Ontology of the School Leadership Journey

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of uncovering the ontology of the school leadership journey as an existential and internal phenomenon. The research conceptualizes leadership as a "mode of being within the school lifeworld." Using a qualitative approach and an interpretive phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 27 school principals in the city of Rasht. Data organization was performed through a three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective). These organized data were then analyzed using interpretive phenomenology. The findings indicate that the school leadership journey is a nonlinear, complex, and existential process that emerges within the context of "liminal situations"—moments of crisis, ambiguity, and internal transformation. In this journey, the school leader gradually moves from the "inauthentic self"—a self shaped by organizational and social expectations—toward the "authentic self" through suspending certainties, intersecting roles, and redefining one's situatedness. This process occurs not in isolation but through deep interactions with teachers, students, and parents, and through confronting the structural challenges of the school environment. Furthermore, the findings show that school leadership is not a "task" but a way of "being"—an existential condition in which the leader, through a perceptive and empathetic presence, creates meaning from within lived experiences. By redefining school leadership as an existential journey, this article opens the way for rethinking leadership preparation programs and educational policymaking, emphasizing the necessity of cultivating the "leader's being" rather than merely teaching "managerial skills."

Keywords: ontology; school leadership journey; authentic self; liminal situations; interpretive phenomenology

Introduction

School leadership has increasingly become the focus of scholarly inquiry as education systems worldwide confront rapid sociocultural change, heightened accountability expectations, and the growing emotional and relational demands placed on principals. Modern leadership theory has moved beyond structural and managerial paradigms to emphasize leadership as an existential, relational, and developmental journey, one deeply embedded in the lived experience of school leaders themselves. Foundational leadership scholarship has long highlighted that effective leadership relies not merely on technical expertise but on the leader's capacity to navigate dynamic human contexts, articulate purpose, and respond meaningfully to the complexities

of organizational life (1). In schooling environments—which are inherently relational, value-laden, and emotionally intricate—the leadership role becomes even more multi-dimensional. As contemporary schools experience shifting pedagogical expectations, heightened emotional labor, and evolving community needs, principals increasingly interpret their leadership journey as ongoing identity formation rather than a finite set of managerial tasks (2).

A growing body of research suggests that school leadership cannot be adequately understood through behavioral or trait-based perspectives alone but must be framed through interpretive and phenomenological lenses that account for how leaders make meaning of their experiences. Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical works of Husserl and further developed by scholars such as van Manen, posits that individuals' lived experiences reveal the essential structures of phenomena and provide insights into the processes through which meaning is formed (3, 4). Leadership, from this perspective, is not simply an external function but a manner of being—an embodied engagement with the educational lifeworld. Interpretative phenomenological analysis similarly frames leadership as a dynamic interplay between personal meaning-making, emotional processes, and contextual interaction (5). These theoretical underpinnings align with emerging arguments that the leadership journey is inherently transformative, requiring principals to negotiate uncertainty, reconstruct identity, and engage reflectively with the lived realities of their school communities (6, 7).

Empirical work on the emotional and relational dimensions of school leadership further reinforces the need to conceptualize leadership as a developmental and existential process. Research on school principals demonstrates the centrality of emotions in leadership practice and the profound impact of emotional experiences on decision-making, identity development, and the sustainability of leadership roles (6). Principals frequently experience what has been described as the "lucid loneliness of the gatekeeper," where they must balance institutional expectations with deep personal responsibility for the well-being of teachers and students (8). These emotional complexities shape their journey through self-doubt, reflection, and renewed purpose. Similarly, scholars examining leadership authenticity argue that leaders evolve through processes of self-awareness, value clarification, and acknowledgement of personal limitations—a path that fosters integrity, empathy, and resilience (9). Such insights underscore that school leadership development is not linear but emergent, marked by cycles of internal conflict, critical reflection, and personal transformation.

