

## Experiencing Leadership: Connecting Theoretical Concepts and Practices of Leadership in Educational Contexts

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### Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to identify aspects of leadership theory prevailing in the practice of educational leaders by analyzing how 22 participants experienced leadership. The study was framed using a conceptual framework grounded in a select body of theoretical and empirical leadership literature. Data were collected via interviews and were analyzed to identify themes within and across interviews. This study showed that leadership was perceived as a complex phenomenon and as responsibility rather than authority. In education, leadership occurred formally and informally, was highly contextual, and focused on students, teachers, and community. There were five interrelated processes that emerged in practice and impacted leadership and work environments: relationships, culture, decision-making, change, and risks. This article has value for leadership scholars, educators, and practitioners as it provides new insights on how educational leadership practices impact people and organizations.

### Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude qualitative interprétative était d'identifier les aspects de la théorie du leadership qui prévalent dans la pratique de responsables éducatifs en analysant la manière dont 22 participants ont vécu le leadership. L'étude a été élaborée à l'aide d'un cadre conceptuel fondé sur une sélection d'ouvrages théoriques et empiriques sur le leadership. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entretiens et ont été analysées afin d'identifier les thèmes au sein des entretiens et d'un entretien

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à l'autre. Cette étude a montré que le leadership était perçu comme un phénomène complexe et comme une responsabilité plutôt qu'une autorité. Dans le domaine de l'éducation, le leadership se manifeste de manière formelle et informelle, est très contextuel, et se concentre sur les élèves, les enseignants et la communauté. Cinq processus interdépendants sont apparus dans la pratique et ont eu un impact sur le leadership et les milieux de travail : les relations, la culture, la prise de décision, le changement et les risques. Cet article s'avérera utile pour les éducateurs, les spécialistes et les praticiens du leadership, car il offre de nouvelles perspectives sur l'impact des pratiques de leadership éducatif sur les personnes et les organisations.

**Keywords / Mots clés :** leadership, educational leadership, leadership practice, interpretive qualitative study / leadership, leadership éducatif, pratique du leadership, étude qualitative interprétative

## Introduction

Much has been written about leadership, but theoretical lenses and research approaches vary widely. Some scholars argued that connecting existing leadership constructs into more cohesive models and capitalizing on descriptive empirical research helped people better understand what leadership was (Bryman, 2007; Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014; Lamm, Carter, & Lamm, 2016). This study did just that. Framed using a conceptual framework grounded in the literature and constructed by the author, the study aimed to bridge the theory-practice gap by identifying aspects of leadership theory prevalent in practice. The research question was: *What aspects of leadership theory, encompassed in a conceptual framework that was constructed in a systematic literature review, are identified in how alumni from a Canadian Research University experience leadership?*

For this study, 22 participant interviews were analyzed and interpreted. The findings of this study are valuable to leadership scholars and practitioners as they offer insights on leadership perceptions and practices grounded in the participant experiences. This study also shows that leaders who are exposed to the leadership theory and research through leadership education are more prepared to fulfill their roles and address the challenges they encounter.

## Literature review

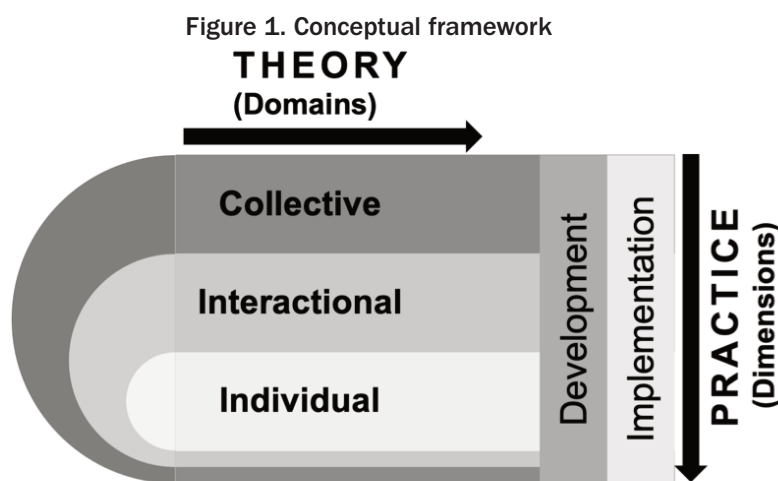
### Overview

The study of educational leadership has increased over time, resulting in an abundance of theory and empirical research on school and higher education leadership. For example, a literature search in databases consisting of major leadership journals using the keywords *higher education leadership* returned over 25,000 articles and another search using the keywords *school leadership* returned over 29,000 articles. Many argued that, in general, leadership approaches often focused on minute issues, seemed oversimplified, or were discipline bound (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012; Northouse, 2016; Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). This is also the case in the educational leadership field.

Educational leadership conceptualization has evolved from hierarchical models to collective or distributive practices, communities of practice, or a combination of individual, collective, organizational, and situational features (Bolden & Petrov, 2014; Bryman, 2007; Burns & Mooney, 2018; Davison, Brown, Pharo, Warr, McGregor, Terkes, Boyd, & Abuodha, 2013; Gumus, Bellibas, Esen, & Gumus, 2018; Youngs, 2017). As leadership theory complexity advanced, researchers suggested that integrating concepts found across theories and designing more systematic frameworks would help make sense of the literature and how leadership was defined, developed, and practiced (Dinh et al., 2014; Lamm et al., 2016). Considering this recommendation, this qualitative interpretive study used a conceptual framework developed in a systematic collection and review of the leadership literature (Eftenaru & Laitsch, 2024).

### Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework constructed for this study mirrors the shifts in leadership definitions and practices and shows how leadership is developed and exercised in educational settings. The literature review and the development process of the conceptual framework as well as the outcome may be found in Eftenaru and Laitsch (2024). This conceptual framework (Figure 1) included three leadership domains (individual, interactional, and collective) that emerged from theory and two embedded leadership dimensions (development and implementation) that emerged from practice.



**Individual Domain.** In this framework, the *individual leadership domain* was the cornerstone of leadership practice. Leaders—as individuals—needed to possess numerous personal attributes, skills, and styles, along with the ability to use them as situations occurred in practice (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; McCarthy, 2015; Skorobohacz, Billot, Murray, & Khong, 2016; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Theory and research informed what Bush (2011) called “good practice” and shaped people’s leadership perceptions and experiences (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008). Theories such as caring, ethical, servant, transformational leadership along with empirical research in these areas provided an extensive list of skills that leaders would benefit from continuously assessing and developing.

**Interactional Domain.** The *interactional leadership domain* was centred on relationships. Relationship development laid the ground for leader-follower influence processes, collaboration, conflict resolution, and improved behaviours and perform-

ance within an environment (Moore, Mayer, Chiang, Crossley, Karley, & Birtch, 2019; Stanley & Algert, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As leadership occurred in people's interactions, everyone within a context (i.e., team, organization, community) was responsible for maintaining meaningful relationships (Skorobohacz et al., 2016; van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & van Meurs, 2009). Some theories and models that informed the interactional domain were transactional, transformational, invitational, leader-member exchange, and relational leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Lynch, 2012; Northouse, 2016; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

**Collective Domain.** Within the *collective leadership domain*, individuals were involved in their own and others' welfare as part of complex social systems. Everyone was encouraged to participate rather than observe leadership, to support one another, eradicate unethical practices, and to create change together (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012; Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). In their practice, people initiated, collaborated, and led problem-solving and decision-making processes (Cardno, 2013; Cloud, 2010; Fullan, 2005). Collaborative environments benefited leaders, followers, and teams as they promoted trust, awareness, and reflection on their own and others' behaviours and actions (Bolden et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2019; Temple & Ylitalo, 2009; Uusiautti, 2013). As no one leadership style was "right," leaders needed to be equipped to assess situations, decide on courses of action, and manage expectations and challenges appropriately (Bush, 2011; Senge et al., 2012). Theories and empirical research that informed the collective domain were shared, dialogic, team, inclusive, and distributed leadership (Bolden et al., 2008; Bolden & Petrov, 2014; Northouse, 2016; Temple & Ylitalo, 2009).

## Methods

The conceptual framework components presented in the previous section informed all stages of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study. Qualitative studies are shown to facilitate the understanding and description of the complexities of a studied phenomenon, such as leadership (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Patton, 2015). Being interested in uncovering the unique experiences and diverse perspectives of educational leaders, interview methods were used (Creswell, 2014, 2016; Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

## Demographics

For this study, the author recruited alumni of an Educational Leadership (English) doctoral program at a Canadian Research University. Participants were selected because of their interest in studying leadership, the knowledge of leadership theory and research acquired through the program, and leadership experiences gained through their work in educational settings. Using public information, 69 alumni from 10 program cohorts were invited to participate in this study. The 22 people (11 female and 11 male) who agreed to participate were at different career stages (from mid-career to retired) and worked across multiple sectors, roles, and geographical regions. Participants shared experiences from K-12 (seven participants), higher education (18 participants), and other (seven participants) settings. At the interview time, partici-

pants worked in various roles in 14 different organizations. Hence, their comprehensive leadership experiences and observations allowed for a rich dataset. Table 1 shows the participants' pseudonyms used to report the study findings, along with the sectors they worked in and experiences shared during their interviews (K-12, higher education, and other).

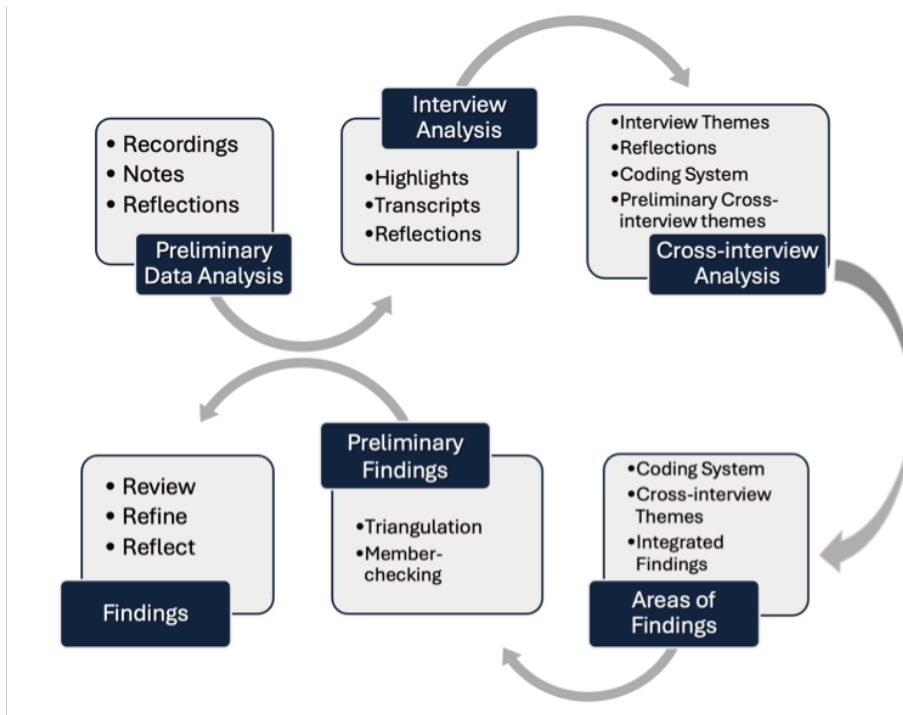
**Table 1. Participant pseudonyms and primary sector**

