



High School Students' Perspectives on Teacher Leadership in Post-Pandemic Hybrid Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Teacher leadership plays a critical role in shaping student engagement and academic identity, especially within hybrid learning environments that have emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While leadership in education has been widely studied, limited attention has been given to how students themselves subjectively experience and interpret teacher leadership in these new learning contexts. Existing research often relies on quantitative approaches that fail to capture the emotional and relational dimensions of leadership, raising the question: How do students make meaning of teacher leadership in hybrid learning settings? This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of high school students and their perceptions of teacher leadership during hybrid learning. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten students (5 males and 5 females, aged 16–18) from urban public high schools in Indonesia and analyzed thematically through a process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Four key themes were identified: empathic leadership, adaptive support, structural disconnection, and the redefinition of what constitutes a “good leader” Students highlighted the importance of emotional presence, flexibility, and relational trust in their interactions with teachers, often valuing this over technical competence or authority. These results demonstrate that leadership, from the students’ perspective, is experienced as a humanistic and context-sensitive phenomenon. The study contributes to a richer understanding of educational leadership by centering student voices and offers practical implications for developing emotionally responsive leadership practices. Future research should expand this inquiry across different cultural and institutional contexts to explore the universality of these experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of educational systems worldwide, the concept of teacher leadership has gained increasing attention as a critical factor influencing student engagement, learning outcomes, and institutional adaptability (Yuliana et al., 2022). The shift toward hybrid learning environments, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, has redefined traditional pedagogical roles and intensified the complexity of teacher-student interactions. These changes have placed unprecedented demands on educators to function not only as knowledge facilitators but also as emotional anchors and adaptive leaders within fluctuating educational contexts.

This study aims to explore the following research question: How do high school students perceive and make meaning of teacher leadership in post-pandemic hybrid learning environments? Globally, schools have been compelled to reconfigure teaching modalities, blending face-to-face instruction with digital delivery to maintain continuity in learning. In this dynamic setting, the nature of leadership within classrooms has undergone significant transformation, requiring teachers to engage with students through new technological platforms, navigate uncertainties, and foster emotional resilience (Wronowski et al., 2022). While many educational studies have emphasized strategies, fewer have addressed students’ own interpretations of teacher leadership—especially

within hybrid models—often relying on quantitative methods that overlook the emotional and relational nuances of the teacher-student experience.

This phenomenon holds profound significance within the broader social and cultural framework of education. Teacher leadership, when experienced through the eyes of students, encompasses more than organizational or instructional competence; it becomes a relational and emotional experience that shapes students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic identity (Ruiz & Rojas, 2020). These subjective experiences—how students interpret, feel, and assign meaning to teacher behaviors—demand qualitative approaches that can capture the richness of lived realities, rather than being reduced to measurable outputs.

Given this complexity, there is a growing need to explore the meaning of teacher leadership from the students' perspective, particularly as they adapt to post-pandemic educational realities (Welsh et al., 2024). A phenomenological approach offers a compelling lens through which to understand these experiences, as it privileges the voices of participants and seeks to uncover the essence of their engagement with a given phenomenon. By attending to the richness of subjective experience, this study aims to illuminate the nuanced ways in which students make sense of leadership in hybrid learning environments, thereby contributing to a deeper and more human-centered understanding of leadership in education.

The study of students lived experiences in educational settings has emerged as a vital area of inquiry, particularly in understanding how pedagogical practices and leadership behaviors influence learning beyond measurable outcomes (Rodriguez & McKee, 2022). Within this field, phenomenological research has offered valuable insights by centering the voices of students and prioritizing the meaning they ascribe to their everyday interactions in learning environments. As education continues to evolve in response to technological shifts and societal disruptions, such as the global pandemic, the importance of grasping how students interpret and experience teacher leadership becomes increasingly urgent.

Despite this growing recognition, methodological challenges persist in capturing the richness and complexity of such subjective experiences. Traditional research in educational leadership has predominantly relied on quantitative methodologies, focusing on metrics such as academic performance, behavioral compliance, or standardized survey results (Li et al., 2023). While these approaches provide useful patterns, they often fail to penetrate the nuanced emotional and relational dynamics through which students engage with teacher leadership. The interpretive processes by which students construct meaning from leadership behaviors especially in hybrid learning environments remain underexplored.

