Research article

Signature pedagogies in educational leadership preparation: university academics' practices and reflections from Türkiye

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Abstract

This article explores the signature pedagogies enacted by university academics in Türkiye's Non-Thesis Educational Administration Master's (NTEA-M) programmes, which are designed to prepare effective school leaders. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, data were collected from 12 academics across 10 universities specialising in educational leadership. The findings reveal a range of pedagogical strategies grounded in situational, transformational and instructional leadership theories, alongside an emphasis on critical skills such as communication, problem-solving and collaboration. Ethical values, including responsibility, justice, honesty and transparency, emerged as central to the formation of leadership. The study highlights ongoing tensions between

theory and practice, and it proposes actionable recommendations such as strengthening school–university partnerships and embedding field-based learning. By foregrounding the lived pedagogical choices and situations, this study contributes to the signature pedagogy literature from within Türkiye's distinctive policy and educational context.

Keywords signature pedagogy; educational leadership signature pedagogy; educational leadership in Türkiye; educational leadership training process

Introduction

In our ongoing pursuit of improving schools, we often arrive at the question of how to cultivate school leaders who can unlock teachers' potential. Given the central role of effective leadership in school improvement, focusing on how these leaders are trained becomes crucial. Shulman's (2005) concept of signature pedagogies – encompassing the surface, deep and implicit dimensions of professional education – provides a strong framework for exploring how knowledge is conveyed and how profession-specific norms and values are integrated. Signature pedagogy is not a rigid, prescriptive framework but a lens through which to examine the practices and values shaping professional preparation. Investigating these pedagogies within school leadership offers valuable insights that contribute to enhancing school improvement efforts.

This article explores the epistemologies and values that guide the teaching methods used by faculty members in educational leadership graduate programmes in Türkiye to discover the signature pedagogies of those responsible for training education leaders. In Türkiye's national literature, the pivotal role of school principals and their training is frequently emphasised – often reflected in widely cited phrases that suggest that the quality of a school depends on the effectiveness of its principal, or that managing education requires first educating its leaders (see, for example, Açıkalın, 1998; Yavuz, 2016). Despite this, many studies identify challenges faced by Türkiye, including gaps in leadership skills, limited authority, underutilisation of power and misunderstandings about the role – all of which undermine the education system (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Cansoy et al., 2024; Deniz and Erdener, 2020; Gümüş and Akçaoğlu, 2013; Kondakci et al., 2019; Sincar, 2013; Ugurlu, 2014). These studies indicate a pressing need for reforms in principal training and appointment policies, which currently fall short. Structural and policy-related factors influence how university academics shape leadership preparation, especially in systems with centralised governance and limited institutional autonomy, such as Türkiye.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the signature pedagogies embraced by faculty in Türkiye's non-thesis educational leadership master's programmes by examining their teaching methods, epistemologies and values. The findings aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice while offering insights into Türkiye's unique leadership pedagogy shaped by its context. Specifically, the research addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1. Which knowledge, skills and approaches do academics in Türkiye's educational leadership field prioritise when training future educational leaders?
RQ 2. How do these academics convey the knowledge, skills and approaches to their students?
RQ 3. What ethical values do these academics strive to instil in their students?
RQ 4. What unique pedagogies are proposed by academics working in Türkiye's educational leadership programmes?

Contextualising educational leadership training in Türkiye

Academics in Türkiye's higher education system exercise limited autonomy in designing course content, teaching methods and assessment strategies, within boundaries set by the national qualifications framework and quality assurance standards (Gedikoğlu, 2013; YÖK, 2023a, 2023b).

In Türkiye, Non-Thesis Educational Administration Master's (NTEA-M) programmes aim to equip school leaders with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills (Karakütük, 2009). These programmes are effective only when the curriculum and teaching methods align with school dynamics (Tonbul, 2016).

NTEA-M programmes, which gained popularity in universities in the early 2000s, are now offered by education or social sciences institutes at many universities (Tonbul, 2016). Currently, 59 universities run these programmes – 8 private and 51 public – offering around 6,000 annual placements (EYTPE, 2021). However, with more than 107,000 school administrators nationwide, this capacity remains insufficient.

A central structural issue is the absence of a clearly defined professional framework for school leadership. School administrators in Türkiye are not recognised as a distinct professional category; instead, they are officially designated as teachers with administrative responsibilities. This ambiguity not only influences appointment processes; it also impedes the development of clearly articulated leadership standards, competencies and ethical codes. As a result, the pedagogical focus within NTEA-M programmes often lacks clarity regarding what leadership roles demand in practice.

Although many school leaders voluntarily enrol in these programmes for professional growth (Yağız and Bozkurt, 2022), the lack of a systemic leadership pipeline undermines consistency. While NTEA-M degrees offer points towards school principal appointments (Official Gazette, 2021), critics highlight persistent disconnection between theory and practice (Aksu and Yücel, 2023; Dalkılıç and Öter, 2024).

A significant policy shift has recently emerged: the Teaching Profession Law (2024) proposes mandatory pre-vocational training for prospective school administrators – a first of its kind. Yet, without a well-established framework that defines the knowledge, values and behaviours expected of school leaders, the content and orientation of such training remain unresolved. This makes it even more critical to investigate how current university-based leadership programmes conceptualise and enact leadership preparation. The long-standing call for clinically rich and field-based pedagogies (Şimşek, 2004) reinforces the need for a distinctive, practice-oriented educational framework – what Shulman (2005) defines as signature pedagogy.

