



Situated knowledge mobilized by Moroccan primary school principals in their daily work

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Abstract

This study identifies and characterizes the situated knowledge constructed and mobilized by Moroccan primary school principals in their daily work. Grounded in the course-of-action research program, microphenomenological self-confrontation interviews were conducted with four principals in southern Morocco. Hexadic sign analysis revealed three categories of situated knowledge enacted through interactions with teachers, students, and parents. Unlike procedural knowledge tied to administrative routines, situated knowledge emerges through embodied, context-sensitive engagement and continuous adaptation to evolving situations. These findings contribute to African educational leadership literature and suggest that principal training programs should incorporate authentic professional situations rather than relying solely on theoretical transmission.

Keywords

School Leadership; Principals; Situated Knowledge; Morocco



1. Introduction

Any researcher studying the everyday work practices of school principals and real-world management practices must engage with the extensive literature on educational leadership, even when adopting a critical stance toward this sometimes-elusive concept (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Progin, 2022; Liden et al., 2025). This can be partly explained by the fact that this literature has extensively documented and generated knowledge about individuals occupying formal leadership positions - specifically school principals in the educational context. It also reflects the concern that has emerged over time within this literature with examining leaders' thinking and developing more comprehensive understandings of school leadership real-world practice. There is, of course, an important issue concerning the relationship or the blurred distinction between educational leadership and management. The essence of leadership resides in the capacity to influence followers and organizational processes, alongside mobilizing diverse stakeholders, in order to generate change and/or improvement that extends beyond compliance with routine school directives. Leaders may occupy formal management roles, but leadership is not limited to such positions, and may also be exercised by teachers, parents, or even students. In contrast, management is sometimes confined to maintaining existing arrangements in an efficient and effective manner. It is sometimes conceptualized as a set of processes - such as planning, organizing, and controlling organizational structures, policies, quality, and operations - undertaken by individuals occupying formal administrative roles within the organization.

Building on these definitional and conceptual clarifications, research on educational leadership has gained prominence in the last decades (Daniëls et al., 2019 ; Karakose et al., 2024), particularly in efforts to understand the mechanisms through which school principals' leadership exerts an influence on various aspects of the school environment, including student performance, teaching quality, parents engagement, and interactions with external stakeholders (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Wu & Shen, 2022; Amatullah et al., 2025). Two models of leadership are often distinguished: instructional leadership - which should be distinguished from educational leadership, a broader concept encompassing the overall management of a school (Langlois & Lapointe, 2002) - and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2004; Brunet & Boudreault, 2001). There is now a consensus that instructional and transformational leadership mutually reinforce one another, exhibiting multiple overlapping dimensions (Hallinger, 2003). Furthermore, the effectiveness of a given leadership model appears to depend on factors in the external environment and the local school context (Hallinger, 2003). Integrated leadership models often incorporate elements of both instructional and transformational leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003; Mohamed et al., 2020). This growing body of work has contributed to recognizing the crucial role of school leadership in promoting high-quality education (Tan et al., 2024; Karadağ & Sertel, 2025). Research indicates that effective and successful leaders play a critical role in enhancing student learning and promoting school improvement (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). This may occur, for example, through the development of a positive school culture, the allocation of resources, or the dissemination of data-driven and best practices in classrooms (Leithwood et al., 2004). Nonetheless, Hallinger (2018) argued that the research focus on leadership effects has too often relegated context and its influence on leadership enactment to the background. Since then, research has increasingly emphasized the importance of contextualizing the study of educational leadership, with scholars increasingly exploring how the cultural context shapes the enactment of educational leadership and producing context-specific synthesis reviews (Bellibaş et al., 2025). This shift toward contextualizing the study of educational leadership represents a pivot point in education leadership research and practice (Hallinger, 2026).



As already mentioned, educational leadership has been the subject of numerous studies, and there is now a wide variety of definitions and theoretical frameworks to account for this phenomenon (e.g. Gumus et al., 2018). “Shared” (Printy & Marks, 2006), “collaborative” (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), and “distributed” (Gronn, 2000; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Spillane, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004) leadership entered mainstream discourse, marking a major theoretical turning point. If these different descriptors are not to be confused, all these terms reflect a common concern with broadening the range of responsibilities and the sources of school leadership to include the principal, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. As suggested by Bolden (2011), “common across all these accounts is the idea that leadership is not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person, with each suggesting a similar need for a more collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process” (p. 352). Two dimensions are emphasized: collaboration and the engagement of multiple leaders. It is noteworthy, however, that in recent years, broader distributed leadership has emerged as the model gaining prominence in both educational research and leadership development (Bolden, 2011). This widespread dissemination of the concept of distributed leadership has not been without criticism and misunderstanding. Starting from the observation that many researchers recognize the significant limitations of distributed leadership yet often set these concerns aside in their studies, Lumby (2016) provides a critical analysis of this concept, its widespread adoption, and the potentially deleterious consequences of its success. For Lumby (2016), the dissemination and adoption of distributed leadership, in its multiple forms, cannot be regarded as a rationally grounded choice; rather, it appears largely shaped by prevailing fashion or fads, contingent upon the degree of external pressure exerted by national or international organizations. Multiple concerns arise regarding the concept and its use: the now 'taken-for-granted status' of distribution, the occasional coexistence of this approach with a heroic model of leadership, the evolution of this concept into a standard approach to practicing leadership, and ironically the lack of consideration of the cultural context when understanding the different forms, or absence, of distributed leadership. The literature, however, reveals considerable variation in how this construct is conceptualized and operationalized, thereby rendering it elusive (Hairon & Goh, 2015).

We recognize the prevailing “fashion and feleeting fad” (Lumby, 2016) and criticisms - many of which we concur with - that are associated with the concept of distributed leadership. But we are primarily concerned with the original development of distributed leadership studies, rather than with the subsequent adoption of the term, which has become virtually hollowed out. Our interest on distributed leadership studies is particularly driven by the integration of distributed cognition and activity theory, which helps to understand so-called leadership phenomena and to deconstruct a heroic, ego-centered approach. The ontological shift introduced by the notions of distributed cognition and activity, in our view, has been largely underestimated by scholars. We are also interested in this approach as a means of envisioning the subsequent stage. Rather than being normative - that is, rather than prescribing what good leadership is or should be - this notion of distributed leadership is primarily descriptive and aims to account for leadership as a situated practice (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2008). The initial aim of the scholars was to develop a conceptual framework for investigating leadership practice. The distributed leadership perspective contrasts with and complements the many leadership approaches that have emerged over time to explain the concept of leadership, by calling for a systematic examination of interactions of leaders' thinking, behavior, and their situation. From this perspective, leaders' practice is understood as being distributed across the leadership situation; that is, it emerges through interactions with other people and the environment (Spillane, 2005; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2008).