This limitation has led to a fragmented understanding of teacher leadership as it is lived and perceived by students (Lingam et al., 2021). Without a robust methodological framework that centers on first-person accounts, existing research risks reducing leadership to a set of technical competencies, overlooking the profound interpersonal and contextual elements that shape students' experiences. Consequently, many prior studies fall short in revealing the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of those most directly affected students themselves. This underscores the necessity for a phenomenological approach that can reveal the inner contours of how leadership is experienced in real and evolving educational contexts.

Conventional approaches to understanding teacher leadership in educational contexts have predominantly focused on applying existing frameworks centered on measurable instructional effectiveness, organizational efficiency, and administrative performance (Burgess et al., 2023). These models often rely on structured surveys, observational checklists, or performance indicators, which, while valuable, tend to emphasize generalizability over depth. As a result, the nuanced, subjective experiences of students the primary recipients of educational leadership are frequently overlooked or reduced to quantifiable categories.

These practical approaches fall short in capturing the emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions that characterize how leadership is experienced in hybrid learning environments. Quantitative methods may reveal patterns, but they rarely access the internal meanings,

interpretations, and affective responses that students associate with their interactions with teacher leaders. Consequently, a significant layer of understanding remains obscured, limiting our capacity to comprehend the essence of teacher-student dynamics in contemporary educational settings.

This gap highlights the pressing need for an alternative methodological lens one that privileges depth over breadth and attends to lived experience rather than statistical inference. A phenomenological approach offers precisely this perspective. By foregrounding the voices of students and exploring the meaning they construct around teacher leadership, phenomenology allows for a more holistic and human-centered understanding of the phenomenon (Lotter et al., 2020). This method not only addresses the limitations of prior research but also enriches the conceptualization of leadership as a relational and interpretative process embedded in specific socio-educational contexts.

Previous studies have examined teacher leadership primarily through quantitative or mixed-method approaches. These studies often focused on performance indicators, instructional practices, and leadership models, yet paid limited attention to students lived experiences. Some qualitative research has explored leadership in virtual or blended learning settings, but few have centered on how students interpret and emotionally respond to their teachers' leadership (Freeman & Fields, 2023). There is a noticeable lack of work that captures how students make meaning of leadership in dynamic learning environments. This gap is especially relevant as education continues to evolve post-pandemic.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how high school students experience teacher leadership in hybrid learning settings. This method was chosen to uncover the personal, subjective, and contextual meanings students associate with their interactions with teacher leaders. It provides a deeper understanding of leadership that goes beyond observable behaviors and into the realm of perception and meaning. In doing so, this study addresses the limitations discussed earlier and responds directly to the identified knowledge gap. The insights generated aim to enrich the discourse on educational leadership from the students' perspectives.

This article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the background, significance, and rationale of the study. The next section presents the context of hybrid learning and the phenomenon of teacher leadership as experienced by students. The method section describes the phenomenological design, participant selection, and procedures for data collection and analysis. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the results, organized by emergent themes, and supported by direct participant quotations. The article concludes with a discussion that interprets the findings, highlights their implications, and proposes directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of high school students in perceiving teacher leadership during hybrid learning in the post-pandemic context. Phenomenology, as a qualitative design, focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals and seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon as it is lived and interpreted by those who experience it (Johnson, 2014). The interpretative strand, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was selected for its emphasis on the meaning-making process within a situated context, acknowledging the co-construction of meaning between participant and researcher. Unlike grounded theory, which aims to generate theoretical models, or narrative inquiry, which emphasizes the chronology and structure of personal stories, IPA allows for a deeper examination of how individuals interpret significant life experiences within their unique contexts. This design was appropriate to uncover the nuanced, personal, and contextual interpretations of teacher leadership from the students' perspective, thus addressing the research question in depth.

Participants

Participants consisted of high school students who had experienced hybrid learning within the past academic year. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that only those who met the

inclusion criteria namely, students aged between 15 and 18 years, enrolled in schools implementing hybrid learning, and having regular interaction with teacher-led sessions were selected. Students with limited exposure to hybrid learning or those without direct teacher interaction were excluded. A total of ten participants were included in the study, comprising six females and four males, with an average age of 16.7 years. All participants were drawn from urban public schools to maintain contextual consistency in the educational environment.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed to elicit reflections on teacher-student interactions, leadership perceptions, and emotional experiences during hybrid learning. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in private school meeting rooms to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The environment was designed to be non-threatening and conducive to open sharing, with protocols adapted from standard qualitative interviewing techniques to facilitate rapport and trust.

