

Phenomenological approach to distributed leadership in educational research: A systematic review

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Abstract

This research aims to systematically review the distributed leadership studies with phenomenological designs in educational contexts to investigate their descriptive indicators, the characteristics of phenomenological research designs, their research focus, and outcomes. A systematic review approach was employed in this study to identify, evaluate, and summarize research evidence within the scope of the research questions. Of 39 publications extracted from Web of Science, Scopus, and Educational Resources Information Center, nine documents were included in the review upon implementing the inclusion and exclusion criteria. According to the results, the studies ranged from 2011 to 2024, and the majority were conducted in Turkey and the USA at the K-12 level in separate or combined designs. Regarding phenomenological design, the studies varied in treating phenomenology and reflecting diverse perspectives. For instance, a notable number of studies utilized the purposive sampling method to select participants. However, most of them differed in their analysis techniques. As for their research focus and outcomes, it was detected that the eligible studies generally focused on influencing factors, elements, and experiences about distributed leadership, and significant results were revealed through phenomenological lenses.

Keywords: Phenomenology, distributed leadership, educational research, qualitative methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is a methodological approach known as “the study of the lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). It is a philosophical and methodological framework that could effectively be applied to comprehend leadership styles in education. This approach essentially focuses on illuminating the meaning and essence of a leader's everyday lived experiences. Therefore, analyzing leadership through phenomenological lenses could bring significant insights into educational leaders' experiences, situations, characteristics, influencing factors, and requirements for their success.

Organizations' Leadership styles vary due to multiple factors, such as policies and organizational culture (Eslava-Zapata et al., 2023). Among leadership styles, distributed leadership (DL) stands out for its dynamic and collaborative approach to leadership, its recognition of the dispersed nature of knowledge, and the need for adaptive governance structures in complex organizational environments (Gronn, 2002). DL can contribute to long-term, organization-wide implementation of sustainability in educational organizations (Avisar et al., 2018; Lee, 2021). Research on DL is particularly significant for schools because it engages all members in achieving organizational objectives and consequently improves school (Lee, 2021; Mercado, 2024). DL contributes significantly to the development of influential, visionary, and energetic educational institutions that can constantly renew themselves, and school administrators adopting a DL style can make the organization more efficient in a collaborative and coordinated manner by using institutional memory with all employees, which helps create high-performance teams (Mercado, 2024).

Despite the growing popularity of phenomenological designs (PD) studied in psychology, nursing, and tourism, they still need to be widely used in educational research (Farrell, 2020). The picture is similar in terms of leadership research in education. Integrating phenomenology into educational leadership research is important because it prioritizes individuals' lived experiences and fosters a far-reaching understanding of their emotions and perceptions. This methodological framework may empower scholars to acquire notable insights into the complexities of human behavior in contexts of leadership, learning, and instruction that are frequently neglected by quantitative approaches. In other words, phenomenological inquiry has the remarkable potential to significantly inform and enrich various educational practices, including instructional strategies and student engagement. It plays a crucial role in the development of leadership initiatives aimed at fostering influential leaders, the formulation of policies that can adapt and respond to the needs of diverse educational environments, and the meticulous cultivation of both effective educational settings and organizational atmospheres that promote collaboration, innovation, and overall growth for all stakeholders involved. Therefore, using PD to analyze DL in education could reveal various situations and facts such as the lived experiences of educational leaders, the dynamics of team collaboration, the impact on decision-making processes, and how leadership responsibilities are shared and distributed among staff (Altunay & Erol, 2023; Boru, 2020; Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2023; Falkenthal & Byrne, 2020; Gaus et al., 2022; Salifu, 2021; Shal et al., 2024). In this respect, DL studies with PD have a distinctive significance because they provide in-depth analysis for DL implementations in education. Therefore, this research aims to systematically review the DL studies with PD in educational contexts to investigate their descriptive indicators, phenomenological research designs' characteristics, research focus, and outcomes.

Background and Study Context

Phenomenology as a Qualitative Approach

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement emphasizing examining conscious experience from the first-person perspective. It involves exploring experience and how things manifest themselves (Ku Leuven Institute of Philosophy, 2024). The term “phenomenon” comes from the Greek word “phaenesthai,” which denotes bringing into light, showing itself, and appearing (Moustakas, 1994). As

implied by the term “phenomenon,” phenomenology sheds light on the first-person point of view of a given experience. Edmund Husserl pioneered the phenomenological philosophical movement at the outset of the twentieth century. Other prominent figures in phenomenology include Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Husserl, a key objective of phenomenology is to establish the foundation of knowledge (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Phenomenology is recognized both as a philosophy and a qualitative research method. Although philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger did not explicitly develop research methods, their ideas have significantly influenced modern research approaches. The phenomenological research method was initially embraced in the 1950s by non-philosophers and has since been widely applied in fields such as psychology, sociology, pedagogy, health sciences, and nursing (Cudjoe, 2023; Patton & Broward, 2023).

