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Leading Under Constraint: A Qualitative Study of School Principals' Identity and Practice in Albania

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Abstract

School leadership has been widely recognized as a key factor influencing school effectiveness; however, evidence from post-communist and transition contexts remains limited. This study explores how school principals in Albania's pre-university education system conceptualize and enact school leadership within a socio-economic environment characterized by structural constraints and limited institutional resources. Data were collected through 27 semi-structured interviews with school principals and analyzed through a theoretically informed codebook thematic analysis using semantic and latent coding. Principals' accounts portray effective leadership as primarily enacted through relational and adaptive practices grounded in trust, collaboration, and a holistic vision of student development extending beyond academic achievement. Schools are perceived as communities sustained by shared responsibility, while principals navigate persistent challenges associated with inadequate infrastructure, financial limitations, bureaucratic demands, and students' socio-economic circumstances. The findings further suggest that principals' professional identities emerge through diverse motivational pathways and that school reputation is shaped by the interaction between observable educational quality and long-term relational trust within the community. These findings contribute context-specific evidence to the international literature on educational leadership in developing and transition settings and highlight the need for policies that strengthen school leadership capacity, reduce administrative burdens, and support context-responsive professional development for school principals.

Keywords: school leadership; school principals; educational leadership; professional identity; Albania; socio-economic context; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

School leadership in Albania has undergone continuous changes over the past two decades, in the context of decentralization reforms in pre-university education, increased institutional autonomy of schools, and increasing pressures for accountability regarding the quality of teaching [1]. School principals, as key figures in this process, operate in a context in which professional expectations, resource constraints, and community relations often intersect in ways that formal policy frameworks do not fully capture [2]. This paper presents the results of a thematic analysis of school principals' experiences, perceptions, and practices, with the aim of highlighting the rationales that guide their daily activities.

The aim of the analysis was to explore, through a theoretically informed, primarily inductive approach [3], how principals themselves understand and articulate their leadership role. Specifically, nine guiding thematic areas were examined: personal motivation to engage in school leadership; factors that principals consider key to institutional success; key challenges they face; initiatives and innovations undertaken in their context; the reasons that, according to them, push parents to choose a particular school; the ways in which they motivate teaching staff; the skills and competencies that they consider essential for the role of principal; the place that extracurricular activities occupy in school life; and, finally, their vision of an "ideal school". These areas served as orienting prompts, while the codebook thematic analysis remained open to unanticipated themes and codes arising from the interviews.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The development of theories on school leadership over the last decades marks a paradigmatic shift from the administrative-bureaucratic model, which conceived of the principal as a technical executor of central decisions and guarantor of institutional order, towards relational approaches that treat leadership as a social process constructed through interaction, trust and shared understanding among school actors [4]. This shift is not simply semantic: it represents a redefinition of the very nature of leadership, from an individual attribute of a formal position to a distributed and negotiated capacity within organizational culture. For these reasons, our study constructs its theoretical framework as a multiple construct, in which five perspectives (transformational, distributed and instructional leadership; social capital; and ecological systems theory) serve as sensitizing concepts: they oriented attention during interpretation but did not supply codes or themes in advance.

Transformational leadership, as originally conceptualized by Burns [5] and Bass [6] and, in the educational context, by Leithwood and Jantzi [7], provides a basis for understanding how school leaders influence teachers' motivation, values, and engagement beyond transactional exchange relationships. This perspective directs our analysis toward themes related to institutional vision, culture of change, and the principal's ability to inspire collective engagement. Distributed leadership, as articulated by Spillane [8], shifts the focus from the individual to the practice, conceptualizing leadership as a product of the interaction between leaders, teachers, and the concrete situation. This approach allows us to interpret the data on collegial decision-making and division of responsibilities within Albanian schools not as a deviation from the hierarchical norm, but as a legitimate form of organization. Instructional leadership [9], on the other hand, focuses the analysis on the direct impact of the principal on the quality of teaching, directing attention to whether, and how far, principals describe involvement in the supervision and improvement of teaching and in teachers' professional development. These three frameworks are complemented by the theory of social capital, developed by Coleman [10] and Bourdieu [11], which extends the view beyond the individual to the networks of trust, norms of reciprocity, and relational resources that circulate inside and outside the school. This perspective is particularly important for understanding how principals mobilize informal resources in conditions of a lack of institutional resources.

Since these dynamics do not develop in a vacuum, the study also integrates Bronfenbrenner's [12] ecological perspective, which allows us to situate leadership practices within successive contextual layers: from the microsystem of the classroom and school, to the mesosystem of parent-school relations, and to the macrosystem of the post-socialist institutional legacy, with its centralizing tradition, distrust of local autonomy, and incomplete democratizing transformations [13]. This contextual layering explains why relational

models imported from Western contexts require critical rereading when applied to the Albanian reality. Thus, our theoretical framework does not function as a mosaic of separate frames, but as a system of interwoven lenses that orient the interpretation of empirical data towards a multidimensional, historically aware, and contextually sensitive understanding of school leadership.

1.2. Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

The international literature on school leadership has expanded significantly over the past decade, producing valuable insights into effectiveness, teaching practices, professional stress, and the impact of leadership on student outcomes [14]. However, this knowledge remains largely based on Western contexts or consolidated education systems, while post-transition Balkan countries, including Albania, continue to be underrepresented [14]. Most existing studies are based on quantitative, correlational approaches or based on large-scale international datasets (e.g., TIMSS, TALIS) [15], which measure statistical relationships between leadership and performance indicators but fail to capture the meaning that principals themselves give to their professional experience. This creates a clear gap in qualitative research, which would allow for in-depth examination of principals' experiences, dilemmas, and adaptive strategies within specific historical and institutional contexts.

