

Article

Reclaiming Everyday Leadership in Jordanian Schools: Navigating Power, Policy, and Local Educational Futures

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores leadership as a daily, relational, and moral practice for school principals in Jordan, within a centralized education system subject to reform imperatives. Jordan is a compelling context for this research, given the centralized system, economic conditions, regional security, and constant reform imperatives. Principals must balance implementing national policy with the realities of their local communities while maintaining stability in their schools. This research, through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, seeks to explore how school principals in Jordan interpret, mediate, and translate policy into practice. This research found that leadership practice can be seen in physical presence, values-based decision-making, discretionary use of the “spirit of the law,” distributed responsibility, acts of care, and justice-based protection of human dignity. Preparedness for the future is not seen in formal strategies, but in daily practices that encourage flexibility, participation, and ethical responsibility. This research contributes a contextually grounded model of leadership practice under constraint, which has implications for leadership preparation, policy, reform in a centralized education system, and quality education.

Keywords: school leadership; social justice; Jordan; Arab; everyday leadership

1. Introduction

Educational leadership research has increasingly questioned traditional, leader-centric, or heroic notions of leadership that concentrate on individuals in formal leadership positions (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Accordingly, research has increasingly sought to address practice-based notions of leadership that view it as a socially embedded, relational practice enacted and created through everyday interactions and practices (Crevani et al., 2010). This is particularly significant in school contexts, where leadership is enacted not only in decision-making and policy implementation, but also in everyday practices that shape relationships, equity, and learning opportunities (Lopez, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2022).

In this respect, everyday leadership has increasingly been recognized and explored as a theoretical framework for studying and understanding leadership in educational contexts. Studies on principals’ work, for instance, have explored how leadership is enacted and created in everyday conversations, negotiations, moral judgments, and context-dependent decisions, rather than heroic acts or positional authority (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Such studies indicate that leadership is enacted through everyday relational practices and



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responses to everyday situations, in which school leaders continuously interpret policies, negotiate tensions, and respond to the needs and demands of their communities.

In parallel, there has been a significant and growing interest in exploring and understanding social justice leadership, particularly in the contexts of equity, inclusion, and care in schools serving diverse and vulnerable student populations (Lopez, 2016; Chaaban et al., 2025). Although this body of research has primarily been conducted in Western contexts, there has been a call for a greater focus on how justice and dignity are conceptualized and enacted in culturally and politically specific contexts, particularly in non-Western and Global South contexts (Arar, 2024; Oplatka & Arar, 2016; Chaaban et al., 2025). Beyond normative and ideal notions of justice, this body of research has sought to explore how school leaders interpret ethical demands and negotiate dilemmas related to justice and inclusion in everyday practice.

However, leadership practice is not an isolated entity from these wider structural factors (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Rather, leadership is subject to a range of political structures, governance models, cultural factors, and socio-economic factors that dictate what is possible in terms of leadership action in specific contexts (Arar et al., 2025; Oplatka & Arar, 2016). Within a highly regulated education system, principals are subject to a range of policy frameworks that dictate their actions, while simultaneously needing to respond to local demands and expectations. Comparative research across a range of contexts continues to reinforce that leadership practices are subject to contextual factors and not transferable models (Hallinger, 2011). Within this understanding, leadership practices can often be seen as moral and political in their everyday application, as principals seek to make sense of policies and respond to a range of competing demands (Bogotch, 2024; Gümüş et al., 2021).

These factors can be seen in relation to leadership practices in Jordanian schools. In Jordanian education systems, principals operate within a system subject to a high level of regulation by a central governing authority. Within this model, principals are subject to a range of national policies and expectations but are simultaneously held accountable for local-level results.

For instance, studies on schools in Jordan have shown the complex nature of the leadership environment in which the principals operate. The leadership environment has been characterized by recurring organizational tensions, including staff relations, resource constraints, and stakeholder expectations, which principals must manage in their normal leadership roles (Jubran, 2017; Zaitoun et al., 2023). The practice of leadership in Jordan has been understood from various managerial and leadership style approaches, including transactional leadership and practice-based leadership, to ensure stability and compliance with national policies and regulations (AlAwad, 2023; Abu-Tineh, 2013). However, the leaders have reported an increase in the impact of social and economic factors on their day-to-day leadership decisions, including the changing student needs, community-school relations, and administrative requirements (Al Tawarah, 2019). Recent studies on leadership in various contexts have shown that leadership practice is patterned and context-specific, affecting how the schools operate (Al-Khateeb, 2025).