There are different types of phenomenology, and while they share some similarities, each type has unique characteristics. Phenomenology is evident in various philosophical traditions, including the positivist tradition with Husserl, the postpositivist tradition with Merleau-Ponty, the interpretive tradition with Heidegger, and the constructivist tradition with Gadamer (Racher & Robinson, 2003). As a research method, Husserl’s phenomenology involves descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology, where everyday conscious experiences are detailed, and pre-existing opinions are put aside or ‘bracketed’ (Reiners, 2012). Conversely, Heidegger focused on ontology and developed interpretive phenomenology by expanding hermeneutics (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Many modern approaches that cross the transcendental/hermeneutic boundary have also emerged (Neubauer et al., 2019). In interpretive phenomenology, researchers inquire into a phenomenon to understand it and not ignore their personal biases and prior experiences related to the question. On the other hand, descriptive phenomenology involves the researcher’s deliberate effort to describe the phenomenon while acknowledging and suspending their biases (Reiners, 2012).

Different schools of phenomenology offer various approaches to data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). To mention the most frequently used ones, Giorgi (1997) and Van Kaam (1959) proposed a series of analytical steps grounded in Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology, focusing on identifying common themes derived from experiences (Anderson & Eppard, 1998; Giorgi, 1997). In contrast, the methodology of interpretive hermeneutics by Heidegger is implemented through the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). It is predicated on the notion that the researcher is an integral part of the research process and cannot be divorced from preconceived ideas (Reiner, 2012). Creswell (2013) outlines an analysis process with six steps to reveal the essence of the studied phenomenon. This process involves textual analysis, which describes participants’ expressions, and structural analysis, which interprets the conveyance of their thoughts. The goal is to reveal the essence of the studied phenomenon through these steps.

The use of phenomenology in educational leadership studies can be important because it emphasizes people’s lived experiences and thus provides an in-depth understanding of their emotions and perceptions. This approach may enable researchers to gain profound insights into human beings in leadership, learning, and teaching that are often overlooked by quantitative methodologies. In addition, phenomenological research could inform and improve educational practice, leadership development, policy-making, and productive educational and organizational environments.

Distributed Leadership in Educational Organizations

The idea of DL dates back to the mid-1960s within organizational theory, and it has become increasingly popular among researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and educational reformers due to its potential for transforming leadership practice and organizational change (Harris, 2009). It emerges from the need to manage organizational conduct through governance relations involving a shift from hierarchical to more collaborative forms of governance (Gronn, 2002). Unlike traditional leadership models emphasizing a single leader at the top, DL is about spreading leadership roles and responsibilities among multiple individuals within an organization, and it theoretically recognizes that leadership can and should

come from various sources within a group or organization (Harris, 2009). Therefore, it involves sharing leadership tasks between managers and employees, and it challenges the idea of a single leader driving organizational change (Harris, 2013; Jakobsen et al., 2023; Polat, 2023).

The distribution of leadership responsibilities throughout the organizational structure facilitates the ability to make decisions for the point where the change is taking place; as a consequence of this decentralization, there is an acceleration in the ability to react promptly to emerging challenges and opportunities (Gronn, 2002). This approach contributes to a more dynamic and agile organization and enables a more effective response to the constantly evolving working environment. Thus, DL is increasingly emphasized because it correlates with positive organizational outcomes, such as functioning as a channel for change and promoting a more dynamic and flexible approach to leadership that can adapt to the organization's needs (Harris, 2009). DL is characterized by the active participation of a diverse group of individuals in decision-making processes or the execution of duties (Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2023). Hence, the concept of DL emphasizes the importance of shared or 'stretched' leadership that procures both formal and informal incorporation of leaders (Harris et al., 2022). Moreover, DL enables the development of leadership capacity across the board by empowering individuals at all levels to take initiative and contribute to the organization's success (Harris, 2009). Knowledge dispersed across individuals within an organization is significant for governance relations because the dynamics of governance relationships are shaped by the distribution of knowledge among individuals, and it influences decision-making processes, communication strategies, and overall organizational effectiveness (Gronn, 2002). Knowledge sharing and exchange among individuals catalyze collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning within the organization and foster a culture of accountability. Consequently, the success of DL depends on the organizational ability to mobilize knowledge, skills, and attitudes to facilitate decision-making (Ahumada et al., 2019). DL enhances organizational adaptability and responsiveness and ensures that decisions are made through diverse perspectives and expertise.

