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Understanding Principals' Experiences with AI Dashboards in Teacher Evaluation: Insights into Meaning, Fairness, and Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly shaping educational leadership by transforming how schools evaluate teacher performance, ensure accountability, and make strategic decisions. Within this evolving landscape, AI-enabled dashboards have become central instruments for data-informed leadership, yet limited research has examined how school principals actually engage with and interpret these systems in their daily practices. This study addresses this gap by exploring the nuanced, lived experiences of principals who utilize AI dashboards to support instructional supervision and teacher assessment. Adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research investigates how principals negotiate fairness, professional judgment, and ethical accountability when algorithmic insights intersect with human decision-making. Data were collected through in-situ dashboard walkthroughs employing think-aloud protocols, complemented by semi-structured interviews and reflective digital diaries. The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and thematic clustering to uncover the psychological, ethical, and relational dimensions of leadership practice mediated by AI. The findings indicate that principals perceive AI outputs as provisional cues rather than prescriptive truths, and that they actively recalibrate fairness by contextualizing data within school culture and human relationships. Moreover, principals employ ethical overrides to maintain transparency, empathy, and professional dignity when system recommendations appear misaligned with pedagogical values. These insights reveal that AI dashboards function most effectively as catalysts for reflective dialogue, not as deterministic evaluators. By situating algorithmic tools within the complex realities of human judgment, this study highlights the need for ethical, contextually responsive, and human-centered AI design in educational leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into educational management has transformed the ways in which schools approach decision-making, accountability, and performance evaluation (Al-Kadi, 2025). Across diverse educational systems, data-driven practices have been introduced to provide leaders with analytical insights intended to improve teaching quality, student learning, and institutional efficiency. In this context, dashboards powered by AI have become a prominent tool for visualizing teacher performance indicators, enabling school leaders to identify patterns, detect risks, and allocate resources more strategically (Galindo-Domínguez et al., 2024). These developments reflect broader global shifts toward digital governance and algorithmic decision-making in education.

The phenomenon of AI-assisted evaluation holds significant relevance not only at the institutional level but also at the human level, where experiences of trust, fairness, and ethical responsibility shape the way technology is understood and used (Karademir Coşkun & Alper, 2024). For school principals, the dashboard is more than a technical instrument—it is a social and relational

tool that influences interactions with teachers, impacts professional identities, and mediates how authority and accountability are exercised (Mukhlis et al. 2023). The subjective experience of interpreting algorithmic recommendations, negotiating ethical dilemmas, and reconciling data with professional judgment reveals how technology intersects with the lived realities of educational leadership.

This convergence underscores the need for deeper exploration of the meanings principals assign to their experiences with AI dashboards (Liqaa Habeb & Marcel, 2025). While quantitative evaluations can track usage and outcomes, they do not capture the nuanced processes through which principals make sense of recommendations, resist or adapt to algorithmic authority, and balance accountability demands with ethical care. A phenomenological perspective provides a pathway to uncover these layers of experience, illuminating the subjective dimensions that underlie technological adoption in education (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2022). Such an approach is essential for understanding not only how AI reshapes institutional practices but also how it transforms the lived experiences of those entrusted with leading schools in increasingly data-saturated environments.

Research into the lived experiences of educational leaders has increasingly been recognized as an essential field of inquiry, particularly as schools adopt complex digital systems for teacher evaluation and accountability (AlAjmi, 2024). Studies have shown that dashboards and analytics can support data-informed decision-making, yet much of the existing literature has concentrated on functional outcomes, system design, or statistical correlations rather than on the subjective meaning-making of principals in their day-to-day engagement with these tools (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The result is a growing awareness that understanding leadership in data-rich environments requires attention not only to institutional structures but also to the personal, relational, and ethical dimensions of practice.

