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A tree, a sun, a compass: Metaphors shaping preservice teachers' views on leadership in education

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Abstract

In contemporary educational discourse, the concept of leadership has expanded beyond administrative roles to include teachers who influence classroom culture, pedagogy, and school development. Despite its increasing significance, teacher leadership—particularly how it is perceived by preservice teachers—remains underexplored in the literature. This study aimed to examine the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding the characteristics of leader teachers and to explore the metaphors they use to describe the concept of teacher leadership. A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology was employed. The study sample consisted of 105 third-year preservice teachers enrolled in the Primary Mathematics and Classroom Teaching programs at a public university in Türkiye. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form including two open-ended questions and analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that participants conceptualized leader teachers through four categories: student interaction, the educational process, family engagement, and environmental awareness. Additionally, 35 distinct metaphors were produced, with common symbols including the tree, sun and the compass — indicating the perceived guiding, enlightening, and nurturing roles of leader teachers. These results suggest that preservice teachers hold a multifaceted and idealistic vision of teacher leadership. The study underscores the importance of integrating teacher leadership training into preservice education programs and encourages further qualitative and mixed-method research to explore contextual factors that shape leadership perceptions among future educators.

Keywords: Leader teacher, metaphor, teacher leadership, preservice teachers, qualitative research.

Introduction

The profound transformations occurring across disciplines in the 21st century have significantly influenced the concept of leadership. Traditionally viewed as a role in which a single individual demonstrates authority and direction, leadership has evolved into a dynamic process whereby an individual mobilizes and empowers group members to act collectively. This shift marks a departure from the 20th-century perspective, rooted in management science, which emphasized control and administrative functions over genuine leadership. In contemporary educational contexts, schools are increasingly recognized as collaborative professional communities in which administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders engage in shared learning and decision-making processes, underpinned by distributed and collaborative leadership practices that have become the model of choice in the 21st century (Bush, 2013;

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Carpenter, 2015; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007; Harris, 2008). Consequently, leadership is now conceptualized not as a top-down managerial role, but as a shared behavior that integrates managerial competencies and can be practiced by all members of the school community (Beycioğlu & Aslan, 2010).

Over the 20th century, leadership was often defined through the lens of individual traits or formal positional authority—emphasizing, for instance, the “Great Man” concept or top-down decision-making (Rost, 1991). However, since the early 2000s a marked shift toward process-, relational-, and distributed models has emerged. Today, schools are increasingly understood as collaborative professional learning communities, where leadership is distributed across teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders. This distributed and collective view of leadership is now widely recognized as the "model of choice" in the 21st century (Bush, 2013; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007; Harris, 2008), signaling a definitive move away from hierarchical trait-based understandings. Building on this broader shift in how leadership is conceptualized, it is also useful to consider how the term “leader” itself is defined in both linguistic and scholarly sources. The concept of leadership has been defined in diverse ways throughout the literature. According to the *Türkçe Sözlük* (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2025), a “leader” refers to a person who holds power and authority in management, assumes the highest level of responsibility within a party or organization, and serves as the head or chief—often akin to a campaign or organizational leader. Leadership is also associated with individuals or teams who are at the forefront of a competition. Bennis (1989) conceptualized leadership as a social influence process, wherein an individual intentionally influences others to structure relationships and activities within groups and organizations. Similarly, Bateman and Snell (2004) defined a leader as someone who influences others to achieve specific goals, underscoring leadership’s inherently relational nature. Lunenburg and Ornstein (1996) further expanded this understanding by emphasizing leadership as the process of directing group activities toward the attainment of objectives, guiding management practices, shaping thinking processes, fostering effective teamwork, and encouraging individuals to prioritize collective goals over personal interests. Among the numerous definitions, the most widely accepted description asserts that leadership is "the process by which an individual influences other group members to achieve defined success or organizational goals" (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2013). This definition highlights three core elements: the necessity of influence, the orientation toward goal achievement, and the presence of followers.

In the context of this study, leadership is understood in line with contemporary perspectives that emphasize its relational and distributed nature rather than positional authority. Specifically, this research adopts a view of leadership as a collaborative process through which teachers influence, guide, and empower others—students, colleagues, parents, and communities—to work toward shared educational goals. While the study does not propose an entirely new definition, it aligns with the widely accepted understanding of leadership as a process of influence and goal attainment (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2013), and extends this conception by focusing on informal, teacher-driven forms of leadership that are enacted within professional learning communities.

The concept of school leadership has traditionally been associated with individuals responsible for the administrative affairs of educational institutions. Beycioğlu and Aslan (2007) noted that leadership in education has often been equated with the role of the school principal.

Nevertheless, contemporary perspectives on school leadership have expanded to include individuals who actively enhance the quality of education within the classroom and foster a transformative school culture. This evolving view emphasizes practices that transcend traditional organizational management, focusing instead on redefining educational leadership to meet future needs (Begley, 2001; Dantley, 2005; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; McInerney, 2000; Sternberg, 2005). Consequently, educational leadership research has adopted a broader and more nuanced approach, introducing concepts such as teacher leadership and shared leadership, which highlight the critical role of teachers in promoting school improvement and student success (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Murphy, 2005; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995).