Overall, this body of research on leadership in Jordan has shown that the leadership environment in which school principals operate includes elements of centralization and community factors, and that their leadership practice involves mediating and addressing ethical dilemmas, tensions, and other priorities. The leadership practice has been shown to be more than just formal leadership and authority, including how leaders make day-to-day decisions about interpreting the rules, resolving conflicts, and protecting the dignity and well-being of students and staff (Zaitoun et al., 2023).

Despite increased research on leadership styles, leadership effectiveness, and organizational practices in Jordanian schools, little attention has been paid to how principals

experience and exercise their everyday leadership in these policy-constrained settings. To fill this void in the literature, more attention needs to be paid to principals' everyday leadership practices within their broader contexts (Al Tawarah, 2019; AlAwad, 2023; Abu-Tineh, 2013).

Everyday leadership refers to leadership that is conceived as a product of everyday social practices, such as "making sense" of policies, managing people, and coping with contextual problems (Crevani et al., 2010). In the educational domain, this perspective emphasizes how principals' everyday activities, such as "mediating between policy and practice," "caring for staff," and "managing ethical dilemmas," contribute to the development of leadership in particular contexts (Hallinger, 2018; Arar & Oplatka, 2022).

The purpose of the current study is to use the everyday leadership perspective to examine how social justice is practiced in Jordanian schools by their principals and how these principals can build a successful future for their respective educational institutions. Therefore, this study answers the following main question: How do school principals in Jordan exercise everyday leadership within their centralized policy settings and sociopolitical contexts?

The practice of leadership does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it is increasingly argued that leadership should be understood in the context in which it occurs. The work of the principal is influenced by the institutional structure, the historical context, and the local context, rather than by the formal role description of the position (Hallinger, 2018).

In highly regulated systems, the principal's work can be framed by strict policy guidelines, yet the principal is also required to address local needs. The principal's work can be understood as translating system-level policies into school-level actions. This translation can occur through small decisions, such as managing time, selecting priorities, and managing relationships (Gunnulfsen, 2024). This perspective resonates with the understanding of the school as an adaptive system, in which change is not understood to occur through the linear implementation of policy but through iterative coordination that can lead to improvement (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). The principal's work can be understood as coordinating different actors to maintain collaboration, where small adjustments can lead to significant change within the organization (Byrd et al., 2023).

1.1. Ethical and Social Justice Leadership in Everyday School Practice

The other important aspect of everyday leadership is its ethical dimension. Leadership in schools is a continuous process of ethical judgment for principals as they seek to balance different demands and expectations in their roles. Principals are called upon to make ethical judgments in situations where different priorities have to be balanced. Such situations include judgment of fairness and justice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Ethical leadership is not just about formal policies or formal situations. Rather, ethical leadership is integral to everyday leadership in schools. Ethical leadership is also about how a leader engages in everyday interactions and makes everyday decisions. Such everyday decisions include how a leader listens to others and engages in decision-making (Ahmed, 2025; Arar & Oplatka, 2022).

Recent research indicates that ethical leadership is evident in everyday leadership, particularly in micro-level decisions. Such decisions include how a leader allocates their time and distributes attention to different people (Gunnulfsen, 2024).

The other important aspect of leadership in schools is social justice leadership. Leadership scholars in education are increasingly interested in how school leaders address issues of inequality and exclusion in their schools (Chaaban et al., 2025). In this sense, the practice of social justice leadership encompasses decisions regarding participation, recognition, access to opportunities, and distribution of resources in the school context

(Pak & Ravitch, 2021; Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Such leadership practices as providing assistance to students in social or economic need, mediating between families and the school, ensuring fair treatment for school staff, and creating spaces for participation can be seen as forms of justice-oriented leadership.

Another significant aspect is that many researchers have started to discuss the importance of understanding the practice of social justice leadership in the cultural and societal context in which it occurs. Leadership practices that can be seen as promoting justice in one context may not be the same in other contexts. Studies in Middle Eastern and Arab cultural contexts have shown the significance of the concept of responsibility to the community, care in relationships, and mediation in relationships within the school (Oplatka & Arar, 2016; Arar, 2024; Arar et al., 2023b). In such contexts, the practice of justice-oriented leadership may not manifest as activism in the school but rather as balancing relationships, mediating conflicts, and attending to vulnerable individuals in the school community.

1.2. Educational Leadership in Jordan and the Arab Region

Previous research in the Arab region, including in Jordan, has shown that, in many instances, the principal's role has been to mediate between policies and on-the-ground realities. The principal's leadership style has been to interpret policies and adapt them to actual situations, in addition to building relationships with teachers, families, and the community (Abu-Tineh, 2013; AlAwad, 2023; Al Awamrah & Sawalhi, 2025). The research has also shown various issues affecting the organization, including conflicts among teachers and various expectations from different stakeholders (Jubran, 2017; Zaitoun et al., 2023).

