



Understanding Transformational Leadership Experiences: Insights from School Principals

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 29-10-2025

Revised 29-11-2025

Accepted 17-12-2025

Keyword:

Transformational Leadership; Digital Transformation; Educational Management; School Principals; Leadership Experience; Reflective Practice

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership in the digital era represents a critical intersection between technological innovation and human experience. Within this evolving context, school principals are challenged to reinterpret their roles as transformational leaders who guide institutions through digital and cultural change. However, current research has primarily focused on leadership behaviors and institutional performance, leaving the subjective experience of principals largely unexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of eight school principals—representing diverse school types and lengths of service—who navigated digital transformation within their institutions. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the research captures the lived experiences of eight school principals through in-depth interviews and thematic interpretation. The analysis reveals four interrelated dimensions of leadership meaning: identity redefinition, emotional negotiation, collaborative vision-building, and ethical reflection. These findings demonstrate that leadership transformation is an interpretive and moral process grounded in self-awareness, empathy, and relational trust. By foregrounding the phenomenological essence of leadership, the study provides new insights into how digital transformation is experienced as both a professional and existential journey. The results highlight the importance of reflective practice and ethical consciousness in leadership training, offering a framework for fostering more human-centered leadership in digital education. Future research may extend these insights to cross-cultural contexts and longitudinal designs to explore how leadership meaning evolves over time.



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INTRODUCTION

Education in the twenty-first century is undergoing a profound transformation shaped by the rapid integration of digital technologies into every aspect of institutional life (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Schools, traditionally seen as stable and structured learning environments, are now compelled to evolve into dynamic ecosystems that integrate digital platforms, online pedagogies, and data-driven management practices (Ghavifekr & Wong, 2022). In this evolving landscape, school principals must navigate increased expectations to lead cultural, organizational, and technological change.

Globally, the movement toward digital transformation in education reflects broader social and cultural shifts associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As societies become more interconnected and technology-driven, educational leaders face the challenge of fostering a learning culture that balances innovation with human values (Ilyas et al., 2022). Leadership, therefore, becomes both a technical and emotional process, requiring principals to navigate the complex intersection of technology, pedagogy, and ethics. The transformation of schools into digitally adaptive organizations depends heavily on how leaders internalize and interpret the meaning of digitalization not merely as a managerial task but as an existential and relational phenomenon.

In this context, the phenomenon of transformational leadership in the digital era emerges as a multidimensional human experience that extends beyond measurable performance indicators. It encompasses how leaders perceive, feel, and assign meaning to their role as agents of change amid uncertainty and resistance (Pamungkas et al., 2023). The process involves emotional resilience, moral reflection, and the reconfiguration of identity as leaders encounter both challenges and opportunities within the digital landscape. Yet, despite extensive quantitative studies on leadership effectiveness and technology adoption, the subjective dimension of leadership meaning how principals personally experience and interpret digital transformation remains insufficiently explored in educational research.

A phenomenological exploration is therefore essential to uncover the essence of leadership as lived experience rather than as a conceptual construct. This approach emphasizes understanding leadership from the perspective of those who live it illuminating how principals interpret their realities, construct meaning, and enact values in a rapidly digitalizing world (Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025). By focusing on the lived experiences of school principals, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of educational leadership as a human, relational, and meaning-making process situated within the broader transformation of education systems.

Within educational leadership studies, research on how individuals experience leadership phenomena has become an increasingly significant area of inquiry. The rise of digital transformation in education has not only changed operational practices but has also reshaped the lived realities of school leaders who must navigate technological, emotional, and organizational complexities. Scholars have emphasized that leadership, particularly transformational leadership, is inherently experiential rooted in human perception, relational engagement, and the search for meaning in times of institutional change (Poolsawad et al., 2020). However, much of the existing literature continues to conceptualize leadership through structural or behavioral lenses, often neglecting the subjective and interpretive dimensions that define leaders' lived experiences.