DL aims to improve the quality of education and school performance through the involvement of all members of the educational organization in fulfilling organizational objectives (Mercado, 2024; Ruiz Salazar et al., 2022). DL has been reported as an effective management approach for educational organizations because it promotes sustainability and enables change in the organization's internal culture concerning mainstreaming sustainability (Avisar et al., 2018; Hairoon & Goh, 2015). Furthermore, effective DL within educational environments necessitates a profound comprehension of contextual noninterference, which relates to the capacity to navigate through various circumstances without causing disruption, moral individuality, which entails upholding personal values and ethics when making decisions, and management skills, which are essential for coordinating resources and guiding a team towards a shared objective (Tan, 2023). It is particularly relevant in environments undergoing significant changes, such as schools adopting self-management policies, which allows for a realignment of responsibilities and a more autonomous deployment of resources within a framework of accountability (Gronn, 2002). Additionally, DL is associated with professional and organizational learning, which are crucial for its implementation (Ahumada et al., 2019). DL fosters an environment in which educators can collaboratively enhance their teaching practices and contribute to continuous school improvement.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review approach to identify, evaluate, and summarize research evidence that meets pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria within the scope of specific research questions (RQs) (Gustafsson, 2020; Turk, 2021). Systematic reviews include formulating RQs, designing a search strategy for selecting publications in the related literature, screening the evidence, and analyzing the eligible documents (Schmid et al., 2020). In this respect, this research aims to systematically

review the DL studies with phenomenological research designs conducted in educational contexts. The following RQs were formulated in the scope of this study:

RQ1. What are the descriptive indicators of DL studies in education with PD?

RQ1.1 In which years have the eligible DL studies in education with PD been published?

RQ1.2 In which countries are the eligible DL studies in education with PD conducted?

RQ1.3 At which educational level are the eligible DL studies in education with PD conducted?

RQ2. What are the characteristics of phenomenological research designs employed in DL studies within educational contexts?

RQ2.1 How are the participants selected for eligible DL studies in education with PD?

RQ2.2 How is data collected in the eligible DL studies in education with PD?

RQ2.3 How is data analyzed in the eligible DL studies in education with PD?

RQ3. What is the research focus of the eligible DL studies in education with PD?

RQ4. What are the research outcomes for the eligible DL studies in education with PD?

Accordingly, this study was designed to investigate the descriptive features (RQ1), methodological characteristics (RQ2), research focus (RQ3), and outcomes (RQ4) of the selected eligible publications included in the review.

Identification of Eligible Studies

Based on the study context, many steps were followed to obtain the eligible documents within the scope of RQs. First, the main keywords were determined as "distributed leadership" and "phenomenology" with their equal representations in the related literature. The research team formulated the search string using Boolean operators to investigate the publications on databases. Next, the databases were selected as Web of Science (WOS), Scopus (SC), and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) based on their indices, including international and qualified records.

Subsequently, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were created for the selection/elimination of the documents in line with the RQs, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the DL Studies with PD in Education

Inclusion Criteria			Exclusion Criteria	
Code	Focus	Description	Code	Statements
Inc-1	Document type	Article, proceedings, book chapter	Ex-1	The document type is not appropriate.
Inc-2	Language	English and Turkish	Ex-2	The published language is not either English or Turkish.
Inc-3	Category	Educational research	Ex-3	The publication category is out of education-specific disciplines
Inc-4	Availability	Full-text screening	Ex-4	The full text is not available.
Inc-5	Scope	Study context aligning with RQs, appropriateness of methodology, quality of analyses, etc.	Ex-5	The publication context does not align with the scope of the study.