Signature pedagogy in educational leadership

Signature pedagogy refers to assumptions about the most effective ways to teach specific knowledge and skills (Shulman, 2005). These assumptions guide decisions about which technical knowledge, values and attitudes should be taught, and how students should shape their professional identities (Khoo and Kan, 2020). The aim is to create professionals who excel in their fields, uphold ethical standards and are socially responsible. Signature pedagogy helps students internalise abstract knowledge, engage in critical reflection and apply ethical responsibility across contexts (Black and Murtadha, 2007).

Research on signature pedagogy in educational leadership presents models for training leaders with necessary competencies (Black and Murtadha, 2007; Jenkins, 2012; Meyer and Shannon, 2010). Methods such as case studies, action research and reflective practices help bridge the theory–practice gap and develop professional identity and leadership skills (Sappington et al., 2010; Zambo, 2011). Participatory action research, in particular, integrates professional knowledge with core values and fosters critical thinking (Brooks et al., 2023; Khoo and Kan, 2020). This flexibility in combining traditional and innovative teaching methods makes signature pedagogy adaptable to different disciplines (McLain, 2022).

In Türkiye, limited research exists on signature pedagogy in school leadership, but studies highlight effective methods for training school leaders, emphasising aligning theory with practice (Ata, 2018; Aydın, 2002; Tonbul and Çavdar, 2019). Addressing this need requires establishing consistent standards, diversifying training programmes and improving pedagogical approaches in the national context (Dalkılıç and Öter, 2024).

Method

Research design

This study employs a phenomenological design within a qualitative approach to examine the shared signature pedagogy in NTEA-M programmes in Türkiye. By focusing on teaching processes, epistemologies and values imparted by academics, the research aims to reveal the underlying structures described by Shulman (2005). The autonomy of academics in both content and pedagogy has led to variations across NTEA-M programmes, with each academic using unique content and methods. A phenomenological design allows us to explore how academics perceive and interpret these shared experiences (Creswell, 2023; Frankel et al., 2012) (Figure 1); this approach can provide a detailed account

of the knowledge, skills, approaches, leadership models, teaching methods and ethical values, and the alignment between theory and practice in NTEA-M programmes.
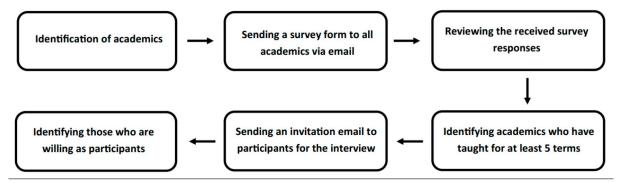
Figure 1. Research model

As illustrated in Figure 1, participants (P1–P12) were asked questions concerning the conceptual framework of educational administration. These questions addressed theoretical knowledge, practices, teaching methods, techniques, approaches and ethical values. From the participants' responses, shared meanings, key elements and effective examples were identified.

Study group

The participants of the study group were selected using the criterion sampling method. The main criterion considered during the formation of the study group was that the academics had taught in NTEA-M programmes for at least five semesters. The reason for this criterion is the assumption that participants have gained in-depth knowledge and experience regarding the programme content and practices over time. This assumption is based on the expectation that academics can provide more comprehensive and meaningful insights into pedagogical practices and the challenges encountered. Figure 2, which visualises this process and consists of six stages, presents the steps followed for the selection of participants in order.

Figure 2. The process of forming the study group

Initially, a list of 295 academics was identified by reviewing the websites of educational and social sciences institutes at state universities in Türkiye where NTEA-M programmes are conducted. These academics were contacted via email to inform them about the purpose of the study and to ask whether they would be

willing to participate voluntarily. The email included a survey form that contained short-answer questions about participants' demographic information, the number of semesters they had taught in NTEA-M programmes and the courses they delivered, as well as seven open-ended questions prepared for the interviews. The aim was to select experienced and willing participants who could provide the most meaningful contribution to the study, to review the survey responses in advance to identify important topics to focus on during the interviews, and to manage the interviews in a more focused manner. In total, 14 academics responded positively to the email. On reviewing the responses, it was found that all of them met the requirement of having taught at least 5 semesters. Subsequently, these 14 academics were invited for in-depth interviews. However, 2 were not available for interviews. Consequently, the final study group comprised 12 academics from NTEA-M programmes across 10 universities in different cities. Of the participants, 6 were associate professors, and the other 6 were full professors. Information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic and academic information about participants

Participant	Gender	Nationality	NTEA-M semesters	Academic title
P1	Female	Turkish	22	Associate Professor
P2	Female	Turkish	24	Associate Professor
P3	Male	Turkish	36	Full Professor
P4	Male	Turkish	28	Full Professor
P5	Female	Turkish	30	Full Professor
P6	Male	Turkish	6	Associate Professor
P7	Male	Turkish	14	Associate Professor
P8	Female	Turkish	8	Associate Professor
P9	Female	Turkish	16	Associate Professor
P10	Male	Turkish	40	Full Professor
P11	Male	Turkish	40	Full Professor
P12	Male	Turkish	36	Full Professor

The gender distribution of the participants consisted of five females and seven males. All participants were Turkish. The teaching experience of the academics in the NTEA-M programmes ranged from 6 to 40 semesters, indicating that the participants had varying levels of experience with the programme.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection process was designed to explore the shared signature pedagogy in NTEA-M programmes by applying Shulman's (2005) three levels of professional education – surface, deep and implicit structures – as the analytical framework. To this end, a semi-structured interview form was developed, comprising seven broad, open-ended questions aligned with these levels. A pilot study was conducted with two academics working in the field of educational administration who were not part of the study group. Based on the feedback received regarding the clarity, scope and structure of the interview form, the form was finalised. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent.