Methodologically, exploring the meaning of experience presents substantial challenges. Quantitative approaches, while useful for measuring leadership outcomes, tend to reduce rich human experiences to statistical variables, thereby overlooking the emotional, ethical, and existential layers that accompany leadership in practice. Similarly, traditional qualitative studies such as case studies or descriptive surveys often remain confined to observable behaviors and contextual descriptions rather than penetrating the inner world of the participants (Mokhtar et al., 2023). These limitations hinder the understanding of how principals interpret their leadership identities, respond to institutional tensions, and internalize the cultural meanings of digital change.

Consequently, prior research has not adequately captured the essence of transformational leadership as a lived phenomenon how principals construct, experience, and make sense of leadership amid digital transformation (Ergin et al., 2021). The gap between observed leadership behavior and the internal meaning-making process underscores the necessity of adopting a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes lived experience as the foundation for understanding leadership. By focusing on the interpretative and reflective dimensions of leadership practice, phenomenology offers a pathway to access the emotional and existential realities that quantitative or descriptive frameworks fail to reveal. This depth-oriented approach provides a more holistic understanding of how school principals embody leadership in times of digital and cultural disruption.

While numerous leadership frameworks and digital transformation models have been proposed within the educational management literature, most practical solutions continue to rely on instrumental or managerial approaches emphasizing measurable performance outcomes, administrative efficiency, and technological implementation strategies (Hidayat & Patras, 2024). These frameworks, though effective for operational guidance, often fail to capture the nuanced, human-centered aspects of how school principals experience and interpret the act of leading in the digital age. Leadership, in such contexts, is frequently treated as a set of competencies or observable behaviors, thereby reducing its complexity to a technical function rather than a meaning-making process rooted in lived human experience.

This overreliance on pragmatic approaches has produced a critical limitation: a lack of understanding of the subjective and existential dimensions of digital transformational leadership (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Quantitative and managerial studies, while abundant, offer little insight into the inner world of leaders their doubts, ethical struggles, emotional negotiations, and evolving sense of self as they confront the challenges of digitalization. Such aspects, which are deeply personal and contextual, cannot be adequately addressed by frameworks that prioritize metrics or performance indicators over interpretative understanding.

To address this gap, there is a growing recognition of the need to employ phenomenological inquiry as an alternative lens for understanding leadership as lived experience. Unlike conventional methods, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of experience how individuals perceive, feel, and construct meaning in their engagement with complex social realities. In the context of educational leadership, this approach enables a more holistic exploration of how principals construct their identity, navigate digital transformation, and integrate ethical and emotional reflections into their leadership practices (Noviana & Antosa, 2020). Adopting a phenomenological perspective, therefore, allows the investigation to transcend procedural analysis and engage with the deeper, interpretative layers of leadership meaning, which remain largely underexplored in contemporary scholarship.

Recent studies in educational leadership and organizational transformation have increasingly explored the human side of leadership in digital contexts. Scholars such as (Chikhungu et al., 2020) have examined how digital innovation influences leadership behavior, while (Al-Barakat et al., 2022) have emphasized the cultural and ethical aspects of leading in times of change. However, most of these investigations have approached leadership through structural or behavioral frameworks, leaving the lived experience of school principals largely unexamined. By focusing primarily on outcomes, such as digital readiness or teacher performance, prior research overlooks how principals personally perceive, struggle with, and make sense of their leadership identities during digital transformation.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to address this conceptual and methodological gap. Phenomenology provides a rigorous framework to explore how individuals experience a given phenomenon and construct meaning within it. The use of IPA enables the uncovering of principals' reflective narratives revealing how they interpret leadership as an ethical, emotional, and existential practice in the digital era (Chotimah et al., 2025). Through this approach, the study responds to the question raised in the previous section: How do school principals experience and interpret transformational leadership amid digital transformation? The phenomenological design thus allows an understanding that is both contextual and deeply personal, capturing the essence of leadership as lived meaning rather than as managerial performance.