In the case of Albania, this gap becomes even more evident. The legacy of the centralized communist system, ongoing decentralization reforms [16], socio-economic pressures, and demographic changes (migration, urbanization) have created a unique leadership reality, one that cannot be fully understood by transferring theoretical models developed in other contexts [13]. Studies such as the one on accountability in Albania are rare and focus mainly on institutional or policy dimensions, not on the subjective experience of principals [2]. Even where Albanian leadership has been treated from a subjective perspective, attention has remained mainly on the phase that precedes the exercise of the leadership function itself. Lesha and Kraja [17], for example, focused on exploring the psychological factors that influence the aspirations and readiness for leadership of teachers following a school principal training program in Albania, a valuable contribution to understanding how the desire to lead is shaped. However, this paper does not go beyond the threshold of appointment of principals to office. Therefore, a paper that gives authentic voice to Albanian school principals, allowing analytical categories to be developed primarily from the data read through, but not dictated by established leadership perspectives, is missing. This study aims to partially fill this gap by providing a theoretically informed, primarily inductive analysis, based on self-reported experience, of the meaning that school principals in Albania give to their leadership.

2. Materials and Methods

The study sample consisted of 27 semi-structured interviews with school principals in Albania. It included 15 female principals and 12 male principals; 16 lead schools in urban areas and 11 in rural areas. The average age of the participants was 50.1 years (ranging from 37 to 66 years), with an average of 26.7 years of experience in education and an average of 11.7 years of experience in the position of principal (up to 30 years). The number of students per school ranged from 85 to 950 (average 343) (Table 1). This diversity in geographical context and professional experience aimed to capture a wide spectrum of institutional realities, without claiming full statistical representation of the national population of principals. By school level, the sample comprised 14 basic (nine-year) schools, 9 upper-secondary/high schools, and 4 schools whose level was not separately recorded; enrollment ranged from 85 to 950 students (median 321), spanning the range across which leadership demands differ most. A purposive sampling approach was used

for this qualitative study. Fieldwork was conducted between November and December 2025 across Albania. Potential participants were identified through official regional education directories and approached via email and telephone. Out of 45 school principals invited, 27 agreed to participate (a 60% response rate), while 18 declined due to time constraints. The semi-structured interviews lasted 40–50 min, were audio-recorded with prior written informed consent, and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Table 1. Demographic composition of the sample.

Characteristics	Values
Number of participants	27
Gender	15 female/12 male
Location of the schools	16 urban/11 rural
Age (mean, range)	50.1 years (37–66)
Experience in education (mean, range)	26.7 years (14–44 years)
Experience as principal (mean, max.)	11.7 years (1 year–30 years)
Students per school (mean, range)	343 (85–950)

In the Albanian pre-university system, school principals are appointed through a competitive procedure regulated by the Law on Pre-University Education System and administered by the regional education directorates, typically for a fixed, renewable term rather than as a permanent post; candidates are drawn from the teaching profession and assessed against formal qualification and experience criteria. This appointment route, and the decentralization reforms that have reshaped it [1,13,16], form essential background for the theme on becoming a principal and are outlined here for readers outside the region.

The analytical approach followed Braun and Clarke's [3] six-stage thematic analysis and was conducted as a codebook thematic analysis [18,19], in which a structured codebook was developed collaboratively, rather than as reflexive thematic analysis in the strict sense. The reading was theoretically informed rather than purely inductive: the leadership perspectives set out in Section 1.1 functioned as sensitizing concepts that oriented interpretation, while the codes themselves were generated from the content of the interviews rather than imposed from a predetermined framework. Coding was conducted at two levels, semantic and latent. At the semantic level, meanings directly expressed by participants were identified, while the latent level aimed at interpreting the deeper assumptions, values, and meanings underlying surface-level statements. The basic unit of coding was the segment of meaning within the transcript: a phrase, sentence, or group of sentences that conveys a complete and identifiable idea [3]. The full interview guide is provided in Supplementary Materials S1, and Table S1 maps the guiding question areas onto the six themes.

At the procedural level, the process followed the well-known steps of the method: a deep familiarization with the material through repeated reading of the transcripts; systematic generation of initial codes, which resulted in 960 coded segments; consolidation of these initial codes into a codebook of 52 unique codes, through continuous comparison and merging of overlapping codes; a search for potential themes by grouping the codes into 18 coherent subthemes; and, in the final phase, the revision, refinement and formulation of these subthemes into 6 main themes, which represent the conceptual structure of the entire corpus. It should be clarified that the interviews were conducted in Albanian, while the analyzed transcripts were translated into English: coding and extracting quotes were carried out on this translated text, while the report was drafted in English. Illustrative quotes are extracted verbatim from the transcripts.

2.1. Sampling Justification and Participant Selection

The study used purposive maximum variation sampling, a strategy recommended for qualitative research that seeks to capture the breadth of a phenomenon rather than statistical representation. The unit of analysis was the school principal as a key informant with direct access to leadership practice. The final sample of 27 principals was constructed to maximize variation on several theoretically important dimensions, such as gender, geographic context, age, school size, general experience in education, and leadership orientation. This intentional approach was designed to capture patterns across variation in urban-rural setting, gender, and experience, rather than patterns confined to a single type of school or principal.

2.2. Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

The study was conducted by two researchers with differentiated roles: one conducted the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the school principals, while the other transcribed them. This division of labour brought two perspectives to the material during data generation and transcription, which supported reflexive engagement rather than serving as a validation check. Both researchers shared prior knowledge of the Albanian education system, which facilitated rapport with the participants and an understanding of contextual nuance, but which also required vigilance against internal assumptions. For this reason, a conscious stance was maintained during coding to separate the participants' direct accounts from the researchers' interpretations. One element of positioning that deserves clear emphasis is the linguistic layer: the interviews were conducted and recorded in Albanian, the mother tongue of both the participants and the researchers, which preserved the richness of the original expression during data collection. The transcripts analyzed were English translations, and coding was performed on the translated text. The Albanian transcripts were translated into English by the two authors, and the translations were then rigorously reviewed by the English-language professor from the University of Shkodra who had also translated the interview instrument (see below); the reviewer's suggestions were incorporated into the affected passages, and the revised translations were the texts used for coding. Where the English rendering of a phrase raised questions of meaning, the authors returned to the original Albanian transcript and discussed the wording with the bilingual reviewer until a consensual rendering was reached. This procedural choice may have resulted in a loss of idiomatic or cultural nuance in translation; illustrative quotes in the manuscript reflect the translated version. Accepting this hermeneutical distance is part of the reflexive stance of the study. The English translation of the research instrument was carried out collaboratively by an English-language professor from the University of Shkodra and the two co-authors, serving as a bilingual expert panel to ensure linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence. To evaluate the clarity and readability of the translated instrument, it was piloted with five school principals prior to full implementation; these five principals did not take part in the main study. Feedback from this trial was used to refine and finalize the language.