The educational leadership context in Jordan can be understood as part of the broader context in which the country's educational system is organized. The Jordanian education system is characterized by centralized governance, with curriculum, testing, and accountability policies set at the national level. In such a system, school principals are responsible for implementing national policies in the school context while also meeting the needs of the local school community. At the same time, schools in Jordan have a diverse range of students with different socio-economic conditions. This presents different leadership challenges. Understanding leadership as a practice offers a deeper insight into how school principals navigate these complexities and respond to the needs of their school communities (Al Tawarah, 2019).

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research approach to explore how school principals in Jordan exercise their leadership in their daily practices within a centralized education system and a complex sociocultural context. The research focus of this study was on how school principals make sense of their daily leadership practices, particularly regarding social justice and future school development. This research design choice of employing a qualitative research approach for this study was appropriate since the focus of the study was on how school principals interpret policies, address multiple demands, and respond to the realities of their school communities, which are difficult to quantify (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study employed the leadership-as-practice perspective, which focuses on leadership as emerging from daily interactions, routines, and decisions, rather than as a position or a set of personal characteristics (Raelin, 2021). This study, therefore, employed the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that social realities are constructed through human interactions, which, in turn, are shaped by culture and context (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the leadership practices of school principals were explored through the principals' own interpretations.

According to reflexive thematic analysis principles, it is necessary to take into account researchers' positionality within the context of their research. Both authors work within or near the Jordanian education system. They have considerable experience in educational leadership, educator development, and education policy in the Arab region. Thus, their understanding of the context enabled them to gain access to participants, establish trusting relationships, and interpret culturally grounded meanings in the data, including religious values and their ethical implications. To avoid compromising participants, all participants used pseudonyms, and institutional details were excluded from the presentation of findings.

2.1. Participants and Data Collection

To explore the research focus of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 school principals working in different educational contexts across Jordan. Purposive sampling of research participants for this study was employed to ensure variation across school types (public, private), levels, and years of professional experience, as leadership practices vary across educational contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The authors developed the interview protocol, and the following are examples of guiding questions used during the semi-structured interviews: "Describe a typical day in your role as a school principal? What does your daily leadership actually look like in practice?" "When you receive a policy or instruction from the Ministry of Education that you are not fully convinced by, how do you respond?" "To what extent do your personal values ever come into tension with institutional requirements? Can you give an example?" "Describe a situation in which you felt you needed to protect a student or teacher from unfair treatment? How did you handle it?"

However, before commencing data collection, the first author's university obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and permission to conduct the research was granted by the Jordanian Ministry of Education. The invitations to participate were then disseminated through school leadership networks and professional contacts, and interested school principals volunteered to take part in the research.

The interviews were carried out in Arabic to facilitate the comfortable expression of their experiences in detail. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min each and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed and checked for accuracy. In addition, some parts were translated into English for reporting purposes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Participating schools ranged from those with about 450 students to those with over 1000 students. All schools were located in urban or semi-urban areas of Amman. Sampled schools were both low-resource public schools facing infrastructure inadequacies, large class sizes, and restricted budgets for staff professional development, and average private international schools accredited under the national system. One of the principals was leading a public school where the second shift was organized for Syrian refugees, numbering about 250 students. Contexts differed in socioeconomic background, characterized either by poverty, with families unable to contribute to student learning, or by the middle and upper-middle classes, with active parents (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic data.