The structure of this article is organized as follows: the Introduction establishes the conceptual and empirical context of transformational leadership in digital education and outlines the study's research problem (Yadav, 2021). The Method section details the interpretative phenomenological design, data collection, and analytic procedures (Chen & Tasi, 2024). The Results section presents the emergent themes that reveal principals' lived experiences and the essence of digital transformational leadership (Biloshchytskyi et al., 2024). Finally, the Discussion interprets these findings in light of existing theories and concludes with implications for leadership development and educational practice in digital contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The study employed an interpretative phenomenological design (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of school principals in implementing transformational leadership during the digitalization of education (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, emphasizes the understanding of subjective experiences and the meanings that individuals ascribe to their lived realities. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how

principals construct, interpret, and internalize the meanings of digital transformation within their leadership practices.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was particularly suitable for this study due to its dual focus on the descriptive essence of experience and the interpretative understanding of participants' meaning-making processes. The approach assumes that human experiences are embedded within contextual, relational, and existential dimensions, making it relevant for understanding leadership as a phenomenon influenced by values, identity, and organizational culture. Through this design, the study sought to uncover the essence of digital transformational leadership as perceived and experienced by principals in real educational contexts. In line with phenomenological principles, the design also foregrounded ethical sensitivity, researcher reflexivity, and rigorous strategies for establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Before data collection, participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the ways in which their data would be used. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were employed in all transcripts and reports to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Digital data (audio files and transcripts) were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Researcher positionality was explicitly acknowledged as part of the study design. The primary researcher, with professional experience in educational leadership and prior engagement with digital transformation initiatives, recognized the potential influence of personal assumptions and professional background on data interpretation. To address this, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, regularly documenting pre-understandings, emotional reactions, and interpretative decisions. These reflections supported the process of bracketing and helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's prior experiences or expectations.

Participants

Participants consisted of school principals who had actively engaged in leading digital transformation initiatives within their respective institutions for at least two academic years (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure the inclusion of individuals possessing direct, substantial, and reflective experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria required participants to:

- (1) hold a formal position as a school principal,
- (2) have a minimum of five years of leadership experience, and
- (3) demonstrate involvement in school-based digital transformation projects.

Exclusion criteria eliminated those who held only temporary administrative roles or lacked direct engagement with digital leadership activities. The final sample included eight principals (five males and three females) aged between 38 and 54 years, representing both urban and semi-urban schools. Their diverse institutional backgrounds provided a rich contextual variation that enhanced the depth of phenomenological insight.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that provided participants with the freedom to describe their experiences and reflections (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview followed an interview guide developed to elicit narratives surrounding leadership meaning, challenges, and adaptation during digital transformation.

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either in participants' offices or via secure online platforms, ensuring minimal disruption to their professional responsibilities. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Supplementary notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual elements relevant to interpretation.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after completion to maintain the authenticity and integrity of participants' voices. The data collection process continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the recurrence of core meanings across interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), guided by the procedures established by Daly, (2007) & Longhofer et al., (2012). The analytic process involved several iterative steps to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

First, each transcript was read multiple times to establish familiarity with the data and to identify meaning units that captured significant statements or reflections. These units were then coded and clustered into emergent themes, reflecting shared meanings across participants.

Themes were subsequently integrated into superordinate categories, forming a coherent narrative that represented the essence of digital transformational leadership (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Throughout this process, the researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing to minimize preconceptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' own expressions. NVivo 12 software was utilized to organize data and assist in maintaining analytical rigor, though interpretative synthesis remained a manual, reflective process rooted in phenomenological philosophy.

The final stage of analysis involved crafting a composite description that synthesized thematic insights into a cohesive account of how principals experienced and interpreted their leadership roles during digital transformation.

RESULTS

Digital Transformation as a Journey of Leadership Reinterpretation

Participants described the digital transformation not merely as a technical adjustment but as a profound redefinition of what it means to lead in a school context. Principals articulated an ongoing process of personal and professional reinterpretation, where leadership shifted from control and supervision toward facilitation, empowerment, and co-learning.