Trustworthiness and methodological rigour. The quality of the study was assessed against Lincoln and Guba's [20] four classic criteria for qualitative research, supplemented by more recent guidelines on rigour in thematic analysis by Nowell, Norris, White and Moules [21] and on quality in qualitative research more broadly [22].

Credibility. Coding was carried out by both researchers, who jointly developed and refined the shared codebook; discussion of divergent readings served to sharpen code definitions and interpretation rather than to compute inter-coder agreement, consistent with a codebook approach that does not assume a single correct coding [18]. Prolonged engagement with the material, through repeated reading of transcripts during the famil-

iarization and coding phases, further contributed to the closeness of the interpretations of the data.

Dependability. The analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's [3] six-phase framework in a documented manner. A codebook of 52 consolidated codes, accompanied by definitions and frequencies, together with a log of 960 coded segments, constitutes an available audit trail that allows decisions to be traced from the raw data to the final themes.

Confirmability. Each theme and subtheme is linked to concrete codes and segments traceable to the participants, and their distribution is transparently reported. Interpretations are supported by direct quotations, enabling the reader to assess the connection between the data and the conclusions.

Transferability. The rich description of the context, such as the demographic profile of the participants, the characteristics of the schools, and the socio-economic circumstances, provides readers with the information necessary to judge the extent to which the findings may be relevant to other similar educational contexts.

3. Results

3.1. Thematic Map

The analysis highlighted 6 main themes, divided into 18 subthemes and supported by 52 consolidated codes, which are presented in Figure 1.

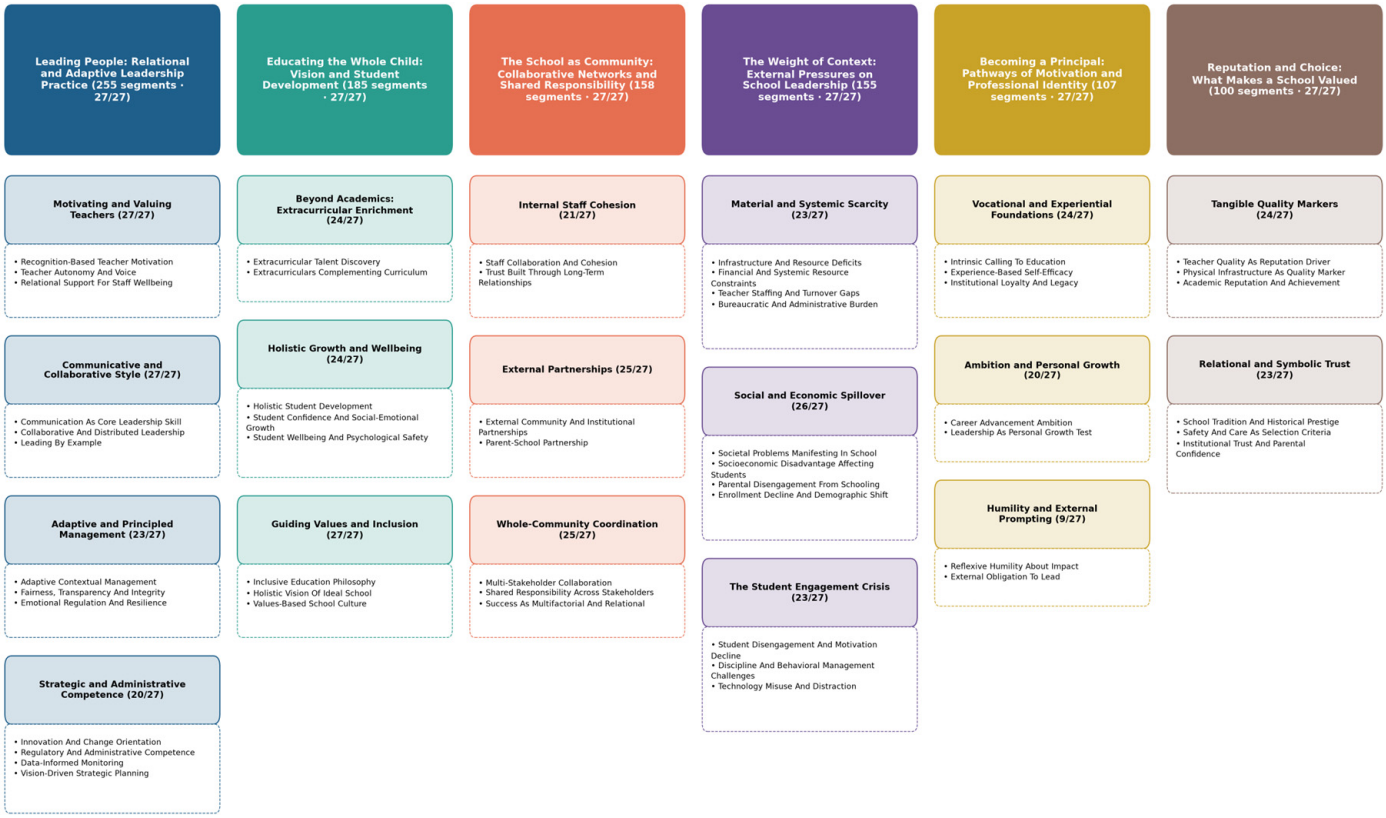

Figure 1. Thematic map of main themes (n = 6), sub-themes (n = 18), and codes (n = 52). Values in parentheses give the number of participants (of 27) in whom each subtheme was present; segment totals per theme are shown in the theme header. Counts are computed from the coded-segment register and correspond to those reported in Section 3.2.

3.2. Explanation of the Themes

For each theme, an analytical, interpretive narrative is presented; the voices of the leaders are placed in the text as illustrative evidence.

Leading People: Relational and Adaptive Leadership Practice

Principals describe effective leadership as involving motivation, communication and adaptation with the staff, supported by fair, competent and strategic management.

This theme captures the human dimension of school leadership and suggests that participants understand effective leadership as deriving less from positional authority than from the ability to build functional relationships with staff. The central organizational concept is that successful principals understand leadership as a two-way process: motivating people through recognition of their contribution, communicating with them through involvement, and adapting to the context without abandoning principles. However, this relational approach coexists with a more technical and strategic layer of management, showing that participants see human leadership not as opposed to administrative competence, but as complementary to it.