Name	Years of Experience	Highest Degree	Gender	School Context
P1	24	Higher Diploma (Educational Management)	Male	1100 students. Urban Amman. Private, KG–secondary. Strong parental accountability. Orphan students are supported confidentially.
P2	29	Higher Diploma (Educational Administration)	Female	Private international, 1000+ students. Urban Amman. robotics and enrichment programs.
P3	8	PhD	Female	Urban Amman. Private, KG–secondary (Grades 4–7 department). Three-branch network. Strong internal monitoring systems. Formal second-line leadership policy (2 potential leaders per department per semester).
P4	20	Master	Female	Public high school (BTEC vocational + academic tracks). Two shifts: morning (~main cohort 500 students) + second shift (~250 Syrian refugee students). Strong vocational inclusion focus; disability inclusion program.
P5	20	Master	Female	Public school. Urban Amman. Details limited by participant privacy preference.
P6	12	PhD	Female	Public primary school. Urban Amman. Resource-constrained: inadequate playground, chronic cleanliness challenges, limited maintenance budget. Many financially struggling families. Low community partnership capacity. The principal purchases materials from personal funds.
P7	15	Higher Diploma (Educational Management)	Male	Public school. Urban Amman (area with low academic achievement and challenging social conditions). ~1200 students, KG–secondary. Socioeconomically disadvantaged community
P8	10	Master	Female	Girls (private). Urban Amman ~900 students. Private, national curriculum + English curriculum. Strong monitoring culture.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name	Years of Experience	Highest Degree	Gender	School Context
P9	14	Master	Female	Urban Amman (Private). 1000 students ~13 orphanage-supported students. Partnership with museums, community organizations, and volunteering sites.
P10	11	Master	Female	Public school (primary and secondary). Urban Amman. Two tracks: vocational (BTEC) and academic. Morning shift (~1000 students) + second shift (~250 Syrian refugee students). Partnerships with Civil Defense and Community Police.
P11	18	Higher Diploma (Educational Management)	Female	Public school. (largest: ~1000+ students, ~90 teachers). Current school: high school with BTEC + academic tracks. Diverse nationalities among students and staff.
P12	22	Higher Diploma (Educational Management)	Female	Public school. Urban Amman. Long-serving principal. Details limited by participant privacy preference.
P13	9	Master	Female	Private school. Urban Amman. KG–secondary. ~1000 students. Resource room and specialist teacher for students with disabilities. Families generally middle-to-low income. Parent community engagement through garden and celebration activities.
P14	16	Master	Female	Private school. Urban Amman. KG–secondary. Generally safe environment. 600 students’.
P15	25	PhD	Male	Public school. Urban Amman. Long-serving principal. 800+ Details limited by participant privacy preference.
P16	18	PhD	Female	Public school. Urban Amman. Details limited by participant privacy preference.

2.2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2019) guidelines. The analysis began with thorough readings of the data to become familiar with it and identify emerging patterns. The data were then analyzed using open coding to identify key statements and actions related to everyday leadership activities, policy interpretation, relational leadership, and ethical leadership decisions.

The codes were gradually synthesized into categories and, through an iterative process, into themes. The analysis was also informed by the leadership-as-practice perspective,

which focuses on how leadership emerges through everyday activities and decisions (Crevani et al., 2010). In a bid to enhance the credibility of the analysis, the authors engaged in ongoing discussion. The participants were given pseudonyms, and all the data were stored safely to ensure confidentiality.

3. Results

The analysis revealed that leadership in Jordanian schools is not experienced as episodic or strategic, but as an ongoing, embodied, and morally infused practice. Through interviews, principals described leadership as something enacted through daily presence, ethical judgment, contextual mediation, and relational coordination under constraint. Rather than positioning themselves as reform architects or institutional commanders, participants articulated leadership as a situated practice of care, discretion, and collective responsibility. From these accounts, seven interrelated themes emerged (see Table 2), together illuminating how everyday leadership becomes a site of justice, mediation, and future-making within centralized structures.

Table 2. Core themes of everyday leadership practice.

Theme
1. Leadership in Motion—Presence as Relational Authority;
2. Values-in-Action Leadership as a Moral and Ethical Practice;
3. The Spirit of the Law—Contextualizing Policy in Practice;
4. No One Carries the School Alone—Distributed Leadership as Sustainability;
5. Care Is Concrete—Infrastructure, Safety, and Dignity;
6. Justice Without Labels—Social Justice as Protection and Dignity;
7. Preparing for the Future Under Constraint—Navigating Change and Uncertainty.

3.1. Theme 1: Leadership in Motion—Presence as Relational Authority

Participants reported that leadership was enacted through physical presence rather than positional authority. “Leadership is not office-based; I am present in school life—morning arrival, corridors, classrooms, and dismissal with buses and parents—because closeness builds trust.” (P1) Being physically present enabled them to be aware of issues before they arose and to address concerns without invoking formal authority. P6 explained that she follows a daily routine to inspect all areas of the school, which may include opening the drain cover on rainy days to ensure proper water flow and prevent flooding. P15 would conduct a similar visit; in addition, he will visit nearby restaurants to check if students are staying there instead of coming to school.

This type of leadership has also been characterized as preventive rather than reactive. Greetings, check-ins, and chance conversations were reported to be effective ways to build trust and maintain order. The principals reported that presence was an instrument for humanizing authority, allowing them to influence without undermining positive relationships.

Physical presence also meant presence among parents and members of the wider community. Being accessible and available was repeatedly cited as a key indicator of leadership legitimacy, especially during periods of tension or crisis. Thus, leadership was enacted via everyday interactions that signaled care, responsibility, and attentiveness.

3.2. Theme 2: Values-in-Action—Leadership as a Moral and Ethical Practice

Throughout all interviews, leadership was conceptualized as being inseparable from personal, moral, and faith-related values. Principals expressed that values such as justice, honesty, responsibility, respect, care, and accountability were integral to guiding their

day-to-day leadership decisions. “The most important value is fear of God. I also strongly value justice, equality, respect, and appreciation” (P2).