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple strategies were implemented. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review their interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations for accuracy. Additionally, analyst triangulation was employed by involving a second coder to cross-check theme development and validate interpretations. Reflexive journaling and audit trails were also maintained throughout the analytic process to enhance transparency and credibility.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method suitable for capturing the depth of meaning within individual experiences. Transcripts were read and re-read to achieve immersion, and meaning units were identified through line-by-line coding. Emergent themes were clustered and refined through iterative reflection, ensuring that each theme retained fidelity to the participant's lived experiences. The software NVivo was utilized to assist with data organization, though analytic decisions were driven by interpretative processes rather than automated coding. The final themes were derived through eidetic reduction, aiming to capture the essence of students' perceptions of teacher leadership in the hybrid learning context.

Theme verification was conducted through ongoing dialogue between coders to reach consensus and minimize subjective bias. The final themes were derived through eidetic reduction, aiming to capture the essence of students' perceptions of teacher leadership in the hybrid learning context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and, where necessary, parental consent was also secured for minors. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study by removing all identifiable information and assigning pseudonyms. The study adhered to the ethical standards set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki and followed national research ethics guidelines applicable to studies involving human participants.

RESULTS

The analysis of participants' narratives revealed four core themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of high school students in interpreting teacher leadership during hybrid learning post-pandemic. These themes emerged through a rigorous process of data transcription, coding, thematic clustering, and eidetic reduction, leading to the discovery of the essential meanings underlying their experiences.

Experiencing Empathic Leadership in Uncertain Times

Students consistently emphasized the importance of emotional support and empathic engagement from their teachers during the transition from fully online to hybrid learning. They perceived empathic leadership not only as an act of academic facilitation but as a critical form of emotional sustenance.

“I felt like my teacher understood how hard it was for us to adapt. She would often ask how we were doing, not just about homework, but about our feelings. It made me feel human, not just a student.” (Participant 3)

This theme illustrates how the students’ perception of leadership was shaped not merely by instructional delivery, but by the humanistic concern shown by teachers during uncertain and emotionally charged periods. Empathy emerged as a vital pillar in sustaining student engagement and motivation.

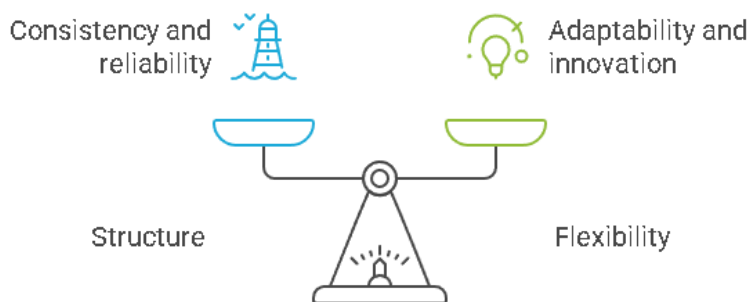
Navigating Hybrid Learning Through Adaptive Leadership

Participants described their teachers as navigators of a fluctuating academic environment, who adjusted their leadership styles to accommodate technical constraints, student feedback, and institutional demands. Adaptive leadership was perceived as the ability to balance structure with flexibility.

“Sometimes the internet was down, or some students couldn’t join the class. My teacher always had a plan B. We could submit assignments through chat, or she would record the class for us.” (Participant 7)

The essence of this theme lies in the students’ appreciation of how their teachers’ adaptability created a sense of reliability and minimized the chaos often associated with hybrid education. Adaptive leadership was synonymous with consistency and student-centeredness.

Balancing Structure and Flexibility in Adaptive Leadership



Feeling Disconnected Despite Structured Leadership

While many participants acknowledged their teachers’ efforts to maintain structure and order during hybrid learning, some expressed feelings of isolation and disconnection. Leadership rooted solely in structure without relational depth was viewed as insufficient.

“The teacher always followed the schedule strictly, but I did not feel like I belonged. It felt more like attending a webinar than a real class.” (Participant 2)

This theme highlights a critical nuance in student experience: leadership in education cannot be reduced to procedural efficiency. Emotional presence and interpersonal connection are indispensable in building a learning atmosphere that fosters engagement.

Reconstructing the Image of a ‘Good Teacher Leader’

From the participants’ narratives, a redefinition of effective teacher leadership emerged. Traditional notions discipline, authority, and academic rigor were reshaped to include vulnerability, adaptability, and human connection.

“Before the pandemic, I thought a good teacher was someone who had clear rules. But now, I think it’s someone who listens and understands.” (Participant 5)

This theme reveals a transformative understanding among students about what constitutes effective leadership in educational settings. Teacher leadership, from their perspective, is no longer confined to academic control but includes relational intelligence and authentic care.