The first subtheme, "Motivating and valuing teachers", is universal (27/27) and is built mainly on recognition of teachers' contributions, which is also reflected in relational support for staff well-being, almost as widespread. However, teacher voice and autonomy appear far less often (11/27), suggesting a possible tension: most principals consider motivation as something that is "given" to staff (recognition, emotional support), while fewer of them see motivation as a consequence of empowerment and participation in decision-making. P23 articulates this spirit of cooperation when she emphasizes "by helping each other, we have helped ourselves," linking collective well-being with individual benefit, a logic of reciprocity that permeates many of the narratives.

The second subtheme, "Communicative and collaborative style", is also universal and is considered a "core competency" of leadership, while distributed leadership and leadership by example complement it, reducing authority from the declarative to the practical level. This shows that communication between Albanian school principals is not conceived as a transmission of information, but as building a common work culture. The third subtheme, adaptive and principled management, affects most but not all participants (23/27), and illustrates a distinctive capacity: the ability to adapt to different local contexts without sacrificing fairness or emotional stability. P10 formulates this adaptation as a source of professional growth: "I have adapted to different worldviews... this is important because it helps me develop my leadership skills", while P26 links the adaptation to knowledge of the local context, noting that local staff "know the problems inside and manage to successfully face the challenges in teaching and in relations with students and parents", an advantage of cultural proximity that is not found in every principal or school.

Strategic and administrative competence appears in three quarters of the participants (20/27), marking a clearer division within the sample. While the orientation towards innovation and change is relatively widespread, the more technical elements, such as regulatory competence, data-based monitoring, and long-term strategic planning, were found in only a fraction of principals. This may be related to the fact that a principal moves from an initially pedagogical preparation to increasingly complex administrative responsibilities, without necessarily having had prior training in strategic management, which leaves this field as one of the directions with the most obvious need for further professional development.

Educating the Whole Child: Vision and Student Development

Principals articulate a values-based vision that extends beyond academic achievement, aiming to achieve the full development and well-being of every student.

This theme captures a value orientation that permeates all data. Albanian school principals conceive of educational success not simply as academic achievement, but as the full development of the student as an individual. This holistic vision serves as a moral compass for principals' decision-making, going beyond the boundaries of the formal

curriculum and giving meaning to the school experience as a space for civic, emotional, and social formation, not just cognitive. The fact that all 27 participants contributed to the guiding values subtheme shows that this is not a peripheral or rhetorical discourse, but a constituent element of the professional identity of the Albanian school principal.

The first subtheme, "Beyond academics: extracurricular enrichment", shows how principals view extracurricular enrichment as a mechanism of discovery, not simply as a complementary activity. The dominant code "discovering extracurricular talents" refers to a pedagogical logic where sports, artistic or scientific activities serve as a window for identifying potentials that cannot usually be revealed within the traditional classroom assessment structure. P23 illustrates this when he describes how biology lessons "take place in nature based on specific topics", while sports activities "are always carried out in the right environment", a statement that indicates the intentional integration of the extracurricular environment as a pedagogical extension, not as a distraction from learning. P10 goes further and links this commitment to his professional identity, stating that he supports" any extracurricular activity related to the scientific development of students". This formulation shows that the principals do not see themselves simply as administrators, but as bearers of a personal vision for student development, shaped by their own experience.

The second subtheme, holistic growth and well-being, deepens this logic by shifting the focus from talent discovery to building the socio-emotional capacities of the student. The predominance of the "holistic development" code (20/27) indicates that the majority of principals articulate their mission in comprehensive developmental terms. The lower presence of the psychological well-being code (4/27), on the other hand, suggests a meaningful differentiation: the language of "full development" is almost universal, while the clear articulation of psychological safety as an institutional responsibility remains limited to a minority of principals. This may be a sign of a well-being discourse that is still in formation within the Albanian school context, compared to the discourse of performance or discipline. P27 makes this institutional responsibility explicit, describing a school in which "the student feels safe and valued" and where "parents feel safe when they entrust their children to us", an account in which psychological safety is framed not as an individual attribute but as something the school is responsible for producing. For the minority of principals who articulate it, well-being thus becomes an institutional commitment rather than a by-product of teaching.

The School as Community: Collaborative Networks and Shared Responsibility

School success is understood as a collective and relational achievement, built through cohesion, partnership and shared responsibility among all stakeholders.

This theme reveals a conceptual shift in the way school principals in Albania understand success. It is no longer seen as an isolated individual or institutional attribute, but as a relational product, built through collaborative networks involving staff, families and the wider community. This collective understanding of success suggests a leadership model in which principals portray their role less as that of a sole decision-making authority and more as that of a connector within a network of relationships supported by trust, cohesion, and shared responsibility. This theme emerged among almost all participants (up to 25 out of 27 for some subthemes), which indicates that collaboration is not perceived as an additional or merely desirable element, but as a fundamental condition for the functioning of the school itself.

The first subtheme, "*Internal staff cohesion*", highlights the internal dimension of this cooperation, namely the relationship between the principal and teachers, as well as between the teachers themselves. This is not limited to functional cooperation, but also includes an emotional and motivational component, as described by P21: "*I always try to help and motivate the teaching staff of my school, giving them advice on their work, but also to the*

students by congratulating them on their learning achievements in different subjects". This quote illustrates a supportive leadership style, where the role of the principal extends beyond administration and moves towards creating a climate of recognition and encouragement. Trust, identified as a specific code, appears less frequently than cooperation itself. Perhaps this indicates that, while practical cooperation occurs widely, building deep trust takes time and consolidated experience. The same is highlighted by P6, who links self-confidence to twenty years of work experience: "*Self-confidence because I have worked for 20 years in Bushat and have built positive, fair and transparent relationships with students, parents and colleagues*". This suggests a link between the duration of institutional commitment and the depth of relational relationships.