Pseudonym	Sector		
	K-12	Higher education	Other
Alex	–	✓	–
Amber	✓	–	–
Avery	✓	✓	✓
Emma	–	✓	✓
Ernest	–	✓	✓
Hannah	–	✓	–
Hope	–	✓	–
Jake	–	✓	–
Jesse	✓	–	–
Johnny	–	✓	–
Joy	–	✓	–
Maggie	–	✓	–
Margaret	✓	–	✓
Maril	–	✓	✓
Mercedes	✓	✓	–
Noah	✓	✓	✓
Shirley	–	✓	–
Spike	✓	–	–
Sunny	–	✓	✓
Timothy	–	✓	–
Victoria	–	✓	–
Zachary	–	✓	–

### **Data collection and analysis**

To collect data, a ten-question interview guide was developed in a three-phase pilot study that included nine leaders (Appendix 1). The pilot-testing allowed for refinement of recruitment strategies (to solidify criteria for participation in the study), interview questions (to provide structure while allowing participants to lead the conversation on a specific topic), and data analysis methods (finalized through several preliminary analyses steps). Data collected through the 22 interviews was coded and analyzed in a multi-layered process (Figure 2), beginning with a preliminary analysis, and followed by interview and cross-interview analyses. The data analysis followed the three primary *a priori* themes on leadership, which were outlined in the interview guide: perspectives, development, and implementation.

Figure 2. Data analysis process



There were several sub-themes that emerged from the dataset within the primary themes, which were related to what informed participant perspectives and approaches of leadership, how leadership was developed through formal, informal, and non-formal education, and numerous leadership practices that emerged in educational settings, as well as what made these practices effective or not.

To ensure trustworthiness, the author used member-checking and transcript verification by asking participants to review their interview transcripts and providing input. Reflective journaling, coding system, and data triangulation within and across interviews and with the researcher's systematic reflections were also used (Briggs et al., 2012; Creswell, 2016; Schnelker, 2006). Eftenaru (2023) presents a complete account of the study methods.

## Findings

This study aimed to identify aspects of leadership theory that emerged in how participants experienced leadership. Participants were identified using pseudonyms to help protect their identity (see Table 1), which are used to present the findings. In their interviews, participants drew examples from their experiences in formal (assigned) or informal (emergent) leadership in K-12 (school, district, or board of trustees) and higher education (unit/department, organization, or community partnerships). This article focuses on findings within the implementation dimension across the individual, interactional, and collective leadership domains of the conceptual framework. The three sub-themes were: leadership is contextual, three foci of educational leadership (students, teachers, and community), and five interrelated leadership processes (relationships, culture, decision-making, change, and risks). As the findings show, participants strived to become better leaders by navigating contextual aspects, assessing situations to identify the appropriate leadership approaches to implement, and learning from both successes and struggles.

***Leadership is contextual***

According to participants, leading in education was a demanding endeavour. Leadership practices did not simply transplant from one institution to the next but needed adapting as contexts required. For participants, leadership focused on people (i.e., students, staff, faculty, community partners) and organizational growth. It meant recognizing others' abilities and passions, creating opportunities for personal and professional growth, offering support in achieving goals, removing barriers, and bringing people within their sphere of influence on "leadership journeys."

**Leadership approaches.** Participants used words such as creative, adaptable, collaborative, and transformational to describe leadership approaches. Genuine interest and care would encourage enthusiasm and contribution whereas actions taken "just for show" resulted in disengagement. Some found that during job transitions, new leaders benefited from meaningful conversations about the work environment, underlying beliefs, workflow, and possible innovation. Leaders needed "the ability to analyze and understand a context ... articulate the challenges, [and find] people, trust them, equip them, rely on them, [and] support them" (Hope). New leadership was perceived as delicate, requiring adaptability, open-mindedness, and balancing expectations. Participants shared examples of conflicts that proved counterproductive or resulted in "a lot of destruction," long recovery, dysfunction, and even organizational rift. A good contextual understanding helped avoid ideological or practical conflicts (e.g., leader-institution, leader-team, or leader-individual).

Higher education leadership often depended on the institution type (e.g., small vs. large, research vs. teaching) and geographical location whereas school and district leadership were generally deemed more hierarchal. Though educational leadership approaches were changing, altering structures and practices did not come easily. As several participants emphasized, leaders attempting to replace top-down, authoritarian, "secretive," or adversarial practices with democratic and participatory practices often experienced resistance or superficial engagement. Leaders with comprehensive contextual understanding created space for timely individual and collective development and had higher institutional impact.

Some challenges with substantial impact on the success of initiatives that participants mentioned were resourcing, competition, and slow change processes. Multi-site organizations seemed to struggle more with equitable resourcing, infrastructure changes, and process cohesiveness. Participants underscored that leaders needed flexibility, prioritization, and transparent communication to address challenges. Discerning when to "roll up your sleeves," be an advocate, or recognize "champions" were also essential. It seemed that building a sense of togetherness, nurturing respectful disagreements, and capitalizing on strengths offered better outcomes.

***Three foci of educational leadership***

Participants shared that they chose to work in education because of its altruistic nature, task variety, and the prospects of influencing others. They perceived educational leaders as builders or changers of culture within a team, organization, or field. They strived to engage stakeholders and develop an environment where trust, learning, and togetherness were promoted. Pursuing leadership was not about themselves or

“the paycheque or title” but about initiating change, creating opportunities, and making a difference. Three foci of educational leadership emerged from the data: students, teachers, and community.

