leadership effectiveness, but they cannot uncover how principals internally process the challenges they face or how they make sense of their professional journeys. This gap highlights the limitations of previous research, where much of the focus has been on measuring external outcomes rather than understanding the inner, lived experiences of those involved.

Given these limitations, previous studies that have relied on more traditional methods of data collection and analysis have often failed to grasp the essence of the leadership phenomenon fully. Quantitative data might offer a broad view, but it lacks the depth necessary for a true understanding of the emotional, cognitive, and social complexities that shape educational leadership (Camarero-Figuerola dkk., 2020). Therefore, the phenomenological approach is particularly valuable for capturing the richness of experience and offering a more comprehensive view of how school principals manage educational change within the broader context of educational policy and practice.

While many studies on educational leadership have employed practical, outcome-based approaches to examine the effectiveness of policy implementation, these methods often fail to capture the full depth of the personal experiences and meanings that school principals attach to their roles. Most research has relied on quantitative measures such as surveys or performance metrics, which can identify patterns and trends but do not delve into the subjective experiences of principals as they navigate complex educational landscapes (Faizuddin dkk., 2022). These approaches, while useful in certain contexts, have limitations in providing a comprehensive understanding of how principals interpret their challenges, make decisions, and engage with educational reforms on a personal level.

The reliance on such conventional methods often results in a shallow understanding of the phenomenon, missing the richness of the lived experiences of school leaders. For example, while data on student performance or teacher retention may highlight the effectiveness of a policy, they do not

reveal the personal and emotional processes that principals undergo when managing change. This gap in understanding underscores the need for a more nuanced approach—one that focuses on the personal and subjective dimensions of experience.

Adopting a phenomenological approach presents a viable solution to this limitation. By focusing on the lived experiences of principals, phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how they make sense of and respond to the challenges they face. This method emphasizes the essence of human experiences, providing a more holistic and meaningful understanding of leadership in education. Through this approach, the study aims to uncover the underlying meanings, perceptions, and emotional responses that shape school leadership in the face of policy changes, offering insights that are not captured through more conventional research methods.

Research on the experiences of school principals in the context of policy implementation has grown over recent years. Studies have highlighted the challenges of leadership, particularly when principals face shifts in educational policy or curricular changes (Ganon-Shilon & Chen, 2019). However, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative methods or broad administrative measures, which overlook the subjective and emotional aspects of these experiences. Previous research has mostly focused on outcome-based approaches, such as student performance or teacher retention, failing to capture the internal, personal realities that shape the decisions and actions of school leaders. Theoretical frameworks on educational leadership, such as transformational leadership and change management, have informed much of this research, yet they do not fully account for the nuanced, lived experiences of principals navigating these shifts.

To address the gaps identified, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of school principals. Phenomenology is particularly suited to uncover the deeper meanings and interpretations that participants give to their daily challenges and decisions. By focusing on the subjective experiences of the principals, the study seeks to answer the critical question: How do school principals perceive and make sense of the challenges they face in implementing new educational policies? This method enables a more holistic understanding of educational leadership, beyond what quantitative data can offer, by delving into the personal insights, feelings, and decisions of the participants.