The second and third subthemes, "*External partnerships and coordination with the whole community*", extend this relational logic beyond the school walls, towards parents, institutions and the local community. Both subthemes were mentioned by 25 out of 27 participants, which suggests that principals perceive the success of the school as critically dependent on legitimacy and external support, and not only on the internal performance of the school. This is clearly evident in P1's testimony, which directly links the school's status and prestige to the quality of collaboration: *"We are a large school, and among the most prominent in the city, and without this collaboration, we would not be the school we are. Treating students with justice and impartiality, listening to all the problems they have and finding solutions that are suitable for both parties, without compromising the teaching and educational process..." (P1)*. This quote is important because it brings together, in a single sentence, institutional identity, justice towards students, and collaboration as elements that are inextricably intertwined.

The Weight of Context: External Pressures on School Leadership

Principals lead within an environment characterized by material deprivation, family socio-economic problems, and declining student engagement, which limits what leadership can achieve.

The theme of the "weight of context" highlights a reality that runs through almost all interviews: school leadership in Albania does not function as an independent technical-administrative process. It is, on the contrary, an activity deeply conditioned by economic, social, and demographic forces that extend beyond the sphere that the principal can influence. The organizing concept here is not the failure of leadership, but its limit. Principals see themselves as actors who constantly negotiate between their pedagogical vision and a material and social context that narrows their room for maneuver. This theme thus serves as a contextualizing framework for all the other themes: every strategy and every innovative practice needs to be read in the light of these structural pressures, which act as a kind of ceiling on what can actually be achieved.

The first subtheme, "material and systemic deficiencies", supported by the vast majority of participants (23/27), reveals a tangible and direct layer of constraints, such as insufficient infrastructure, insufficient funding, lack of staff and bureaucratic burden. The high frequency of the code "Infrastructure and resource deficits" (17 /27) is striking, and suggests that the problem does not lie simply in a financial shortage, but affects the physical conditions of teaching itself. As P8 puts it, "Being a large school, it is difficult to provide it with modern materials for the development of quality teaching. State investments, to be honest, are limited, which makes it more difficult to achieve these conditions". This statement illustrates how, for some principals, school size itself can be experienced as an additional source of resource pressure. This is a participant-level perception rather than a general pattern across the sample, as the internal comparison reported in Section 4.1 does not show greater relational-leadership coding in larger schools. In accounts of this subtheme, responsibility is clearly shifted towards the state and systemic level, and not to the individual failure of the principal. The second subtheme, "social and economic impact", has the widest participation (26/27) and is perhaps the most important analytically, as it shifts

the boundary of leadership beyond the walls of the school, towards macro-social dynamics. The code "Social problems that manifest themselves in the school" (14/27) shows that the school is a mirror in which the problems of the wider community (poverty, unemployment, migration) are concentrated, while "Decline in enrollment and demographic shift" (8/27) is directly related to the phenomenon of emigration, which P9 articulates in terms that go beyond the individual case: "Emigration has gradually led to a decline in the number of students in school, but in fact this is now a very broad problem that encompasses our entire country" (P9). This quote is important because it reformulates the problem from a local-institutional issue to a national-structural issue. This phenomenon frees the principal from sole responsibility, but at the same time highlights his powerlessness in the face of demographic forces that reconfigure the very basis of the school's existence (the number of students). This subtheme thus creates a visible tension: principals manage institutions but face social forces that cannot be managed at the school level.

The third subtheme, "Student engagement crisis", present in most participants, brings the weight of the context within the classroom itself, where external pressures become everyday behaviors that the principal and teachers have to cope with. The most widespread code, "student disengagement and decreased motivation" (18/27), shows that the fading interest in school is not seen as the fault of the individual student, but as a broader phenomenon. P16 formulates this connection directly, when he notes that "The decline in students' interest in education, unfortunately, also brings about the decline in the teaching and learning process itself", while P3 places the problem on a social plane, saying that "The decline in students' interest in learning is a problem that we face not only as a school, but also as a society". The second code, "challenges in discipline and behavior management" (14), links this disconnect to the difficult task of maintaining order in large, heterogeneous classrooms, while the third, "misuse of technology and distraction" (8/27), highlights a new pressure entering the school from outside. P1 describes this in simple but significant detail, saying that students "stay up late on their phones and come to school late in the morning." Taken together, these three codes show that student engagement depends not only on the quality of teaching within the school, but also on the habits, motivation, and circumstances that students bring with them from outside, making it a challenge that the principal can mitigate, but rarely completely solve, within the school walls alone.

Becoming a Principal: Pathways of Motivation and Professional Identity

Principals' sense of themselves as leaders is shaped by calling and experience, by ambition and the need to prove themselves, or by humility and external encouragement.

Becoming a school principal, according to the data collected, does not appear as a single moment of administrative decision-making. Rather, it is a layered process of identification, in which personal calling, professional ambition and a sense of obligation to others collide and intertwine until they produce a stable understanding of themselves as leaders. This diversity of paths to leadership identity is the axis around which this topic is organized: some participants understand themselves as principals through an inner calling and a long accumulation of experience; others construct this identity by consciously seeking personal growth and success; while a smaller group sees the role as something entrusted to them from outside, not necessarily sought by them. This diversity shows that the professional identity of the principal is not a homogeneous, uniform category, but a multiplicity of motivations that coexist, and sometimes come into tension, within the same professional group.

The first subtheme, "Calling and experience as a foundation", represents the broadest and most stable basis of leadership identity, present in 24 out of 27 participants. Here, the inner calling towards education merges with a sense of self-efficacy built over years of work, creating a kind of earned rather than simply proclaimed authority. P12 illustrates this

when he says: "My long experience as a school principal for 26 years has helped me a lot to recognize the main problems and find effective solutions to them". This statement directly links the length of one's career to the perceived competence and internal legitimacy of the role. P8, on the other hand, does not base self-efficacy on time itself, but on deep knowledge of people and the institution: "I knew my staff, I knew everything about their personalities, professional and personal skills. . . I built together with them the vision with which I would lead this institution". This shows that experience does not function simply as a marker of the past, but as knowledge embedded in the relationship, which for some principals also feeds an institutional loyalty, transforming leadership into a form of personal commitment to the school.