**Students.** The first educational leadership focus that emerged from the dataset was the *students*. Participants perceived teaching as leadership, highlighting that their “mission and goals are all about the students” (Joy) as they strived to contribute to “the betterment of the student experience” (Zachary). They also advocated for causes or subject matters and initiated pedagogical and curriculum changes that improved all students’ learning, recruitment, and retention. However, the education system was perceived as structured, rigid, and favouring traditional students. Some mentioned systemic barriers that non-traditional students encountered in accessing education such as unrealistic expectations, “good intentions but wrong actions,” inadequate resources, and cultural biases.

Overall, participants from K-12 settings strived to increase access to education and help all students “graduate and become contributors to society” (Jesse). They assessed and improved teaching methods as one “can’t underestimate the kind of power that [educators and leaders] have in leveraging the trajectory of students’ learning and success” (Mercedes). Higher education faculty participants highlighted the need to ensure equal student access to adequate academic, career, health, and counselling services. Increasing retention and managing issues such as academic dishonesty, harassment, discrimination, and mental health were an integral part of most participants’ roles. Higher education administrators valued learner-centred environments. As Emma stated, “you should be there for the students. Everybody’s goal should be students. They’re here, right and centre, and everything else revolves around them.” Indeed, what would educational institutions be without students?

But the educators’ passion was not enough to ensure student success. All stakeholders needed to work together for the same. Hence, rather than lowering standards and predetermining career pathways, the focus needed to shift to creating opportunities for development beyond getting “a labour job ... Who knows, there might be a burgeoning geologist, or lawyer, or doctor ... and why ... limit opportunities?” (Hope). Overall, fairness, equal access, and student success were essential in all educational settings.

**Teachers.** The second educational leadership focus emerging from the dataset was the *teachers*. To enhance teaching practices, participants conducted and encouraged research, committee work, and interdisciplinary and cross-organizational initiatives. For instance, Mercedes emphasized modelling educational leadership as “whatever we want for students, we should want for ourselves.” Johnny recommended that senior instructors coach and guide junior colleagues through issues such as adapting teaching and assessment strategies, addressing student misbehaviour, and navigating organizational policies. Zachary shared how through collaboration and collective thinking, faculty were able to navigate “channels of disagreement ... philosophical struggles ... [and make] difficult decisions” about teaching, learning, and program development.

District leaders like Jesse strived to support teachers to develop appropriate skills and find their passion to “do good work.” Avery and Amber also stressed the importance of teacher preparedness and manageable workloads in achieving student success.



Finally, Spike continuously reminded teachers that they taught *students* and not *subjects*. Hence, it was the leaders' responsibility to walk the talk by supporting and appreciating teachers and their "paramount work" of ensuring student learning and success.

**Community.** The third focus of educational leadership in the interviews was *community*. Building community within or outside organizations took different forms and was driven by contextual purposes. As such, many participants thought that the leaders' awareness of what was happening in their organizations, open communication, and transparent decision-making processes built better workplaces. Nevertheless, engaging multiple stakeholders with different perspectives, interests, and power levels in decisions seemed more complex in some institutions: "it was like herding cats ... it was very much a long, drawn-out process" (Sunny). Many participants shared that challenges such as competing demands, band-aid initiatives, lack of resources, and increasing workloads resulted in dissatisfaction, which at times, would "push the boundaries of people's capacity and patience" (Victoria).

For participants, community partnerships aimed to increase people's access to specialized credentials and were developed through careful needs assessment, mutual respect, and system-thinking processes. They shared successful social change initiatives yet emphasized setting realistic goals as some social issues would not be "cured" but rather alleviated. Adapting institutional practices were key in the efforts to improve education and tackle the "insurmountable hurdles and barriers" (Maril) occurring due to the lack of knowledge and awareness of economic, cultural, or social issues in the served communities. Some challenges in community partnerships that participants shared were power dynamics, allegiances and loyalties, boundary blurring, and competition. However, active listening, information gathering, adaptability, realistic goal setting, and reflection on the effectiveness of practices and outcomes facilitated strong community relationships. On a broader scale, according to participants, building community required people to be present and eager to partake in activities within their interconnected system.

### ***Five interrelated leadership processes***

The dataset showed that in today's educational contexts, leaders needed to address complex issues, initiate and manage change, and break systemic or organizational barriers. By pursuing leadership development opportunities, participants acquired extensive knowledge of leadership theory and research, which informed their practices. There were many facets of leadership practice that participants referred to in their interviews, but the following five processes surfaced the most: relationship development, culture building, decision-making, change implementation, and risk taking. These processes seemed interrelated and built on each other.

**Relationship development.** For participants, relationship development involved connecting with people, supporting their interests, providing feedback, and cultivating mutual trust and respect. Leaders empowered their teams by creating trusting environments and by helping others find their intrinsic motivation and passions. Endurance, respectful disagreement, and unbiased decision-making were important skills required in people's interactions. According to participants, profound relationships took time and effort and required thoughtfulness, adaptability, and authenticity.

For Sunny, negotiation, organizational knowledge, and building a “bridge” rather than a “divider” were key in developing relationships. Zachary strived to inspire faculty to take ownership of their curriculum and teaching initiatives. Johnny emphasized patience and dedication in mentoring, and Alex’s focus was on “guiding people to come along with me on the journeys to decisions.” As leaders, “you can’t solve everybody’s problems and all the problems. So, you’re there to facilitate—to get people to think of best ways to solve an issue” (Emma). Some memorable relationship building experiences were as follows: Maggie’s “powerful moment” that generated enthusiasm within her team when trying a new process; Mercedes’ “amazing” student-teacher collaborations that increased student autonomy; Spike’s creative change initiatives in crises; and Avery’s continuous encouragement and care for others.