The concept of teacher leadership constitutes a fundamental dimension of classroom management and school development. Unlike traditional notions of authority rooted in formal positions, leader teachers derive their influence from informal sources such as expertise, trust, and interpersonal skills (Phillips, Stewart-Fox, Phillips, Griffith, & Bhojedat, 2023). Accordingly, a leader teacher is expected to demonstrate key educational leadership competencies, including problem-solving abilities, sound decision-making, forward-thinking, and effective communication with students (Can, 2014). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) define a leader teacher as an individual who "leads within and beyond the classroom, identifies with and contributes to the learning community of teachers and leaders, and influences others toward improved educational practices." The existing literature consistently emphasizes that leader teachers possess the capacity to inspire change among their colleagues and actively contribute to learning communities beyond their immediate classrooms. In this regard, leader teachers play a critical role in transforming schools into learning organizations, fostering institutional change, and mitigating professional alienation among teachers (Çobanoğlu, 2024). Adams, Kutty, and Zabidi (2017) further articulate teacher leadership as the capacity to initiate innovation and development within schools, support the professional growth of fellow educators, create personalized learning environments, and promote effective communication across the broader educational community.

To be effective in their roles, leader teachers are expected to exhibit a range of competencies that reflect both instructional leadership and collaborative engagement. Their effectiveness is largely dependent on the level of trust and respect they garner from colleagues within their professional environment. Leader teachers are often characterized by their willingness to innovate within their classrooms, encourage parental involvement, and uphold high expectations for student achievement (Volante, Müller, Salinas & Cravens, 2023). Additionally, they contribute to the school community by introducing new projects and ideas, and by inspiring peers through their pioneering behavior (Donaldson, 2006; Gündüzalp & Şener, 2018). Harris (2002) further categorizes leader teacher roles into two key dimensions: transfer and mediation. The transfer role involves adapting the principles of school development to classroom practices, positioning the teacher as the primary instructional leader in the classroom. The mediation role, on the other hand, refers to the facilitation of improved teaching practices and the promotion of collaboration among colleagues. According to Labich (1988, as cited in Can, 2014), effective leader teachers are those who can instill confidence in others, develop a compelling vision, remain composed under pressure, take calculated risks, demonstrate professional expertise, embrace differing viewpoints, and simplify complex processes. These attributes are considered foundational to robust leadership, and the extent to which a teacher embodies them is often seen as an indicator

of their potential for success and influence within the educational setting.

Teachers assume a variety of roles within educational settings, including those of leader, manager, mediator, and instructional leader. Each role encompasses a distinct set of competencies that teachers are expected to develop or demonstrate throughout their professional practice. The leadership role involves skills such as effective communication, the ability to motivate students, fostering autonomy, promoting respect for learning and teaching, and creating a positive classroom climate (Küçükakın & Göloğlu Demir, 2021). As managers, teachers are expected to conduct educational research, master learning principles, make effective collaborative decisions with students, design clear instructional steps, activate student participation, and assess achievement using objective criteria. In the mediating role, teachers engage in mutual and interactive teaching strategies, bridging students' prior knowledge with new content, structuring topics for shared exploration, and transforming complex information into accessible and meaningful concepts while addressing individual differences (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). The instructional leadership role is characterized by modeling desired cognitive and affective behaviors, fostering supportive and respectful relationships, demonstrating enthusiasm for teaching, and addressing instructional challenges proactively (Can, 2014). These multifaceted roles underscore the dynamic nature of the teaching profession and highlight the need for a broad range of professional skills to support student development effectively.

A substantial body of literature has examined the concept of teacher leadership, with a significant focus on the roles that teachers assume both within their schools and across the broader educational community. Within this field, York-Barr and Duke (2004) identified three prevailing trends. The first involves teachers assuming formal administrative positions. The second emphasizes instructional leadership, particularly through curriculum development and student guidance. The third reflects a more contemporary shift toward fostering student learning and cultivating professional learning communities, aligning teacher growth with school improvement initiatives. Complementing this framework, Cosenza (2015) argued that teacher leadership does not require a formal administrative title; rather, it flourishes within collaborative school cultures that empower teachers to lead through shared vision and practice. These evolving dimensions of teacher leadership are summarized in Figure 1, which visually illustrates the three major trends outlined by York-Barr and Duke (2004).

Figure 1 Trends in Teacher Leadership

Note. Adapted from York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. Review of Educational Research, 74(3), 255–316.

Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake (2018) conducted a study to explore the perceptions of early childhood education (ECE) professionals regarding the implementation of teacher leadership in three ECE centers in Finland. The participants included child care nurses, teachers,

and center directors. The study was theoretically grounded in existing literature on teacher leadership and distributed leadership within both early childhood and school education contexts. Data collected through focus group discussions and interviews revealed that, in the Finnish educational setting, teacher leadership is viewed as a fundamental component of pedagogical practice in early childhood education.

The document analysis conducted by Ustaoğlu and Tekin Bozkurt (2022) revealed that teacher leadership is a multifaceted and multidimensional construct. Their study indicated that teacher leaders develop leadership behaviors through a combination of formal training programs and personal professional experiences. The findings also emphasized the importance of a coherent organizational structure and cultural alignment in facilitating the enactment of teacher leadership roles. Additionally, the attitudes and support of school administrators were found to be significant factors influencing the development of teacher leadership practices. In a related study, Özçetin (2018) investigated the metaphors used by teachers and school administrators to describe teacher leadership. The results demonstrated that both principals and teachers held predominantly positive perceptions of teacher leadership, viewing it as a key component in enhancing school effectiveness and educational quality.

Teacher leadership is increasingly recognized as a key factor in improving school effectiveness and fostering student success (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Despite this global recognition, the concept of teacher leadership remains underexplored within the Turkish context, particularly from the perspective of preservice teachers. Recent studies have emphasized that research on teacher leadership in Türkiye is still developing and lacks depth, especially in terms of conceptual clarity and role perception (Yenipınar & Yıldırım, 2024). Moreover, existing literature frequently focuses on in-service teachers, while the views of preservice teachers—those in the formative stage of their professional identity—remain largely absent (Kasapoğlu & Karaca, 2021).