The second subtheme, "*Ambition and personal growth*", shifts the center of identity from the past to the future: 20 out of 27 participants articulate the role of leadership as a step forward in their career or as a personal test of development. Unlike the narrative of calling, here leadership is perceived less as an internal "mission" and more as an achievement that is consciously sought. This perception creates a subtle tension within the topic itself: while some principals see the role as a natural extension of their educational identity, others see it as evidence of their professional worth, regardless of the field. Thus, a subgroup of participants can be identified who treat leadership more as a personal development project than as an obligation to the school community, suggesting a more individualistic form of professional identity in the face of institutional loyalty. P7 captures this forward-looking, achievement-oriented stance directly, noting that "the position of principal provides opportunities for career growth, the opportunity to realize a vision or goal".

The third subtheme, "Humility and external prompting" (9/27), describes a smaller group of principals for whom the path into leadership ran not through ambition or a longstanding calling but through external encouragement or a sense of obligation, often accompanied by a modest, reflexive stance towards their own impact. P10, for instance, recalls that "it was an offer and I had to accept it and adapt". The evidence for this subtheme is thinner than for the other two: beyond P10′s account, it rests mainly on brief, modest self-qualifications, such as P23′s aside that the changes she hoped to make might be small, "however modest they may be".

Because the extracts do not show how these principals later came to regard the role, we do not claim that an externally prompted entry is subsequently transformed into personal commitment; whether and how that happens is a question for longitudinal work.

Reputation and Choice: What Makes a School Valued

Principals believe that parents and communities judge and choose schools through a combination of tangible indicators of quality and relational trust accumulated over time.

A school's reputation, as evidenced by principals, does not appear to be a uniform or simply "objective" construct. It is constructed by a combination of what can be measured and verified externally and what is gradually built up through the relationships and history of the institution. In principals' accounts, parents and communities do not evaluate a school solely on the basis of a list of formal criteria, but through a multi-layered decision-making process, in which the tangible (infrastructure, results, quality of teachers) functions as pre-verifiable "evidence," while the intangible (trust, tradition, sense of security) acts as a kind of symbolic capital accumulated over time, which cannot be quickly reproduced by a new school. This tension, between the speed at which the visible is assessed and the long time required to build relational trust, constitutes the organizing axis of this theme.

The first subtheme, "tangible indicators of quality", was the most present in the data (24 out of 27 participants); this suggests that school principals perceive themselves, perhaps consciously, as actors who operate within a logic of "measurability" vis-à-vis the

community. The quality of the teaching staff was consistently mentioned as the main determinant of reputation, as clearly illustrated when P1 emphasizes that "The pedagogical staff I have has the highest qualifications in the field of education today, and the necessary and indispensable commitment and dedication to the education of generations". This quote is significant not only because it refers to formal qualifications, but because it attaches to them an emotional language, "commitment", "dedication", which implies that technical and professional qualifications alone are not enough without a personal investment by teachers. This creates a connection between the first and second subthemes. At the same time, physical infrastructure was widely used as an external, visible and easily comparable "sign" of quality, while academic achievements, although present, were less prominent compared to the other two codes. This fact reveals an internal hierarchy among the tangible indicators themselves: infrastructure and staff function as more direct and more communicable signals to parents than academic results themselves, which take longer to be verified. The second subtheme, "relational and symbolic trust", was represented by 23 out of 27 principals, but reveals the deeper and more enduring dimension of reputation. The school's tradition and historical prestige emerged as a source of legitimacy that cannot be "bought" or "built quickly", while safety and care for students were presented as selection criteria that directly affect the emotional concerns of parents, not only their academic expectations. Here, a practical-emotional dimension closely related to trust also appears easing the parental burden. When P5 notes that "Completing homework within the school day relieves parents of a daily worry and gives them time and peace to deal with the child at home, no longer with pressure, but with pleasure", she is showing that trust in the school does not arise only from formal indicators, but also from the way the school transforms the family's daily life into a less tiring experience. This kind of perceived ease becomes, over time, part of the "story" that those parents tell each other and that, in the end, nourishes that symbolic capital that is difficult for other institutions to copy.

4. Discussion

Leading People: Relational and Adaptive Leadership Practice

The finding that principals describe effective leadership as involving motivation, communication and adaptation to colleagues, supported by fair, competent and strategic management, is consistent with what is widely stated in the international literature on school leadership.

Studies from other settings, mostly Gulf states and cross-national datasets, associate relational and supportive leadership with teacher engagement, satisfaction and lower stress [23–25] and, together with innovation and leadership development, with students achievement [26,27]. Our data cannot test such links, since they rest on principals' own accounts; what they add is a picture of how these principals describe the relational side of their work, and where that description is thinner than the literature would lead one to expect.

The most revealing pattern in this theme is asymmetry. Recognition of teachers' contributions is almost universal (26/27), and collaborative or distributed leadership is described by 15 of 27 principals, yet teacher voice and autonomy appear in only 11 accounts. Reading through Spillane's practice-based view of distributed leadership [8], this asymmetry suggests a possible gap between the language of collaboration and principals' reports of teacher participation in decision-making. Because the present study relies on self-report, it cannot establish the extent to which leadership is distributed in practice. A similar gap appears for instructional leadership [9]: monitoring teaching and learning through data is mentioned by only 5 of 27 principals, suggesting that the direct supervision and improvement of teaching, central to that model, occupies little of the space in which these

principals describe their role. Both patterns are consistent with a system in which principals' attention is absorbed by relational maintenance and resource pressures (see The weight of Context), and both deserve investigation through observation rather than self-report.

Educating the Whole Child: Vision and Student Development

The finding that principals articulate a values-based vision that goes beyond academic achievement and aims for the full development and well-being of each student is widely confirmed by the international literature. Limburg et al. [28] argue that school is "more than a place to learn", highlighting its cross-cutting role in adolescent well-being, particularly in the post-pandemic period.

In the same vein, Ordóñez-Carabaño et al. [29], through the IMMERSE project, show that intercultural values in school strengthen children's sense of belonging, indicating that a values-based vision feeds directly into students' emotional and social development.

What the present study adds to this picture is the setting in which such a vision must be enacted. In a post-communist system still consolidating its decentralization reforms [1,16], principals pursue a holistic, values-based vision without the stable structural support that comparable Western systems assume, so that the vision is sustained relationally rather than through resourced programs. Read against Vampa's [13] account of the still-underdeveloped support for Albanian principals, a familiar international theme becomes a context-specific claim about how vision survives under scarcity.