Furthermore, the initial screening was performed in June 2024, and the eligible studies to be included in the review were identified after processing the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the extracted documents from WOS, SC, and ERIC. The process of elimination is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Identification Process of the Eligible Documents

Steps	WOS (n)	SC (n)	ERIC (n)	Total
Initial Screening	13	8	18	39
Duplicates	N/A	5	12	17
Ex-1	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ex-2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ex-3	4	N/A	N/A	4
Ex-4	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ex-5	5	1	3	9
Eligible Documents	4	2	3	9

N/A: Not Applicable

As presented in Table 2, 39 publications in total were obtained from WOS (n=13), SC (n=8), and ERIC (n=18) at the initial screening phase. 17 of these extracted documents were detected as duplicates in SC (n=5) and ERIC (n=12). After the exclusion criteria were applied, four studies (n_{WOS}=4) from Ex-3 and nine studies (n_{WOS}=5; n_{SC}=1; n_{ERIC}=3) from Ex-5 were eliminated from the documents extracted from the databases. Finally, the eligible publications were determined as nine documents included in the review (n_{WOS}=4; n_{SC}=2; n_{ERIC}=3).

Quality Assessment

Before assessing the quality of the eligible documents, the reliability and validity of this systematic review were ensured in several ways. Firstly, systematic approaches require the documentation of critical components such as the search strategy and study selection (Shaheen et al., 2023; Page et al., 2021). This study explains all stages of the systematic review, from the search strategy to inclusion and exclusion criteria. Moreover, the RQs were clearly stated, and the findings were reported following these questions. Additionally, accurate data extraction and analysis are crucial for synthesizing data and reaching reliable conclusions (Shaheen et al., 2023). To be objective and reliable in data synthesis, the research team prepared a very detailed and predefined review protocol at the beginning of the process outlining the criteria for study selection, data extraction, and analysis.

Within the scope of the RQs, the quality of the eligible documents was assessed through the published journal's review process, the clarifications of the study context, research objectives, methodological procedures, and analyses of findings. Accordingly, the research team checked the quality of these nine studies and decided to include them in the review process to investigate the RQs.

Synthesis of Eligible Studies

Descriptive analyses were adopted to address RQ1. At this phase, both quantitative and qualitative evaluations were carried out on the eligible documents. Regarding RQ2, the methodologies of the studies were analyzed qualitatively to the characteristics of phenomenological research designs. To address RQ3 and RQ4, the eligible studies were qualitatively synthesized regarding research objectives and outcomes.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Features of DL Studies in Education with PD

Descriptive indicators were analyzed to explore RQ1, including publication year (RQ1.1), research location (RQ1.2), and educational level (RQ1.3). The distribution of publication years is presented in Figure 1. Accordingly, the studies ranged from 2011 to 2024. The highest number of studies was conducted in 2020, with two records, followed by only one study in 2011, 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. In the remaining years, no eligible DL studies were identified with PD.

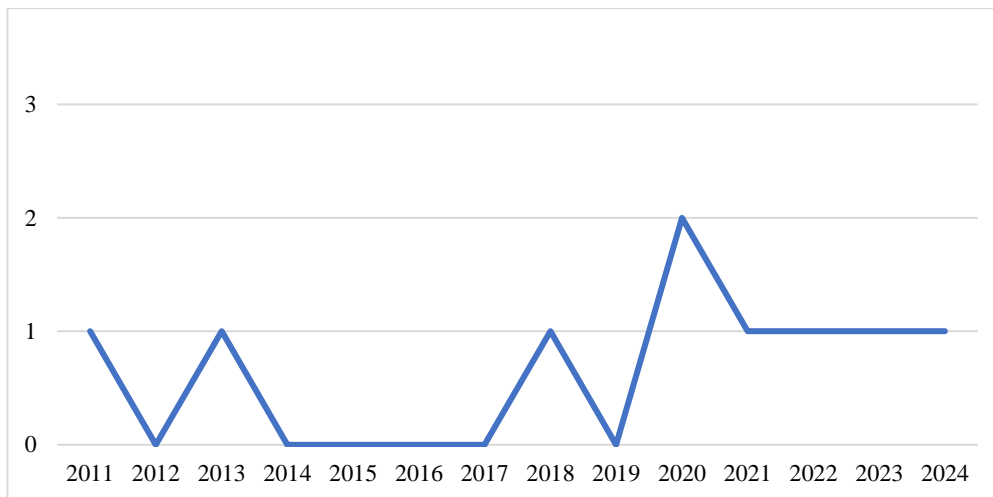


Figure 1. Distribution of the Eligible DL Studies with PD in Education by Year

Subsequently, the eligible studies' research location (RQ1.2) and educational level (RQ1.3) were descriptively analyzed. Table 3 illustrates the results of the descriptive analysis for RQ1.2 and RQ1.3.