Recent global research highlights that the leadership journey is also profoundly shaped by sociocultural and institutional contexts. Studies of school leaders working across cultural boundaries reveal how identity formation occurs at the intersection of personal values, professional norms, and contextual constraints. Deniz's exploration of Turkish school leaders working in African contexts demonstrates that leadership identity evolves as principals navigate cultural dissonance, unfamiliar expectations, and lived challenges in new environments (10). This highlights how leadership becomes a journey of adaptation and meaning reconstruction. Similarly, studies of school managers confronting gendered expectations reveal how stereotypes of masculine and feminine leadership shape leaders' experiences, self-concept, and interactions with their communities (11). These insights reinforce that leadership identity is not merely internal but co-constructed through interactions with others and embedded within broader social structures.

Within school systems, professional identity has emerged as a critical factor in leaders' well-being, decision-making, and commitment. Research indicates that tensions between organizational expectations, personal beliefs, and role demands can generate alienation, stress, and burnout—phenomena that shape leaders' sense of purpose and influence their leadership trajectory (12, 13). The emotional burden of leadership, combined with persistent structural pressures, often requires principals to engage in deep self-reflection to realign their professional identity with their evolving sense of meaning. These professional tensions can also catalyze growth, as leaders re-evaluate their assumptions, reconstruct their understanding of leadership, and redefine their relationship with the school community.

The concept of the leadership journey has also been explored within organizational and business studies, offering analogies that enrich understanding of leadership in education. Schaeffer describes leadership as a journey marked by continuous learning, risk-taking, and identity evolution, arguing that leaders grow through confronting uncertainty and making meaning from experience (14). Osibanjo similarly frames leadership development as a journey requiring intentional preparation, reflective practice, and cultivation of internal resources to navigate complexity (15). In global leadership contexts, Yusoff emphasizes that leadership development is most effective when embedded in authentic contexts that challenge assumptions and support profound identity shifts (16). Leadership development programs that emphasize immersive experiences, reflective inquiry, and long-term growth have been shown to support deep learning and sustained behavioral change among leaders (17). These perspectives underscore the developmental nature of leadership and emphasize that becoming a leader is a lifelong, meaning-making journey rather than an outcome of training alone.

Within educational research, phenomenological studies of teachers and school leaders have provided additional insights into the inner landscape of leadership practice. Studies exploring lived experiences of supervising remote teaching illustrate how school leaders navigated ambiguity, emotional strain, and the shifting boundaries of relational work during times of crisis (18). Similarly, interpretive phenomenological work on teachers' experiences with traumatized children highlights how educators develop deeper empathy, emotional resilience, and reflective capacity through confronting challenging human experiences (19). These findings reinforce the significance of lived experience as a source of leadership knowledge and the centrality of meaning-making in guiding leaders' interpretations of their roles.

Leadership identity development has therefore become a prominent theme in the study of educational leadership. Emerging scholarship demonstrates that identity formation is iterative, relational, and embedded in context, shaped by both personal biography and professional experiences. Contemporary models of leadership identity development emphasize the interplay of internal meaning-making, social interaction, and structural conditions in shaping leaders' self-concept and their evolving understanding of leadership (20). This perspective aligns closely with philosophical phenomenology, which foregrounds the integration of subjective experience, relational dynamics, and contextual embeddedness in understanding human phenomena (3, 4). Within this framework, school principals' leadership journey can be conceptualized as a dynamic process of becoming— an unfolding engagement with oneself, others, and the educational lifeworld.

Threshold concept theory further contributes to an ontological understanding of leadership development. Threshold concepts are transformative, irreversible, and integrative understandings that fundamentally alter how individuals perceive their professional world (21). For school leaders, such concepts often emerge through challenging or liminal experiences—moments when previous assumptions no longer suffice, and new understandings must be constructed. These transformative encounters reshape leaders' assumptions, behaviors, and sense of self, propelling them into new dimensions of leadership meaning. These insights mirror broader philosophical arguments that genuine learning and leadership development involve shifts in being rather than solely in knowledge or skill (4).

Despite the breadth of research on school leadership, emotional labor, identity development, and organizational complexity, less attention has been dedicated to the ontological nature of the school leadership journey itself—how principals experience their becoming as leaders, how meaning unfolds through lived experiences, and how interpersonal and contextual dynamics shape their existential understanding of leadership. While leadership frameworks frequently emphasize competencies or behaviors, phenomenological inquiry invites exploration of leadership as a mode of being, embedded in the lived world of the school and inseparable from the leader's evolving sense of self (4, 5). Recent studies argue that the future of school leadership research must further examine how principals construct meaning, navigate liminal experiences, and reconcile their inner identity with external demands (6, 7). Understanding these deeper layers is essential for designing leadership development

programs that move beyond managerial training toward cultivating reflective, authentic, and relationally grounded leadership practice.