The article is structured to first introduce the broader context of the phenomenon, setting the stage for the importance of understanding school leadership in times of change. The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach and outlines the data collection and analysis processes, including the use of thematic analysis (Kolleck dkk., 2020). Following this, the findings are presented, highlighting key themes that emerge from the principals' experiences. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, offering insights into how principals navigate policy changes and their broader implications for educational practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to explore the lived experiences of school leaders in managing educational challenges. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding the essence of individuals' subjective experiences, providing a deep insight into how participants make sense of their world. This design was selected because it is particularly suitable for answering the research question, which focuses on uncovering the personal, lived experiences of school principals as they navigate the implementation of educational policies (Ngema & Lekhetho, 2019). Specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach was applied to this study. This method seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences in their specific context, emphasizing the interpretation of meanings rather than merely describing the experiences. By employing this approach, the study was able to explore the complexities of the participants' experiences within the educational system and their response to policy changes.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a focus on those with direct experience relevant to the research question. The sample consisted of 10 school principals from various regions, including both urban and rural schools, to provide a broad perspective on the phenomenon (Park & Datnow, 2022). The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of experience as a school principal and to have been involved in the implementation of new educational policies within the last year. Exclusion criteria included principals who had less than two years of experience or those who had not been directly involved in policy implementation during the study period. The average age of the participants was 45 years, with a range of 35 to 58 years, and the group consisted of 7 male and 3 female participants. This demographic diversity contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of school leaders across different educational contexts. Future studies with larger sample sizes could provide a broader range of perspectives and enhance the generalizability of the findings across varied educational settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of the participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in participants' schools to ensure comfort and relevance to their daily environments. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to explore how principals experienced and responded to recent changes in educational policies (Richard, 2024). The interview protocol was adapted from previous studies on educational leadership and policy implementation, with minor modifications to suit the specific context of this study. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which allows for the identification and interpretation of themes within participants' lived experiences. The analysis was conducted in several stages: (1) reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain familiarity with the data, (2) identifying initial codes to capture significant elements of the participants' experiences, (3) grouping related codes into emergent themes, and (4) refining these themes to represent the essence of the participants' experiences. This systematic process allowed for a deep, nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions and responses to the challenges of educational leadership. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and categorizing the data, although the primary focus remained on the interpretative process.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's aims and their rights as participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). Pseudonyms were used for all participants and their schools to protect their identities. The data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. This research adhered to international ethical standards for qualitative research, ensuring respect for the participants' dignity and privacy throughout the study.

RESULTS

The Role of School Leadership in Managing Educational Challenges

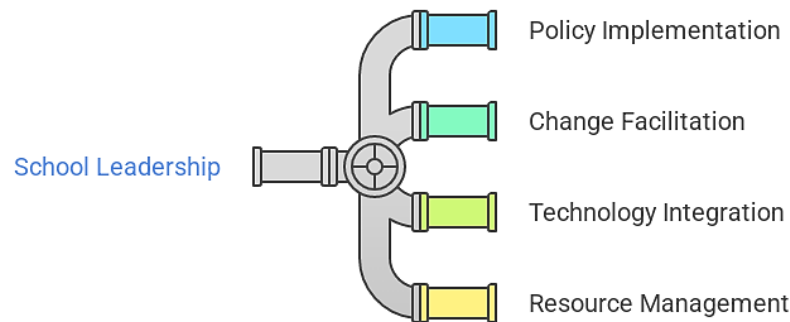
The role of school leadership, particularly that of the principal, emerged as a central theme throughout the interviews. Participants consistently highlighted the significant responsibility that principals bear in navigating educational changes, especially in the context of the 21st-century challenges. One participant, a school principal from an urban area, shared:

"As the principal, it is my duty not only to implement policies but also to ensure that these changes are understood and embraced by both the teachers and the students. It's a continuous learning

process for all of us, especially when policies are introduced that directly affect the way we teach and learn."

This statement underscores the dual role of school leaders as both implementers of policy and facilitators of change, navigating challenges such as integrating technology and adapting to new educational frameworks. This finding resonates with the idea that the principal's leadership is pivotal in ensuring the effective management of school resources, which are often strained due to shifting policies.

Unpacking the Multifaceted Role of School Leadership



Perceptions of Policy Implementation and the Response of Teachers

Another critical theme that emerged was the perception of teachers regarding the implementation of new educational policies. Teachers described a range of responses, from initial resistance to eventual acceptance, as they adapted to new teaching methods and curricula. One teacher remarked:

"When the new curriculum was first introduced, there was a lot of uncertainty among us. But after a series of workshops and guidance from the principal, we began to see its potential and how it could improve student learning."

This statement highlights the importance of professional development and the support of school leadership in helping teachers navigate policy changes. It also emphasizes the necessity of clear communication between principals and teachers to overcome initial resistance and foster a collaborative environment for policy implementation.

The Social Context of School Management

The interviews revealed that school leadership is heavily influenced by the social and cultural context in which the school operates. Principals from rural schools noted that managing educational change in these areas presents unique challenges, such as limited access to resources and the need for community engagement. A rural school principal shared:

"In our school, the biggest challenge is not just the policy changes, but how to get the community involved in supporting those changes. We have to make sure the parents and local authorities understand the importance of these educational reforms."

This response underscores the critical role of the community in supporting educational reforms. It suggests that principals must act as liaisons between the school and the wider community, ensuring that stakeholders are aligned with the goals of educational policies.