Table 3. Descriptive Findings of the Eligible DL Studies with PD in Education

Publications	Country	Educational Level
Altunay and Erol (2023)	Turkey	K-12 level
Boru (2020)	Turkey	Primary education
Falkenthal and Byrne (2020)	USA	Higher education
Gaus et al. (2022)	Indonesia	Higher education
Kafle (2013)	Nepal	Upper-secondary education
Klein et al. (2018)	USA	Lower- and upper-secondary education
Postholm (2011)	Norway	Lower-secondary education
Salifu (2021)	Ghana	Higher education
Shal et al. (2024)	Qatar	N/A

N/A: Not Applicable

As indicated in Table 3, four studies were conducted in Turkey and the USA with two records each, followed by Indonesia, Ghana, Nepal, Norway, and Qatar, with only one DL study with PD. Five of the educational levels analyzed in the eligible studies were conducted at the K-12 level, including primary and secondary education levels, in a separate or combined design. Three records were detected at the higher education level. However, for only one study, the education level could not be determined because teachers from virtual communities of practice were investigated in non-specified education levels.

Characteristics of Phenomenological Research Designs in DL Studies in Education

The characteristics of phenomenological research implemented in the scholarly articles on DL in education were comprehensively examined (RQ2). The findings were organized into three sections addressing participant selection (RQ2.1), data collection (RQ2.2), and data analysis (RQ2.3) of eligible studies on DL in education with PD.

Upon reviewing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the nine remaining scholarly articles were examined to comprehend the methods of participant selection employed in these phenomenological research designs. Table 4 presents the participant selection strategies of nine studies. Accordingly, the number of participants varies, with a maximum of 47 (Altunay & Erol, 2023) and a minimum of three (Kafle, 2013). In the studies on DL in education conducted with PA, the participants were mainly administrators and leaders (n=4) (e.g., Boru, 2020; Gaus et al., 2022). While leaders and teachers were the participants in the two studies, only teachers, esports athletes, or instructors were the participants in the remaining three

studies. Purposeful sampling strategies were primarily employed in the participant selection of the studies (n=5). Three studies did not provide direct information on how they selected the participants. Boru (2020) used only a maximum variation sampling strategy, while Salifu (2021) adopted modal purposive and accidental sampling techniques. Finally, Altunay and Erol (2023) preferred maximum and purposeful sampling techniques.

Table 4. Participant Selection of Studies on DL in Education with PD

Publications	Number of Participants	Identification of Participants	Participant Selection Strategy
Altunay and Erol (2023)	47	School principals	Maximum sampling technique and purposeful sampling
Boru (2020)	15	Primary school principals	Maximum variation sampling
Falkenthal and Byrne (2020)	14	Esports athletes	N/A
Gaus et al. (2022)	7	University leaders	N/A
Kafle (2013)	3	Middle-level leaders	Purposive sampling with information-rich cases
	13		
Klein et al. (2018)	(8 science teachers + 5 district coordinators)	K-12 science teachers & district coordinators	Criterion-based purposeful sampling
	11		
Postholm (2011)	(4 interviewees + 7 survey participants)	School leaders & teachers' team leader (interviewees) & Teachers (survey participants)	N/A
Salifu (2021)	17	Higher education instructors	Modal purposive sampling and accidental sampling technique
Shal et al. (2024)	12	Teachers	Criterion-based purposeful sampling

N/A: Not Applicable

When analyzing the data collection process used by nine scholarly articles, information was obtained about the data collection method, interview protocol/schedule, data maintenance/saving, and interview length, as depicted in Table 5. Thus, eight studies reported using the semi-structured interview method, while Kafle (2013) utilized an in-depth interview model and protocol for data collection. While four studies mentioned conducting one-to-one interviews, two used one-to-one and group interviews. Salifu (2021) performed semi-structured one-to-one interviews, group interviews, and classroom observations. A lack of information on the interview format was noted in two studies (Kafle, 2013; Klein, 2018). Interview protocols/schedules varied across studies. Two studies lacked detailed information on this topic (Gauss et al., 2022; Kafle, 2013). Regarding maintaining and saving data, two studies did not provide any information on this subject (Boru, 2020; Klein, 2013). Out of the six studies that documented their data as recording, three used video recording, and one study mentioned that it keeps data in text blocks. Regarding the length of interviews and observations, three articles did not provide any information on this topic (Boru, 2020; Kafle, 2013; Postholm, 2011). The most extended interview duration was 50-70 minutes in the study conducted by Altunay and Erol (2023), while it was 30 minutes in the work of Shal et al. (2024). Salifu (2021) also noted that data collection involved 45 minutes of observations besides 35-45 minutes of interviews.