The dataset showed that the leader-follower interactions impacted retention and development within teams. Multiple participants emphasised some useful hiring practices for leadership roles such as assessing interpersonal skills, forming leadership teams with complementary skills and work styles, and recruiting with long-term goals in mind. For example, Jesse highlighted that people capitalizing on their strengths and passions became “so, so good at their job” and made a real difference in the workplace and community. To allow for innovation, Timothy focused on bridging the team skills and knowledge gaps. For Emma, matching personalities and excellent mentoring skills enhanced leader-follower interactions and helped prevent power struggles. Overall, for participants, it was essential that organizations recruited capable leaders, created cohesive teams, and mentored future leaders because strong relationships were conducive to better workplace cultures and performance.

**Culture building.** For participants, culture building was a lengthy and arduous venture. It required patience, effective communication, fostering participation and momentum for change, and forming strong relationships. They shared that in multi-site organizations, this seemed more challenging due to site (campus, department, location, etc.) uniqueness. By implementing strategies to bring people together around ideas and to provide appropriate resources, participants created more cohesive cultures. Though building trust and transparency was everyone’s responsibility, participants agreed that leaders played vital roles in establishing an environment conducive to “great work” by dismantling complacency, self-centredness, inequities, and silos. Strength emerged when different perspectives and problem-solving strategies were sought and not when people would “nod and bob and say ‘yes’” (Amber), then “go off in their own corners and do their thing” (Margaret). As Noah highlighted, leaders needed to recognize what their “spheres of control are and levers that they had or not.” Achieving goals meant inspiration, collaboration, and action.

Participants shared how in workplaces, openness and respectful disagreement nurtured relationships, whereas deep-seated biases, stereotypes, fear, and hidden agendas shattered trust and wellbeing. Rebuilding culture after crises was lengthy and involved addressing core issues rather than symptoms, bringing justice, (re)building trust, and dealing with the ripple effects and unforeseen outcomes. Nevertheless, participants agreed that “the right leaders” were equipped to aid recovery, bring people together, listen to concerns, and initiate the tough conversations.

**Decision-making.** As it emerged from the dataset, trustworthy relationships seemed to create a workplace culture that fostered effective decision-making processes. Overall, participants highlighted that collaborative and inclusive dialogue aided better decisions. They shared some strategies that worked well such as approaching differences of opinion or conflict with tact, embracing other viewpoints, asking non-judgmental questions, and building good rapport. For example, Sunny employed a consultative leadership style and Zachary endeavored to encourage contribution in conversations. But Mercedes mentioned that a lack of contextual awareness, poor work ethics, and “a false sense of knowing” on the leaders’ side hindered decisions. Hope stressed the importance of a leader’s discernment and critical thinking on *when* and *what* information to share during “massive pressures” because not everyone could carry “the weight of leadership.” In contrast, Joy shared that during rapid change, a perceived “lack of transparency” emerged rather quickly when information reached the masses via “word of mouth” rather than the right channels. Emma and Hannah argued that in crises, quick thinking, strategic communication, and immediate action were preferred to lengthy dialogue.

Participants shared that in making decisions, consensus-building was a useful strategy because it promoted multiple perspective integration. However, the approach could result in delays, conflicts, and false inclusion. Maggie argued that merely talking about inclusion was not enough without establishing infrastructures for authentic participation. Though leaders could not please everyone, dialogue was helpful in better understanding issues, navigating philosophical or practical disagreements, resolving conflicts, and making better decisions. As well, Zachary emphasized that giving everyone a voice and listening actively and carefully helped move initiatives forward. Nevertheless, decisions that favoured individuals or groups were disheartening more so when they resulted in responsibility changes, stifling initiatives, or silencing individuals. Attitudes such as, “I am the leader ... I want to look good ... I’m a strong leader ... I don’t need help ... I can make this decision” (Spike) were also detrimental.

The lack of good rapport, transparency, and approachability seemed to create a space where “people become afraid to make decisions because they don’t know how they’re going to be taken” (Alex) and feared repercussions. Overall, the data showed that decisions were not perfect. As several participants stated, some decisions needed to be revisited when new information surfaced and circumstances or expectations changed. Thus, according to participants, adaptability and open-mindedness were vital in ensuring a process that resulted in better decisions.

**Change.** The leadership tasks outlined above—relationships, culture building, and decision-making—were foundational to change. Participants argued that change processes were lengthy and required extensive work and perseverance not only on the part of the leaders, but their teams, as well. During organizational change, in particular, leaders had to set priorities, encourage open communication, and identify effective decision-making strategies. As change decisions had long-term consequences, participants emphasized that rushed processes that addressed symptoms rather than causes generated “band-aid” solutions and possibly more problems. Some strategies that participants used effectively in times of change were research use, system thinking, and foresight.

Isolation, deep-seated beliefs or behaviours, and low performance benchmarks were shown to hinder people's participation in change processes. Margaret stated that people retreated to self-preservation or became defensive when change was managed poorly. Jake shared that initiating change without the positional authority or as an outsider to "an institutional class" was challenging. At times, people perceived change as "too much work ... too hard" (Spike). Shirley recommended that before pursuing major changes, leaders need to step back, gather information, understand the individual and/or organizational impact, and plan accordingly. Several other participants exemplified how people-centred and data-informed change decisions offered purpose and inspired participation whereas implementing change superficially or hastily sparked reactivity, dissatisfaction, and disconnect.