The School as Community: Collaborative Networks and Shared Responsibility

The finding that school success is understood as a collective and relational achievement, rather than as the result of the individual action of the leader, places the institution in a key position within overlapping networks of internal cohesion and external partnership. This relational perspective coincides with the theory of social capital [10], according to which mutual trust, obligation and close ties between actors produce resources that no single member can create alone.

Therefore, the effectiveness of the school depends more on the density and quality of relationships with staff, families and community actors than on formal authority. Bourdieu's capital formations [11] construct success by transforming relational trust into shared cultural expectations and collective norms that circulate between the staff-family-community triangle. If we look at it through the lens of distributed leadership [8], this collective conception of success reconfigures leadership itself as a property of interaction, not of hierarchical position, where authority and initiative are distributed among coordinating actors, which is consistent with the interviewees' rejection of narratives of a single leader.

The intersectoral role of the school in adolescent well-being [28] places this coordination within broader ecological systems, where sectors such as the family, health, and education jointly support student outcomes. Meanwhile, intercultural values and a sense of belonging [29] suggest that such networks become productive only when accompanied by inclusive relational climates that foster identity.

The Weight of Context: External Pressures on School Leadership

The finding that principals operate within a limited context, marked by material and infrastructural deficiencies, the socio-economic hardship of families who come to the school door, and a widespread crisis of student engagement, clearly shows that leadership effectiveness cannot be assessed in isolation from the ecological layers surrounding the school.

This is closely related to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [12], according to which the school functions as a mesosystem embedded within broader exosystemic and macrosystemic forces, family poverty, community infrastructure, and public policy neglect, which determine what happens within the microsystem of everyday teaching. The same logic is also evident in research on job demands and resources [24], where infrastructural

and socio-economic pressure functions as a chronic demand that consumes the resources needed for instructional leadership and teacher satisfaction [25]. Consistent with accounts of post-communist Albanian schooling in which decentralization has devolved responsibility without fully devolving resources [1,16], school climate is conditioned as much by surrounding socio-economic circumstances as by anything within the principal's control.

These pressures also help explain a pattern that runs across the interviews: 22 of 27 principals described external community and institutional partnerships, and 16 of them combined such partnerships with accounts of material or financial scarcity. We term this pattern, tentatively, the principal as community entrepreneur. Where state investment is limited (as P8, leading a large urban school, notes, "state investments, to be honest, are limited"), principals describe securing what the school needs by mobilizing resources outside official channels: P27 speaks of "the continuous search in the educational authorities for the completion and maintenance of school facilities", P25 of "cooperation with NGOs, as well as cooperation with the local government", and P6 of "designing the school as a community center". In each case, the principal acts less as an administrator of allocated means than as a broker who assembles them, drawing on the social capital [10] embedded in local relationships to access resources they report are not available through routine institutional provision. Given the result reported in Section 4.1, we treat this as a descriptive pattern in principals' accounts, not as evidence that such brokerage compensates for scarcity.

Becoming a Principal: Pathways of Motivation and Professional Identity

The finding that principals construct their leadership identity in different ways, such as professional calling and experience accumulated over the years, ambition and the need for self-testing, or modesty accompanied by external encouragement, shows that the professional self is a negotiated construction shaped by the biography and context of each individual. This diversity shows that the "professional self" is not a ready-made quality that is acquired equally through training, but something that each person constructs over time and is shaped by their own history and circumstances.

This view is consistent with the classic distinction between transactional and transformational leadership [5], which Bass later expanded with the idea of inspirational influence and attention to the individual [6].

Different entry pathways may be compatible with the relational and inspirational orientations described in transformational leadership theory [5–7]. However, our data contain no measures of practice or outcomes by pathways; therefore, we cannot determine whether principals entering through calling, ambition, or external prompting differ in leadership practice or effectiveness. The present finding is limited to the heterogeneity of motivational pathways and to how principals narrate the development of their professional identity.

From this, we can say that professional identity is built step by step, whereby internal motivation and external conditions influence each other.

Therefore, leadership development programs [27] should not be thought of as a single channel through which everyone passes, but as a flexible support that adapts to the different paths through which someone becomes a principal.

Reputation and Choice: What Makes a School Valued

The finding that, in principals' perceptions, parents and communities value a school by combining tangible indicators of quality, qualified teachers, adequate infrastructure, visible academic results, with relational and symbolic wealth accumulated over the years shows that a school's reputation cannot be limited simply to measurable indicators of performance. This is closely related to Coleman's conception of social capital [10], where trust, norms, and information channels embedded in relationships between families, teachers, and institutions function as productive resources that foster collective action and the belief that the institution is capable of fulfilling its promises. Bourdieu's broader theory of capi-

tal [11], and primarily symbolic capital, further emphasizes that prestige, legitimacy, and recognition accumulated over time through sustained practice translate into an institutional value that parents read as trustworthiness. The Albanian setting sharpens this logic. Where decentralization reforms have shifted responsibility towards schools without a matching transfer of resources [1,16] and where principals report shrinking enrollments driven by emigration (8/27), reputation becomes something principals feel they must actively cultivate to secure pupils, rather than a byproduct of institutional standing. Taken together, this dual evaluative logic implies that reputation functions as a socially constructed and constantly renegotiated asset, rather than as a frozen attribute.

Authentic leadership practices, which build trust and reduce teacher turnover [23], maintain the continuity of relationships on which a school's reputation is based: where staff remain and do not change every year, which transmits to the community a calm, coherent and caring school. Similarly, principals describe school climate and student well-being as cues through which they believe parents interpret school quality. Taken together, their accounts portray school choice as shaped not only by measurable data but also by the trust that families build in it over time.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions that go beyond a purely descriptive account of the experiences of school principals.

First, the study proposes, as conjecture rather than a finding, that relational leadership may operate as a compensatory response where state agency support and structural resources are scarce, with principals working through trust, staff motivation, and community networks to maintain organizational cohesion. Our internal comparison does not support this reading. Relational leadership coding accounted for the same share of coded segments (0.27) in rural and urban schools, although rural schools are those our recommendations single out as facing additional difficulty; and the share was lower in the largest schools (0.25) than in the smallest (0.29), although P8 and others describe larger schools as feeling resource pressure more acutely. Segment share, moreover, measures how much principals talked about relationships in response to our questions, not how intensively they practice relational leadership. The compensatory idea therefore remains a conjecture that, if confirmed, would extend distributed leadership theory [8] to transitional systems, but testing it requires a design that measures resources and leadership practice directly.