Table 5. Data Collection of Studies on DL in Education with PD

Publications	Data Collection Method	Interview Protocol/Schedule	Maintaining and Saving Data	Length of Interviews/Observations
Altunay and Erol (2023)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews	Open-ended questions and probes	Videorecording	50-70 minutes of interviews
Boru (2020)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews	12 open-ended questions	N/A	N/A
Falkenthal and Byrne (2020)	Semi-structured focus group interviews	Five themes	Videorecording	60 minutes of interviews
Gaus et al. (2022)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews	N/A	Recording	40-50 minutes of interviews
Kafle (2013)	In-depth interview model & protocol writing	N/A	Text blocks	N/A
Klein et al. (2018)	Semi-structured interviews & artifacts	Three themes	N/A	60 minutes of interviews
Postholm (2011)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews & focus group interviews & questionnaire	Three themes for headteachers Four themes for teachers	Recording	N/A
Salifu (2021)	Semi-structured one-to-one and group interviews & classroom observations as follow-ups	Two major open-ended questions and probes	Recording & writing memos	35-45 minutes of interviews & 45 minutes of observations
Shal et al. (2024)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews	Five main open-ended questions and probes	Videorecording	30 minutes of interviews

N/A: Not Applicable

To understand the characteristics of phenomenological research applied in scholarly articles on DL in education, it was explored how the data of the studies was analyzed. Insights about the data analysis of the nine studies are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Data Analysis of Studies on DL in Education with PD

Publications	Analysis type and technique	Steps of analysis
Altunay and Erol (2023)	Interpretive content analysis approach	N/A
Boru (2020)	Deductive content analysis	Merriam's (1988) steps
Falkenthal and Byrne (2020)	Deductive analysis and coding process for the five themes	N/A
Gaus et al. (2022)	Hermeneutic(interpretive) phenomenological analysis	Seven step-by-step processes of analyzing based on hermeneutic phenomenological practices
Kafle (2013)	Interpretive inductive wholistic or sententious approach	N/A
Klein et al. (2018)	Constant comparison and contrast method	Glaser and Strauss's (1967) steps to code, sort, and categorize data Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological data reduction method
Postholm (2011)	Analysis through developing themes	
Salifu (2021)	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method Inductive content analysis and thematic approaches.	N/A

Publications	Analysis type and technique	Steps of analysis
Shal et al. (2024)	Theme-based approach and constant comparison and contrast	Several stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding

N/A: Not Applicable

Upon reviewing the studies on the type and technique of phenomenological analysis, it was noted that two studies employed deductive analysis (Boru, 2020; Falkenthal & Byrne, 2020), while the other studies used inductive analysis. Furthermore, most studies placed a prevalent emphasis on the use of “interpretive” analysis techniques. Some studies also detailed the analysis steps (e.g., Postholm, 2011; Shal et al., 2024).

Synthesis of DL Studies in Education with PD

The eligible DL studies with PD were synthesized based on their research focus (RQ3) and overall research outcomes (RQ4), specifically for DL. Each study's research focus was evaluated through the research objectives. In contrast, research outcomes are generally analyzed based on the themes obtained from the results of phenomenological investigations related to DL in each study. The results are demonstrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Research Focus and Outcomes of the Eligible DL Studies with PD in Education

Publications	Research Focus	Outcomes
Altunay and Erol (2023)	School leadership and school repositioning under challenging conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involvement of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process - Fostering a sense of collective responsibility and ensuring that decisions are well-rounded and inclusive - Development of teamwork among school staff for more effective problem-solving and innovation - Collective accountability for the success and challenges faced by the school to promote a more cohesive and supportive work environment - Development of a culture of fairness and equity within schools
Boru (2020)	Organizational and environmental factors affecting DL behaviors of school principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influence of legislation, as a part of the accountability system of schools, on DL - Influence of school culture shaping how a school functions on DL - Influence of parents’ and students’ culture involving the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of parents and students on DL - Influence of national culture representing societal values, traditions, and norms within which a school operates on DL - Influence of the centralized and bureaucratic structure of the educational system on DL
Falkenthal and Byrne (2020)	Elements of DL in collegiate esports teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dynamic sharing of leadership roles for flexibility and responsiveness in team strategies and decision-making - Leadership development applicable in real-world organizational contexts through engaging in esports - Role of perceived credibility in mediating team communications and behaviors
Gaus et al. (2022)	Understanding and exercising leadership in higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversity in interpretations of what leadership means and how it is practiced - Relational approach in leadership through recognition, soft touch, affection, and care - Promoting a more inclusive and participatory approach to leadership within institutions - Incorporation of social constructivism into leadership theories and practices