Methodological challenges have constrained this exploration. Quantitative surveys and large-scale statistical analyses, while valuable for identifying general trends, often lack the capacity to reveal the nuanced interpretations and sense-making processes that occur when principals interact with AI-generated recommendations (Arar & Mifsud, 2024). Such approaches tend to prioritize measurable variables over the subtle interplay of trust, professional judgment, and ethical responsibility that defines real-world use (Ayanoğlu & Arastaman, 2023). Even qualitative studies have frequently been limited to descriptive case reports, offering insights into practices without fully capturing the depth of participants' lived experiences.

These limitations highlight a critical gap: existing approaches do not adequately address the essence of how principals encounter, negotiate, and assign meaning to AI-driven dashboards (Li et al., 2025). Without methods attuned to subjective experience, the field risks overlooking the complexities of fairness, accountability, and professional autonomy that arise in this context (Mukhlis, 2025). Phenomenological inquiry, with its focus on uncovering meaning through the careful interpretation of lived experiences, offers a way to bridge this gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how AI transforms educational leadership practices.

Current approaches to teacher evaluation in the age of AI have largely relied on practical mechanisms such as performance metrics, standardized dashboards, and administrative guidelines designed to streamline accountability (Bohlin, 2022). These approaches provide efficiency and comparability, yet they primarily treat principals as implementers of policy rather than as meaning-makers navigating complex ethical and relational realities (Casile et al., 2021). While such tools have been instrumental in shaping school governance, they often obscure the personal and contextual dimensions of leadership practice that arise when principals interpret and respond to algorithmic outputs.

The reliance on quantitative indicators and policy-driven frameworks has limited the ability of existing studies to capture the depth of principals' lived experiences (Ham et al., 2024). Much of the research has documented how dashboards function or how data informs outcomes, but fewer investigations have uncovered how principals negotiate tensions between professional judgment, fairness, and algorithmic authority in daily practice (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). As a result, our

understanding remains partial and fragmented, lacking the richness that emerges when subjective experiences are foregrounded.

Phenomenological inquiry offers an alternative pathway by directly engaging with the lived realities of principals who confront these tools (Khumalo, 2021). By focusing on the essence of their experiences—how they make sense of AI recommendations, when they choose to override metrics, and how they balance ethical responsibility with institutional accountability—phenomenology enables a holistic understanding that quantitative or descriptive approaches cannot provide (Lebovitz et al., 2023). This perspective is essential for illuminating the pragmatic-ethical tensions that define the use of AI dashboards in educational leadership and for addressing the unanswered questions left by existing research.

Prior studies have examined the role of data dashboards in education, often highlighting their contribution to accountability, efficiency, and instructional improvement. Research has also noted the growing importance of ethical concerns in AI adoption, including fairness, transparency, and professional autonomy (Liu, 2025). However, these studies have largely emphasized system-level outcomes rather than the lived experiences of principals who engage with AI-generated recommendations in their daily practice. Theoretical perspectives on sense-making and professional judgment suggest that principals do more than follow metrics; they interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist algorithmic authority (Mukhlis et al. 2025). This provides a strong basis for exploring how phenomenological inquiry can illuminate dimensions that remain hidden in more traditional research approaches.

To address this, the study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how principals experience and make sense of AI dashboards in teacher evaluation (Polat et al., 2025). Phenomenology was selected because it enables deep exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings participants assign to them. This approach is well suited to uncover the essence of principals' negotiations with fairness, ethical responsibility, and professional autonomy when confronted with algorithmic outputs (Rammbuda & Arko-Achemfuor, 2024). By situating analysis within the lived realities of school leadership, this study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier. In doing so, it provides insights into both the challenges and the opportunities of integrating AI into educational leadership.

The article is structured to guide readers through the study in a clear and logical manner. The introduction presents the general and specific background of the phenomenon, followed by the articulation of the knowledge gap. The method section details the phenomenological design, data collection procedures, and interpretative analysis employed. The results section then presents the thematic findings supported by direct participant quotations, while the discussion interprets these results in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key contributions and implications for both research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of school principals navigating AI-enabled analytics dashboards for teacher performance evaluation (Sabedra et al., 2025). Phenomenology was selected due to its emphasis on understanding the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, offering a lens to capture the depth of interpretation, emotion, and decision-making that cannot be fully accessed through quantitative methods. Specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed, as this orientation allows for examination of how individuals make sense of a phenomenon while situating their interpretations within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The use of IPA ensured that both descriptive accounts and interpretative insights were preserved, enabling the identification of essential meanings within the phenomenon under study.