Leadership practice, as cognition, is situationally distributed in the physical environment - that is, through the material and cultural artefacts present in that environment - and is also socially distributed through interactions with other people. According to Hutchins (1995), the initiator of the distributed cognition approach, cognitive science has committed a fundamental category error by conflating the properties of a person engaged with a social and material world with the cognitive properties attributed solely to the individual. A central claim of the distributed cognition framework is that the proper unit of analysis for cognition should not be set a priori but should be responsive to the nature of the phenomena under study (Hutchins, 1995). From this standpoint, adopting a distributed leadership framework constitutes a shift in the unit of analysis: a call to focus on a system broader than the individual and to move boundaries of the unit of analysis. It allows us to see how it can be that many of the cognitive accomplishments that have routinely been attributed to individual (brains) are in fact the accomplishments of cognitive systems that transcend the boundaries of individual bodies. But this needs to be observed and should not be taken for granted. It demands a description of how cognitive properties arise from the interaction of person with social and material world.

Recently, the insights provided by embodied and enactive approaches have been integrated into distributed cognition theory giving rise to an enactive-style distributed cognition. Hutchins (2006) agreed that:

“Cognition in the Wild” describes social processes and the cognitive properties of those social processes, but it says almost nothing about the embodied practices of the navigators as flesh-and-blood people. For the most part, the cognitive processes described in *Cognition in the Wild*, and in other treatments of distributed cognition, are presented without reference to the role of the body in thinking.

That’s why Hutchins turned to enaction in last publications (Hutchins, 2010b, 2025). The aim was to reembody distributed cognition and to consider the fact that “every meaning that is apprehended is made, not received” (Hutchins, 2008, p. 2012). This perspective underpins the present study. The advancement of understanding of real-world practices of school principals, and the enactment of these practices through a new theoretical framework, is proposed here. Our study adopts an enactive and phenomenologically inspired activity centred approach to understand school principal’s everyday practices and situated knowledge in Morocco. In this case, the exploration of these phenomena is undertaken without being constrained by the unsatisfactory concept of leadership. It is not the intention of this study to propose a new model of leadership, but rather, it draws on a novel perspective intended to complement existing theoretical and methodological approaches, to contribute to a deeper understanding of the situated and embodied phenomena associated with this concept.

This study focuses on the identification of the situated knowledge constructed and mobilized by Moroccan school principals in their daily work, as well as the dynamic processes through which this knowledge is enacted in the interaction between the actor and the environment. According to the enactive perspective, knowledge is not conceptualized as an abstract representation of the world, but as an embodied and enacted process that emerges through continuous interaction between the principal and their environment. At this stage, the study deliberately sets aside the distributed nature of this knowledge, taking as the unit of analysis the lived experiences of principals. Building on this perspective, the study aims, first, to yield empirical advances and to open new theoretical and methodological avenues for understanding the situated and embodied everyday practices of school principals, with a particular focus on their situated knowledge. Second, it seeks to identify the different types of knowledge that principals mobilize in specific situations and with specific actors or stakeholders, thereby contributing to the growing body of African literature on educational leadership and enriching it with in-depth qualitative inquiry. Third, given the emphasis on the importance of continuous professional development for school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Poirel et al., 2021), it aims to inform the design of training programs for school principals in Morocco.

Theoretical framework



The course-of-action research theoretical and methodological framework (Poizat, Flandin, & Theureau, 2023; Poizat, & San Martin, 2020; Theureau, 2004, 2015) offers the theoretical framework and analytical tools to study school principals real-world practices, the situated knowledge they construct or mobilize, and the ways in which these are enacted in actor–environment interactions (including others). This framework mobilizes the concept of activity as a core notion, understood as an actor–environment coupling that gives rise to immediate experience, and seeks to develop an understanding of activity as a succession of enaction (a course of enaction ; Theureau, Drakos, Poizat, & Salini, 2025) enmeshed in a cognitive, social, and cultural ecosystem, at both local and broader scales. The combination of the enaction paradigm (Stewart, Gappenne, & Di Paolo, 2010) and the hypothesis of pre-reflective self-consciousness (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008) constitutes the basis of the course of action theoretical and methodological framework. This is complemented by insights from Peirce’s semeiotic for analytical purposes.

The enaction paradigm is based on the notion of autopoiesis, developed by Maturana and Varela (1994), which conceives of living beings as autonomous or operationally closed. This paradigm developed as an alternative to cognitivism and connectionism in the field of cognitive science. Cognition is not approached as a manipulation of symbols or information processing (involving representations of a pre-given world), but as a productive action consisting of bringing forth a meaningful world. Di Paolo, Rhode, and De Jaegher (2010) proposed five concepts as the core of the enactive approach: autonomy, sense-making, emergence, embodiment, and experience. The specificity of the enactive view is the assumption that these core concepts cannot be dissociated in the study of cognition. Accordingly, within the course-of-action theoretical and methodological framework, activity 1) is conceptualized as an asymmetric coupling between the living being and its environment, 2) is sense-making, and 3) is considered as radically embodied and, constituted and giving rise to lived experience.

Pre-reflective self-consciousness, as developed in Sartre’s (1943) philosophical work, is also of particular importance within the course-of-action theoretical and methodological framework, especially in its approach to experience. One convenient way to define the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness is by contrasting it with reflective self-consciousness, which arises, for example, when individuals introspect their ongoing experience or explicitly explore their own subjectivity or interiority. By contrast, pre-reflective self-consciousness is described as ‘pre-reflective’ to the extent that « (1) it is an awareness we have before we do any reflecting on our experience; (2) it is an implicit and first-order awareness rather than an explicit or higher-order form of self-consciousness » (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2025, p.1). As Sartre (1943) emphasizes, pre-reflective self-consciousness is not an additional layer superimposed upon ongoing experience and, by extension, upon activity, but instead ontologically constitutes the very mode of being of experience. Within the course-of-action theoretical and methodological framework, it is assumed that human activity co-occurs with this specific modality of consciousness, which is consubstantial with activity and gives rise to a first-person perspective, corresponding to a presence-to-self or to the experience of oneself in the act of acting. We have a thin, pre-reflective awareness of what we are doing while we are doing it (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). This pre-reflective self-consciousness is understood as a surface effect of the structural coupling of the actor with their environment (or of the course of enaction). It is also worth noting that bodily self-awareness and bodily actions are crucial in constituting the pre-reflective foundations of self-awareness (e.g., Ciaunica, 2015). There is an experiential sense of agency that comes along with activity at the pre-reflective level, the first-order level of consciousness, although the sense of agency may also involve more explicit and reflective forms of consciousness. “Indeed, an explicit reflective self-consciousness is possible only because there is a pre-reflective self-awareness that is an on-going and more primary self-consciousness” (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2025, p.1).