Data analysis was conducted by two researchers who independently reviewed the transcripts to identify patterns of meaning related to pedagogical practices, epistemologies and values reflected in the participants' responses. Rather than relying on direct question-to-answer mapping, a holistic approach was adopted, recognising that rich narratives and complex meanings could emerge across multiple questions or within a single response. The researchers collaboratively examined the initial codes, compared interpretations, and discussed areas of convergence and divergence to construct shared understandings and to identify common themes.

An inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed to systematically identify patterns and themes within the data. The analysis was theory-driven, explicitly guided by Shulman's (2005) model of professional education, which provided a conceptual framework for interpreting the data across the surface, deep and implicit levels.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, member checking was conducted in two stages. First, participants were sent the full transcripts of their interviews and were invited to suggest any additions or corrections. Second, prior to finalising the analysis, the main findings and emerging themes were shared with the participants for feedback. This iterative validation process helped refine the findings and ensured an accurate representation of participants' perspectives. As the study was conducted in Türkiye, the interviews were conducted in Turkish with no translation issues. An English version of the interview guide is provided in Box 1.

Box 1. NTEA-M signature pedagogy semi-structured interview form

Interview date:
Interview duration:

Introductory statement
This interview is part of a research study aiming to examine the pedagogical approaches, epistemological orientations and professional values emphasised by academics working in the field of Educational Administration in Türkiye, particularly within the context of non-thesis master's programmes. The interview will take approximately 30–45 minutes. Participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential. The data collected will be used solely for academic research purposes. You are free to skip any question or withdraw from the interview at any time. The interviews will be recorded in real time. Thank you for your valuable contribution.

Personal information

1. Full name:
2. Gender:
3. Institution:
4. Academic title: Assistant Professor ☐   Associate Professor ☐   Full Professor ☐
5. How many years have you been teaching graduate-level courses?
6. How many semesters have you taught in NTEA-M programmes?

Interview questions

1. What knowledge, skills and approaches do you believe your students need to acquire in order to become leaders in their schools?

    1.1. How do you emphasise these knowledge/skills/approaches in your courses?
    1.2. Which leadership theory do you think students in this programme should be trained in, considering the context of Türkiye?

2. What teaching method(s) do you use in your NTEA-M courses?

    2.1. Could you explain the function of your chosen method(s) in supporting the students' acquisition of knowledge and skills?
    2.2. What strategies/methods/techniques do you believe should be used in these programmes?

3. What ethical values do you think students should acquire in NTEA-M courses?

    3.1. What approach do you use to help students internalise these values?
    3.2. Are there universally accepted ethical values that should be taught during the training of school leaders?
    If yes, please share what they are.
    If no, please explain why such consensus does not exist.

4. How do you approach the planning of your NTEA-M courses? If applicable, please explain the key aspects of your planning approach.
5. What are your thoughts on the alignment between theory and practice in non-thesis master's programmes in Türkiye?

    5.1. What should the balance between theory and practice look like?
    5.2. What do you do in your own practice to maintain this balance?

6. What are your views on the ability of these programmes to equip school administrators with knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, professional ethics, and the capacity to manage uncertainty?
7. Considering the Turkish education system, do you have a unique pedagogical suggestion for universities to help students become educational leaders? If yes, please briefly explain.
8. Is there anything else you would like to add or share before we conclude?

While the voluntary nature of participation resulted in a relatively small sample (12 academics), the depth of data and the collaborative analysis process provided robust insights into the pedagogical practices in NTEA-M programmes. Additionally, the course content in NTEA-M programmes is based on the courses offered by academics according to their individual areas of expertise. Therefore, in this study, the learning outcomes vary depending on the content and context of each course, and a common or standardised framework is not presented. This situation makes it difficult to clearly reveal the relationship between the signature pedagogy examined in the study and the overall framework of the NTEA-M programme, and this is considered to be a significant limitation of the study. Ethics approval for the study, including the research instruments, was obtained from Gaziantep University (Approval No. 565472).

Findings

What knowledge, skills and approaches should students acquire to become leaders?