While teacher leadership has been widely examined in studies focusing on in-service teachers, these studies primarily highlight its impact on school culture, professional learning communities, and student achievement (Balyer, 2016; Muijs & Harris, 2006). However, research focusing specifically on preservice teachers remains limited. The few available studies in Türkiye that examine preservice teachers' views tend to remain descriptive (Kasapoğlu & Karaca, 2021; Yenipınar & Yıldırım, 2024) and do not explore how preservice teachers conceptualize leadership roles using metaphorical thinking or how these perceptions may inform their future professional practices.

Much of the existing research on teacher leadership has been conducted with in-service teachers, leaving preservice teachers underrepresented. Unlike in-service teachers whose views are shaped by practical experiences, preservice teachers develop their perceptions within teacher education programs, influenced by their values and anticipatory beliefs (Hammerness et al., 2005). Investigating these early conceptions is important because they influence how novice teachers will later approach leadership roles, collaboration, and school improvement initiatives (Nguyen et al., 2020). This study specifically focuses on this formative stage, which remains an underexplored perspective in the current body of research.

Consequently, there is a need for studies that go beyond general descriptions and critically analyze preservice teachers' conceptualizations of leadership. This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on preservice teachers, examining both (1) the characteristics they

associate with teacher leadership and (2) the metaphors they use to describe it. By doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how leadership identities begin to form during teacher preparation and offers insights that can inform teacher education curricula, leadership development initiatives, and educational policy.

Accordingly, the present study aims to explore preservice teachers' conceptualizations of teacher leadership during their teacher education programs. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do preservice teachers describe and evaluate the key characteristics of a leader teacher?
2. What metaphors do preservice teachers use to conceptualize the notion of a leader teacher, and what do these metaphors reveal about their underlying perceptions?

Method

This section outlines the research design, participants, data collection instruments, and data analysis procedures.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenology aims to explore how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences through reflective descriptions (Onat Kocabıyık, 2015). In this context, the study was designed to investigate how preservice teachers perceive the concept of teacher leadership through metaphor construction. The phenomenological approach was particularly suitable for revealing the meanings participants attributed to "teacher leadership" based on their observations and prior classroom experiences.

Participants and procedure

Participants were selected using typical case sampling, a form of purposive sampling that focuses on participants who exemplify the average characteristics of the population of interest (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2010). The sample consisted of 105 third-year preservice teachers enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Anadolu University during the 2022–2023 academic year. These students were from two departments: Primary Mathematics Teaching (n = 47) and Classroom Teaching (n = 58). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variables		f	%
Gender	Female	81	77,1
	Male	24	22,9
Age	20-25	101	96,2
	26-30	2	1,9
	31 +	2	1,9
Department	Primary Mathematics Teaching	47	44,8
	Classroom Teaching	58	55,2
Total		105	100

Participants were selected using typical case sampling, a form of purposive sampling that focuses on participants who exemplify the average characteristics of the population of interest (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2010). The sample consisted of 105 third-year preservice teachers enrolled in

the Faculty of Education at Anadolu University during the 2022–2023 academic year. These participants were drawn from the Primary Mathematics Teaching and Classroom Teaching departments, which were chosen based on ease of access to participants. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1; however, variables such as age, gender, and department were not used for comparisons in the analysis, as these factors were not within the scope of the study.

Data collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form designed to elicit preservice teachers' perceptions and metaphorical representations of teacher leadership. The form included two open-ended questions:

1. *Please describe the role of the leader teacher and explain how it makes a difference in fulfilling the teaching profession.*
2. *Fill in the blanks: A leader teacher is like a ..... because .....*

The first item focused on participants' general perceptions and understandings of teacher leadership, whereas the second explicitly asked them to express these perceptions through metaphors. Metaphors were thus employed as an analytical tool to reveal how participants cognitively and emotionally associate the concept with familiar or symbolic representations (Uyan Dur, 2016; Saban, 2009). Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and interview forms were distributed accordingly. The returned forms served as the primary data source for the research.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form specifically designed to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership. The form consisted of two open-ended questions:

1. Please describe the role of the leader teacher and explain how it makes a difference in fulfilling the teaching profession.
2. Fill in the blanks: A leader teacher is like a ..... because .....

The first item aimed to elicit participants' general understanding of teacher leadership, while the second encouraged them to represent this concept metaphorically. This dual structure allowed for both descriptive and symbolic insights, in line with the approaches of Saban (2009) and Uyan Dur (2016), who emphasized the value of metaphor analysis in educational research for accessing underlying beliefs and values.

The interview form was developed by the researchers based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature on teacher leadership, particularly focusing on conceptual frameworks by York-Barr and Duke (2004), Muijs and Harris (2006), and Balyer (2016). Expert opinions were obtained from three academics specializing in educational leadership and qualitative research methods to ensure the appropriateness, clarity, and content validity of the questions. The form was revised based on their feedback prior to implementation.

Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and given written consent forms. The printed interview forms were then distributed in person, and the responses, collected manually, served as the primary data source for the study.

Data analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using a five-stage content analysis process, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Li & Zhang, 2022). Content analysis began once the raw data were collected and continued throughout the coding and category development stages. The process involved the systematic coding of participants' responses, the identification and selection of relevant codes, the development of categories, the calculation of frequencies, and the final interpretation of data patterns.

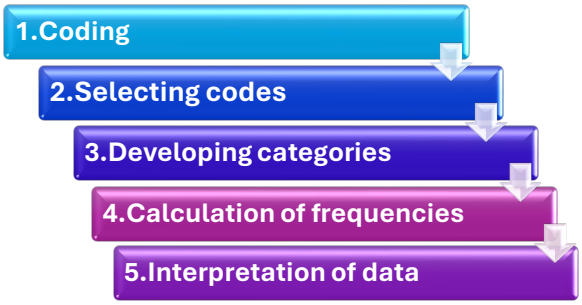

Figure 2 Stages of content analysis

Note. Visual representation of the five-step qualitative content analysis process used in this study.