Finally, the course of action theoretical and methodological framework is also based on an analytical hypothesis called “activity-as-sign”, inspired from Peirce’s semeiotic. According to this hypothesis, the unfolding of an actor’s immediate experience, as well as the activity giving rise to experience and, by extension, situated practices, can be described as a concatenation of signs.



2. Methodology

a. Participants

In the present study, an initial sample of ten school principals was contacted. However, only four agreed to voluntarily participate in the research and to be video recorded. The reason behind this is that in the Moroccan context, the use of video recording in qualitative research remains relatively uncommon and may generate discomfort among participants. All four participants were principals working in urban schools and had more than twenty years of experience in school management. The initial stage of data collection involved preliminary immersion; we conducted exploratory visits to the participating schools, during which we presented the research and the discussed the terms of their participation to the study. This phase enabled the establishment of trust between the researcher and participants. Beyond this relational and ethical dimension, these visits enabled the researcher to gain an insight into daily life of the principals and the different tasks they perform to collectively organize the data collection phase.

b. Data Collection

Data collection relied mainly on the self-confrontation micro-phenomenological interview method (Poizat et al., 2023). This method involves confronting principals with audiovisual recordings of their own activities in order to render explicit and re-enact the pre-reflective self-consciousness consubstantial with past activity viewing on the screen. To proceed, we unfolded successive phases, beginning with direct observations and audiovisual recordings made during a half-day spent with each principal, documenting their work routines, actions, and interactions in situ. The filmed episodes were selected to reflect the three main roles of Moroccan school principals - pedagogical, administrative, and relational, involving different stakeholders as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Video-recorded episodes for each school principal and description of the situation

Principals	Episodes	Situation/Interaction
1	Classroom visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Interacting with a preschool teacher during a classroom observation.Preparing an extracurricular activity with educators/teachers.
	Monitoring student dismissal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Interacting with a parent regarding a student-related issue.
	Meeting with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Resolving a conflict between two students.
2	Monitoring students during break time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engaging with trainee teachers in a supervisory context
3	Meeting with an external partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coordinating with a teacher and a painter as part of the assessment of the school's painting requirements.
	Monitoring students and teachers dismissal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Observing students and engaging in interactions with them.
4	Monitoring students and teachers dismissal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engaging in brief exchanges with teachers at the end of the school day.



We then conducted self-confrontation micro-phenomenological interviews, either on the same evening or the following day, depending on the principals' availability, in order to facilitate the dynamic reenactment. During these interviews, participants viewed excerpts of their recorded activities, together with the researcher, and were invited to comment on and verbalize their actions and its immediate experience. The researcher guides and controls the interviews through prompts focused on eliciting and reenacting participants' experience: they are invited to describe what they were doing, thinking, concerned about, taking into account, and perceiving or feeling at each moment (Dieumegard et al., 2021). Finally, the researcher constrains post hoc reconstructions and rationalizations by probing their conditions of emergence. The micro-phenomenological self-confrontation method seeks to disrupt habitual ways of parsing, describing, and justifying action, and to shift from the level at which we are able to provide reasons for our actions to the pre-reflective level. Access at this pre-reflecting level provides documentation showcasing a diversity of situated knowledge.

c. Data Processing and Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in three successive stages (Theureau & Jeffroy, 1994): The first stage is the construction of double-entry protocols. This stage consisted of transcribing and synchronizing all the data collected in a table, juxtaposing the objective description of the situations recorded and the corresponding verbalizations of the main actors during the self-confrontations. The second stage involves the construction of a condensed narrative through the segmentation of the flow of activity into elementary units of meaning. When participants are prompted to describe their activity, they spontaneously segment the continuous stream of activity into discrete, meaningful units. The smallest units of meaning for the actor are referred to as elementary units of meaning (Poizat & San Martin, 2020) This framework assumes that each elementary unit of activity is the manifestation of a sign. The third stage consists in the elaboration of a plausible description of the unfolding of the activity as it gives rise to immediate experience, through the documentation of this concatenation of signs.

Within the course-of-action methodological framework, these signs are called hexadic because they consist of six components: Involvement in the situation (E), Potential actuality (A), Referential (S), Representamen (R); Unit of the course of action (U), and Interpretant (I). Involvement in the situation (E) refers to the set of openings that derive from past interactions with the environment at a given instant (t). These openings constitute themes that orient and circumscribe the actor's possibilities and concerns at that moment. The anticipation structure (A) corresponds to the actor's expectations at a given moment, in relation to their involvement (E). The referential (S) corresponds to the situated knowledge mobilized from past interactions with the environment, in relation to the involvement (E) and the anticipation structure (A) at that moment. The representamen (R) refers to perceptual, proprioceptive, or mnemonic elements that are meaningful to the actor in their interaction with the environment. The unit of the course of action (U) is the fraction of activity that gives rise to experience; it includes actions, communications, interpretations, emotions, feelings, self-talk, ideation, and forms of productive imagination. The interpretant (I) refers to the validation, extension, enrichment, reorganization, or creation of situated knowledge at a given instant.



Table 2: Example of documented hexadic sign

Unit of the course of action (U)	The principal enters the preschool classroom.
Involvement in the situation (E)	Seeks to motivate and encourage educators who find themselves in particular situations
Potential actuality (A)	Expects his visit to have an impact on the teacher's morale
Referential (S)	The principal relies on the idea that teachers expect classroom visits as a sign of his interest in their work, and that a lack of visits may worry them or be interpreted as disinterest.
Representamen (R)	The principal notices that all teachers are currently in their classrooms teaching and that classrooms are occupied.
Interpretant (I)	The principal's visit affects teachers and educators.

For that once the overall hexadic signs had been documented, the analysis and interpretation focused on two components: Referential (S) and the interpretant (I). The analysis of the data, allow to identify different forms of knowledge, including theoretical, procedural, and situated knowledge. However, as the purpose of the study is to describe situated knowledge, the results and discussion focus exclusively on this latter form.