The participants were asked, 'What knowledge, skills and approaches do you believe your students need to acquire in order to become leaders in their schools?' This question aimed to identify the essential knowledge, skills and approaches deemed necessary by the participants. The responses highlighted a multifaceted perspective within the framework of the NTEA-M programme, outlining the competencies required for students to excel as school leaders. The themes and codes derived from the responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Knowledge, skills and approaches considered necessary by academics

Themes	Codes
Knowledge	Scientific Research Educational Policies and Legal Knowledge Culture and Society Technology Use Motivation Techniques Human Resource Management Organisational Structure Leadership Theories and Approaches
Skills	Leadership Communication Teamwork and Collaboration Problem Solving Motivation Crisis Management Initiating Change Analytical and Critical Thinking Decision-Making
Approaches	Leadership Awareness Academic Awareness Openness to Change Emotional Literacy Ethics and Legality Building and Developing Social Networks

On examining Table 2, eight codes emerged under knowledge, nine under skills and six under approaches. The academic and theoretical knowledge that students acquire evolves into skills, which then develop into approaches, suggesting fluid boundaries between these themes. For example, participant P9 stated:

> I believe they should be aware that they need to become leaders in their schools … [the 10 courses offered in the programme] … should give them academic awareness.

P9 emphasised that students should acquire scientific research skills and an academic stance, guiding their actions. This indicates that knowledge evolves into diverse skills, ultimately transforming into practical approaches. Mastery of research methodology also emerged as a key theme (P9, P10). Although participants stressed scientific approaches in schools, one participant distinguished between being a researcher and being scientifically literate:

> I don't think a good school principal necessarily needs to be a good researcher. Research competencies and practitioner competencies are different. However, I believe it is beneficial for them to be scientifically literate and to analyse their practices from a scientific perspective. (P4)

This highlights the need to instil a scientific perspective in school administrators. Some participants believed that this skill can be nurtured through practical applications, while others argued for a research methodology focus. Participants also noted the importance of managerial and leadership skills, including strategic thinking, decision-making and crisis management:

> Gaining strategic thinking and decision-making skills, knowing communication and motivation techniques, acquiring team management and conflict resolution skills. (P1)

> Turning crises into opportunities. (P6)

> They should possess the necessary knowledge and skills related to management to direct human resources within the organisation towards the organisational goals. (P10)

The findings reveal that knowledge, skills and approaches in leadership are interconnected and form an integrated structure. The participants' statements indicate that these three domains are not independent of one another; rather, they are considered in a way such that they complement and reinforce each other. Considering the ever-changing nature of educational environments, the emphasis placed by academics on scientific thinking and a culture of research demonstrates their aim to help students not only to generate solutions to current problems, but also to become leaders capable of adapting to changing conditions and developing innovative approaches.

Which leadership approach stands out?

When asked, 'Which leadership theory do you think students in this programme should be trained in, considering the context of Türkiye?', participants frequently mentioned situational, transformational and instructional leadership. They stressed that leadership approaches should not be limited to a single theory, but should be approached synthetically, with a strong emphasis on ethical values. Given Türkiye's dynamic and rapidly changing environment, many participants highlighted situational leadership as essential for adapting to changing circumstances:

> In the context of Türkiye, I think 'situational leadership' theory would be more effective. Given the geographical, sociological, economic and political conditions of the world and our country, uncertainty takes precedence. (P9)

> Situational leadership is suitable for both the Türkiye context and schools because it's uncertain what they will face. (P7)

Participants also pointed out that transformational leadership could significantly contribute to the education system amid constant reforms:

> The transformational leadership theory is quite suitable in the context of Türkiye, where schools are in a period of constant change and reform. Visionary leadership, along with innovation and change management skills, are critical elements of this approach. (P1)

> The school's claim to make a difference in individuals highlights transformational leadership. (P11)

> Transformational leadership leads change by motivating people with visionary goals. (P1)

Alongside the emphasis on change and transformation, instructional leadership emerged as another prominent leadership theory/approach in the views of the participants:

> The instructional leadership theory aims to improve the academic performance of schools, and this approach is quite suitable for schools in Türkiye. (P1)

> Instructional leadership and educational leadership in educational institutions are just as important as other leadership theories. (P11)

Some participants also suggested distributed leadership theory, emphasising the importance of sharing leadership authority and managing in a democratic structure:

> I see distributed leadership theory as important for educational organisations. There is a need for an approach that redefines power and authority, giving schools and teachers a broader perspective. (P4)

> Distributed leadership is important for the sharing of different authorities and responsibilities. (P3)

In the context of Türkiye, it was also noted that ethical values in education should be emphasised. Participants highlighted the importance of leaders acting in accordance with ethical standards:

> In today's societal structure, the leadership approach we need most might be ethical leadership. (P7)

Some participants expressed that a single leadership theory might not suffice for Türkiye's complexities, advocating a model synthesising various theories (P10, P11). This suggests integrating multiple approaches for a more comprehensive leadership framework. While emphasising situational, transformational, instructional, distributed, ethical and synthetic approaches, participants noted the need for school administrators to demonstrate leadership beyond mere authority, while also acknowledging that existing regulations may limit their ability to fully exercise such leadership.

How do we teach?

This section explores the methods participants use in their lessons, specifically examining the learning environments they create to help students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. This investigation provides insight into the deep structures of the pedagogies applied by faculty in NTEA-M programmes. The resulting themes and codes are outlined in Table 3.