Upon completion of the content analysis, it was determined that the participating preservice teachers described the characteristics of teacher leaders across four major categories: student, educational process, parent, and environment. These categories were derived from patterns in the metaphorical and descriptive responses provided by the participants. The analysis followed an iterative and systematic process: responses collected via Google Forms were organized in Microsoft Excel, similar ideas were grouped together, and recurring themes were identified. Through this process, individual expressions from participants were synthesized into broader themes, resulting in the four categories reported in the findings.

Validity, reliability, and ethical considerations

To ensure validity and reliability, detailed documentation of the sampling, data collection, and analysis processes was maintained throughout the study. The principle of transferability was considered by describing participant characteristics and the study context in detail (Arastaman, Öztürk-Fidan, & Fidan, 2018; Creswell, 2007). Coding and categorization were supported by representative quotations and frequency tables to strengthen credibility. Throughout the coding and theme development stages, the authors worked collaboratively, discussing and reaching consensus on the categorization of data to ensure consistency in interpretation. The entire process adhered to consistent methodological rigor, as outlined by Baltacı (2018).

To enhance inter-coder reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of the data (approximately 30%) in the initial phase of analysis. The consistency between the coders was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for agreement:

Reliability = Number of Agreements / (Number of Agreements + Disagreements) × 100.

The initial reliability coefficient was calculated at 87%, which is above the recommended threshold of 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus, and the coding scheme was revised accordingly before being

applied to the rest of the data. The remaining data were then coded collaboratively using the refined coding framework, ensuring uniform application across all responses.

All participants were informed about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, and written consent was obtained. Ethical procedures followed national guidelines for research involving human participants. The study was conducted in alignment with ethical research principles regarding confidentiality, autonomy, and respect for participants' rights.

Findings

This section presents the results of the study supported by tables, figures, and participant quotations.

Findings related to the first research question

The first research question sought to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding the role of teacher leaders in fulfilling the teaching profession. Specifically, participants were asked:

"In your opinion, what is the role of the leader teacher in fulfilling the teaching profession?"

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the responses, revealing that participants conceptualized the role of a leader teacher through four primary dimensions: students, parents, the educational process, and the environmental stewardship. These thematic categories reflect how preservice teachers perceive the scope and influence of teacher leadership within and beyond the classroom.

The results are presented thematically and supported with frequencies and representative quotes. The views of participants regarding the role of teacher leaders in relation to students are summarized in Table 2, followed by additional tables addressing other thematic areas.

Table 2 Opinions of preservice teachers on the potential impact of teacher leaders on their students

Category	Codes	f
Teacher Roles	Acting as a guide / mentor	10
	Preparing students for life	7
	Supporting personal and professional development	7
	Meeting students at their level	4
	Uncovering student potential	3
	Cultivating 21st-century skills	2
	Raising responsible individuals	2
	Being a source of inspiration	1
Classroom Culture	Promoting democracy	15
	Demonstrating effective communication skills	10
	Ensuring equality	7
	Promoting active student participation	7
	Valuing students	6
Teacher Traits	Serving as a role model	20
	Motivating students	16
	Respecting differences	7
	Being trustworthy	6
	Being understanding	2
	Maintaining a cheerful attitude	2

Based on the participants' responses, three major themes were identified—Teacher Roles, Classroom Culture, and Teacher Traits—each encompassing distinct yet interrelated codes. Within these themes, the most prominent codes included serving as a role model (f = 20) and motivating students (f = 16) under Teacher Traits; promoting democracy (f = 15) and

demonstrating effective communication skills (f = 10) under Classroom Culture; and acting as a guide or mentor (f = 10) under Teacher Roles. These codes reflect how preservice teachers perceive leader teachers not only in terms of their instructional and managerial roles but also through their personal characteristics and the learning environments they create. Representative quotations from participants are presented below to illustrate each of these key perceptions.

Teacher traits

The most frequently mentioned codes within this theme relate to the personal qualities of leader teachers, such as serving as a role model, motivating students, respecting individual differences, trustworthiness, empathy, and maintaining a positive attitude.

Serving as a role model

As posited by the participants, one of the most salient characteristics attributed to teacher leaders was their ability to function as exemplary role models, both in their personal and professional lives. This perspective is in alignment with the notion of modelling as a fundamental leadership function, a concept that is frequently emphasised in the domain of teacher leadership literature (e.g., York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is the contention of the participants that the function of modelling extends beyond the realms of mere instructional proficiency. Rather, it is asserted that the role encompasses such aspects as emotional influence, the transmission of values, and the promotion of future orientation. These elements, it is claimed, constitute fundamental components of a transformational leadership approach in education.

Participants viewed leader teachers as individuals who inspire students' personal growth and emotional development, shaping their vision of themselves and their futures. For instance, one participant noted the far-reaching impact of a role model in the classroom:

> "They create an exemplary model for the student, evoke moving emotions, and broaden horizons. The student feels more valuable. He lives closer to his goals. His perception is broadened." (TC26)

This quotation illustrates how modeling is perceived not merely as behavior imitation, but as a catalyst for self-worth and aspiration. The emotional tone of the response also suggests that leader teachers influence the affective climate of the classroom by fostering meaningful student–teacher connections.

Another participant emphasized the moral and relational dimension of role modeling:

> "They can make a difference by being a good role model for their students, by loving and respecting their students. In my opinion, a teacher who is loved and respected by his students is doing his job well. This is one of the characteristics of a leader teacher." (TC40)

Here, ethical conduct and mutual respect emerge as essential elements of teacher leadership. Such accounts underscore the role of the teacher not only as an instructor but as a moral exemplar, capable of shaping students' interpersonal values through their own demeanor and actions.