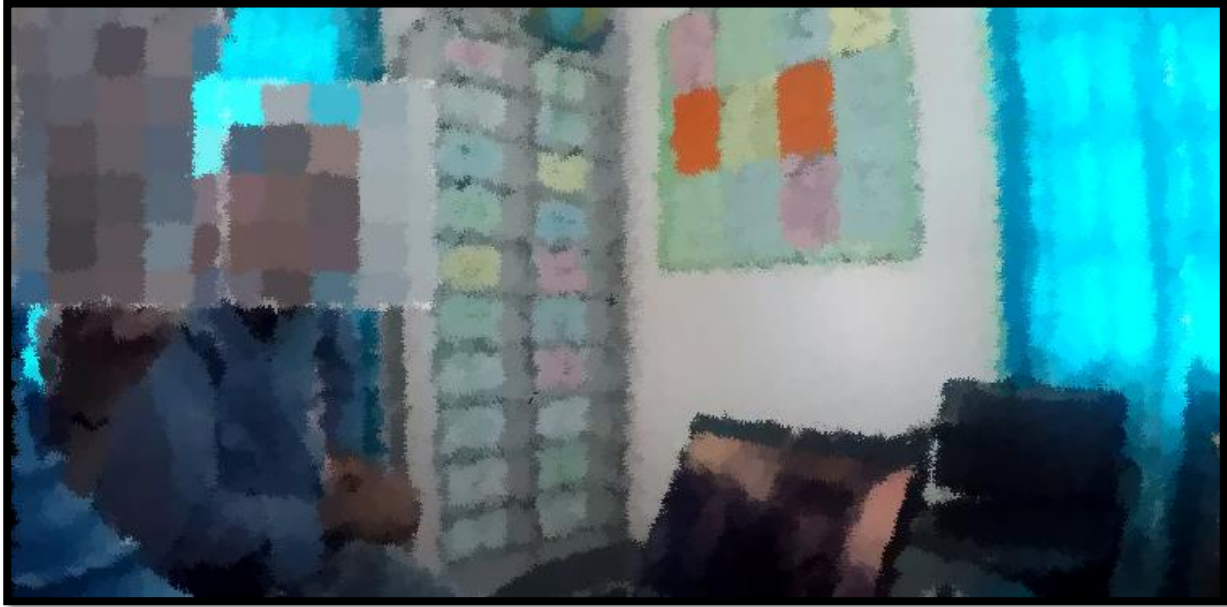
3. Results

a. A cross-situational category: Situated Knowledge

Our data reveal a form of knowledge that arises from the unpredictable, lived dynamics of school life and from principals' embodied engagement with their environment and the people in it. We refer to this as situated knowledge as it emerges in a specific situation, and requires principals to adapt, interpret, and respond in real-time to evolving contexts. This knowledge is especially mobilized when it comes into direct contact with other actors and for activities that are not procedural. To further elucidate this finding, the following vignette from the self-confrontation micro-phenomenological interview illustrate how situated knowledge is enacted in practice.

Vignette: Example of a case scenario of situated knowledge

Figure 1: Self-confrontation micro-phenomenological interview



This verbatim is an extract from the self-confrontation micro-phenomenological interviews with principal 1. The viewed activity showed the school principal supervising students leaving the school. He was standing in a strategic position in front of his office, but close to the exit door. When two students arrived screaming, one accusing the other of pushing him into a door and injuring him, the school principal sent them immediately to the chairs next his office, then suddenly a parent comes and asked him a question about the certificate of enrollment, he looked at the phone and asked the parent to come back in the afternoon.

Principal: This gentleman asked me for help with a problem he was having with the Massar platform; he couldn't view his grades. I directed him to come back to my office later so we could look into the issue together. And I'm getting back to what's important, I focused on the task at hand. Even if he wanted a school certificate, I would have asked him to wait until I finished what I had to do.

Suddenly, two students arrived screaming, one accusing the other of pushing him into a door and injuring him.

Researcher: As you listen to each of them speak, what are you thinking?

Principal: I'm looking at him (the one screaming), I'm listening to him, but he doesn't seem very sincere.

Researcher: How did you know that?

Principal: His history! It's like we're the police (laughing). I always get complaints about him; it's impossible that he's always the victim. It's been going on for years, since elementary school. He's always like that, causing problems. And now he's trying to convince me that he's telling the truth. I already have experience with him, and I know he's lying. But despite all that, I have to listen to his version as well as the other person's, and then it's easier to decide.

He invited the first student to recount the incident, and the student reported that the other student had pushed the door toward him.

Researcher: And at that point, what do you pay attention to?



Principal: My concern is not to be unfair; the students must not feel that they have been treated unfairly. So, I must listen carefully to each version. It's a routine: when two students argue, I ask each of them to explain what happened. But before the confrontation, it's important to gather information and question other students to get a complete picture of the situation... In general, these conflicts between children are resolved fairly quickly; they greet each other and tolerate each other, because they are children.

He asked the other student, who denied having pushed the door.

Principal: He denies pushing the bathroom door, but I'm convinced he's lying. If you were in my place, would you believe him? Personally, I look at his eyes; they're not steady, they're moving. We are used to these kinds of confrontations, and we know how to recognize the signs. The real victim looks down and shows obvious sadness. But he looks up, shouts, and defends himself vigorously. So, something is wrong.

He asked first student "the accuser" to return to his classroom and the other student "the accused" to wait for him next to the office.

Researcher: Here, you asked one of the students to sit down near your desk and the other to return to class. What were you thinking and what were your intentions?

Principal: Yes, imagine if I let both students go; they could hide, fight again, and create another problem. So, I decided to keep this one close to me until I was free. I'll talk to him briefly before letting him go. Then I'll follow both students to their classroom, call them in, and ask them if they're okay now, after tolerating their behavior. I'll also make an announcement to all students to prevent this kind of behavior. I'll ask the teacher to do what's necessary: she'll take about five minutes to talk to them and raise their awareness.

Researcher: What were your concerns at that moment?

Principal: Here? My main concern was to avoid exacerbating the hostility between the two students. I insisted that they greet each other and reconcile so that the conflict would not escalate outside.



Table 3: Identification of hexadic signs

Unit U₃₂	A man comes up to greet him and ask for information about the Massar platform. He tells him that he can come to his office later to discuss the matter.
(E)	He tries to send the man away, because his problem is not urgent, so that he can complete the task he is working on.
(A)	He expects the man to return to his office another day to discuss the matter calmly, with a clear head.
(S)	For the principal, administrative and logistical matters come after supervising the students' departure. They can wait until he has finished.
(R)	The man shows him his phone and starts talking about a technical problem with the platform.
(I)	The gentleman returned in the evening to see him in his office.
Unit U₃₃	He walks over to the two students waiting near the desk. He asks them what happened and listens to what they say.
(E)	He tries to determine which of the two students is telling the truth, while striving to be fair in his judgment.
(A)	Expects that the behavior and actions of one of the two students will reveal the lies.
(S)	Students generally find it difficult to lie to principals, especially when one of them has a history of problematic behavior. It then becomes difficult to systematically consider him or her as the victim. Furthermore, their attitude and gestures often reveal the truth, making their lies even more obvious.
(R)	The words and nervousness of the student who speaks first
(I)	The one who speaks first turns out to be the liar.
Unit U₃₄	Asks one of the students one last time if he pushed the door, and the student denies it.
(E)	Trying to confirm that this student is lying.
(A)	Expects that by asking the question again, the student will eventually tell the truth.
(S)	Principals are used to this type of dispute and know how to recognize the signs of lying. If a student is truly a victim, they will lower their eyes and show sadness. On the other hand, if they defend themselves and shout, this probably indicates that they are the one being blamed.
(R)	The student's eyes dart around, and he shouts while defending himself vehemently.
(I)	PrincipalThe student is indeed lying.
Unit U₃₅	He asks one of them to sit on the chairs near his desk while they wait for him to return, and the other to go back to class.
(E)	He tries to calm the situation down and not fuel the hostility between the two students.
(A)	He expects the two students to hide and fight somewhere.
(S)	When they are alone, students may resume their argument and create a much more serious problem, whether inside or outside the school.
(R)	The emotional intensity of the two students.
(I)	The student calms down after sitting alone on the chair.