Publications	Research Focus	Outcomes
Kafle (2013)	Understanding the experiences of middle-level leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The significance of multiple leaders within an organization other than top-level positions - Contributions of middle-level leaders as integral to the leadership structure of schools - Collaborative leadership and collective decision-making in educational settings - Creation of a conducive environment for middle-level leaders to actively enhance their role in school administration
Klein et al. (2018)	Teacher leadership in science education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The perception of personal and organizational change as a process - The significance of differentiated mentoring and support - The acceptance of obstacles as part of growth - The importance of reflection for sustaining leadership efforts - The shift in focus from individual teacher leaders to the interacting relationships and linked contexts in which teacher leadership occurs
Postholm (2011)	Role of continuity in leadership and teaching staff in developing a shared identity and common objectives over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guiding and directing instructional improvement and student performance - Distributing knowledge from multiple sources to effectively guide improvement within the organization - Organizing various competencies within the school to form a coherent whole to solve a problem and seeking external expertise if necessary - Creating a common culture of expectations and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to collective results - Fostering an environment of continuous improvement and collaboration within educational settings
Salifu (2021)	Coteaching in higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared responsibilities among teachers with a collaborative teaching approach to achieve desirable learning outcomes for students and create convenience and pleasure in classroom management and technology integration - Proving diverse expertise and knowledge to students' learning experience - Educational change and improvement through coteaching under DL - Constituting a collective achievement of learning outcomes
Shal et al. (2024)	Teacher leadership in virtual communities of practice (vCoP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhancing collaboration and equality among participants - Encouraging members to take on leadership roles - Developing members' abilities in communication, collaboration, and problem-solving - Creating a supportive atmosphere to encourage teachers, as risk-takers, to experiment with new teaching methods and share experiences through a safe space - Supporting the development of a culture where teachers are encouraged to assume leadership roles built on trust and respect

Table 7 provides an overview of DL research focus and outcomes with PD in educational contexts. First, the role of collective responsibility was emphasized in fostering cohesive environments, whether in traditional school leadership, coteaching, or virtual communities of practice (Altunay & Erol, 2023; Salifu, 2021; Shal et al., 2024). Altunay and Erol (2023) emphasized stakeholder involvement and collective responsibility in decision-making, fostering teamwork and equity in schools, whereas Salifu (2021) demonstrated the benefits of co-teaching for educational change and collaborative classroom management, and Shal et al. (2024) found that virtual communities of practice enhance collaboration, leadership roles, and innovative teaching methods among teachers. Second, cultural and environmental factors affecting DL emerged as a central theme, particularly in Boru (2020) and Gaus et al. (2022), who

highlighted the influence of organizational, national, and school culture on leadership dynamics. Boru (2020) identified factors such as legislation, school culture, and national culture influencing DL behaviors of school principals, while Gaus et al. (2022) promoted inclusive and participatory leadership approaches in higher education. Next, continuous improvement and reflection were revealed as notable implications in DL, as highlighted by Klein et al. (2018) and Postholm (2011), who focused on the need for constant growth, learning, and adaptability within leadership structures. Klein et al. (2018) focused on teacher leadership in science education and emphasized mentoring reflection and contextual relationships, and Postholm (2011) highlighted the role of continuity in leadership for instructional improvement and collaboration. Finally, differences were raised in the contexts and specific leadership practices explored. Falkenthal and Byrne (2020) emphasized the dynamic sharing of leadership roles and leadership development through esports, whereas Kafle (2013) stressed the importance of middle-level leaders and collaborative decision-making in Nepali schools.

DISCUSSION

DL studies in education with PD were systematically reviewed to determine their descriptive indicators, phenomenological research design characteristics, research focus, and outcomes. The descriptive results indicated that the number of DL studies was limited and that they were conducted in various countries at various educational levels. It has been observed that while phenomenology studies have been undertaken in various fields, there appears to be a paucity of research in the realm of education, educational leadership, and particularly in the area of DL in education (Farrell, 2020). There could be several reasons contributing to this situation. One of these factors is the traditional paradigm of educational administration, which has historically been rooted in positivism, assuming an objective reality that can be fully measured and described (Peca, 2001). However, with the emergence of post-positivism in the 1950s, phenomenology also started to develop in educational research (Farrell, 2020). As a second reason, phenomenological research has an interdisciplinary structure fed by philosophy and psychology (Ferrell, 2020; Feijoo, 2023). Therefore, researchers may not feel close to the topic or be interested in this sense (Giorgi, 2010). In addition, phenomenology is quite laborious, and its data is usually based on in-depth interviews (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2018; Giorgi, 2010). As a result, some researchers may need more insights into the methodology.