Decision-Making and Adaptability of School Leaders

The ability of school leaders to make informed, adaptive decisions was another prominent theme. Principals emphasized their need to make decisions that not only adhered to new policies but also considered the unique needs of their students and staff. One principal explained:

"Every decision I make must consider the students' well-being, the teachers' capacity to adapt, and the long-term impact of these policies. It's not just about following orders; it's about making decisions that will work in our context."

This highlights the autonomy that principals feel in their decision-making processes and their ability to tailor policy implementation to suit the needs of their specific educational environments.

The results indicate that school leadership plays a central role in the successful implementation of educational policies in the face of 21st-century challenges. Principals must not only be effective administrators but also communicators, decision-makers, and community leaders. The findings underscore the importance of support systems, such as professional development for teachers and engagement with the community, to navigate educational reforms successfully. These themes provide a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role of principals and the dynamic challenges they face in managing educational change.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that school principals navigate a complex landscape of policy implementation that requires them to balance institutional goals with the lived experiences of their teachers and students (Sarmurzin dkk., 2023). The essential experiences highlighted include the challenge of adapting to policy changes, the necessity of effective communication, and the emotional burden of leadership decisions in the context of educational reforms. These findings provide insights into the intricate realities of school leadership, directly answering the overarching research question regarding how principals perceive and manage the challenges posed by educational policy shifts.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

This study contributes to the understanding of educational leadership by emphasizing the personal and subjective dimensions of school principals' experiences. By adopting a phenomenological approach, it sheds light on the inner processes of decision-making, the emotional responses to policy changes, and the strategies employed by principals to navigate these challenges. Unlike previous studies that have focused on more objective measures of leadership effectiveness, this research offers a deeper, more nuanced view of the experiences that shape the actions of school leaders. The study illustrates that, beyond managing administrative duties, principals are deeply involved in the emotional and cognitive processes that influence the way they lead their schools.

Connection with Existing Literature and Theory

The findings of this study align with existing literature on educational leadership, particularly the work on transformational leadership, which highlights the importance of leaders' emotional intelligence and their role in fostering organizational change. However, this study challenges and extends the literature by offering a more personalized, in-depth exploration of how principals experience these processes on a daily basis. The emotional aspects of leadership, particularly the burden of balancing policy demands with personal values and the needs of their school communities, have been underexplored in prior research. This study's focus on the lived experiences of school principals complements the work of scholars like Simon dkk. (2019), who emphasize the importance of leadership in driving change, but provides a richer understanding of the personal challenges that accompany such leadership roles. Moreover, it contributes to the theoretical framework of change management by illustrating how principals actively interpret and adapt to policy changes, rather than merely implementing them. The findings also resonate with research on the social context of leadership, where principals' decisions are not only influenced by policy but are shaped by their interactions with teachers, students, and the broader community.

Explanation of Findings Implications

The findings of this study have important implications both for theory and practice in educational leadership. From a theoretical perspective, the study enriches the existing body of literature on school leadership by focusing on the lived experiences of school principals. It highlights the emotional and cognitive processes involved in leadership decisions, providing a deeper understanding of the personal and social dimensions of leadership in the context of educational reforms. Practically, the results suggest that principals need more than just administrative skills to successfully implement policy changes (Skott, 2022). They require emotional intelligence, effective communication strategies, and the capacity to build trust and collaboration within their school communities. Furthermore, these findings have significant social and cultural implications, as they reflect the challenges of educational leadership in a rapidly changing, culturally diverse environment. The experience of principals in managing policy changes, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, can provide valuable insights into how education systems can better support leaders in navigating these challenges. This research suggests that professional development for school leaders should focus not only on managerial skills but also on emotional resilience and adaptive leadership strategies.

Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 10 school principals, which limits the ability to generalize the findings across all schools or regions. Additionally, the study focused on principals in urban and rural areas in Indonesia, which means the findings may not be applicable to educational leadership in other countries or contexts. The qualitative nature of the study, though rich in detail, means that the experiences of the participants may not fully represent the broader population of school leaders (Supiadi, 2020). The use of a phenomenological approach, while effective for understanding the subjective experiences of participants, does not provide statistical generalizability. These limitations suggest the need for further research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as comparative studies in different educational settings.