The dual impact of modeling—both pedagogical and emotional—is further reflected in the following statement:

> "The teacher is a role model for the pupil. While the teacher's teaching qualifications are of great importance in terms of his authority, he also has a power that positively influences the

> student's feelings of respect and admiration for the teacher." (TC89)

This excerpt demonstrates that participants associate effective modelling with both professional competence and emotional charisma, suggesting that students' respect is earned not only through instructional mastery but also through the integrity and consistency of the teacher's character.

Collectively, these narratives portray the role model as a multidimensional figure: a person who embodies ethical leadership, builds strong emotional bonds with students, and acts as a guidepost for their academic and personal journeys. Within the context of teacher leadership, such representations indicate that preservice teachers conceptualise leadership not in hierarchical or managerial terms, but as value-based, emotionally resonant influence embedded in daily classroom practice.

Motivating students

Motivation emerged as a key trait attributed to leader teachers, especially in terms of fostering student engagement and supporting goal-oriented learning. This aligns with studies emphasizing motivational leadership as a component of classroom influence (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Participants conceptualized the leader teacher as someone who energizes learning environments, removes affective barriers, and inspires students to reach their potential.

The emotional dimension of this motivation was strongly emphasized, as seen in one participant's observation:

> "It makes learning easier. It makes students feel more comfortable. It motivates students towards lessons." (TC29)

This response reflects how motivation is tied not only to academic goals but also to emotional safety and psychological comfort—factors known to enhance learning retention and classroom participation.

Another participant pointed to the encouraging function of the leader teacher:

> "In my opinion, the teacher leader should encourage and motivate students to learn." (TC31)

Such views align with the transformational leadership approach, where the teacher becomes a source of inspiration, encouraging student ownership over their own learning process.

Beyond individual encouragement, leader teachers were also described as capable of mobilizing collective energy within the classroom:

> "A teacher leader is someone who can gather students around a certain goal and at the same time motivate them to achieve this goal." (TC55)

> "It helps students learn and grow. It motivates students to do their best." (TC60)

These excerpts portray teacher leadership as vision-driven and collaborative, where motivation is not simply emotional uplift but a means of unifying and directing student efforts.

Respecting differences

Respecting individual differences was considered a key trait of a leader teacher:

> "The leader teacher makes a difference by valuing students, caring about their opinions, seeing them as individuals, and creating a democratic environment in the classroom." (TC39)

Being trustworthy

Participants frequently described leader teachers as individuals who cultivate trust by being fair, dependable, and emotionally attuned. Trustworthiness was seen not as a passive trait but as a leadership act—actively demonstrated through consistent behavior.

> "Trust is essential in a learning environment. A leader teacher earns this trust by being consistent, fair, and understanding." (TC43)

This aligns with literature emphasizing relational trust as a foundation of instructional leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In this view, trust is a precondition for risk-taking, student voice, and classroom harmony.

Being understanding and empathetic

Some participants viewed empathy as a vital leadership characteristic that enables teachers to connect ethically with students and create psychologically safe learning spaces.

> "He should act as a teacher with the student and teach by fulfilling ethical principles. He should never think he can do anything and never victimise students. He should always lead his students and take them to the next level." (TC48)

Here, empathy is framed not merely as kindness, but as a moral commitment to student dignity and justice, echoing the values of servant leadership in education.

Maintaining a cheerful attitude

Positive affect also emerged as a trait associated with leadership. A positive attitude was considered conducive to maintaining composure, motivation, and emotional equilibrium in the classroom:

> "The leader teacher is like the conductor of an orchestra. He has control skills. He is confident about communication, time, and providing target knowledge and skills." (TC85)

While the quote primarily illustrates guidance, the mention of control and confidence also suggests that a positive, composed demeanour enhances classroom management and engagement – key responsibilities of a teacher-leader.

Classroom Culture

This theme includes how leader teachers shape the classroom climate—fostering inclusion, communication, active participation, and student empowerment.

Promoting democracy

One of the most frequently emphasized elements of classroom culture was the democratic ethos created by leader teachers. Participants linked democracy to inclusiveness, respect for ideas, and collective engagement.

> "It makes the classroom more democratic. It values student ideas. This can make students think more positively about the lesson and get them more involved." (TC18)

> "The leader teacher makes a difference by valuing students, caring about their opinions, seeing them as individuals, and creating a democratic environment in the classroom." (TC39)

These insights indicate that democratic classroom practices are perceived as a core function of teacher leadership, aligned with distributed and participatory leadership frameworks.

Demonstrating effective communication skills

Effective communication was consistently mentioned as a foundational skill for teacher-leaders. Participants saw communication not only as a tool for delivering content but as a relational mechanism that builds trust and enhances motivation.

> "It's important for teachers to know their students and communicate with them well. But if a teacher communicates well with their students, they become more valuable to them." (TC38)

> "A good leader teacher listens and communicates well, which makes them popular with their students." (TC87)

These perspectives frame communication as a two-way, empathetic interaction, reinforcing the idea that leadership is enacted through daily conversations and responsive engagement.

Promoting active student participation

Leader teachers were also seen as those who enable participation and foster collaborative learning. Rather than adopting top-down instructional styles, they build environments where students are co-constructors of knowledge.

> "They don't just lecture—they involve us. We feel part of the lesson, which keeps us focused and motivated." (TC5)

This quote positions the leader teacher as a facilitator, echoing learner-centered pedagogical models where participation is both a right and a responsibility.

Valuing students

Participants linked leadership to the teacher's ability to recognize student worth, suggesting that respect and affirmation significantly affect engagement.