This vignette highlights four salients aspects of the knowledge emergence within a given situation, which was supposed to be supervising the students leaving school, and turned into settling a conflict between two of them:

- Mobilization of situated knowledge: the principal acts on the basis of situated, experiential, and non-abstract knowledge built up through action.



- Tension between fairness and pragmatic effectiveness: there is a trade-off between perceived fairness and the need for rapid control to prevent escalation.
- Spatial regulation as a mode of leadership: the placement of bodies (distance, proximity, separation) is managed to stabilize the situation.
- Situated construction of authority: authority is revealed through regulatory action and posture in interaction, rather than through formal status.

b. Situated Knowledge mobilized across stakeholder interactions

During the interaction situations, principals engage with multiple stakeholders: teachers, students, parents and an external agent. For the purpose of clarity, we choose to present this part of data according to the stakeholder groups concerned. This organizational choice does not mean that the knowledge mobilized is specific to a given stakeholder.

In the next section, we will identify the type of situated knowledge mobilized with each of these stakeholders. Each of them was associated with a specific thematic focus, reflecting the issues that the principal addressed in that particular interaction. We will provide examples from the verbatims for every theme.

When interacting with students, principals mobilize a form of situated knowledge that prioritizes immediate regulation of behavior and safety over the formal application of rules, resulting in pragmatic and context-sensitive decision-making. We can therefore identify three themes of situated knowledge used during the interaction with the students: Situated knowledge related to the protection of students and their security, to the relationship between students, to the relationship between principal and students, see table 4.

i. Situated knowledge mobilized or constructed through interaction with students

Table 4: Themes of Situated Knowledge mobilized and constructed in Interactions with students

Theme 1: Situated knowledge related to the protection of students and their security	
Situated knowledge	Example of verbatim
During entry, exit or recreation, an open school door means potential danger: a stranger can enter, a student can run away, or a parent can enter and cause conflict with a teacher.	Principal: <i>I avoid the disasters that happen during this period by staying here, just by staying here, you see, the mother brings her child and once he sees me in front of her, he calms down and leaves quietly.</i>
Gathering students in the large courtyard prevents them from dispersing and losing control of their location and activities.	Principal <i>(commenting on calling students to come all next to the courtyard): At this point, I think they should all come to one place, which is the large courtyard ... Because there (in the big courtyard) we can keep an eye on them... if they're all in one place, I won't have any problems, but if I leave them there without calling them, without gathering them together, and I go to the big courtyard, they'll scatter and I won't know where they are or what they're doing, and I'm the only one supervising them...</i>



<p>Having the principal at the school entrance prevents students from misbehaving and forces them to follow the rules.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on him standing with his assistant next to the exit door): We settle down and watch who comes in, if the students have anything with them, such as ice cream, which we confiscate, or if they are dressed inappropriately, with an inappropriate hairstyle, for example. We watch until the flow of students stops, then we close the door.</p>
<p>Theme 2: Knowledge related to building supportive and inclusive student relationships.</p>	
<p>Situated knowledge</p>	<p>Example of verbatim</p>
<p>Groups of students near the restrooms can pose risks, including falling, pushing someone, or even worse</p>	<p>Principal (Commenting on paying attention to students next to the restrooms): Yes, because there were toilets there... I always have to keep an eye on the toilets to protect the children; it's one of our concerns. As I told you, it's one of the most important things: We often talk about risk management, and we tend to think that the risks are mainly earthquakes and floods, when there are details that may seem trivial but have serious consequences, here for example: They're just children, they don't know what they're doing, they can run, fall, push a colleague, push the toilet door...</p>
<p>Walking near students in the playground to warn them not to misbehave in addition that approaching a group of students encourages them to disperse.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on looking at a group of students): I pay attention to groups; groups are a sign of risk... I'm worried... Because there may be tension between them... or something may be wrong. The fact that I walk near them prevents them from doing anything stupid; they sense my presence and calm down.</p>
<p>The student wants to make sure that their message is understood and that the principal will take the necessary action</p>	<p>Principal: Oh yes, he complains (smiling)! I understand that this kind of behavior between children is normal! He's waiting for the other child to be punished, but I just wanted to calm him down... Well, it depends on the seriousness of the situation, but you'll see that I looked around me to see where the other child was, and it seemed normal, nothing serious, so I must move on to something else. In another case, if it's serious, I have to call them and bring them to my office. Here, I tap him on the shoulder and reassure him that his message has been received and that I'll investigate it later.</p> <p>Researcher: Here you are looking at the other student.</p> <p>Principal: Yes, I saw him. I looked him in the eye to let him know that I had noticed him and that</p>



	<p><i>if he did nothing else, we would take further action. The student is also aware of this, and as I said, the severity of the offense...</i></p>
<p>Theme 3: Knowledge related to fostering respectful principal-student relationship</p>	
<p>Situated knowledge</p>	<p>Example of verbatim</p>
<p>The fact that students come to greet the principal is a sign of the latter's success</p>	<p>Principal (<i>commenting on Students come to greet him</i>): I like it, it shows the quality of the relationship between the management and the children, even though I don't live with them in the classroom, unlike the teacher, but I consider it a success... The principal is responsible for helping the child integrate into the school; as principal, along with the security guard and the cleaning lady, we are all there to serve this child, so we have to be close to him...</p> <p><i>When students feel that you are working for their benefit, they are treated like children... who know nothing, etc., when in fact they know everything... That's how I see it! They know who respects them, who loves them... and they are also influenced by what their parents say about the principal...</i></p> <p>Researcher: I understand. But I want to go back to this scene, and ask what you were thinking at that moment,</p> <p>Principal: Actually, I felt very comfortable because he came over to greet me of his own accord. No one pushed him to do so. You know, we usually ask the children to stand up when someone arrives... but here, he did it of his own accord... Before, we used the power approach; the principal has power, the teacher has power, so we're very careful about how we dress to reflect that power. But here, I look at him and I don't see him as a child, but as a man... do you see?</p>
<p>Principals are used to this type of dispute and know how to recognize the signs of lying. If a student is truly a victim, they will lower their eyes and show sadness. On the other hand, if they defend themselves and shout, this probably indicates that they are the ones being blamed.</p>	<p>Principal (<i>commenting on a fight between two students</i>): This history! It's like we're the police (<i>laughing</i>). I always get complaints about him; he can't always be the victim. It's been going on for years, since elementary school. He's always like this, causing trouble. And now he's trying to convince me that he's telling the truth. I've had experience with him before, and I know he's lying. But despite all that, I have to listen to his</p>
<p>Students generally find it difficult to lie to principals, especially when one of them has a history of problematic behavior. This makes it difficult to systematically consider them as victims.</p>	