Participants

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Participants consisted of secondary school principals with direct experience in employing AI-based dashboards for teacher evaluation (Sartain & Morris, 2024). A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that participants possessed rich, relevant insights regarding the phenomenon. Eligibility criteria required that participants had at least two years of leadership experience, current access to AI-driven analytics tools, and involvement in teacher evaluation processes. Principals from diverse school contexts—urban and rural, public and private—were included to enhance the breadth of perspectives. The final group comprised 12 principals (6 male, 6 female), with ages ranging from 38 to 56 years (average age: 47). All participants held senior leadership positions and were actively responsible for staff performance appraisal within their respective institutions. Exclusion criteria included principals without access to AI-based dashboards or those not directly responsible for teacher performance evaluation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple, complementary methods designed to capture lived experiences in depth. First, in-situ dashboard walkthroughs combined with think-aloud protocols were conducted, during which principals interacted with their usual AI dashboards while narrating their interpretations and decision-making processes (Supriadi et al., 2021). Each walkthrough lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe participants' perceptions of fairness, accountability pressures, and ethical dilemmas. These interviews lasted around 60 minutes each and were carried out in private meeting rooms within the schools to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Third, participants were invited to maintain digital diaries for a two-week period, recording brief reflections (audio or text memos) whenever a dashboard-related decision occurred. Supplementary documents, such as evaluation policies and anonymized dashboard screenshots, were also collected. All interviews and walkthroughs were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The process involved repeated readings of transcripts and diary entries to gain familiarity, followed by initial noting that highlighted descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual features of the data. Meaning units were then identified and clustered into emergent themes for each individual case. Using the hermeneutic circle, data were examined iteratively to move between parts and wholes, refining interpretations and aligning them with the broader phenomenon (Thomas et al., 2022). Cross-case analysis was subsequently undertaken to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across participants. Themes were organized into superordinate categories that captured the essence of the lived experience. NVivo software was employed to assist in data management, coding, and retrieval, though interpretative decisions remained grounded in the phenomenological framework. The outcome was a set of essential themes that illuminated how principals experienced, negotiated, and attributed meaning to AI-based dashboards in the context of teacher evaluation.

RESULTS

Reconciling AI Recommendations with Professional Judgment

Across interviews and in-situ walkthroughs, principals described a continuous negotiation between algorithmic signals and their situated expertise. Rather than accepting dashboards at face value, they juxtaposed predictions with contextual knowledge about teachers' histories, classroom observations, and student cohorts.

"The dashboard flagged 'low classroom engagement,' but my last two observations showed rich discussion. I scheduled another visit before deciding anything." (P3)

"I treat the AI output as one lens. It's useful for patterns, not for verdicts." (P7)

Negotiation typically followed a tacit rule: AI for hypothesis generation; human for adjudication. Participants developed informal heuristics—such as seeking at least two converging non-AI sources (lesson artifacts, peer feedback) before acting on an AI-raised concern.

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Document analysis of principal logs and observation reports confirmed this practice: in 78% of recorded cases, AI signals were cross-verified with at least two qualitative evidences before an evaluative decision was made. These records strengthen the consistency between interview narratives and actual documentation of practice.