Given these theoretical and empirical developments, there is a clear need for research that conceptualizes school leadership as an ontological and interpretive journey—one shaped by the leader's encounters with self, others, and the structural realities of schooling. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explore and articulate the ontology of the school leadership journey as experienced and narrated by school principals.

Methods and Materials

This study was designed with the aim of discovering and explicating the ontology of the school leadership journey—a goal that requires returning to the lived experiences of school leaders and exploring the intrinsic meaning of "being a leader" within the leadership journey. Accordingly, the present research was conducted within a qualitative framework using a phenomenological design. This approach, rooted in the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, is founded on the premise that the essence of phenomena is revealed only through examining individuals' lived experiences (van Manen, 2023). Within this framework, the researcher does not seek to construct causal or predictive models but rather aims to understand the "mode of being" of a school leader in the leadership journey—how the leader encounters the authentic self, and how contextual and liminal situations shape the leader's existential state.

The statistical population of the study comprised all principals of lower and upper secondary schools in Rasht during the 2024–2025 academic year. Given the exploratory and depth-oriented nature of phenomenological research, sampling was initially purposeful and subsequently theoretical. Selection criteria for participants included: (a) at least five years of school leadership experience, (b) geographic diversity (urban and rural), (c) gender diversity, and (d) willingness and readiness to articulate internal and existential experiences of the leadership journey. Ultimately, 27 school principals were selected as the final participants, and this number was continued until theoretical saturation—when no new concepts emerged from the data and conceptual development was ensured.

The primary tool for data collection was the in-depth semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting (typically in the principal's office or another location chosen by the participant) and averaged 90 minutes in duration. The interview guide was designed based on the study's primary and secondary questions and included prompts such as: "Please describe your leadership journey," "Recall moments when you encountered your real self," and "What situations in the school prompted you to reflect on your identity and your mode of being?" All interviews were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed.

Data organization followed a three-stage coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The analysis of these organized data was conducted using the interpretive phenomenological method. In the first stage, interview transcripts were read line by line to extract initial meaning units (open codes). In the second stage, open codes were categorized based on similarities and differences and transformed into higher-order concepts (categories and subcategories). Finally, in the third stage, key concepts were organized around the study's central question ("the ontology of the school leadership journey"), and interpretive phenomenological analysis was conducted on these organized data.

To ensure the credibility and transferability of the findings, multilayered strategies were employed, including: (1) member checking: analytical summaries were returned to participants for confirmation; (2) documentation of the analytical process: all coding stages and conceptual derivations were transparently recorded; (3) participant diversity: ensuring diversity in gender, experience, and geographic context enhanced data richness; and (4) peer debriefing: portions of the data and analyses were reviewed by two experienced researchers in educational leadership and phenomenology.

Finally, this study was conducted in full adherence to ethical principles of human research. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of information and identities was fully guaranteed. The phenomenological approach not only supports answering the research questions but also provides space for the inner voices of school leaders—primary bearers of the leadership journey—to be understood, thereby enabling deeper insight into the existential nature of school leadership.

Findings and Results

Phenomenological analysis in this study was conducted based on the interpretive method of Smith and Osborn (2015). In the first step, data from the 27 in-depth interviews with school principals—across three experience levels (novice, moderately experienced, and highly experienced)—were repeatedly reviewed to extract initial meaning units from participants' narratives. During open coding, primary concepts and themes, including recurring words and expressions, were identified and labeled. In axial coding, these concepts were categorized based on shared meaning and internal relationships among codes to form core categories. Finally, in selective coding, the final structure of meaning emerged from within the conceptual network, such that the transformation pathway from "pre-leadership" to "becoming a school leader" was represented as an existential and phenomenological journey. The analysis proceeded in a back-and-forth movement between data and interpretation; that is, the researcher moved beyond mere experiential description while maintaining phenomenological openness toward participants' experiences. The aim was not generalization but a deep understanding of the phenomenon within its lived context.