In this research, faculty members teaching in NTEA-M programmes were asked about the teaching methods they use in their courses. Their responses revealed three main themes: Theoretical Knowledge and Lecturing Methods; Applied and Interactive Learning; and Critical Thinking and Discussion Methods. Faculty members indicated that they generally adopt a blended approach, integrating multiple methods instead of relying solely on one. Lectures, case studies, group work and discussions emerged as the most commonly used techniques. Participants shared their perspectives:

> I combine theoretical knowledge and practical applications through activities like case analyses, school management dramas in class, case studies and in-class simulations. (P1)

> I teach theoretical knowledge and have students perform discussions, exercises, assignments, projects and presentations to connect this theoretical knowledge with practice. (P10)

> I frequently use the case study method in my classes. We analyse real-world problems. (P12)

> Through case studies, I ask students, 'What would you do?' to encourage them to think critically. (P7)

I use brain-based learning, Socratic discussions and opposing panels in my classes. (P6)

Table 3. Methods and techniques used by faculty members

Themes	Codes
Theoretical Knowledge and Lecturing Methods	Lecture Method Article/Book Critique Reading and Discussion Presentations
Applied and Interactive Learning	Project-Based Learning Simulation and Drama Group Work Problem Solving Mentorship and Observation
Critical Thinking and Discussion Methods	Discussion and Brainstorming Q&A Socratic Discussion and Opposing Panel Case Study Method

As is evident, there is strong agreement among faculty members on the need to integrate theory and practice through diverse methods, including case studies, discussions and projects. Faculty members often invite school administrators to participate in their classes, and they emphasise the significance of teamwork and collaboration, encouraging students to work together. Their goal is to develop students' critical and creative thinking, problem-solving abilities and collaboration skills by engaging them with field knowledge, supporting diverse perspectives, and promoting independent thinking. One participant expressed their view as follows:

I design the content according to the learning outcomes and assign group tasks to encourage collaboration. I use responsibilities like case studies and assignments to reinforce these skills. (P7)

Participants noted that lecture methods help students better understand concepts, while assignments and projects play a crucial role in internalising and applying the knowledge (P2, P3, P5 and P10). One participant's view was that:

Lecturing helps students master the fundamental concepts, assignments help them absorb the topic, discussions reinforce it, research allows them to learn it, and projects make the knowledge functional. (P3)

Applied and interactive learning methods help students learn how to apply theoretical knowledge in the real world, with case studies and simulations accelerating this process. One participant commented:

For example, discussing theoretical knowledge and then incorporating observations and case studies makes the learning process easier. (P10)

Critical thinking and discussion methods help students develop analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, with case studies and brainstorming sessions allowing them to understand different perspectives. These methods enable students to gain deeper thinking skills:

With this method, students develop the ability to make sense of concepts and theories. At the same time, they develop the ability to create thesis, antithesis and synthesis through discussions. (P2)

Students don't get bored, and they remain more active during and after the class, which facilitates the learning process. (P4)

When participants were asked about the strategies, methods and techniques that should be used in their classrooms, a gap emerged between their ideal practices and what they were able to implement. They emphasised the need for more collaboration and interaction, suggesting techniques such as panels, workshops and open forums. Additionally, the growing importance of technology in the digital age was highlighted, with recommendations to integrate online learning platforms, simulations and web-based tools. Some participants shared the following views:

> Techniques like panels, workshops and open forums should be used. (P9)

> Learning environments should be created with discovery- and problem-based strategies. (P5)

> Online learning platforms, simulations and web-based tools should be integrated. (P1)

In conclusion, it is observed that some participants predominantly use 'Theoretical Knowledge and Lecture Methods' in their classes, but they wish to diversify these methods with 'Applied and Interactive Learning', as well as 'Critical Thinking and Discussion Methods'. This situation indicates that there may be a gap between current practices and ideal teaching approaches. Some participants also emphasise the importance of integrating interaction-based methods such as panels, workshops and open forums, along with digital tools and online platforms.

How do we plan courses?

Participants were asked, 'How do you approach the planning of your NTEA-M courses?' Most noted that they begin by understanding the group's characteristics, considering factors such as professional seniority, specialisations and educational levels. Planning focuses on balancing theory and practice, ensuring that theoretical content is relevant to practical application, reflecting current developments, and incorporating student preferences. A student-centred approach was widely preferred, fostering active participation, and influencing content and methods. Transparency in assessment and providing clear feedback were also key:

> The reflection of the theoretical knowledge we share in the courses on to real work life is very important. Theory often remains abstract for students, but it needs to be made concrete. Trying to find solutions to educational problems with the knowledge that theory provides is more realistic. (P5)

> I identify who my target audience is. Then, I determine my assessment method according to the learning outcomes and share the process with the students. (P9)

> I have been teaching similar courses for years. The course content is well-established, but I update it in light of technological and scientific developments. Making changes based on feedback from students about aspects they didn't like in the previous term can also be helpful. To do this, it's important to build a respectful, sincere and open-to-growth relationship with students. (P11)

> We base everything on student-centred approaches. If a student doesn't participate in discussions, even if they get full marks on the exam, they're not considered successful. (P2)

> I try to consider changes in the education programme and regulations, as well as the impact of technology on school life. (P12)

Participants prioritise understanding student needs, balancing theory and practice, integrating technology, fostering participation and maintaining transparent assessment. A student-centred approach is seen as key to preparing students for effective leadership and management in the field.

What is the balance between theory and practice?