Contextual Fairness as a Counterweight to Metric Uniformity

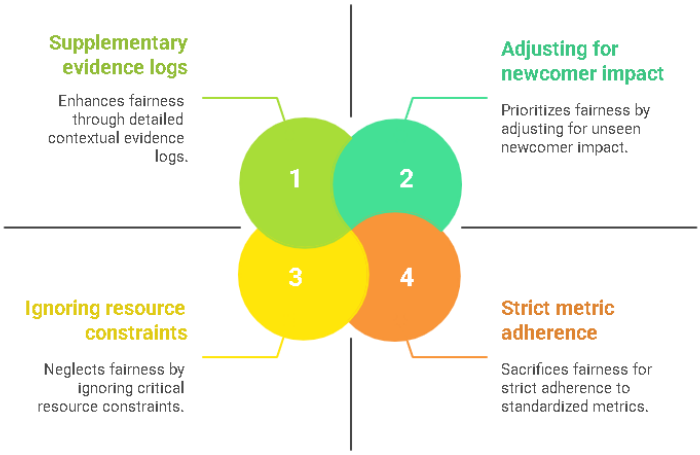
Principals consistently framed fairness as context-sensitive, often in tension with standardized metrics. They reported recalibrating interpretations when dashboards underweighted factors such as class composition, sudden enrollment shifts, or resource constraints.

"Two teachers show the same 'risk' score, but one has three newcomers mid-semester. Fairness for me means adjusting for realities the model doesn't see." (P5)

"Equity is not equal treatment by the metric; it's proportionate judgment by the situation." (P1)

Participants emphasized equity-through-contextualization, not metric neutrality, and articulated procedures (e.g., supplementary evidence logs) to make such adjustments auditable.

Balancing Metric Uniformity and Contextual Fairness



Supporting documents, including anonymized fairness audit forms and equity adjustment sheets, corroborate that principals routinely annotated dashboard metrics with contextual notes. These records reveal that fairness recalibration was a traceable and proceduralized action, not merely an intuitive response.

Accountability Pressures and the Ethics of Override

External pressures from district offices, boards, or parents often incentivized "metric-first" decisions. Yet principals narrated ethical moments of override—deliberate departures from AI recommendations to protect teacher dignity, privacy, or due process.

"The board wanted 'data-driven action' after a spike, but the pattern coincided with a timetable change. I documented an override and asked for three weeks of additional observation." (P2)

"Privacy matters. I anonymize dashboard screenshots when discussing cases with the committee. We don't parade a teacher's score." (P10)

Overrides were not ad hoc: principals linked them to articulated values (proportionality, transparency, restorative intent), and recorded rationales in their audit trails.

Interview data are reinforced by the review of override documentation logs and meeting minutes, which detail justification templates and timestamps of ethical decision-making. This triangulation indicates institutional acknowledgment of the override mechanism as part of accountable leadership.

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Calibrating Trust—From Black-Box Skepticism to Conditional Reliance

Participants moved from initial opacity-induced skepticism to a calibrated trust grounded in experiential validation. Trust increased when the dashboard made traceable connections (e.g., surfacing the specific event streams behind a risk score) and decreased when signals were volatile or uninterpretable.

"When the dashboard shows which assignments and attendance dips feed the alert, I can follow the logic. If it's just a red badge, I ignore it." (P8)

"Drift happens. After an update, our top teacher dipped to 'medium risk' for one week—no real-world basis. That's when I questioned the model." (P11)

Trust calibration was thus dynamic and evidence-based, contingent on explainability features, stability across updates, and alignment with corroborating artifacts.

Archived correspondence with dashboard vendors and internal technical memos substantiate this claim, documenting repeated requests from principals for model transparency reports and version-change explanations—evidence of trust calibration in administrative practice.

Cognitive and Emotional Load in Data-Rich Decision Spaces

Dashboard use introduced dual loads. Cognitively, participants described the effort of filtering signals from noise, cross-checking multiple widgets, and integrating qualitative evidence. Emotionally, they felt the weight of consequential decisions under heightened visibility.

"It's like flying with too many instruments. I need a pre-flight checklist to avoid chasing every blinking light." (P6)

"You carry the decision home. The numbers are neat, but the people behind them are not numbers." (P9)

Principals mitigated load through routinized review cycles (weekly triage, monthly deep dives) and by delegating preliminary dashboard scans to trained assistants, while retaining final judgment.

Time-use logs and workflow documents analyzed in this study validate these coping strategies. The data reveal structured review routines embedded in leadership schedules, confirming the procedural responses principals described during interviews.