(P8), for example, captured the connection between values and internal accountability with more than compliance: “Values are essential. Without them, leadership would become detrimental to both people and the work environment. Faith-based foundation, honesty, morals, and good intentions are key. Externally imposed controls, such as surveillance cameras, cannot substitute for internal accountability and conscience. A teacher can monitor a class, but without conscience and personal responsibility, there is nothing one can do.” This statement illustrates the use of values as a self-regulation mechanism, which is absent from external controls.

Like (P8), (P3) explained the role of personal accountability as the driving power of staff sincerity: “We don’t work for salary alone. We work with conscience and personal accountability before God. Some important actions are done not because of money and not because there is someone else who would be watching you.” This approach does not limit the behavior of the staff members but guides it through providing personal motivation.

Principals mentioned cases in which they relied on their values when facing difficult and sometimes unclear situations, particularly those involving conflict, authority, and competing interests. Values were viewed as an internal compass for making consistent decisions, especially where those involve personal and professional aspects. Values were also communicated relationally as the principles guiding behavior, in the form of pedagogy, by modeling ways of listening, respecting employees’ dignity, avoiding humiliation, and appreciating their efforts. All of these were viewed by principals as tools for shaping school culture, in which the values also communicate how authority should be used. A common element across all stories was that their values were deeply connected to social justice approaches, in which fairness meant considering individual circumstances.

Some principals talked about how they relied on their values in dealing with complex or ambiguous situations, especially those involving conflicts, authority, and interests. Values were conceptualized by principals as an internal guide that helped them make consistent decisions, even if these decisions had professional and personal implications.

Values were also expressed relationally, especially through modeling behaviors such as listening, treating staff with dignity, avoiding humiliation, and acknowledging efforts. Principals conceptualized these behaviors as pedagogies that shaped school culture, with values being implicitly taught on how authority should be exercised.

A very important feature stated by all interviewees was that values were also related to social justice orientations, with fairness being conceptualized not merely as treating everyone equally but also as being responsive to specific situations and circumstances. Protecting a teacher’s rights, considering staff circumstances, and being respectful, even in disciplinary action, were also conceptualized by principals as value-related.

3.3. Theme 3: *The Spirit of the Law—Contextualizing Policy in Practice*

Principals were found to consistently position themselves as mediators between policy and practice. Although they expressed loyalty to Ministry of Education regulations, they highlighted the need to adjust policies to fit the context of their respective schools. In other words, they preferred to assess the possible consequences of the policies, make gradual changes, and adjust their implementation to prevent any harm.

This was often referred to as abiding by the “spirit of the law,” rather than the literal implementation of the law. I learned to apply the spirit of the law, not only the letter of the law.” (P5, P1, and P15). (P13) made a significant addition to the developmental aspect of this issue, reflecting on how he has developed his style of policy enactment: “In my early years of leadership practice, I was too strict in circumstances where some flexibility could

have helped. Sometimes this led to opposition to what I said and did, and the desired outcome was not achieved. Later, I understood the importance of the spirit of the law and, step by step, started using more democratic and relational styles of leadership.” It is clear that policy enactment is not something one is born with; rather, it is an acquired skill gained through experience. Therefore, it turned out that policy enactment is one of the key aspects of daily leadership practice, as principals need to make judgments, exercise discretion, and reason ethically.

Principals argued that they needed to make such adjustments to maintain justice, care, and practicality. In some cases, they mentioned making adjustments to attendance, disciplinary, and time-management policies to align with the law and the school’s context.

Policy enactment was found to be an important practice in daily leadership work, requiring principals to make judgments, exercise discretion, and engage in ethical reasoning. Principals recognized the need to strike a balance between care and responsibility, ensuring compliance with policies without compromising education and morality.

3.4. Theme 4: No One Carries the School Alone—Distributed Leadership as Sustainability

Participants rejected individualized or heroic models of leadership, instead describing leadership as collectively enacted through distributed roles and shared responsibility. Principals highlighted the importance of assistant principals, department heads, counselors, and teacher leaders in sustaining daily school operations. P2 stated, “I intentionally develop second-line leadership. . . Leadership must be transferred, not centralized”

(P9) explained her practice of building the school vision as a process of co-creation rather than writing the vision herself: “As soon as I start working at the school, I don’t write the vision and the mission myself. I ask the teachers to send me their suggestions; we form a team and reach a consensus on the common vision and mission. I will explain what vision and mission are and how they can be adapted to the stage of our school.” This practice shifted vision-building from a top-down administrative activity to a relational process.