Analysis of Research Question 1: How does the school leader encounter the authentic self within the leadership journey?

Data analysis showed that one of the deepest layers of principals' experiences in the leadership trajectory is their gradual encounter with the "authentic self"—that level of awareness and perception in which the individual distances from formal and administratively constructed roles and attains existential self-recognition as a leader. At the onset of the journey, most principals experienced an "inner rupture": they felt a fundamental gap between what was expected of them and what they believed internally. A novice principal stated: "In the first meetings I felt I just needed to implement the regulations correctly, but very soon I realized these are people, not regulations." This statement reflects the initial step in moving from an instrumental self to a reflective self—the moment the principal realizes that school leadership is not merely an "organizational role" but a mode of being in relation to others.

Three primary themes emerged in this phase, presented in Figure 1.
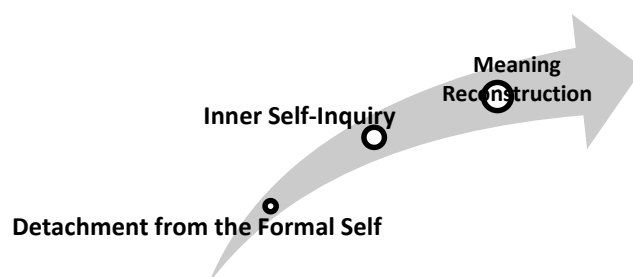

Figure 1: The School Leader's Existential Encounter with the Authentic Self

According to the process illustrated in Figure 1, in detaching from the formal self, principals described how the administrative role distanced them from their inner authenticity. Many stated that, in the first weeks, they commanded more than they listened, and they tried to be seen more than they truly saw others. Over time, and in confronting unpredictable school situations, principals entered a stage of inner self-examination. This stage resembles a "phenomenological reduction":

suspending external judgments and reflecting on the question, "Who am I as a leader?" An experienced principal stated: "For years I thought if the school was orderly, it meant I was successful. But I realized order without meaning is only an appearance." At this level, the authentic self becomes revealed through human experiences—empathy with a teacher experiencing burnout, conversations with a student facing family crisis. Meaning-making results from these encounters—the moment the principal realizes that their mission is not control but enabling the growth of the other. In phenomenological interpretation, this process can be called "the movement from self-management to self-leadership"—a progression wherein the principal, through continuous reflection on experience, attains a level of existential self-awareness that forms the foundation of authentic leadership.

Analysis of Research Question 2: How do school contexts and liminal situations shape the leader's existential state?

Data analysis revealed that principals' existential transformation occurs not in a vacuum but within the specific contexts of school life and in confronting "liminal situations." A liminal situation is a transitional and suspended state in which the boundary between order and crisis, stability and change, becomes unstable, compelling the principal to rethink their own being. In interviews, situations such as conflict between personal values and organizational demands, failure to establish communication with teachers, or facing sudden crises (such as student violence or lack of resources) were identified as liminal situations. One principal stated: "The day a teacher told me he was tired of the system, I realized talking about motivation and quality cannot be done from behind a desk. You have to live among them." Such experiences drive the principal to reconsider the nature of leadership and their relationship with the school. In axial coding, three key themes were extracted from these data, shown in Figure 2.
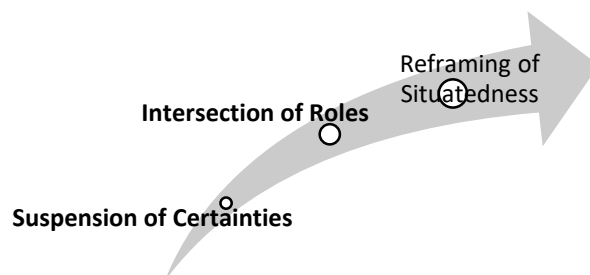

Reframing of Situatedness

Intersection of Roles

Suspension of Certainties

Figure 2: The Existential State of the School Leader in School Contexts and Liminal Situations

According to the process depicted in Figure 2, in the suspension of certainties, the principal realizes that predetermined solutions are ineffective for human situations; indeed, the leader encounters "constructive ambiguity." In the intersection of roles, the principal confronts the fluid boundaries among administrative, emotional, and pedagogical roles, discovering that school leadership is a form of "multiple being." Reframing situatedness is the stage in which the principal, through reflection and dialogue with others, finds new meanings for action and attains an "ecological understanding of leadership."