The participants' views on the alignment between theory and practice indicate that the NTEA-M programmes place too much emphasis on theoretical knowledge and do not provide enough opportunities for practical applications. Most participants noted that finding the right balance between theory and practice is a significant challenge in the field of educational administration, and that this imbalance reduces the effectiveness of the programmes:

> I think there is very little alignment between theory and practice. School administrators need different types of courses. (P9)

> Non-thesis programmes focus heavily on theoretical knowledge while not giving enough space to practical experiences. (P1)

Participants argued that this disconnect between theory and practice needs to be resolved and that a more practical approach should be adopted. Opinions on how to achieve a balance between theory and practice varied. While most participants suggested a 50 per cent theory and 50 per cent practice ratio, some advocated for a stronger emphasis on practical applications in non-thesis master's programmes:

> Theory and practice should be balanced at 50 per cent each. Each theoretical course should be complemented by appropriate practical opportunities. (P1)

> In non-thesis programmes, it should be 80 per cent practice and 20 per cent theory; in thesis programmes, it should be 70 per cent practice and 30 per cent theory. (P11)

In line with this, the participants shared a common view that theory and practice should be considered together, and that practical applications should be given more prominence in the current system. Their opinions on how to achieve this balance were expressed as follows:

> I conduct case studies, fieldwork and organise experience-sharing sessions with experts. (P11)

> I try to connect theory and practice by giving examples from daily life and analysing current educational issues. (P4)

> In non-thesis programmes, I focus on students' own real-life experiences. (P11)

Participants strive to achieve this balance in their own courses by using case studies, fieldwork and real-life examples to make theory more tangible. These approaches suggest that faculty members aim to offer students learning opportunities connected to real-life situations to strike a balance between theory and practice. These findings clearly indicate that while strengthening the theoretical foundations of the NTEA-M programmes in Türkiye, there is also a need for greater emphasis on practical applications.

What ethical values should be acquired by students?

Participants were asked, 'What ethical values do you think your students should acquire in NTEA-M courses?' Five main ethical themes emerged: Honesty and Transparency, Responsibility, Justice and Equality, Empathy and Respect, and Scientific Integrity and Critical Thinking.

Honesty and transparency

Most participants highlighted honesty as the foundation of trustworthy leadership, and transparency as essential for open, accountable decision-making. P9 and P5 emphasised gaining trust through honesty and transparency, with P1 describing honesty as the 'cornerstone of leadership'.

Responsibility

Responsibility was viewed as a critical requirement for successful leadership. Participants stressed that responsibility should be both an individual and a societal value, with leaders being held accountable for their decisions. P9 identified responsibility as a core leadership value, while P3 noted that it ensures that leaders are answerable for their actions. P6 also highlighted responsibility as a professional ethical standard.

Justice and equality

Participants frequently expressed that educational leaders must act fairly and impartially, particularly in decision-making. Equality of opportunity and fairness were emphasised as central ethical principles in leadership. P1 and P10 underscored the importance of justice and equality, while P6 emphasised that fairness is indispensable for leadership.

Empathy and respect

It was stressed that leaders must guide their interpersonal relationships with empathy and respect. Participants noted that educational leaders need not only knowledge and skills, but also human values such as empathy and respect. P1 and P10 emphasised the role of empathy in leadership, while P7 highlighted respect as a fundamental ethical value.

Scientific integrity and critical thinking

Participants agreed on the importance of scientific integrity and critical thinking. Leaders should base decisions on research and maintain a critical, unbiased mindset (P9, P4, P6). Participants emphasised that ethical values should be imparted practically, with faculty acting as role models. Ethical behaviour is adopted by students when educators embody these values. P11 noted that 'It stands out when we ask others for something we don't possess ourselves.' Ethical case studies and dilemmas help students engage in deeper reflection (P4, P5), while reflective learning and self-assessment promote internalisation (P1). Providing feedback also reinforces ethical awareness and behaviour (P9, P2). Faculty members use role modelling, case studies, reflective practices and feedback to teach ethical principles, ensuring their application in leadership roles.

Unique pedagogical proposals for NTEA-M programmes

When asked for pedagogical suggestions, several participants emphasised 'andragogy' to address adult learning. Since the training targets school leaders, participants highlighted the need to reflect andragogy in teaching processes. P4 argued that andragogy, rather than pedagogy, is more appropriate for educators, focusing on practical and professional competency. P5 noted that most students are already teachers or administrators with existing competencies. P6 emphasised critical pedagogy, stressing the importance of self-reflection and critical thinking for adult learners.

The need to align theory with practice was a key theme in the pedagogical suggestions. P1's 'Integrated Leadership Development Pedagogy' emphasised leadership development through hands-on field experience. P9 supported this by advocating for a school–university partnership to bridge the theory–practice gap, while P12 proposed testing classroom solutions in real-world settings, suggesting that leadership training should primarily occur on the job.

Some participants noted challenges in defining a unique pedagogy for NTEA-M programmes. P8 highlighted the difficulty of creating a pedagogy suitable for all aspiring educational leaders. P10 emphasised student diversity, varied undergraduate backgrounds, and the lack of merit-based promotion, pointing to the need for collaboration among scholars. P3 raised macro-level concerns, suggesting stronger economic support, decision-making autonomy for administrators, and a decentralised management model in schools.