> "They treat every student like they matter. That makes a difference in how much effort we want to put into learning." (TC76)

Such reflections affirm that acknowledging individual student identity is not a soft skill, but a central leadership function that enhances classroom efficacy.

Teacher roles

This theme captures how leader teachers are positioned as guides, facilitators, and ethical leaders who support students' long-term development.

Acting as a guide

Leader teachers were consistently portrayed as mentors who provide both academic and ethical direction, helping students move forward with purpose.

> "A leader teacher is a teacher who helps and guides students." (TC8)

> "He should act as a teacher with the student and teach by fulfilling ethical principles. He should never think he can do anything and never victimise students. He should always lead his students and take them to the next level." (TC48)

> "The leader teacher is like the conductor of an orchestra. He has control skills. He is confident about communication, time, and providing target knowledge and skills." (TC85)

These views suggest that teacher leadership involves pedagogical navigation—balancing

structure with responsiveness, and vision with empathy.

Preparing students for life

Participants saw leader teachers as educators who connect learning with real-life outcomes:

> "A leader teacher doesn't just teach the curriculum; they prepare us to think critically, solve problems, and contribute to society." (TC82)

Supporting personal and professional development

Participants identified the leader teacher as someone who identifies and develops students' unique potentials.

> "They recognize our strengths and help us develop them. We feel more confident because of their support." (TC92)

This quote illustrates the individualized attention leader teachers give, resonating with developmental and strengths-based leadership models.

Meeting students at their level

Preservice teachers also associated leadership with the ability to differentiate instruction and adjust to student readiness levels.

> "They don't expect the same from everyone. They meet us where we are and help us move forward." (TC27)

This aligns with contemporary expectations that effective teacher-leaders adapt their pedagogy to ensure equitable progress for all learners.

Uncovering student potential

inally, several participants viewed teacher leaders as visionaries who recognize students' hidden talents and inspire self-belief:

> "Sometimes they see abilities in us before we do. That changes how we see ourselves." (TC66)

Such perceptions position leader teachers as transformative figures, central to students' identity construction and motivation.

Educational process

The participants' responses revealed that teacher leaders significantly shape the instructional and methodological aspects of education. Their impact goes beyond classroom management and extends to pedagogical innovation, continuous professional development, and inclusivity. The codes grouped under the Educational Process category reflect the participants' perceptions of how leader teachers make a difference by adapting teaching methods, staying up-to-date with research, and managing the classroom environment effectively. Table 3 below presents these codes with their corresponding frequencies.

Table 3 The opinions of preservice teachers on how teacher leaders can make a difference in the educational process

Category	Codes	f
Education Process	Offering sufficient opportunities in terms of methods and materials	23
	Following current research and studies	12
	Possessing strong professional knowledge	12
	Being sensitive to individual differences	11

Emphasizing student-centered practices	11
Managing the educational process effectively	11
Creating meaningful educational differences	6
Integrating technology into the learning process	4

When analyzing preservice teachers' views on the role of teacher leaders in the educational process, the most frequently emphasized theme was the importance of offering sufficient opportunities in terms of instructional methods and materials (f = 23).

One participant highlighted several aspects of this role by stating:

> "Teachers should encourage students to learn, care about their needs and expectations, create a safe classroom environment, apply different methods and techniques, put students at the centre, treat students warmly, value students and establish students' love and respect. It makes a difference by winning." (TC89)

This response reflects the multifaceted nature of teacher leadership in the instructional context, combining pedagogical adaptability, emotional support, and a student-centered mindset.

Teacher leaders' influence on parental engagement and environmental stewardship

In addition to their roles within the classroom, preservice teachers identified that teacher leaders play a vital role in building strong school–family partnerships and fostering broader social responsibility. Their perceptions clustered around two interrelated domains: parental engagement and environmental stewardship. The responses emphasized the teacher leader's role in facilitating home–school communication, guiding parents, and serving as a bridge between stakeholders. Regarding environmental and societal roles, participants highlighted leadership practices that promote awareness, respect for diversity, and collaboration with the wider community. Table 4 summarizes the emerging codes and their frequencies.

Table 4 Preservice teachers' views on the potential impact of teacher leaders in parental engagement and environmental stewardship

Category	Codes	f
Parents	Collaborating with parents	44
	Acting as a bridge between parent and student	32
	Guiding and supporting parents	25
Environment	Fostering environmental and civic awareness	26
	Serving as a role model	24
	Creating meaningful change	6
	Collaborating and communicating with stakeholders	5
	Being respectful of differences	4
	Gaining respect from the community	4
	Raising awareness	3
	Being transformative	3
	Educating successful students	2
	Being solution-oriented	2
	Acting as a controller	2

Parental engagement

Upon examining preservice teachers' views on the potential impact of teacher leaders in the domain of parental engagement, the most frequently cited theme was collaborating with parents (f = 44). Participants emphasized the importance of open communication, mutual support, and shared responsibility between teacher leaders and parents. For example:

> "The leader teacher is in communication and cooperation with the parents, and they guide the student together with the parents." (TC14)

> "The leader teacher is respected by parents. He gets along well with parents and gives guidance about the student." (TC65)

> "The leader teacher informs parents about the student and makes recommendations based on the student's needs." (TC85)

Participants also discussed how teacher leaders act as a bridge between the school and home, enhancing mutual understanding:

> "The leader teacher helps parents communicate with their child. Parents trust the teacher. The leader teacher is the one who talks to parents and decides what to do with the student." (TC69)

Environmental stewardship

In the context of the school environment and wider community, participants identified "fostering environmental and civic awareness" as the most salient characteristic (f = 26), followed by being a role model (f = 24). Teacher leaders were seen as responsible not only for fostering awareness but also for demonstrating environmentally conscious behavior:

> "The leader teacher cares about the environment. He/she supports school and environmental projects." (TC98)

> "A leader teacher should set an example. They should not throw rubbish on the ground, recycle, and explain recycling to their students." (TC101)

Environmental stewardship and social engagement was also highlighted. One participant emphasized the integrative and transformative nature of teacher leadership:

> "The leader teacher can bring together the school, family and environment and integrate them. They become a role model while raising students and prepare them for the social environment and society by creating awareness that shows them real life." (TC81)

Findings related to the second research question

The second research question explored the metaphorical perceptions of preservice teachers regarding the concept of teacher leadership. Participants were asked to complete the sentence:

"A leader teacher is like a _____ because _____."