Another principal (P3) presented an institutionalized policy for developing second-line leaders in the school where she worked. Namely, the school asked all departments to develop at least two future leaders each semester by having them complete leadership tasks with increasing responsibility. Internal training, with support from the university-affiliated training center, was used to support this process.

(P11) highlighted the emotional aspect of distributed leadership: “My teachers and I are one team. We either succeed together, or responsibility is shared between us. We work together, and I try to maintain the family atmosphere.” Such framing of collective responsibility was a conscious response to the blame culture typical of hierarchical organizations, which many principals mentioned during interviews.

Leadership sustainability was directly connected to the distribution of workload. Structured processes, such as weekly meetings, duty schedules, and time frames, provided the conditions for independent action and coordination towards common objectives. Trust in staff capacities was presented as both a necessary condition and an ethical position. Some of the principals made a contrast between this approach and an authoritative management style.

Leadership sustainability was explicitly linked to the distribution of the workload. Routine structures—such as weekly meetings, duty schedules, and clear timelines—enabled others to act autonomously while remaining aligned with shared goals. Trust in staff capacity was framed as both a practical necessity and an ethical stance.

Several principals contrasted this approach with authoritarian leadership styles, which they associated with resistance, burnout, and organizational fragility. Effective leadership,

in their view, depended on enabling others to participate in decision-making and take ownership of school improvement.

3.5. Theme 5: Care Is Concrete—Infrastructure, Safety, and Dignity

A prominent theme was how principals attended to the material and physical aspects of schooling. For example, leaders discussed at length buildings, sanitation, electricity, heating, safety, and maintenance, among other issues, with some referring to these as neglected problems requiring immediate attention. “A child should at least have a clean, safe place.” (P6).

What stands out in this theme is not only that principals were concerned with infrastructural matters, but also that many pursued this concern under conditions of acute resource scarcity and little institutional backing. (P6), working in the context of insufficient playgrounds, cleanliness issues, and financially struggling families, explained how she was engaged in the process of making her school dignified despite the structural odds: “Even the weakest schools have better hygiene than us, and it’s very painful”. Instead of waiting for the solution from above, she explained that she bought the necessary equipment herself, worked to instill a culture of environmental responsibility through conversations with children and parents, and tried to make even small but effective changes where she could. She perceived the words of a child, “Now my school is nice,” as the most valuable sign of her leadership success.

Constraints make the micro-level leadership of such principals exceptional. While Western models of leadership operate under assumptions of sufficient infrastructure, adequate personnel, and a relatively stable resource environment, these principals were practicing adaptive leadership in its fullest sense: continuously improvising, reprioritizing, and taking action under conditions of acute scarcity to keep their children’s dignity intact. For instance, (P9) did that in another way: during exams, when the electricity went out on the ground floor in the extreme heat, she decided to move the children to the air-conditioned floor, organizing their move up the stairs with the help of the staff. She said that she accepted whatever administrative consequences this action might bring, because the well-being of children was the number one priority. It seems like in this case, “care” is not some secondary addition to leadership—it is a demanding kind of situational judgment practiced under conditions of acute scarcity, which should be recognized as such in the literature.

Care was exercised in decisions concerning space, safety, and resource allocation. Such practices, therefore, can be seen as conducted not in terms of management but of morality, dignity, and justice. For instance, ensuring safety in class, at school, and more generally was seen as essential to learning, justice, and equity. In addition, there were instances in which leaders made crucial decisions during crises, prioritizing students’ welfare over administrative convenience.

Therefore, care was demonstrated in practical ways, with leaders making crucial decisions regarding space, among other issues, that defined their role in making humane schools.

3.6. Theme 6: Justice Without Labels—Social Justice as Protection and Dignity

Although the participants did not often use specific social justice terminology, justice-oriented leadership was evident throughout the interviews. Principals discussed intervening to protect teachers from unfair treatment. “I pursued the issue until the teacher received her full rights. . . preventing injustice.” (P7), ensuring confidentiality for vulnerable students, and preventing practices that could marginalize students. “Orphans are supported. . . their status is kept private, so teachers and students do not know.” (P1).

(P14) offered one of the most detailed accounts of justice work enacted against institutional resistance. When she observed that a teacher's rights were not being fairly honored, she pursued the matter independently—without formal authorization—until the teacher received full entitlement. She described her reasoning explicitly: "I saw it as preventing injustice. I was prepared to justify and explain my stance if questioned." This account reveals justice-oriented leadership as an act of moral courage that may require principals to position themselves in tension with institutional authority rather than simply in compliance with it.