<p>Their attitude and gestures often reveal the truth, making their lies even more obvious.</p>	<p><i>side of the story as well as the other people, and then it's easier to decide...</i></p>
<p>When the principal intervenes, the problem is often resolved immediately.</p>	<p><i>It's routine; when two students are arguing, I ask each of them to explain what happened. But before the confrontation, it's important to gather information and question other students to get a complete picture of the situation... In general, these conflicts between children are resolved quickly; they say hello to each other and tolerate each other because they're children...</i></p> <p><i>He denies pushing the bathroom door, but I'm convinced he's lying. If you were in my place, would you believe him? Personally, I look at his eyes; they're not steady, they're moving. We're used to this kind of confrontation, and we know how to recognize the signs. The real victim looks down and shows obvious sadness. But he looks around, shouts, and defends himself vigorously which means that something is not right.</i></p>

ii. Situated knowledge mobilized or constructed through interaction with teachers

In interactions with teachers, principals' knowledge-in-action is characterized by a continuous arbitration between institutional expectations, relational dynamics, and local constraints, highlighting the inherently negotiated nature of school leadership. We identified four main themes: Situated knowledge related to the motivation and support of the teachers, to the importance of visiting the class, to the importance of giving time and space to the teachers (Table 5).

Table 5: Themes of Situated Knowledge mobilized and constructed in Interactions with teachers

Theme 1: Situated knowledge related to the motivation and support of the teachers	
Situated knowledge	Example of verbatim
<p>Educators who work with associations and find themselves in difficult financial situations need more support and encouragement.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on visiting a class): <i>But here, I am referring specifically to this lady who works in difficult conditions, different from ours, particularly in financial terms. She is employed by an association that only pays the minimum wage. However, their work deserves much more because they are the backbone of this institution. So, you see, their morale is already low, and on top of the stress of work, they need encouragement from time to time. It's important to tell them that things will improve in the future and that they just need to keep their passion alive... I am sure that what I am doing with them (encouraging teachers) will not have a negative impact if it does not have a positive one... Encouragement helps you move forward... My goal and focus are on the whole circle (teachers, students, etc.). The results will be good for everyone.</i></p>



<p>By actively engaging in their work and valuing it, we show people that their efforts are important and appreciated.</p>	<p>Principal: <i>(the director stops the video). As someone in charge, it may seem simple (as the teacher explained to her), but I need to add a dose of encouragement by saying: "Well done, you're doing a great job with these children." They are preparing an activity for the Day of trees, in her classroom and outside of her working hours. So, I have to encourage her... After she finishes her day, she will say to herself: "Wow, I'm doing something good with them." I'm sure that what I'm doing with them (encouraging the teachers), if it doesn't have a positive impact, it's not going to have a negative impact either... Encouragement helps you move forward... My goal and my focus are on the whole circle (teachers, students...). The results will be good for everyone.</i></p>
<p>The principal must always give positive and constructive critic even in bad situation:</p>	<p>Principal: <i>If I notice that her work isn't being done properly, for example if her classroom isn't clean, would I tell her that in front of you and the students? In that case, I would tell her privately: "Listen, teacher, classroom cleanliness is important." I wouldn't tell her she's responsible but rather ask her to ask the students during recess to pick up some dust near them, so we can throw it all away and your classroom will be super clean. I wouldn't say to her: "What's with this dirty classroom?" So even negative things, I try to present them in a constructive way. Imagine walking into a classroom and say to the teacher: "What is this, teacher?" He might respond arrogantly: "That's not my job; there's a cleaning lady." Yes, there is a cleaning lady, but there is also an educational aspect when the teacher enters the classroom. He can talk to his students about the importance of cleanliness. We have trash cans in our classrooms, in the courtyard, in the restrooms; so that's our role.</i></p>
<p>Theme 2: Situated knowledge related to classroom supervision visits</p>	
<p>Situated Knowledge</p>	<p>Verbatim</p>
<p>Visits from the principal make the teachers feel that their work is important.</p>	<p>Principal <i>(commenting on checking on the preparation of a group of teachers and interns to an activity): I want to integrate with them, immerse myself in their work. I take what they do, I touch it, so I give it value. What they are doing now has value. That's not the case if I just walk by without going in. If they are here working and laughing, how are they going to feel? Is What they are doing even unimportant? But when I walk in... um... just walking in and out, and talking to them afterwards, will have a big effect on their work, as I told you, a positive effect. God bless them, they've made good progress.</i></p>



<p>Teachers look forward to visits from the principal and see them as a sign of interest in their work.</p>	<p>Principal: <i>When I walk into the room, I say hello and ask what they're doing. That way, the support worker, intern, or manager feels that management is monitoring their work. We're doing something, and I value what they do. As I told you, I visit them twice a day to monitor their progress, encourage them, and make sure they finish their work in a healthy environment.</i></p> <p>Principal: <i>I am a manager; I take care of the establishment to ensure its smooth running. I am not a boss in the authoritarian sense of the word; that term is more appropriate for the office. No, I leave my office, I am with people, I smile, I laugh, I greet everyone. The teachers have told me that just seeing me smile at 8 a.m. makes them feel better.</i></p>
<p>Teachers worry when the principal does not visit them.</p>	<p>Principal <i>From time to time, the teacher hopes that the principal will come into his classroom, greet him (he nods), encourage him, and take an interest in his work... This simple gesture has a big impact on him. On the other hand, if you stay in your office, the teacher will come in and out without you noticing. He might wait two or three days, then come and say to me:</i> <i>"Ahh, sir, you didn't come to see me, I didn't see you..."</i></p>
<p>Theme 3: Situated knowledge related to the creation of an ensuring and respectful environment</p>	
<p>Situated knowledge</p>	<p>Example of verbatim</p>
<p>If the principal tells the teacher that he is in a hurry and must leave, they will feel that what they are doing is not important to him.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on him waiting patiently for a teacher to find a video that she was looking for): <i>Here, I'm listening to her (he pauses for a moment then continues), you know why? She's looking for a video. Normally, I could have said we were in a hurry and that I had to leave, but I let her look for her video. She searches and searches, and honestly, I have to leave, but I have to listen to her, stop what I'm doing, and show her that I value her. Because if I say, "OK, OK, we'll see later," she'll feel (he leans back) that what she wants to show me isn't important. No, I listen to her and wait until she finds what she wants to show me, I look, then I leave. Here, you value the other person, and when I value you... It becomes mutual, do you see?</i></p>
<p>The principal gives the organizers (teachers) freedom to prepare activities, if they are not inappropriate.</p>	<p>Principal: <i>Yes, but there is another aspect to consider. I gave the companion the opportunity to express herself freely... : Emm, I look at the content carefully, as I mentioned. I check to make sure there is nothing anti-educational or inappropriate that would need to be reported, whether in the photos provided or elsewhere. But my intention is not to be an inspector... I just look at it this way (he crosses his hands), and if I notice something of concern, I point it out by saying, "We need to be careful here."</i></p>