Essential Summary of Findings

The lived experiences of students during hybrid learning converged around the need for leadership that is empathic, adaptive, and relational. While procedural structure remained important, it was the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of leadership that defined meaningful engagement for students. These findings point to a paradigm shift in how educational leadership is experienced and valued by learners in post-pandemic learning environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students experience teacher leadership in hybrid learning environments as a deeply relational, emotional, and adaptive process (Herman et al., 2023). The essence of their experience’s centers on the need for empathic connection, flexible support, and a redefined image of leadership that goes beyond authority to include presence, care, and responsiveness directly addressing the central research question on how students interpret teacher leadership post-pandemic.

These insights directly contribute to answering the core question posed in the introduction: How do students subjectively experience and make meaning of teacher leadership in hybrid learning contexts? The results demonstrate that leadership, from the students’ perspective, is not defined solely by instructional expertise or classroom management but by the relational capacity of teachers to engage, support, and adapt within uncertain learning landscapes (Torres et al., 2020). This highlights a unique contribution to the literature by offering a student-centered, phenomenologically grounded account of educational leadership that enriches existing frameworks often dominated by administrative or teacher-centered viewpoints.

When compared to existing literature, the themes identified in this study support and extend prior research that emphasizes the role of emotional intelligence and adaptive pedagogy in educational leadership (Scallon et al., 2023). The emergent theme of empathic leadership echoes findings from Even & BenDavid-Hadar (2025), who noted that teacher presence and care were vital to student well-being during remote learning. However, this study diverges by emphasizing not only what teachers did but how students felt about those actions, adding a deeper affective dimension to our understanding. Furthermore, the redefinition of a “good leader” by students complements transformational leadership theories while challenging hierarchical conceptions that overlook student agency and interpretation in leadership discourse.

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational practice, policy, and teacher development. At a practical level, the recognition of empathic and adaptive leadership as central to students’ learning experiences suggests a need to reframe professional development programs to include emotional intelligence, relational pedagogy, and responsive leadership. From a socio-cultural standpoint, the voices of students offer a valuable lens into how leadership is co-constructed within dynamic educational environments especially during periods of uncertainty and transition. These insights underscore the value of student-centered approaches that respect learners not merely as recipients of instruction, but as meaning-makers in the educational process. Such a shift in perspective may enhance the development of inclusive and emotionally responsive schooling, especially in hybrid or disrupted contexts.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling and the focus on a specific age group within urban high schools may limit the transferability of findings to other educational settings, such as rural or international contexts. In addition, phenomenological analysis prioritizes depth over breadth, which inherently constrains

generalizability. The subjective nature of the data also relies on participants' capacity and willingness to articulate complex internal experiences. These limitations, however, are characteristic of qualitative inquiry and serve not as weaknesses but as guideposts for future investigation.

Future research could extend this work by exploring how teacher leadership is experienced in different cultural or institutional settings, or by comparing the perspectives of students and teachers within the same hybrid learning environments. Longitudinal studies may also provide valuable insights into how perceptions of leadership evolve over time as students navigate various educational transitions. Furthermore, integrating phenomenological approaches with complementary qualitative methods, such as narrative or ethnographic research, could deepen our understanding of the relational and contextual dynamics that shape educational leadership as lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how high school students perceive and experience teacher leadership within hybrid learning environments following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that students value leadership that is empathic, adaptive, and emotionally engaging, which challenges traditional models that focus solely on instructional or managerial competence. By centering students lived experiences, the study offers a nuanced understanding of teacher leadership as a relational and contextual phenomenon. These insights address previous gaps in the literature, which often neglected the subjective and affective dimensions of educational leadership.

The results suggest that leadership development programs for teachers—particularly within teacher training institutions and professional development initiatives—should explicitly integrate components on emotional intelligence, relational sensitivity, and adaptive communication strategies. Training modules could include scenario-based learning, student perspective-taking exercises, and reflective mentoring practices tailored to hybrid and flexible learning models. From a policy perspective, educational authorities are encouraged to revise leadership competency frameworks to include socio-emotional competencies and contextual responsiveness as core indicators of teacher effectiveness. Policies supporting ongoing teacher professional learning should prioritize not only digital literacy but also relational and emotional competencies in hybrid teaching. Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring different cultural or institutional settings and incorporating longitudinal designs to examine how perceptions of leadership evolve over time. Moreover, comparative policy analysis could examine how national education systems formally recognize and support these emerging dimensions of teacher leadership.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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