A total of 105 valid responses were collected, and 36 unique metaphors were identified. The collected metaphors were analyzed and grouped into five conceptual categories: images related to nature, human characteristics, instruments, places, and other symbolic representations. The distribution of metaphors across these categories is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 Metaphorical images used by preservice teachers to describe leader teachers

Among the categories, human-related metaphors were the most frequently used. These included figures such as manager, warrior, tour guide, artist, class president, gardener, referee, commander, orchestra conductor, chemist, and scientist. Such metaphors emphasize leadership, guidance, creativity, and responsibility—traits participants associated with effective teacher leadership.

The second most common category involved nature-related metaphors, such as sun, light, tree, ocean, queen bee, water, pole star, fruit, moon, spark, and full moon. These metaphors often conveyed nurturing, enlightenment, constancy, and natural influence—suggesting that participants viewed teacher leaders as sources of growth, direction, and inspiration.

Instrument-related metaphors, including compass, mirror, scales, magic wand, elevator, and watch, were used to highlight functions such as guidance, reflection, balance, transformation, and time management. Place-related metaphors, such as library, city, shelter, and Maiden's Tower, emphasized protective, knowledge-based, or community-oriented dimensions of teacher leadership.

Finally, a small group of metaphors—brain, snow globe, and matryoshka doll—were classified under the "other" category due to their abstract or complex symbolic meanings. These metaphors were interpreted to reflect mental processes, layered complexity, and the dynamic nature of leadership identity.

While Figure 3 presents a visual summary of the metaphor categories, Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown of the specific metaphors generated by the participants along with their frequencies and corresponding participant codes.

Table 5 Metaphors created by preservice teachers regarding the concept of "leader teacher"

Codes for Participants	Metaphor	f	Codes for Participants	Metaphor	f
TC15, TC24, TC28, TC33, TC34, TC35, TC36, TC39, TC41, Ö68, TC72, TC78, TC99	Sun	13	TC1, TC22	Mirror	2
TC9, TC13, TC23, TC29, TC31, TC32, TC52, TC71, TC77, TC88, TC98	Light	11	TC49, TC94	Ocean	2
TC6, TC12, TC26, TC48, TC50, TC62, TC75, TC90, TC97	Tree	9	TC44	Queen Bee	1
TC14, TC45, TC46, TC51, TC53, TC56, TC63, TC81, TC95,	Compass	9	TC58	City	1
TC2, TC10, TC30, TC37, TC38, TC42, TC96	Manager	7	TC65	Matryoshka Doll	1
TC59, TC60, TC61, TC79, TC105	Library	5	TC7	Scales	1
TC3, TC11, TC74, TC92	Warrior	4	TC66	Spark	1
TC4, TC8, TC76, TC93	Tour Guide	4	TC67	Magic Wand	1
TC67, TC69, TC82, TC104	Artist	4	TC18	Class President	1
TC17, TC20, TC84, TC100	Water	4	TC19	Snow Globe	1
TC5, TC43, TC86	Gardener	3	TC70	Chemist	1
TC83, TC85, TC101	Referee	3	TC72	Moon	1
TC54, TC55, TC91	Brain	3	TC20	Elevator	1
TC47, Ö73, TC80	Pole Star	3	TC21	Scientist	1
TC16, TC57	Commander	2	TC89	Watch	1
TC27, TC103	Fruit	2	TC25	Full Moon	1
TC40, TC64	Orchestra Conductor	2	TC43	Maiden's Tower	1
TC87, TC102	Shelter	2			

Among the metaphors produced, the most frequently cited were Sun (f = 13), Light (f = 11), and Tree (f = 9). These metaphors emphasize nurturing, growth, inspiration, and guidance. Participants frequently likened teacher leaders to natural forces that foster development and

illuminate the path for others:

> "The leader teacher is like the sun because he provides enlightenment to the students by giving them the warmth they need." (TC15)

> "A leader teacher is like a rooted tree because he/she both sets an example and contributes to the beings around him in every aspect (with his roots, fruit, leaves, etc.)." (TC26)

Similarly, metaphors such as Manager, Compass, and Library emphasized organization, direction, and knowledge:

> "It is similar to a manager. Because, just like the manager of any institution, he tries to ensure that the people he manages receive the best service. The area that teachers manage is their classroom." (TC38)

> "A leader teacher is like a compass. Because it aims to show everyone the right direction." (TC81)

> "A teacher leader is like a library. Because there is always a guide there that will make us better." (TC79)

Several metaphors conveyed care and ethical responsibility. For example:

> "The leader teacher is similar to the gardener because the gardener grows, protects and cares for the flowers. The teacher also educates, protects and cares for his students." (TC86)

> "A leader teacher is like a referee. Because he is the person whose opinion will be sought and given importance in solving and understanding the events." (TC101)

Some metaphors carried symbolic meanings—such as justice, transformation, and inspiration:

> "A teacher leader is like a scale. Because he is always equal, fair, reliable, true and honest." (TC7)

> "A leader teacher is like a pole star. Because... it is the brightest in a dark sky and sheds light around it... and strives to enlighten and guide those around him." (TC73)