Participants also suggested emphasising ethical values and offering internships at successful schools, both locally and internationally. Their recommendations highlight the need for diverse pedagogical approaches in NTEA-M programmes, integrating theory with practice, and focusing on ethics and critical thinking. These models can better prepare future educational leaders both academically and professionally. However, developing a unique model will require structural reforms and greater collaboration among educational administration scholars in Türkiye.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has explored the approaches and shared values of academics (that is, trainers) in Türkiye's NTEA-M programmes for training educational leaders. It serves as an exploratory examination of these trainers' signature pedagogies. The findings suggest that the participating academics employ diverse yet somewhat fragmented approaches, with inconsistencies in how they apply leadership training methods and differing expectations among faculty members. Nonetheless, there was a strong consensus among them about the importance of aligning theory with practice.

The challenge of balancing theory and practice can be seen through Morgan's (1998) metaphor of theory as a sharp blade: it not only provides keen vision, but it can also create blind spots, especially if abstract concepts overshadow practical applications. Integrating practical knowledge with theory

can bridge this gap by reducing abstraction and connecting theory to real-life problems. Supporting this notion, Yıldızhan and Güçlü (2019) found that academics tend to focus predominantly on theory in NTEA-M programmes, a tendency which, they argue, makes it difficult to equip students with the skills and understanding required for leadership practice, and which thus deepens the theory–practice divide. In contrast, Umur and Demirtaş (2016) observed that students coming from the field (teachers and school administrators) bring valuable real-world experiences into the classroom, which can help ground and reinforce theoretical knowledge with concrete examples. This insight underscores an opportunity to create a richer, more integrative learning environment.

Our participants stressed the critical importance of aligning theory with practice. They suggested that academics should employ approaches such as applied and interactive learning and structured discussion methods, while drawing on students' practical experiences, to bridge the theory–practice gap effectively. At the same time, they noted that determining which teaching method is most effective depends greatly on the context of the course and the learners.

Various studies have documented ongoing debates on the disconnect between theory and practice in NTEA-M programmes, noting that theoretical knowledge often fails to adequately address practical needs in the field (Aksu and Yücel, 2023; Armağan and Yıldırım, 2015; Dalkılıç and Öter, 2024; Kısa et al., 2021). Our findings echo these concerns and underscore the need to better align formal theory with practice, enabling theoretical knowledge to be transformed into actionable insight. Participants in our study provided examples of this alignment: they described using role-playing activities to help students apply theoretical concepts of school leadership in realistic school scenarios, thereby effectively translating theory into practice.

Participants' strong focus on theoretical and scientific perspectives can also be understood in light of the low professionalisation and limited 'scientification' of school leadership in Türkiye (Balcı, 2008; Recepoğlu and Kılınç, 2014). Low professionalisation in this field often leads to inconsistent training practices, limited standards for leadership and unclear professional pathways, which collectively hinder the effective preparation of school leaders. With no clear national standards for leadership and frequent policy changes at the ministry level, expectations for school leadership training have become inconsistent (Pelit, 2015). Teaching under these conditions, our participants must pay attention to diverse leadership approaches while still fostering scientific thinking in their students. Indeed, the signature pedagogies they employ may be shaped by these broader educational policies. Further exploration is needed to understand how such rapid and inconsistent policy shifts influence trainers' pedagogical approaches.

According to the trainers, the process of training educational leaders in Türkiye involves both surface-level and deeper aspects of a signature pedagogy. In their view, future school leaders are expected not only to manage schools, but also to understand scientific research, educational policies and societal dynamics – essentially extending their role to raising societal awareness. The trainers emphasised integrating theory with these real-world dynamics, positioning leaders as both school managers and agents of societal change. For instance, some participants described incorporating community-based projects where students apply theoretical knowledge to address genuine societal issues, thereby practising their dual role as managers and change agents. Participants also noted that in Türkiye's fast-changing sociopolitical landscape, educational leaders must be well-versed in current policies and legal frameworks to handle crises effectively.

Our participants further pointed out that effective educational leaders in Türkiye need practical skills such as crisis management, communication and the ability to initiate change. The trainers' signature pedagogies frame these practical skills as reflections of a leader's values and vision, underscoring the importance of fostering leadership abilities, critical thinking and ethical decision-making through coursework. For example, participants reported that during role-playing exercises in their classes, many trainees demonstrated critical thinking and ethical judgement when addressing hypothetical school crises, illustrating how practice can nurture these qualities. The faculty members in our study described aiming to blend field-based experiences with a broad vision for leadership development. They highlighted that their underlying pedagogical philosophy emphasises internalising ethical values and social responsibility. In practice, the academics encourage aspiring leaders to develop collective leadership, emotional literacy and openness to change. By doing so, they seek to shape school leaders as agents of societal transformation, with ethical decision-making at the core of leadership practice.