An important aspect of change that emerged from the dataset was organizational renewal. This process required forging stakeholder relationships, careful needs assessments, and unbiased hiring practices. However, participants argued that retention was not guaranteed without sustained efforts to create equitable pathways for professional development within the organization. They observed that people who departed organizations did so because of lack of growth opportunities, inadequate working conditions, and poor leadership practices. Participants also noted that leaders who were self-centred or unethical caused damage and provoked an "exodus of people." For example, Sunny left organizations when losing the "respect for the leaders." Hannah and Ernest looked for a better fit, value-system alignment, and higher-performing environments. Emma mentioned leaving a toxic workplace where people's wellbeing was not central. The dataset showed that by creating opportunities for professional development and promotion, reskilling, and building upon employees' interests and motivations, organizations increased their human capital and institutional knowledge, promoted good work ethic, and maintained the organization's reputation.

**Risk taking.** Participants holding positions of leadership had a wider impact, but they often took risks in advocating for people or causes. They referenced times of change in the socio-economic and political landscapes, navigating budget cuts and difficult negotiations during job actions, and dealing with competing priorities or loss of government funding. But Johnny and Hannah observed leaders in more hierarchical organizations who did not take action to address issues impacting their teams due to fear of repercussions. As Ernest shared, to protect others, "leaders put themselves on the line" at times. Several participants shared how they refused to merely comply out of fear even if the risk could be "almost career ending." They "dared go where others wouldn't," despite disapproval, opposition, or even job loss. Many times, they succeeded in their quests. Through risks, trial and error tactics, and grit, participants created "something out of nothing." Sunny considered taking risks on behalf of the team a "test of fortitude," saying that if unsuccessful in his advocacy, "I was going to be done as a leader for them." Participants agreed that leaders who were stepping into a space of risk prepared a way for others. They also sought stakeholder support, went the extra mile, and navigated intricate policies and stubborn hierarchies of power. Participants praised the courageous pioneers of innovative pathways. By setting an example and taking a confident but respectful stance, they extended what Maggie called, "an invitation to have a different conversation."

### Summary: *Becoming better leaders*

Participants shared that they strived to be better leaders. They learned from both struggle and success, yet the former seemed to offer more memorable lessons. Several participants shared difficult lessons about shattered confidence, failure, job loss, conflicting interests, and unrealistic expectations. As Noah noted, some struggles could be daunting, and they often did not come alone. Some challenges encountered were lack of training and experience in a specific area, change (mis)management, dealing with new or ineffective leadership, and taking corrective action. These challenges made dealing with complex situations, such as dysfunction, conflict of interests, political or power struggles, tensions between employee groups or subcultures, and financial loss, particularly difficult. Other struggles were related to workplace issues such as unprofessional behaviour, poor work ethic, bullying, harassment, favouritism, grievances, and absenteeism. These situations were taxing and emotionally charged, and impacted workplace wellbeing.

Conveying organizational changes initiated with “no consultation and no warning ... just an announcement” (Joy) were difficult to process. In such situations, leaders felt caught between the institutional purposes and their team’s perception of such decisions and their own involvement in them. Often, these changes impacted staffing, workflow, and partnerships. Participants found that support from their institutions, their peers, and their teams helped them find viable solutions. Moreover, reflection, external consultations, and making data-informed decisions helped them mediate these challenges. Other helpful strategies were giving others time to process and prepare for change, listening to and advocating for teams, offering access to resources, and emphasizing some anticipated positive outcomes. As leaders faced new challenges constantly, participants shared that they needed to develop grit, resilience, and innovation.

### Discussion and implications

This study aimed to identify aspects of leadership theory encompassed in a conceptual framework grounded in literature (Eftenaru & Laitsch, 2024), which transpired in educational leadership practices. Data were collected by interviewing 22 participants using a 10-question interview guide (Appendix 1) and were analyzed in a multi-layered process (Eftenaru, 2023). The findings presented in this article correspond to the leadership implementation dimension, which is an *a priori* theme and a conceptual framework component. This section discusses how the main emerging findings relate to existing literature, in the context of the conceptual framework, and how they support the answers to the research question.

### Overview

Leadership experiences shared in interviews spanned over four decades. The interviews showed that over time, educational leadership shifted from top-down to more participative approaches, and from leadership exercised by *one* individual holding a formal position to leadership exercised by *many* individuals, some of whom were entrusted with informal leadership roles. These study findings align with how leadership conceptualization and emphasis changed over time as showcased by the con-

ceptual framework (Burns & Mooney, 2018; Kezar et al., 2006; Northouse, 2016). Moreover, the study shows that educational leadership meant responsibility for teams and organizations, it emerged within interactions, and its primary features and goals were specific to education—teaching, learning, scholarship, and research (Bolden et al., 2008; Cardno, 2013; Lynch, 2012).

### **Leadership conceptualization**

Participants conceptualized leadership as primarily concerning people (individuals or groups) and emphasized relationship and culture building. Newer leadership theories and approaches were supported by data. For example, leadership was about responsibility—in the sense of trustworthiness, duty, and dependability—rather than authority—in the sense of power and control (Bush, 2011; Dinh et al., 2014). Considering Northouse's (2016) concept of influence within a context, leadership seemed to be the reason behind the development of individuals, organizations, and communities. But in collaborative or distributed settings, authority remained an inherent part of instruction and subject matter expertise in addition to formal leadership (Burns & Mooney, 2018; Bush, 2011; Lynch, 2012).