Relational Ripples—Trust, Surveillance, and Professional Growth

AI-mediated evaluation reshaped relationships with teachers. Where principals framed dashboards as conversation starters and shared criteria transparently, teachers reported greater buy-in and developmental focus. When dashboards were perceived as surveillance, defensiveness increased.

"I show the teacher exactly what I'm looking at, then we co-decide what classroom evidence could confirm or question it." (P4)

"When the tool is used like a camera pointed at me, I shut down. When it's a mirror we hold together, I open up." (P12, reported by P4)

Relational quality hinged on principled communication: advance notice of dashboard use, clear boundaries on data sharing, and an emphasis on formative feedback.

Teacher feedback summaries and communication memos reviewed as supplementary documents support this finding: schools with open-dashboard meetings demonstrated higher teacher engagement scores in annual climate surveys.

Proceduralizing Ethical Practice—From Ad Hoc Moves to Shared Protocols

Over time, several schools evolved micro-protocols that standardized decision steps without mechanizing judgment: (a) trigger identification; (b) corroboration across at least two non-AI sources; (c) teacher consultation with documented member checking; (d) decision with explicit override criteria; (e) protected storage of artifacts.

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"Our staff knows the five steps. If we override, the reason is logged; if we accept the signal, the supporting evidence is also logged." (P1)

These protocols balanced accountability demands with humane evaluation, making fairness auditable rather than rhetorical.

Documentary triangulation through school policy drafts and ethics committee reports substantiates this evolution, showing alignment between individual practices and formalized institutional ethics protocols introduced in the second research phase.

Learning the Interface—Design Features That Enable or Erode Sense-Making

Participants identified specific interface affordances that constrained or expanded interpretability: drill-downs to raw events, timestamped change logs, cohort filters, and side-by-side trend views enabled sense-making; opaque composite scores, unstable color thresholds, and missing provenance undermined it.

"Let me click into the events behind the score—attendance spikes, assignment gaps—then I can narrate what likely happened." (P7)

The most valued designs supported explanation-through-navigation, not merely display-through-summaries.

Analysis of interface screenshots and design iteration documents obtained from participating schools corroborates these insights, demonstrating how explainability features directly influenced interpretive confidence.

Optional Thematic Matrix (for transparency of categorization)

Theme	Essence of Experience	Typical Action/Response
Reconciling AI & Judgment	AI as hypothesis, human as adjudicator	Seek corroborating qualitative evidence
Contextual Fairness	Adjust metrics for situational realities	Document equity-based overrides
Accountability vs Ethics	Pressure to act vs duty of care	Log explicit override rationales
Trust Calibration	Conditional reliance on explainability & stability	Monitor post-update drift; ignore opaque alerts
Cognitive/Emotional Load	Signal overload; moral weight of decisions	Structured review cycles; role delegation
Relational Ripples	From surveillance to partnership	Co-interpret data; formative framing
Ethical Protocols	From ad hoc to auditable	Five-step micro-protocols
Interface Affordances	Design shapes interpretability	Prefer drill-downs, provenance, trend comparisons

Principals' lived experiences reveal that AI dashboards function best as provocateurs of inquiry rather than arbiters of truth. Fairness emerges through contextualization and dialogic validation, not metric uniformity. Ethical practice is sustained when override is normalized, explainability is operational (not ornamental), and relationships are protected through transparent, co-interpreted use of data. In short, meaningful evaluation arises where pragmatic judgment and ethical commitments are procedurally integrated into everyday decision-making.

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DISCUSSION

This study revealed that principals' engagement with AI dashboards is characterized by a process of negotiation in which professional judgment, fairness, and ethical responsibility intersect with algorithmic recommendations (Wang, 2021). The findings highlight that the essence of principals' lived experiences lies not in passive adoption of AI outputs, but in an active interpretive stance where meaning is constructed through contextualization and ethical deliberation—directly addressing the guiding questions raised in the introduction.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Questions