Participants collectively emphasised the importance of ethical values, such as justice, empathy and responsibility, alongside practical leadership skills and the integration of theory and practice in

school leadership education. They identified situational, transformational and instructional leadership approaches as particularly relevant in the Turkish context, given the need for school administrators to adapt to rapidly changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. Cansoy et al. (2024) note that Türkiye's school principals face challenges such as heavy workloads, lack of authority and limited resources, making a situational approach crucial for adjusting leadership strategies to urgent needs. Özkan et al. (2017) highlight that leadership behaviours are shaped by multiple variables, stressing the importance of development-oriented, flexible and innovative leadership. Instructional leadership, which is prevalent in Türkiye, is critical in helping school administrators navigate the country's evolving education system – focusing on achieving national goals, motivating teachers, maintaining learning environments, ensuring curriculum alignment and conducting evaluations (Cansoy et al., 2024; Gümüş et al., 2021; Kalman and Arslan, 2016). Bellibaş et al. (2021) even propose that combining instructional and transformational leadership could better address ongoing educational reforms. Thus, both our participants' perspectives and the literature indicate that leadership styles in Türkiye are heavily shaped by the country's specific contextual and educational system needs.

Our study found that the participating faculty members frequently use a mix of teaching methods – lectures, case studies, discussions, group work and project-based learning – in their NTEA-M courses. According to them, lectures provide a structured foundation for understanding theoretical concepts, whereas case studies allow students to apply those theories to complex real-life situations. The trainers value discussions for fostering critical thinking and for encouraging students to explore multiple perspectives. They use group work to enhance collaboration and communication skills (crucial attributes for leadership roles), and they rely on project-based learning to offer hands-on experiences that bridge theory and practice. These methods collectively form the core of their instructional approach, as they are aimed at developing students' critical thinking and problem-solving capacities.

This multifaceted approach aligns with findings in the wider literature. For example, Black and Murtadha (2007) highlight the value of case studies for helping students tackle complex situations and build practical solutions, while Jenkins (2012) emphasises the effectiveness of group discussions in leadership training. The lecture method remains a common way to convey foundational theory (Shammas, 2022), but our participants endorse combining lectures with more interactive, student-centred methods, so that students can test leadership skills in the field and learn from varied perspectives. In line with Umur's (2015) findings from faculty interviews, our participants did not subscribe to any single teaching method as universally most effective; instead, they stressed that different approaches should be adopted depending on the context and the nature of the course. Similarly, Brooks et al. (2023), Meyer and Shannon (2010) and Stoten (2023) suggest that effective leadership training integrates various pedagogical methods to bring out students' potential – marrying robust theoretical knowledge with practical application to foster multidimensional thinking.

Across all participants, there was consensus that future school leaders must adhere to strict ethical guidelines and embody qualities such as justice, responsibility, honesty, transparency, empathy, respect, scientific thinking and critical thinking. This aligns with Karaköse's (2007) assertion that internalising values such as justice, patience, understanding and respect is essential for creating a positive school climate and enabling healthy communication and success. Indeed, in diverse educational environments, such values are crucial for fostering peace and mutual respect (Caliskan, 2020; Tosun, 2023). Accordingly, our participants believe that educational leaders should adopt these ethical principles in order to practice fair, transparent and trustworthy leadership that takes into account the needs of all school stakeholders.

In conclusion, based on the trainers' perspectives in this study, the current NTEA-M programmes in Türkiye are seen as providing a solid foundation in educational administration and emphasising key leadership skills such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving and change management. The academics we interviewed generally believe that these programmes would benefit from integrating more experiential learning components and mentorship opportunities to further bridge theory and practice – a point strongly aligned with international research, which shows that principals feel better prepared when their training includes hands-on learning opportunities such as internships and coaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2022). They described their curricula as combining openness to change, emotional literacy, ethics, legal knowledge and professional networking, delivered through diverse methods such as case studies, discussions, group work and project-based learning. Not only do lectures remain important for conveying core theoretical content, but the trainers also encourage students to internalise ethical values such as responsibility, justice, empathy and scientific thinking throughout their learning experience. In the view of our participants, strengthening the blend of theory and practice –

particularly with a heightened focus on ethical leadership – will better prepare future educational leaders to tackle complex challenges.

While participants advocated for more experiential learning and mentoring in Türkiye's NTEA-M programmes, few described structured internship opportunities or formalised mentorship practices in their own teaching. This suggests a potential gap between ideal pedagogical aspirations and actual implementation. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) emphasise, effective principal preparation requires institutional commitment to embed clinical practice and sustained coaching – not just as supplementary experiences, but as core programme components. Without systemic alignment, trainers' efforts risk remaining fragmented or being overly dependent on individual initiative rather than on programme-wide design.

However, our findings also suggest that certain structural and policy limitations in Türkiye need to be addressed to fully realise these improvements. The trainers operate in a system that lacks clear professional standards for school leadership and where institutional support can be inconsistent. These broader issues must be resolved to effectively implement changes such as increased practice-oriented training and mentoring. Ultimately, the academics in our study envision a comprehensive signature pedagogy that integrates theoretical knowledge, practical skills and ethical responsibility. They believe that this holistic approach will produce school leaders capable of balancing technical expertise with moral leadership and adaptability in a dynamic educational landscape.

This study is an initial, exploratory look at the pedagogies, epistemologies and values guiding educational leadership training in Türkiye, viewed from the perspective of a small group of trainers. While the findings provide valuable insight into current practices, this research is not intended to be definitive. Instead, it establishes a foundation for future, more extensive studies – potentially with larger samples, varied contexts and mixed methods – to further investigate the complexities of leadership preparation in higher education settings.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Gaziantep University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee in line with ethical guidelines for educational research.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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