For participants, leadership was concerned with processes that affected people's personal and professional enhancement. Relationship and culture building required motivation, support, empathy, trust, and encouragement. Lamm et al.'s (2016) model of interpersonal leadership also identified support, motivation, and professional development as leadership features. Building meaningful and strong relationships was essential in achieving individual and organizational goals (Arghode, Lathan, Alagaraja, Rajaram, & McLean, 2022; Lambersky, 2016; Temple & Ylitalo, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Participants acknowledged that studying leadership and their own research helped them enhance their practice and advance important issues. They strived to inspire others to be lifelong learners and do not become complacent. In literature, organizational development involved continuous assessment of “best” practices and development of “next” practices as contexts or situations required (Bolden et al., 2008; Bolden & Petrov, 2014; Leithwood, 2008). Leadership is key in developing and retaining organizational capital. System thinking and holistic or integrative leadership approaches were helpful in carrying out processes and organizational initiatives (Bolden et al. 2008; Fullan, 2005; Senge et al., 2012).

### **Context**

Context played an important role in educational leadership, which is also supported by Bryman (2007) and Kezar et al. (2006). Thus, successful leaders needed organizational knowledge (e.g., system, environment, policy), as well as a strong character, moral behaviours, and a wide range of skills and approaches (Barbutto & Wheeler, 2006; McCarthy, 2015; Mendelson, Alam, Cunningham, Totton, & Smith, 2019). Bryman and Lilley (2009) argue that theory and research do not always influence the practices of higher education leaders who also engaged in leadership research, whereas this study shows the opposite. Participants considered grasping leadership theory and research as fundamental to their current practice. However, this may be

because one of their own motivations to pursue formal leadership education was to improve their practice.

### ***Connecting the findings to the conceptual framework***

This study investigated how a group of leadership scholars and practitioners experienced leadership. By exploring, analyzing, and interpreting the interviews, the author aimed to identify what aspects of leadership theory, as encompassed in the study's conceptual framework, were found in practice. When examining the primary framework concepts and the study's findings, it might be inferred that leadership is complex, contextual, and evolving, as well as mostly concerned with the people side of organizations. Hence, leaders need to continuously learn and adapt their styles to the specific needs of their organizational context and those whom they lead.

The findings support the conceptual framework that was constructed by systematically analyzing a select body of conceptual and empirical research (Eftenaru & Laitsch, 2024). Overall, participants perceived leadership within the people-centred group of newer leadership theories, and as focusing on positive aspects of influence, relationship development, and change (Arghode et al., 2022; Lynch, 2012; Mendelson et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2019; Northouse, 2016). Although participants' experiences revealed aspects related to the managerial or administrative facets of formal leadership, aspects of leadership theories emphasizing a leader's influence on individuals, groups, or organizational systems to achieve goals were more prevalent.

In summary, based on participants' interviews, effective educational leaders were invested in their own and others' development (individual domain), focused on sustaining quality relationships (interactional domain), and strived for meaningful stakeholder engagement (collective domain) to enrich their practice and support people and organizational development (implementation dimension).

### ***Bridging the theory-practice gap***

Bush (2011) argues that when theory, research, and practice inform one another, the "good practice" of leadership emerges. Youngs (2017) claims that leadership "holds all other practices together" (p. 146) in organizations. But without addressing crucial systemic and organizational barriers and eradicating poor and unethical leadership practices, the theory-practice gap will continue to amplify. Both theory and practice are important in achieving leadership excellence. They inform one another. On one side, systematic conceptual research contributes to broadening one's understanding of leadership complexities and possibilities. On the other side, continuous reflection on practice helps leaders develop a toolkit to draw from in addressing multifaceted issues. To bridge the theory-practice gap, one needs to continuously enhance their competencies, enact their leadership ethically, and create an environment conducive to continuous learning, commitment, and contextual problem solving. This study shows that leaders engaged in lifelong learning and committed to research-informed practices are more prepared to tackle the challenges of leadership.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for practice and future research emerge from this study.

These recommendations help scholars and practitioners better engage in studying, developing, and implementing leadership in their context.

### **Recommendations for practice**

Some recommendations for practice are related to the need for organizations to create better leadership development opportunities that help leaders be effective in fulfilling their complex roles in educational settings.

**Creating leadership opportunities.** Leadership is often perceived as contained in formal leadership roles (Bush, 2011; Lynch, 2012). But when there is distinction between formal roles (i.e., job titles) and leadership as capacity to influence and effect grassroots change, leadership is no longer attached to job titles or functions. Instead, leadership emerges in any role within an organization. Thus, organizations are responsible for fostering leadership at all levels by creating suitable infrastructures and by providing the space for individuals and groups to make sense of their capacities and further develop and apply them. Being perceived as a potential rather than a threat, informal leadership can be encouraged.

As emerged from participants' experiences, there are no instant solutions to overcoming challenges that educational leaders encounter. As well, no one leadership style works in *all* contexts and in *all* situations. Some challenges may not be fully addressed whatsoever by outdated organizational structures and policies. In education, structure and policy changes seem to occur at a much slower pace than required. Thus, leaders should be equipped to identify where change is needed and take timely action. They would also need to continuously assess their leadership styles and the impact they have (or should have) in their organization.

**Equipping leaders for practice.** This study shows that to be better equipped for leadership, people need to be resilient in the face of challenges, adaptable to contexts and situations, and committed to continuous learning. Successful educational leaders are those who apply broad skillsets, are aware of their context and spheres of influence, and strive to remove existing organizational and systemic barriers. They need to recognize, make sense of, and assume leadership roles. They also need to be accountable and continuously advocate for people and causes. Formal leaders need to find balance between focusing on people and focusing on tasks. Informal leaders need to be astute in identifying the need for change, pursue grassroots initiatives, and challenge power imbalances. Organizations need to focus on recruiting, preparing, and retaining such leaders by creating the appropriate policies, procedures, and systems.