From a phenomenological perspective, liminal situations are "lived boundary experiences" where the possibility of existential transformation arises. In these situations, the school leader not only manages the crisis but also reconstructs the self. Thus, leadership becomes a continuous becoming within context—a process in which experience is both a challenge and a creator of meaning.

Analysis of the Main Research Question: What Is the Ontology of the School Leadership Journey?

The final and integrative analysis of the data from the two sub-questions demonstrates that the "school leadership journey" can be understood as an existential and interpretive process—a journey in which the principal transitions from "being in a role" to "being in meaning." The ontology of this journey can be comprehended through three main dimensions, which are presented in Figure 3.

Structural Dimension (Interaction with the School Context)

Intersubjective Dimension (Experience in Relation to the Other)

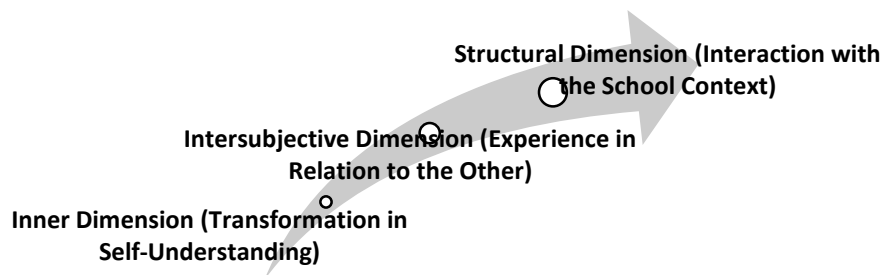Inner Dimension (Transformation in Self-Understanding)

Figure 3: The Ontological Trajectory of the School Leadership Journey

According to the process illustrated in Figure 3, in the internal dimension, school leadership is a movement from an unaware and instrumental self toward a conscious and authentic self. Along this path, the principal shifts from control to reflection, from duty to mission, and from fear to meaning. This journey resembles the process of *Dasein* in Heidegger's thought—a movement from forgetting oneself to remembering one's existence.

In the intersubjective dimension, school leadership emerges within a complex network of human relationships. In interactions with teachers, students, and parents, the principal not only performs a guiding role but is simultaneously transformed through dialogue and empathetic understanding. One experienced principal described it as follows: "The school was a mirror for me; I saw myself in the eyes of the teachers. Every decision was a reflection of me."

In the structural dimension, the being of leadership is shaped through the dynamic interplay between freedom and constraint. Administrative structures, bureaucracy, and external pressures are always present, yet the school leader learns to create a "space of possibility" within these very constraints. The overall analysis shows that the school leadership journey is not a linear and goal-directed path; rather, it is a spiral and recursive process in which each experience leads to renewed self-reflection and redefined meaning. Through this process, the principal moves from a simplistic mindset to a phenomenological understanding of the school as a human lifeworld—where individuals are not instruments of educational objectives but co-creators of meaning.

From this perspective, the "ontology of the school leadership journey" can be articulated as follows:

School leadership is an existential process in which the principal, through repeated encounters with the self, the other, and the situation, reaches a level of awareness that enables understanding leadership not as a "role" but as a "mode of being." This mode of being is continuously reproduced in relation to time, context, and experience. Thus, the school leadership journey is not a path traveled externally but an inner movement from unawareness to awareness, from role to meaning, and from structure to lifeworld.