The results of the methodological analyses in the review depicted a significant picture of participant selection, data collection, and analysis in PD of DL studies in education. First, the selection of participants in PD is commonly shaped by purposive sampling and specific criteria (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Consistently, it was observed that a considerable number of studies stated their use of the purposive sampling method to select participants based on specific criteria. For example, Altunay and Erol (2023) and Shal et al. (2024) acknowledged the implementation of purposive sampling in their studies, while others did not provide explicit information on this aspect.

Subsequently, in the context of data collection in PD, conducting in-depth interviews is considered a practical approach for collecting input. These interviews are preferably open-ended and semi-structured, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in detail and allowing the researcher to understand their narratives more deeply. Moreover, the phenomenological approach places significant value on the uniqueness of each participant's case. A small sample size is typically chosen to facilitate thorough and detailed engagement with each case (Moustakas, 1994). Nevertheless, the specific number of participants is not fixed; instead, it is determined based on the point of data saturation (Seidman, 2006). Most of the nine publications analyzed in the current study incorporated a consistent application of these techniques. For instance, Gaus (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with seven participants, and Kafle (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with three participants. In phenomenology studies, participant homogeneity is also essential depending on selection criteria. Compatibly, Gaus (2021) exclusively included university leaders, while Kafle (2013) focused on middle-level leaders.

Furthermore, phenomenological analysis generally involves textual and structural analysis from descriptive or interpretive perspectives. Different schools follow specific steps based on their unique understanding. Similarly, among the publications examined in this study, Salifu (2021) used the Interpretative phenomenological analysis method, and Gaus (2022) followed step-by-step processes of analyzing based on hermeneutic phenomenological practice. Although deductive analysis is not frequently preferred in phenomenology research, this technique was utilized in Boru's (2020) and Falkenthal and Byrne's (2020) studies.

Regarding the research focus and outcomes of the DL studies with PD, it was detected that the eligible studies generally focused on influencing factors, elements, and experiences about DL, and significant results were revealed through phenomenological lenses. Phenomenological research is highly convenient for exploring individuals' perceptions of their unique experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making in DL. PD could allow for a deep understanding of the lived experiences of educational leaders, teachers, and stakeholders. Evidently, in the study by Kafle (2013), the significance of middle-level leaders was emphasized within school administration and their collaborative roles in decision-making. Altunay and Erol (2023) consistently pointed out the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process, which fosters a sense of collective responsibility and teamwork among school staff. Falkenthal and Byrne (2020) discussed the dynamic sharing of leadership roles in contexts like collegiate esports and its significance for the adaptability and responsiveness required in educational environments. Similarly, Postholm (2011) addressed the importance of continuity in leadership and teaching staff in developing shared identity and common objectives over time, which supports the need for phenomenological insights into the educational leadership experience. Briefly, the in-depth approach in PD is essential for capturing the complexity of DL as it unfolds in various educational settings.

CONCLUSION

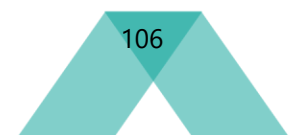
DL studies employing a phenomenological methodology in educational settings were meticulously examined in this comprehensive systematic review. Of the 39 studies initially obtained from the online databases of WOS, SC, and ERIC, nine studies were found eligible to be analyzed for their descriptive indicators, phenomenological research design characteristics, research focus, and outcomes. The results contribute to the understanding of DL as a leadership style from the exploratory perspectives of PD. The study indicates significant room for further exploration into applying the phenomenological approach to DL within educational research. Future studies should consider phenomenological methodology as a valuable approach to examining DL in education. This approach may facilitate a more profound and authentic understanding of individual experiences in leadership roles within educational settings, which could provide valuable insights into the complexities of human behavior, learning, and instruction, often overlooked in quantitative studies. This study is limited to the DL literature with PD; therefore, it is recommended that future research should focus on other methodological approaches to DL in addition to PD. Moreover, another limitation of the study is its reliance on publications exclusively from WOS, SC, and ERIC since these platforms are recognized as the most advanced and frequently cited academic indexes in educational sciences. Future research could enhance the breadth of this study by incorporating analyses from additional sources.

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