**Effective leadership approaches.** As emerged from the dataset, there are leadership approaches that seemed to better facilitate employees' professional development and improve employees' wellbeing, job satisfaction, and retention. Hence, organizations should create mechanisms to examine the practices of current and prospective leaders. For example, regular evaluation processes could stop or alleviate unethical and unfitting practices of current leaders. As well, recruitment practices could probe candidates' leadership qualifications and employ strategies to better assess competencies for a specific context (e.g., tailored job descriptions, hiring and onboarding processes). When people constantly assess their leadership experiences, perspectives, and approaches, they better understand their preparedness and suit-



ability for specific roles and organizations. The responsibility of building a successful leadership practice is shared by leaders and organizations. Leaders should be committed to developing effective leadership whereas organizations should be committed to providing appropriate resources (i.e., human, financial, technological, physical, or cultural) and support leaders' success. One without the other is not enough. As leadership is contextual, leaders need to possess excellent organizational knowledge, a broad exposure to theory and research, and the capacity to explore and adapt their approaches to the needs surfacing in their context.

### **Recommendations for research**

Some recommendations for future research that emerge from this study are related to deeper data analyses, focus on formal leadership, and the role of context. Fellow leadership scholars are invited to address these recommendations in their future research endeavors.

**Deeper data analyses.** Further analysis of the dataset could reveal aspects of how leadership pertains to specific organization types (i.e., schools, departments, universities, colleges, etc.). At a much deeper level, each study participant or group (i.e., specific roles or organizations) could form a case to explore leadership further. However, more research is recommended to investigate whether the study findings are supported by a larger participant pool from similar settings (e.g., organization type, socio-economic context) and/or by different data collection and analysis methods (e.g., survey, focus group).

**Formal leadership.** From participants' interviews, it seemed that formal leadership roles incorporate aspects of leadership, management, and administration. Although terminology used in literature is not consistent, people pursuing formal roles were considered leaders of people, managers of tasks and processes, and administrators of resources. Issues related to management and administration transpired in interviews, but they were deemed outside the study scope and were not probed further. More research is recommended to explore how these concepts interrelate, overlap, and/or complement in practice. Such studies will provide a better understanding of what formal leadership roles entail in organizations.

**Context.** The study showed that context played a large role in leadership approaches and effectiveness. Investigating how local (e.g., team, organization) and broader (e.g., provincial, national, international) contextual aspects impact formal and informal leadership approaches would be valuable. Also, looking at how leadership varies between K-12 and higher education would add more layers of understanding of how leadership emerges in educational settings.

### **Limitations**

There were three limitations identified for this study related to generalizability, conceptual framework, and the focus on leadership only. Firstly, the findings cannot be used for generalization purposes. Participants experienced leadership in multiple educational contexts within a wide geographical region and over an extended period. However, they all pursued doctoral leadership studies at one institution, which might have influenced how they perceived the phenomenon. Hence, being exposed to

some of the same leadership theory and research could have resulted in the findings' alignment with the conceptual elements of the study framework. Secondly, as the study's conceptual framework informed the research design and processes, these findings need to be considered within the context of the framework and not as generally relevant to all educational contexts or all leadership approaches. Finally, focusing on leadership only and not on overlapping concepts (e.g., management or administration) may have limited the understanding of how the phenomenon emerges in educational settings. Specifically, formal leadership seemed to encompass other elements (e.g., tasks, technical procedures, policy, etc.) that fall outside the people-centric view of leadership.

## Conclusions

This article examined leadership practices in educational contexts that emerged from exploring, analyzing, and interpreting how 22 participants experienced leadership within the context of a conceptual framework rooted in a select body of literature. The study shows that educational leadership is a complex phenomenon and entails highly contextual approaches. Considering the conceptual framework and the participant views, within the *individual leadership domain*, leaders who were committed to long-term development and application of leadership skills and strategies were more effective in addressing challenges in their context. Within the *interactional leadership domain*, quality relationships supported a culture of trust, a sense of togetherness, and purposeful dialogue. Through meaningful and encouraging interactions, leaders inspired respect, self-reliance, and self-efficacy in others. As such, within the *collective leadership domain*, leaders and teams cultivated an environment conducive to creativity, innovation, wellbeing, and achieving a balance between work and play. Being grounded in the participants' experiences with leadership, this study brings to light novel insights about leadership concepts and how theory and research could improve practice. Leadership influences the development of individuals and organizations. Therefore, this study is valuable to leadership researchers, practitioners, and educators as it could inform future research, inspire leadership excellence, and offer leadership development principles.

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## Appendix 1. Interview Guide

*Experiencing  
Leadership  
in Educational  
Contexts*

### A. Participant Profile

1. To begin with, tell me about your current institution, your role, and how long you've been in your current role at this institution.
2. What do you think informs your perspective of leadership? In what ways?

### B. Overall Perspective of Leadership

3. Tell me about some experiences you've had with leadership that, from your perspective, best define what leadership is or isn't. These stories can be about your own leadership or what you may have observed in others' leadership.

### C. Leadership Development

4. Think about memorable times and surprising lessons of leadership. Tell me some stories that are meaningful to you about how you've developed your leadership. These stories can be about your own leadership or what you may have observed in others' leadership.
5. How are you planning to continue your leadership development?

### D. Leadership Implementation

6. Tell me some stories about times when you've experienced success or struggle with leadership and how these experiences influenced your leadership. These stories can be about your own leadership or what you may have observed in others' leadership.

### E. Closing

7. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
8. If I need additional information or clarification on anything you shared with me today, may I contact you for a follow up interview?
9. Once the transcript of this interview and the initial analysis are finalized, may I ask you to verify them for accuracy and provide me with feedback?
10. What pseudonym would you like me to use to identify you in my study?