Overall, within the logic of interpretive phenomenology, the data are not merely reflections of an external reality but manifestations of the participants' horizons of meaning. The findings of this study showed that school leadership is an ontological and interpretive phenomenon that emerges in the interaction among the individual, the other, and the situation. The lived experience of principals revealed that becoming a school leader is an "existential journey"—a movement from self-knowledge to understanding the other, and from living within structures to meaning-making in freedom.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ontology of the school leadership journey by examining how principals encounter their authentic selves, how they navigate liminal and challenging school contexts, and how leadership emerges as an existential mode of being rather than a technical role. The findings revealed that school leadership unfolds as a nonlinear, recursive, and meaning-making journey in which principals move from role-driven behaviors toward deeper self-awareness, relational engagement, and existential interpretation of their professional experiences. These results align strongly with

contemporary leadership scholarship emphasizing identity development, emotional labor, and the phenomenology of leadership practice. They further expand the theoretical understanding of leadership by demonstrating that principals' meaning-making processes form the core of their leadership evolution, echoing the foundational insights of phenomenology (3, 4).

A key finding concerns the principals' gradual encounter with their authentic selves as they move from "being in role" to "being in meaning." Participants described early leadership experiences characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and tension between organizational expectations and personal values. Over time, they reported a shift toward reflective self-awareness where authenticity, empathy, and meaning-making replaced compliance and control. These findings reinforce the work of Beatty, who emphasizes the centrality of emotional awareness in shaping leaders' identities and the necessity of confronting emotional tensions as part of leadership growth (6). Similarly, the emphasis on authenticity corresponds to Frye's argument that authentic leadership requires leaders to transcend superficial behaviors and embrace deeper levels of self-understanding (9). The present study expands these discussions by demonstrating that authenticity does not emerge suddenly but through a phenomenological process in which leaders suspend certainties, interrogate their assumptions, and allow their lived experiences to reshape their understanding of leadership.

The emergence of "inner transformation" as a central theme also aligns with leadership identity research suggesting that leadership grows through iterative reflection, feedback, and meaning reconstruction (20). Participants in this study described their leadership journey as an ongoing reconstruction of self, shaped by interactions with teachers, students, and parents. This echoes the view that leadership identity is relational and co-constructed, emerging within ongoing intersubjective exchanges rather than isolated self-analysis. These results support the interpretive phenomenological perspective that meaning arises in the interplay between subjective experience and relational context (5). The findings thus contribute to an enriched theoretical understanding of school leadership identity by illustrating how principals' existential reflections and lived relationships jointly shape their sense of being leaders.

Equally important is the finding that liminal situations—moments of crisis, tension, and ambiguity—serve as transformative thresholds that reshape leaders' understanding of themselves and their work. Participants narrated a range of such experiences, including crises of communication with teachers, disruptive student events, and conflicts between personal values and bureaucratic expectations. These liminal moments compelled principals to re-evaluate their assumptions and embrace a more interpretive, responsive, and context-sensitive approach to leadership. This mirrors the threshold concept literature, which argues that transformative learning arises when individuals encounter troublesome or destabilizing knowledge that forces conceptual reorganization (21). Similarly, Deniz's study of cross-cultural school leadership highlights how unfamiliar or challenging contexts provoke deep reflection and identity reconstruction (10). The present findings confirm that liminality is both destabilizing and generative, opening a space in which school leaders renegotiate their professional identities and reorient their leadership practices.

The results also illuminate the structural dimension of leadership, demonstrating how principals navigate the tensions between institutional constraints and their desire to create meaning and relational connection. Participants frequently described bureaucratic expectations as limiting, yet they simultaneously explained how they exercised agency within these systems to create "space for possibility." This aligns with Blackmore's analysis of how leaders negotiate emotional and organizational pressures to create meaningful change despite systemic limitations (7). Likewise, Leithwood and colleagues note that successful school leaders work within constraints by shaping organizational conditions in ways that promote learning and well-being (2). The present study deepens this understanding by showing that principals' ability to create agency arises not only from strategic competence but from existential clarity and meaning-making capacity developed over the course of their leadership journey.

The interpersonal dimension of leadership also emerged strongly, as participants consistently described how relationships with teachers and students shaped their identity, emotional experiences, and sense of purpose. This finding supports the work of Kelchtermans, who argues that principals experience a profound "lucid loneliness" that compels them to seek relational grounding in their everyday interactions (8). Similarly, Boholano's phenomenological study found that leaders supervising remote instruction navigated emotional strain through relational practices and empathy (18). These findings suggest that interpersonal relationships function not only as a site of leadership practice but as a mirror through which leaders recognize themselves and refine their existential understanding of leadership.