Future Research Directions

This study opens the door for several avenues of future research. One potential direction is to explore how the experiences of school principals differ across various educational systems or countries, particularly in countries with different cultural or policy contexts. Comparing how principals in diverse environments interpret and respond to educational reforms could provide valuable insights into universal versus context-specific challenges in leadership. Additionally, future research could examine how specific leadership development programs influence the way principals manage policy changes. Investigating the impact of targeted professional development on the emotional and cognitive aspects of leadership could offer practical strategies for improving leadership effectiveness. Moreover, research that examines the experiences of other educational stakeholders, such as teachers or students, could complement this study by providing a more comprehensive view of the effects of educational policy changes on the entire school community.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of school principals in managing the challenges of implementing educational policy changes. The findings revealed that principals face complex emotional and cognitive challenges, requiring not only administrative skills but also emotional intelligence and effective communication. The study highlighted the importance of leadership in managing these challenges, especially in fostering collaboration and trust within the school community. It also addressed a gap in existing research by focusing on the subjective, personal experiences of principals, offering a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes. These insights contribute to both the theoretical understanding of educational leadership and practical recommendations for professional development programs. For future research, it would be valuable to

conduct comparative studies across different educational systems to understand how contextual factors influence the leadership experiences of principals. Additionally, future studies could explore the effectiveness of targeted leadership training programs on enhancing principals' emotional resilience and adaptability in response to policy changes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All findings, interpretations, and conclusions drawn in this study are the authors' own and have not been influenced by any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Alsaleh, A. (2019). Investigating instructional leadership in Kuwait's educational reform context: School leaders' perspectives. *School Leadership and Management*, 39(1), 96–120. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1467888>
- Bailey, L., & Gibson, M. T. (2020). International school principals: Routes to headship and key challenges of their role. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 48(6), 1007–1025. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219884686>
- Benotiel, P. (2021). Is it your personality, your boundary leadership or both? An integrative approach for the improvement of school management team effectiveness. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 59(6), 669–687. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-08-2020-0171>
- Camarero-Figuerola, M., Tierno-García, J.-M., Barrios-Arós, C., & Iranzo-García, P. (2020). Leadership and school success in disadvantaged contexts: The principals' perspective. *Revista de Educacion*, 2020(388), 163–187. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2020-388-451>
- Faizuddin, A., Azizan, N. A., Othman, A., & Ismail, S. N. (2022). Continuous professional development programmes for school principals in the 21st century: Lessons learned from educational leadership practices. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.983807>
- Ganon-Shilon, S., & Chen, S. (2019). No school principal is an island: From individual to school sense-making processes in reform implementation. *Management in Education*, 33(2), 77–85. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618805799>
- Kolleck, N., Rieck, A., & Yemini, M. (2020). Goals aligned: Predictors of common goal identification in educational cross-sectoral collaboration initiatives. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 48(5), 916–934. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219846906>
- Ngema, M., & Leketho, M. (2019). Principals' role in managing teacher professional development through a training needs analysis. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 77(6), 758–773. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/19.77.758>
- Park, V., & Datnow, A. (2022). Principals' emotions in school improvement: The role of people, practices, policies, and patterns. *School Leadership and Management*, 42(3), 256–274. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2071863>
- Richard, T. (2024). Novice School Leaders' Turnover Intentions: The Role of Working Conditions and Organizational Factors. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 60(3), 341–378. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X241253288>

- Rintoul, H., & Bishop, P. (2019). Principals and vice-principals: Exploring the history of leading and managing public schools in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 51(1), 15–26. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2018.1513913>
- Sarmurzin, Y., Menlibekova, G., & Orynbeikova, A. (2023). “I Feel Abandoned”: Exploring School Principals’ Professional Development in Kazakhstan. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 32(5), 629–639. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-022-00682-1>
- Simon, S., Dole, S., & Farragher, Y. (2019). Custom-designed and safe-space coaching: Australian beginning principals supported by experienced peers form pipeline of confident future leaders. *School Leadership and Management*, 39(2), 145–174. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1470502>
- Skott, P. (2022). Successful health-promoting leadership – A question of synchronisation. *Health Education*, 122(3), 286–303. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-09-2020-0079>
- Supiadi, O. (2020). Management capability in a structural modelling of the quality of economics and accounting education in Indonesia. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(1). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n1a1658>