Second, the study integrates ecological systems theory [12] with distributed leadership and social capital [10,11]. Principals are shown to exercise leadership at the intersection of interwoven contextual pressures, such as family socio-economic conditions, community expectations, and system-level constraints, which transform relational resources into the collective capacity of the school. This integration specifies how structural conditions at the macro level are translated, through the principal's identity and practice, into school culture at the micro level.

Third, the study outlines, as propositions for further research rather than a model established by the data, how structural constraints, professional identity and collective school culture may interact in transitional and post-socialist systems. These propositions are offered for empirical testing in contexts similar to the Western Balkans and the wider former socialist space.

4.2. Study Limitations

The study has several methodological limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the sample of 27 school principals, although sufficient for an in-depth thematic analysis, remains small and not representative of the general pop-

ulation of school principals in Albania. For this reason, the findings cannot be generalized statistically but should be understood as knowledge placed in a certain context, related to the experiences of the participants involved in the study.

Second, the interview transcripts, conducted in Albanian, were translated into English prior to the coding process. This translation carries the risk of losing linguistic, cultural, and emotional nuances present in the original discourse, which may have influenced the interpretation of some implicit meanings.

Third, codebook thematic coding, conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's approach [3], inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity on the part of the researcher in identifying and naming codes, subthemes, and themes. This may affect the consistency and reproducibility of the categorization if the same process were to be carried out by other researchers. Fourth, the study relies exclusively on data collected through interviews, without triangulation with other methods, such as direct field observation of leadership practices or analysis of institutional documents. This limits the ability to independently verify the principals' statements. Finally, although every participant contributed to each of the six themes, the presence of individual subthemes ranged from 9–27 of 27 participants, and the broad coverage at the theme level may be partly related to the structure of the interview questions. In a semi-structured design, the questions may have guided participants towards similar thematic categories rather than these emerging entirely spontaneously; Supplementary Materials S1 makes this relationship explicit.

4.3. Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for recommendations at three levels of action, closely linked to the identified themes, in particular the weight that the context and external pressures exert on school leadership.

At the policy-making level, continued investment in school infrastructure is recommended, especially in rural areas, where principals report additional difficulties in exercising their leadership function.

The bureaucratic burden of administrative reporting should be reduced, so that principals have more time and space to focus on pedagogical leadership and on relationships with colleagues and the community.

It is also necessary to create supportive financial mechanisms that provide schools with resources for local initiatives, without leaving them completely dependent on central decision-making. At the same time, policies should define clear and transparent criteria for evaluating principals, in order to avoid creating unnecessary and unjustified pressures.

Regarding the professional development of principals, it is recommended to design training programs oriented towards relationship-based and adaptive leadership, which strengthen communication skills, conflict management and trust-building with teachers and families. This training should be based on practices that link the principal's professional identity with the vision for the holistic development of the student. Mentoring among colleagues and the creation of professional networks can contribute to maintaining motivation and alleviating the sense of isolation observed by some participants. At the school level, it is recommended to strengthen strategies for motivating teachers through recognition of their contribution and inclusion in decision-making processes, as well as the development of sustainable partnerships with parents and the community, which were mentioned as a source of shared responsibility.

4.4. Future Research

The above limitations of this study suggest some clear directions for future research. First, the data were collected at a single point in time, through 27 semi-structured interviews,

which does not allow observation of how the leadership practices, the professional identity of the leaders and the perceptions of the school's reputation evolve over time.

Longitudinal studies, which would follow the same principals or the same schools for several school years, would enable a deeper understanding of the dynamic processes underlying the identified themes, especially those related to the initial motivation to become a principal and the subsequent transformation of the professional identity.

Second, the sample of 27 principals, while providing considerable analytical depth, remains limited in scope. Future research could include larger samples, relying on quantitative or mixed-method approaches. This would allow for more systematic comparisons between urban and rural contexts and would deepen current findings on the impact of context on school leadership.

Third, a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative data with quantitative data on student outcomes, such as academic achievement, well-being, and participation, would make it possible to establish an empirical link between leadership practices and concrete student outcomes.

Fourth, the inclusion of other perspectives, such as those of teachers, parents, and students themselves, would further enrich the findings of this study, providing a more multidimensional panorama.

Finally, international comparisons within the region, particularly in the Western Balkans and Southeastern Europe, would help to distinguish the specific features of the Albanian reality from the broader regional processes that characterize school leadership.

5. Conclusions

From the synthesis of the six main themes, a central message emerges: school leadership, as experienced by principals themselves, is not primarily a technical or administrative exercise, but a deeply relational practice, built on relationships with teachers, students, parents, and the wider community. Principals do value formal indicators, and tangible markers of quality were the most widely present subtheme of the reputation theme (24/27); however, their accounts indicate that institutional success is not defined by such indicators alone and also involves the trust, collaboration, and community involvement that the principal manages to build and strengthen.

Among the themes analyzed, a persistent tension is observed between the leadership vision and the real material constraints: a lack of financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and bureaucratic pressures lead many principals to describe themselves as mobilizing resources beyond official channels to enable innovation or extracurricular activities, a pattern we have termed, tentatively, the principal as "community entrepreneur". We advance as a hypothesis, not a finding, that in such conditions the Albanian school may function as much as a joint project of the surrounding community as an administrative unit. At the same time, in principals' perception, teachers' motivation and parents' choices are closely linked to the way this commitment of the school and the community is perceived.

In terms of implications for educational policies, the findings suggest, pending confirmation by research that measures resources and practice directly, that support mechanisms should recognize and strengthen the relational and community-facing work that principals describe, rather than limiting the role to administrative requirements.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/soc16100344/s1, Supplementary Material S1: Interview guide (ten guiding questions) and Table S1: Mapping of guiding question areas to the six themes.

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Informed Consent Statement: All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all interview data were pseudonymized using participant identification codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3), and all personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts prior to analysis.

Data Availability Statement: The interview transcripts are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the anonymity of the participants. Anonymised excerpts, the codebook and the code-segment register are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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