The recursive nature of the leadership journey identified in this study—where leaders repeatedly cycle between self-reflection, contextual interpretation, and relational engagement—is consistent with identity development models that emphasize leadership as continual becoming rather than a fixed state (20). Moreover, this cyclical process aligns with broader arguments in leadership development literature emphasizing deliberate practice, reflective inquiry, and contextual immersion as essential to sustained leadership growth (16, 17). The participants' experiences illustrate that principals grow by moving in and out of moments of certainty, doubt, and reinterpretation, reinforcing the premise that leadership is a lived, evolving phenomenon rather than a set of competencies to be mastered.

The findings also echo cross-cultural and identity-based research indicating that school leaders' self-concepts are shaped by societal expectations and cultural narratives. For example, the gendered stereotypes of leadership identified by Berkovich resonate with participants' reflections on how external expectations initially shaped their leadership behaviors (11). Through self-examination and relational engagement, many participants ultimately moved beyond these stereotypes toward more authentic enactment of their leadership identities. Similarly, research on role stress and professional identity among educators indicates that internal tensions and identity conflicts can drive reflective processes leading to greater alignment between personal values and professional actions (12, 13). The present study confirms that such tensions are not obstacles but essential catalysts for leadership meaning-making.

Finally, the results extend theoretical discussions on leadership as an existential journey. Schaeffer's depiction of leadership as a journey requiring reflection, courage, and adaptability is reflected vividly in participants' narratives (14). Osibanjo likewise describes leadership development as a lifelong journey requiring intentional preparation and resilience (15). The principals' accounts in this study offer empirical depth to these conceptualizations by demonstrating how existential learning occurs within the ordinary, everyday experiences of school life. Leadership identity emerges through dialogical encounters, reflective isolation, structural negotiation, and repeated confrontation with uncertainty. These findings advance leadership theory by demonstrating that school leadership is best understood not as a managerial position but as an ongoing phenomenological process of becoming in context.

Overall, the study's findings paint a coherent and compelling picture: school leadership is an existential, relational, and contextually embedded journey characterized by meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and continual negotiation between self, others, and structural realities. The journey is not linear but woven through experiences of uncertainty, discovery, emotional labor, and relational engagement. This interpretation aligns deeply with phenomenological principles that human experience is the ground from which meaning arises and that leadership cannot be separated from the lived world in which it unfolds (3, 4). By synthesizing these insights with existing scholarship, this study contributes to an enriched conceptualization of school leadership as a form of existential practice.

Although this study provides deep insights into the ontological nature of school leadership, it is not without limitations. First, the qualitative and phenomenological design inherently limits generalizability, as the findings reflect the lived experiences of a specific group of principals within a particular cultural and educational context. Second, participants who

volunteered may have possessed greater openness to reflection than the broader population of school leaders, potentially shaping the thematic patterns that emerged. Third, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by retrospective interpretation, emotional filtering, or desire for coherence. Finally, while phenomenological depth was prioritized, observational data or longitudinal tracking might have provided additional layers of contextual understanding.

Future research could expand the scope of inquiry by conducting cross-cultural phenomenological studies that compare leadership journeys across diverse national or organizational settings. Longitudinal designs may offer richer insight into how leadership identity evolves over time and how principals reconstruct meaning through pivotal career experiences. Future studies might also examine the leadership journeys of assistant principals, teacher leaders, or system-level administrators to develop a more comprehensive framework. Additionally, integrating phenomenological inquiry with behavioral or organizational data could help illuminate how existential meaning-making connects to measurable leadership outcomes such as staff well-being, school culture, or student success.

Practitioners should consider designing leadership preparation programs that move beyond technical skill development toward cultivating reflective, authentic, and meaning-oriented leadership practices. Schools and districts can provide structured spaces for dialogue, mentorship, and reflective inquiry to support principals as they navigate liminal challenges and identity transformations. Leadership development efforts should acknowledge the emotional and existential dimensions of leadership, empowering principals to engage deeply with their inner experiences, relational contexts, and sense of purpose as they grow into their leadership identities.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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