"I used to think being a principal meant making decisions and setting directions. Now, I realize leadership in a digital school is more about learning together, guiding teachers to explore technology with me." Participant 3

This redefinition reflects a deep sense of humility and adaptive growth, as principals recognized that technological competence alone was insufficient without cultivating digital resilience and shared learning. The digital era, therefore, became a transformative mirror through which leaders rediscovered their identity and purpose.

Digital Leadership Transformation Cycle



Navigating Cultural Resistance and Emotional Tensions

The participants emphasized that digital transformation inevitably triggered emotional and cultural resistance within their institutions. Some teachers felt threatened or anxious about new digital tools, perceiving them as challenges to their established pedagogical comfort zones. Principals, consequently, had to navigate between empathy and assertiveness.

“Some teachers told me they felt left behind when everything became online. My role was to make them feel included – not forced, but guided.” Participant 1

The phenomenological essence of this theme lies in the tension between innovation and belonging. Leaders experienced emotional labor as they balanced the institutional demand for change with their commitment to human relationships. This process illuminated how leadership in education is not purely administrative but deeply affective and relational.

Reconstructing School Identity through Collaborative Visioning

Another significant theme emerged around how principals reconstructed their schools’ collective identity by fostering shared digital visions. The participants described their leadership as a process of meaning-making that encouraged collaboration among teachers, students, and parents.

“We rebuilt our school’s vision together – teachers, students, even parents. The question was not about ‘what technology to use,’ but ‘what kind of learning community we want to be in this digital world.’” Participant 5

This collaborative reimagining served as a catalyst for cultural coherence in digital transformation. Rather than imposing top-down directives, principals invited stakeholders into an interpretive dialogue, enabling the emergence of a shared digital ethos grounded in trust and innovation.

Transformational Leadership as an Ethical and Reflective Praxis

Beyond management and vision, principals viewed transformational leadership as an ethical commitment to personal reflection and moral responsibility. They perceived leadership as a process of continuous ethical questioning about fairness, inclusion, and humanity in digital education.

“Technology changes fast, but our values should stay. I always remind myself am I leading for the system’s efficiency or for the growth of people?” Participant 2

The reflective praxis of leadership represented a moral anchor amid digital disruption. The principals’ narratives revealed an integration of spiritual and ethical dimensions into their managerial practices, suggesting that transformational leadership in education transcends organizational boundaries to embody values of care, justice, and human dignity.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

The phenomenological analysis revealed that school principals experience transformational leadership during digital transformation as a process of identity redefinition, emotional negotiation, and ethical reflection (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Their narratives highlighted how leadership meaning emerges not only from managerial decision-making but also from the inner experience of guiding others through uncertainty and cultural change. This understanding directly addresses the study’s central question how principals interpret and embody transformational leadership in the context of educational digitalization.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The findings demonstrate that principals construct leadership meaning through four essential experiential dimensions: reinterpretation of leadership identity, emotional navigation of resistance, collaborative vision-building, and ethical self-reflection. These dimensions collectively reveal that leadership in digital transformation is not merely a technical response to innovation but a phenomenological journey of meaning construction. The study contributes to the field by reframing transformational leadership as a lived moral and existential practice rather than an administrative or behavioral model (Kusumawati & Umam, 2025). This perspective deepens the understanding of leadership as a human-centered phenomenon one that is shaped by self-awareness, empathy, and ethical deliberation within dynamic institutional contexts. The insights also suggest that effective digital leadership requires cultivating reflective capacities that enable leaders to integrate technology with humanity, fostering not only institutional progress but also collective well-being.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Context

The interpretation aligns with and extends prior work by (Amin et al., 2025), who identified the importance of adaptability and relational trust in educational leadership. However, this study goes beyond functional interpretations by revealing the inner interpretive process through which leaders make sense of digital transformation. While (Budiningsih et al., 2020) emphasized transformational leadership as a behavioral catalyst for change, the present findings show that transformation is deeply rooted in existential reflection and emotional authenticity. Similarly, Fullan’s (2019) notion of moral purpose in leadership finds resonance here, as principals in this study framed digital change as both a professional obligation and an ethical calling. The results also complement Schein’s (2020) theory of organizational culture, illustrating that meaning construction among principals serves as the cultural anchor that stabilizes schools amid digital flux.