	<i>No, I gave them freedom and all the necessary privileges. From the beginning, I told them what they were going to do: trees, insects, etc. Then they present their plan to me. That way, I have an overview, and I give them some leeway. I don't get involved in the details, saying "you have to do this or that," unless I see something serious.</i>
Theme 4: Situated knowledge related support and guidance of the trainees/interns	
Situated knowledge	Example of verbatim
Trainees are unfamiliar with how the school operates, particularly the supervision system.	<p>Principal: <i>I'm looking at the interns; they're not involved in surveillance. Why? Well, we haven't discussed it yet, so I'm trying to get them to come and help me... This morning, I gave them a class because the teacher who usually teaches this morning is on strike, so I'm giving them responsibility for this class... You know, I can't let the students leave the school.</i></p> <p>Principal: <i>They're new interns, they don't really know the system, they don't know what they're supposed to do, that's the problem! Did I do what I was supposed to do? They're here to be in class, so I must talk to them and explain (he looks at the supervision chart), I explain why we supervise recess, is that really one of the teacher's roles? You see, I'm thinking positively here. If there's a problem, I consider it to be my fault. I look at them and I know that the message hasn't got through (i.e., her request for help with supervision), so I tell myself that the approach I chose didn't work and that I need to find another way.</i></p>
Trainees place greater importance on their internship and classroom teaching than on other activities, which they consider less important	<p>Principal: <i>I pay attention to everyone. For example, if an intern comes to do an internship at our institution and I send them here, to this room, they might think there's nothing to do. No! I must explain to them that their presence in this room is just as important as their presence in class, in the library, etc. When I enter the room, I say hello and ask what they are doing. This way, the supervisor, intern, or manager feels that management is monitoring their work.</i></p>

iii. Situated knowledge mobilized or constructed through interaction with parents

During the interactions with parents, principals draw on knowledge focuses on interactions with parents, principals draw on situational knowledge that focuses on managing the parent–student relationship as well as the relationship between families and the school, supporting pragmatic and context-sensitive regulation of expectation of stakeholders, and potential tensions of the different responsibilities. We identified then two main themes: situated knowledge related to ensuring integration of parents into the educational process, and situated knowledge related to safeguarding and trust-building as shown in table 6.

Table 6: Themes of Situated Knowledge mobilized and constructed in Interactions with parents

Theme 1: Situated knowledge related to ensuring integration of parents into the educational process
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<i>Situated knowledge</i>	<i>Example of verbatim</i>
<p>Sometimes students do not pass on information correctly, or at all, to their parents, either because they forget or because they are afraid.</p>	<p>The principal: <i>She showed me the backpack and said they had lots of notebooks at home. I replied that her child wasn't communicating with her and wasn't passing on messages. My goal was to make her feel that I am genuinely interested in her child's well-being, while showing her that the administration's interventions are always for the benefit of the students.</i></p>
<p>Even if the student forgets their belongings, it is still the parents' responsibility to make sure they have everything they need in their backpack, as they are only children. Buying supplies is not enough to fulfill their parental obligations.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on an exchange with a mother who justified her son for not bringing his notebook to class) <i>...The lady told me they have 100 notebooks at home... but she was on the defensive. I told her it didn't matter, that her child was still young. My intention was to make her understand that the responsibility lies with the parents. If something happens to this child, you are to blame. My phrase "he's still a child" was not innocent. If there's a problem, if he didn't bring his pen or notebook, it's your responsibility because you have to supervise him, ask him "what did your teacher ask you to do..."</i></p>
<p>Theme 2: Situated knowledge related to safeguarding and trust-building</p>	
<i>Situated knowledge</i>	<i>Verbatim</i>
<p>The principal's presence at the entrance helps reassure parents and fosters a sense of safety.</p>	<p>Principal: <i>Ah, here, when the students leave, we must be welcoming. On normal days, there are three of us working with two other agents. When parents come and see the three of us, they say they feel reassured about their children's safety.</i></p> <p>Principal: <i>I avoid any disasters that might happen during this time by staying here, just staying here, you see. The mother brings her child, and once she sees me in front of her, she feels reassured and leaves calmly. If she doesn't see you, she stays in front of the school with the other mothers, while the students have already entered the school and they just stand there looking at each other.</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes I have a lot of work to do, so I watch the entrance and then I leave. But I always keep an eye on the situation by looking out the window to make sure everything is going well. Once, I saw several heads in front of the school, and I immediately understood that I had to go out so that they would disperse. But just seeing me was enough to make them leave on their own.</i></p>



<p>He trusts the teacher who reported that the student does not bring his notebook, so he expects to find incomplete exercises in it.</p>	<p>Principal: <i>Today, she called me again because the teacher informed me that her child was not bringing her school supplies. I asked the mother if her child had said anything to her, and she denied it. I explained to her that her child wasn't bringing his workbooks home... I wanted to see the notebook she had brought. I checked it, it was incomplete, and I showed her, then told the child where he is supposed to write his exercises.</i></p>
<p>The school entrance marks a boundary: before the line, he speaks as the principal and the law supports him; after the line, the situation becomes more informal, and his authority is not the same</p>	<p>Principal: <i>Yes, there is significance to where I am standing. Um, yes, it is intentional to be standing just before the door... (he pauses briefly and continues), I must not cross the exit line. If I speak with a parent after this line, it is not the same as if I do so before it. Before the line, I am the principal, and the law is on my side.</i></p> <p><i>If a parent brings in an injured child, covered in blood, and tells me that it happened "near home," then why are they bringing them to me?</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I can do something for this child; my role is to educate them to be careful about this kind of accident and to warn the rest of the class. However, if an accident happens at school, we document it, ensure hospitalization, and follow legal procedure. But if it happens elsewhere, it's not my responsibility."</i></p>
<p>Recess is when parents drop their children off at school and take the opportunity to see the principal or teachers if they have any concerns to discuss.</p>	<p>Principal (commenting on meeting a parent before letting her meet the teacher): <i>Again, I try to smooth over the relationship between parents and teachers to avoid conflicts, especially during the initial phase. I already mentioned this: when the children first start, don't disturb them. The teachers are shy, so if you go to them, they'll give you time, but when I'm with them, they complain.</i></p>
<p>The principal needs to be the first person to contact parents, in order to save them from possible conflicts.</p>	<p><i>For example, as a mother, you go to see a teacher. You find her in the middle of class, but she can give you some time, say 10 minutes maximum. If you talk too much, she'll find it difficult to interrupt you out of politeness. But afterwards, the teachers come to me to complain about this kind of situation, as if it were also my responsibility not to let parents into their classrooms.</i></p> <p><i>Once classes have started, that's it: no more "I want to see the teacher" or "I want to see the teacher." Just this morning, a parent monopolized two teachers for over 25 minutes! Meanwhile, the students were left alone in the classroom. The teachers had to check in from time to time to make sure nothing serious was happening, but in the end, we lost 25 precious minutes</i></p>