(P10) described a different dimension of this complexity regarding orphaned students supported through an external arrangement. While these students received institutional care—activities, follow-up, structured support—she was careful not to equate material provision with the absence of emotional vulnerability: "In a private-school context, most students are relatively similar socioeconomically, but there are still students with family stress—such as living with one parent or limited home support. Often the issue is not money but lack of follow-up at home, which affects learning habits and independence." This account challenges easy categorizations of vulnerability, revealing that justice work must remain sensitive to both invisible and visible forms of disadvantage.

Justice work in this study was also shaped by the complex web of competing pressures these principals navigated. Community expectations, parental demands, ministerial directives, and institutional hierarchies all operated simultaneously, and principals frequently had to exercise the very discretion described in Theme 3—applying the spirit of the law—to maintain fairness under these competing demands. (P1) described protecting orphaned students' dignity through deliberate confidentiality within a community where social stigma is real and consequential: a form of justice work that required actively managing information across staff and student communities, not just responding to individual incidents.

Social justice leadership was also evident in the experiences of principals in schools with diverse student populations—including Syrian refugees, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. Even in more socially homogeneous settings, justice work was evident in everyday practices related to student discipline, workload distribution, recognition, and giving voice to those most at risk of being overlooked.

Social justice leadership was also evident in the experiences of principals in schools with diverse student populations, such as refugees, socio-economically disadvantaged students, or students with disabilities. Even in more socially homogeneous settings, justice work was evident in everyday practices related to student discipline, workloads, recognition, and voice.

3.7. Theme 7: Preparing for the Future Under Constraint—Navigating Change and Uncertainty

Principals expressed a strong commitment to preparing students for the future, but this commitment was heavily constrained by significant challenges. Principals talked about introducing new technologies, "Josor Labs: virtual science labs where each student has a login to run experiments digitally," vocational education, innovative education programs, and student leadership opportunities. Principals, however, also expressed challenges related to curriculum overload, time constraints, and reforms without sufficient consultation. "Not everyone must be academic; students can be professional." (P4).

(P11) exemplified efforts towards changing the stigmas attached to vocational education in her school by challenging the stereotypes associated with the fact that BTEC routes were for academic failures and by including students with special needs in these routes as part of the future-making process.

Future-oriented leadership demonstrated pragmatism rather than idealism. Principals were concerned about the development of adaptability, engagement, and educational

meaning among their students under considerable limitations. Preparation for the future took place through daily routines rather than through radical changes—consistent with the more general finding of this study, which holds that consequential leadership occurs through cumulative micro-level actions.

Thus, future-oriented leadership was characterized by pragmatism rather than idealism. Principals focused on developing students' adaptability, student engagement, and educational meaning, all of which took place under significant constraints. Preparation for the future was enacted through daily practices rather than large-scale reforms.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how school principals in Jordan practice leadership in their everyday work, given a centralized education system. The results indicate that leadership is not seen as a series of episodic reform initiatives or strategic planning exercises, but rather as an everyday, relational, and ethical practice. Principals practiced leadership by being present, making moral judgments, providing mediation, and facilitating coordination. Principals did not describe themselves as leaders by portraying themselves as institutional commanders or reform architects but as practitioners of care, discretion, and collective responsibility. This study contributes to a growing body of literature that understands leadership as a practice that emerges out of everyday interactions and relationships rather than a role or a personal trait (Crevani et al., 2010).

One of the key findings of this study is that relational presence is a critical factor for establishing leadership legitimacy. Principals emphasized that being physically present in classrooms, school corridors, and everyday school life, and engaging with teachers, students, and parents, helped them anticipate and address potential issues and maintain trust among school members. This study's results are supported by the leadership-as-practice perspective, which emphasizes that leadership can emerge through everyday interactions and micro-level practices rather than through directives or commands (Crevani et al., 2010). Other studies on leadership in specific contexts also emphasize that leadership legitimacy is related to relational engagement and presence in organizational contexts (Arar & Oplatka, 2022).

At the same time, however, the findings suggest that leadership decisions are significantly affected by ethical and moral considerations. Participants emphasized their leadership actions in terms of the values of justice, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Such values guided their actions in complex situations involving their relationships with staff and students. Such findings support long-standing arguments that educational leadership is a moral practice grounded in ethical judgment (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). On the other hand, ethical decision-making in the Jordanian context cannot be approached solely from a professional duty perspective. Many of the principals used their religious beliefs and their sense of accountability to God (taqwa) when deciding which actions to take to be ethically responsible (Arar et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, these values were part of a larger culture in which the ideas of social responsibility, mutual respect, relationship-building, and the well-being of all members of the community were emphasized. Such findings are consistent with Islamic views of educational leadership, which see leadership not as a managerial activity but as a moral and educational process that seeks to cultivate human potential and the common good. Based on Al-Kaylani's ideas, one may say that educational leadership can be seen as a form of stewardship that promotes the holistic growth of the individual and society through the development of ethical character, social responsibility, and responsible action. Instead of focusing only on policies and procedures, principals used the policy in question through the lens of ethical, cultural, and spiritual considerations (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Oplatka &