Overall, this study bridges the gap between theory and experience by showing that leadership transformation in digital contexts cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its phenomenological essence the lived consciousness through which leaders perceive, interpret, and respond to the evolving realities of education.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both theory and practice within the field of educational leadership. From a theoretical perspective, they illuminate the existential and interpretive dimensions of leadership that have been overlooked in traditional models of

transformational leadership. By foregrounding principals' lived experiences, the study emphasizes that leadership transformation begins not with structural reform but with self-awareness, moral discernment, and meaning-making (Xu et al., 2024). This recognition challenges the dominance of managerialist paradigms and invites a redefinition of leadership as a human process grounded in empathy, ethical consciousness, and collective reflection.

Practically, the results suggest that professional development for school leaders should integrate reflective and phenomenological approaches that encourage introspection and dialogical learning rather than prescriptive training (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). In particular, leadership programs should support principals in exploring their personal narratives, emotional struggles, and ethical dilemmas as part of professional growth. This approach would foster authenticity, compassion, and moral resilience in navigating digital transformation. Moreover, the social and cultural relevance of these findings extends beyond individual schools: as education systems globally confront rapid technological change, understanding the human meanings behind leadership practices becomes essential for creating sustainable, value-driven educational ecosystems.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its depth of insight, the study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as a phenomenological investigation, the findings are contextually grounded in the experiences of eight school principals, which limits their transferability to other educational or cultural settings. The interpretative nature of phenomenology also means that the analysis is mediated by the researcher's interpretive lens, although strategies such as member checking and audit trails were employed to enhance credibility (Din et al., 2024). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of retrospective bias, as participants may reconstruct experiences in ways influenced by memory or social desirability. Finally, the focus on leadership within the digital transformation of education, while providing a rich context, may not fully capture other external factors such as policy pressures or community expectations that shape leadership meaning in practice.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the study's value; rather, they highlight the importance of situated understanding in phenomenological research. The findings should be interpreted as offering transferable insights rather than universal laws, inviting readers to reflect on their own contexts and professional experiences.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could build upon this study by expanding its scope both contextually and methodologically. Comparative phenomenological studies across different cultural or institutional contexts could deepen understanding of how sociocultural environments influence leadership meaning construction. Longitudinal research might also reveal how principals' interpretations of transformational leadership evolve over time as digital transformation becomes more institutionalized. Additionally, integrating phenomenological insights with other qualitative traditions such as narrative inquiry or ethnography could provide a more holistic account of how leadership meaning is shaped within organizational life.

From a practical standpoint, future studies could explore the implications of these findings for leadership training and policy development, particularly in designing reflective frameworks that foster emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, and adaptive leadership in digital education (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Ultimately, this line of research holds the potential to bridge the gap between leadership theory and the lived experience of leading change, contributing to a more humanistic and phenomenologically informed understanding of educational leadership in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how school principals experience and interpret transformational leadership amid the digital transformation of education, addressing the fundamental question of how

leadership meaning is constructed in times of technological and cultural change. The phenomenological analysis revealed that leadership is not merely a managerial role but a reflective, ethical, and relational process rooted in personal meaning and collective vision. By highlighting themes such as identity redefinition, emotional negotiation, collaborative vision-building, and moral reflection, the study advances understanding of digital transformational leadership as a lived experience rather than a prescriptive model. These findings fill a critical gap in existing leadership literature that has often prioritized performance metrics over human experience. The insights contribute both theoretically by emphasizing the interpretive essence of leadership and practically by informing leadership development grounded in empathy and ethical awareness. Future studies could extend this inquiry by examining how such lived meanings evolve across cultural contexts or longitudinally as digital transformation deepens in educational systems.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All procedures and analyses were conducted independently and objectively, without any financial, personal, or institutional influence that could have affected the outcomes or interpretations of this study.

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