> "A leader teacher is like a spark. The leader teacher creates the initiating fire... causing everything to catch fire... This fire is the formation of a productive, innovative, developing community." (TC66)

Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into how preservice teachers conceptualize teacher leadership through both descriptive attributes and metaphorical representations. Preservice teachers described leader teachers across four key domains: students, parents, the educational process, and the environment. The most salient characteristic was the teacher as a role model, followed by themes of parental collaboration and environmental sensitivity. These findings align with previous research indicating that teacher leadership extends beyond formal administrative roles to encompass informal, practice-based influence in classrooms and communities (Balyer, 2016; Doraiswamy et al., 2022; Muijs & Harris, 2006). In line with this broader view, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) argue that teacher leaders play a pivotal role in establishing a strong learning culture within schools and maintaining its resilience against external pressures. However, this idealized role is not always reflected in practice. Balyer (2016), for instance, found that although teachers recognize the importance of leadership, many do not feel free or empowered to display leadership behaviors due to institutional constraints. This

tension between perceived roles and structural limitations underscores the need for supportive school cultures and leadership training during teacher preparation.

A key contribution of this study lies in its metaphorical dimension. Preservice teachers frequently employed nature-based metaphors (e.g., sun, tree, compass) and human-centric metaphors (e.g., manager, guide, conductor) to express their understanding of leadership. This reflects the guiding, nurturing, and organizing roles they associate with teacher leaders. Prior research also confirms that metaphors are powerful tools for uncovering implicit beliefs about teaching and leadership (Saban, 2009). The dominance of metaphors centered on guidance and influence is consistent with Işık and Bahat's (2018) finding that teacher leadership often manifests through supportive, collaborative, and instructional roles rather than hierarchical authority.

Importantly, participants in this study did not associate teacher leadership with formal positions, such as department head or administrator, which contrasts with earlier studies in which leadership was often linked to positional power (Can, 2006). Instead, participants described leadership as a distributed and relational process, echoing the work of York-Barr and Duke (2004) and recent Turkish research (Yenipınar & Yıldırım, 2024), which highlight the shift toward informal and practice-oriented teacher leadership models.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the societal role of teacher leaders. Metaphors such as lighthouse, orchestra conductor, and matryoshka doll suggest a view of the teacher as not only a guide within the classroom but also a transformative agent within the school and broader society. This aligns with Balyer's (2016) view that teacher leaders influence not only students but also parents, colleagues, and the educational environment at large.

When compared with studies that have examined metaphors and perspectives of other stakeholders such as students, in-service teachers, and school principals, a notable pattern emerges. Previous research indicates that in-service teachers and school leaders tend to use metaphors that emphasize management, coordination, and organizational vision (e.g., "captain of a ship," "architect") (Balyer, 2016; Işık & Bahat, 2018; Aykaç & Çelik, 2014). Students, on the other hand, often describe teachers with metaphors related to care, support, and authority (e.g., "parent," "gardener," "lighthouse") (Saban, 2009; Aydın & Pehlivan, 2010). In contrast, the preservice teachers in this study produced metaphors that strongly emphasized guidance, inspiration, and nurturing potential rather than authority or positional control. This difference can be attributed to their current context: preservice teachers have not yet been fully immersed in the organizational demands of schools and thus conceptualize leadership primarily as a personal and relational quality, shaped by their teacher education experiences rather than daily administrative realities.

This distinction highlights the importance of exploring perspectives at different stages of professional development. Preservice teachers' metaphors capture anticipatory beliefs and values that may evolve as they encounter the complexities of real school environments. Understanding these early conceptions not only helps bridge the gap between teacher education and professional practice but also offers a foundation for leadership development interventions tailored to preservice teachers' needs.

These findings have practical implications for teacher education programs and school leadership. Given the emerging emphasis on distributed and instructional leadership, there is a clear need to incorporate leadership development into preservice teacher training, particularly

through reflective practices, peer collaboration, and metaphor-based inquiry. This aligns with Doraiswamy et al. (2022), who argue that fostering teacher leadership at the initial stages of teacher education is essential for sustainable school improvement.

Limitations and future directions

While this study offers meaningful insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a single cohort of preservice teachers from one university in Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, although metaphors provide deep insight into perceptions, they may be influenced by cultural, contextual, or linguistic factors that limit transferability across settings.

Future studies could expand the scope by including participants from different institutions, departments, and grade levels. Moreover, mixed-method designs may help triangulate metaphor-based data with observational or longitudinal data on leadership practices. Comparative studies between in-service and preservice teachers would also be valuable to explore how leadership perceptions evolve with experience.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on teacher leadership by exploring how preservice teachers conceptualize and symbolically represent leader teachers. The findings demonstrate that preservice teachers predominantly view teacher leadership as an informal, relational, and transformative process that extends beyond formal administrative roles. Four key areas emerged from their responses: supporting students' personal development, fostering parent-teacher collaboration, promoting environmental and social responsibility, and encouraging innovation in instructional practices. Metaphorical expressions such as "sun," "tree," "compass," and "orchestra conductor" further highlight how participants associate leadership with guidance, inspiration, nurturing, and coordination rather than authority or hierarchical power.

Based on these findings, several implications can be drawn. First, the results underline the importance of explicitly integrating leadership-related content into teacher education programs. Such integration would help preservice teachers translate their conceptual and metaphorical understandings of leadership into concrete skills. Second, the emphasis placed by participants on relational and collaborative dimensions suggests that school leaders should cultivate cultures that empower teachers to take initiative and share responsibility in educational settings. These actions, when aligned with the perceptions revealed in this study, have the potential to enhance teacher agency, foster professional collaboration, and ultimately support sustainable school improvement.

Statement of researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement

All authors contributed equally to the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study.

Conflict statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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