[Arar, 2016](#)). The second important dimension of everyday leadership in this study concerns principals' roles as mediators between national policies and local realities. Participants emphasized their understanding of leadership as the constant interpretation and adaptation of Ministry policies to local realities. Rather than relying on formal policies and laws, principals emphasized their efforts to work in accordance with the "spirit of the law." Such a trend is consistent with the literature on policy enactment in schools. Such literature suggests that policies are interpreted and enacted in schools in ways that differ from their formal content ([Hallinger, 2018](#)). In a highly centralized system such as Jordan, principals are in a critical position to mediate between policy mandates and local realities.

The results also underscore the collective dimension of leadership in school contexts. The participants were unanimous in rejecting the idea of heroic leadership, instead focusing on the importance of cooperation and collective responsibility among the school leadership, teachers, and other school staff. The importance of distributed leadership in the school context was also underscored by the participants as vital to the school's day-to-day operations. These findings align well with theoretical work on distributed leadership, which posits the spread of leadership work among multiple individuals in school contexts, rather than heroic leadership that relies on a single individual ([Spillane, 2006](#)).

The aspect of school leadership that was perhaps most interesting in the context of the participants' day-to-day work was the focus on the physical condition of the school as an educational space. The participants spent considerable time discussing the importance of the school's physical conditions, including school infrastructure, safety, sanitation, and maintenance, in the context of the school as a space of education that required care and respect for students' human dignity. These aspects of school leadership in the context of the school as a space of education could also be observed in other studies examining the role of school leadership in resource-constrained environments ([Arar & Oplatka, 2022](#)).

Instead of considering resource constraints as impediments to being an effective leader, participants frequently saw them as situations requiring constant adaptation and innovative problem-solving, thus demonstrating adaptive leadership characteristics. Similarly, justice-oriented leadership emerged as another theme from the interviews, even though principals did not explicitly use justice-related vocabulary. The principals' actions, such as intervening on behalf of teachers, protecting the dignity of vulnerable students, and promoting equality in school practices, are all indicators of justice-oriented leadership that can be exercised in the everyday activities and relationships between principals and teachers, rather than in a specific justice-related framework or ideology. This is consistent with [Furman's \(2012\)](#) study, which found that justice-oriented leadership is embedded in everyday practices that promote equality, dignity, and inclusion in schools. These practices were often enacted amid competing expectations from parents, communities, and educational authorities, requiring principals to balance care, justice, and institutional responsibilities in contextually responsive ways.

Lastly, the study has shown that principals in Jordan, within a centralized educational system, seek to prepare students and schools for the future while facing significant constraints. The principals' actions, such as the introduction of technology, support for students in vocational courses, and student leadership programs, indicate that principals are trying to prepare students for the future, while facing limitations and constraints in doing so, which is a general issue in educational reforms in a centralized educational system, where principals are supposed to implement reforms in a context where there are limitations and constraints, and in response, principals in this study tried to prepare students for the future in incremental and everyday activities that promote adaptability, responsibility, and engagement.

5. Conclusions

The study has shown that educational leadership in Jordan's semi-centralized educational system is a complex, everyday relational practice exercised in a judgmental, mediating, and collaborative manner. The following sections share implications of the study's findings for leadership development, educational policies, and further research:

The results of this study have implications for leadership preparation programs. Leadership preparation programs should pay more attention to the relational and ethical aspects of leadership practice. Leadership preparation programs often emphasize administrative skills and policies. However, the results of this study have shown that leadership practice also requires ethical judgment, conflict mediation, and building relationships. Therefore, reflective practice, case study methods, and collaborative problem-solving approaches should be included in leadership preparation programs.

In the same vein, educational policies should support the implementation of distributed leadership models in schools. Distributed leadership models can help reduce leadership overload and promote collaborative leadership development among assistant principals, department heads, and teacher leaders. In addition, policymaking should provide greater flexibility in policy implementation.

It is important to note the various limitations that arose during this study. First, the results are based on the perspectives of a relatively small sample of principals within the Jordanian educational environment, and second, on self-reported measures of leadership practice. Moreover, the study has captured a single point in time without incorporating the viewpoints of other participants, such as teachers, students, and parents.

Future research can use comparative studies across different educational environments to better understand how aspects such as culture and policies influence leadership practices. Moreover, longitudinal studies may add value to capturing the development of leadership practices.

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