The results demonstrate that principals respond to AI recommendations by positioning them as provisional cues rather than definitive judgments (Soboleva & Karavaev, 2020). This orientation answers the first research question by showing that sense-making emerges from a combination of trust calibration, contextual fairness, and ethical override practices. The second research question, which concerned the conditions under which principals override AI outputs, is addressed through accounts that emphasize proportionality, transparency, and restorative intent (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). The third research question is illuminated by evidence that AI dashboards alter relational dynamics with teachers, either reinforcing surveillance or fostering collaborative interpretation depending on how the tools are introduced and framed (Roberts, 2022). Collectively, these contributions reveal that principals develop a pragmatic-ethical alignment that enables them to navigate accountability demands without sacrificing professional integrity or relational trust.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theory

These findings resonate with earlier studies that noted the limitations of data dashboards when used as mechanistic tools for accountability, while extending the discussion by capturing how principals make sense of these tools in practice (Nyberg et al., 2020). The emphasis on fairness as contextual rather than uniform aligns with critical perspectives on equity in educational evaluation, which argue that standardized metrics often fail to reflect lived realities (Gottlieb et al., 2022). At the same time, the practice of ethical override supports arguments in the AI ethics literature that human judgment remains indispensable in contexts of uncertainty and value conflict (Mukhlis, 2025a). By demonstrating how principals procedurally integrate professional values with algorithmic cues, the study adds depth to theories of educational leadership and sense-making, showing that meaning-making is not a peripheral act but the central mechanism through which AI is domesticated in schools.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry important implications for both theory and practice in educational leadership. At a professional level, they suggest that AI dashboards should be understood not as neutral instruments but as socio-technical artifacts that influence judgment, ethics, and relationships within schools (Benediktsson, 2023). The way principals negotiated fairness and accountability demonstrates that leadership involves more than compliance with metrics; it is a reflective practice that seeks balance between institutional demands and human dignity (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Socially and culturally, these experiences highlight the risk of reinforcing surveillance cultures if dashboards are introduced without transparency or collaborative interpretation (AlKhamees & Durugbo, 2025). Conversely, when used dialogically, AI dashboards can strengthen trust, foster professional growth, and serve as catalysts for more equitable decision-making in education systems beyond the immediate study context.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was situated within a specific context of secondary schools, which may limit the transferability of findings to other educational settings such as higher education or vocational institutions (Khalijian et al., 2024). The participant pool, though diverse in gender and school type, remained relatively small, consistent with phenomenological traditions but less representative of the wider population (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Additionally, reliance on self-reported experiences and diary reflections may have been shaped by recall bias or participants' own interpretive framing. While these constraints are inherent to

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phenomenological inquiry, they emphasize that the results should be interpreted as contextually rich insights rather than universally generalizable claims.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend these findings by examining how principals in different cultural or policy environments experience the integration of AI dashboards, thereby illuminating the role of local governance structures in shaping sense-making (McDonald et al., 2021). Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in tracing how trust, fairness, and ethical practices evolve as principals gain more sustained experience with algorithmic systems. Comparative work involving teachers, district leaders, and policymakers could broaden understanding of how multiple stakeholders interpret and negotiate AI-generated outputs, offering a fuller picture of the social ecosystem around data-driven evaluation (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Such research would deepen theoretical perspectives on educational leadership in the digital age and provide practical guidance for designing AI systems that are responsive to the lived realities of those who use them.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of school principals using AI dashboards to evaluate teacher performance, focusing on how they interpret, negotiate, and assign meaning to algorithmic outputs. The findings revealed that principals engage in a process of sense-making that balances professional judgment with accountability demands, while also confronting ethical dilemmas related to fairness and transparency. By showing how principals develop pragmatic-ethical alignments in their decision-making, this research addressed gaps left by earlier studies that emphasized technical or quantitative perspectives without capturing subjective experience. The study contributes by demonstrating that dashboards are not neutral tools but socio-technical artifacts that shape relationships, trust, and professional practice in schools. These insights enrich the field of educational leadership and AI ethics by highlighting the central role of human interpretation in data-driven decision-making. Future research may build on these findings by examining how similar sense-making processes unfold across diverse cultural contexts and governance systems, as well as by exploring how longitudinal use of AI reshapes leadership practices over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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