	<p><i>So here, in the exit phase, I try to avoid conflicts between parents and teachers. You know that during the exit period, teachers—God help them—are tired. In short, teaching is a difficult job, they leave stressed, the simple gesture of another person can provoke them,</i></p> <p><i>I always try to be careful, and to monitor the reactions of parents and teachers during their discussion, but when I see someone raising their hand, for example, I have to intervene, because there are many problems that arise in this kind of situation.</i></p>
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4. Discussion

The objective of this research is to describe the situated knowledge that Moroccan principals construct and mobilize in their daily work, particularly in concrete situations involving different actors. This discussion is structured in two parts: first, we examine the situatedness and embodiedness of this knowledge; second, we identify the different types of knowledge mobilized in interaction with specific stakeholders.

Our findings show that principals' situated knowledge varies according to the situations in which it is enacted and the actors involved. This result aligns with the perspective developed by Lord and Shondrick (2011), who conceptualize knowledge as emerging from a complex, dynamic system encompassing the brain, the body and the environment. It is also consistent with the work of Spillane et al. (2008), which emphasizes that leadership practice—and the knowledge underpinning it—cannot be understood independently of the situations in which it unfolds. More specifically, our results support the view that principals' knowledge is both situated and enacted. Rather than being derived from formal training or reducible to predefined procedures, it is continuously constructed through interaction with particular individuals, problems and organizational contexts. The situatedness of this knowledge lies in the fact that it is inseparable from the specific contexts in which principals act. It is not abstract or decontextualized, but emerges through ongoing interactions with actors, constraints and affordances present in the situation. In this sense, it is dynamically constructed in relation to the singular configurations of each school context. Second, this knowledge is embodied, as it is grounded in principals' engagement in action. It is not limited to explicit reasoning or formalized procedures, but is expressed through perceptions, attentional orientations and immediate adjustments in activity. This perspective aligns with phenomenological approaches to action (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty), which emphasize that knowing is inseparable from being physically and perceptually involved in the world. In addition, our results also suggest that situated knowledge is highly personal and variable: it is not prescribed in training programs and cannot be reduced to a predefined set of steps, but is shaped over time by each principal's biography, bodily dispositions and repertoire of past experiences, which leads to significant differences from one actor—and from one situation—to another.

The empirical results illustrate how principals interpret situations in real time and adjust their actions accordingly. For instance, when a principal adapts the way, he supervises interns who are not yet aware of their responsibilities, or when he responds to a teacher's personal difficulties through supportive engagement, his actions are not guided by abstract rules but by an ongoing interpretation of situational anchors. These examples show that situated knowledge is enacted through practice, as principals make sense of evolving situations and respond in contextually appropriate ways. Principals are bodily and emotionally situated in concrete interactions with interns, teachers and pupils, and meanings emerge and are renewed across these encounters. In this sense, principals' knowledge is not only located "in their heads" but also in their bodily orientations, affective states and responsiveness to the



environment, which together shape how situations are perceived and acted upon, in line with Pfeifer and Bongard's (2007) and O'Malley et al.'s (2008) arguments about embodied and embedded cognition.

These findings must be understood considering the Moroccan educational context, where school principals operate under significant institutional constraints. Unlike their counterparts in North American or European systems, Moroccan principals do not hold formal authority over human resource management or pedagogical leadership (OECD, 2024). In other African education systems, particularly in West Africa, principals similarly tend to exercise a predominantly managerial form of leadership, oriented toward administrative efficiency, hierarchical coordination and compliance with accountability demands in resource-constrained environments (Bush & Glover, 2016). These patterns in African countries are linked to contextual factors such as resource availability, political and institutional stability, and the policy frameworks that structure school leadership. This contextual specificity may help to explain why the situated knowledge we identified is predominantly relational and regulatory rather than instructional: principals invest their embodied presence and relational skills precisely because these are the domains in which they retain the greatest scope for agency. Beyond establishing the situated nature of principals' knowledge, our analysis allowed us to distinguish several types of situated knowledge that are mobilized and constructed in different configurations across situations. In the Moroccan educational context, these findings have important implications for the training of school principals. The current training program is based more on theoretical subjects and modules than on practical situations. Our findings therefore highlight the importance of incorporating practical aspects, particularly for situations that occur daily and are of great importance, and which in a way define and influence school leadership. The research program that we mobilized in this study, focused on analyzing leadership activity and generating 'evocative cases' (Spillane et al., 2008) through which practitioners can reflect. In what follows, we further develop this contribution by distinguishing and characterizing these categories of situated knowledge.

With teachers:

Our findings suggest that training programs could incorporate situations related to the motivation and support of teachers, pedagogical supervision, and the creation a respectful environment for teachers and trainees. These situations require principals to mobilize situated knowledge, particularly through everyday practices such as encouragement, classroom visits, and informal interactions. As observed, principals' practices and words have a very strong effect on the professional motivation of teachers, encouraging the teaching staff to function in a healthy work environment. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies, which suggest that the leadership styles and practices of school principals are among the main factors that motivate teachers in their work and in their willingness to perform specific tasks (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021; Roth et al., 2007; Fernet et al., 2008).

While Wayne (2011) conceptualizes classroom visits as supervisory tools aimed at evaluating performance or monitoring program implementation, our findings reveal a fundamentally different function. For the principals in our study, visiting classrooms operates primarily as an embodied act of recognition and relational investment. This distinction suggests that in the Moroccan context, where principals lack formal mandates for pedagogical supervision (OECD, 2024), classroom visits serve a situated relational function that cannot be reduced to instructional leadership practices as typically described in the literature. This adds another aspect to the visit, which we did not reveal in our results, namely providing information and feedback on their work and progress, as well as on teachers' practices, rather than limiting ourselves to motivation and supervision. The results of this study corroborate the findings of another study, which suggests that variables related to organizational culture have a significant effect on variables related to work motivation and that the more favorable the relationships between superiors and subordinates and the more supportive the school environment, the more comfortable the work environment, which promotes work motivation (Suriansyah, 2021).

With the students



With regard to the students, that training programs could incorporate situations related to the supervision of student arrivals and departures, these situations highlight an important aspect of their work, based on two main categories of knowledge: the protection of students and their security and building supportive and inclusive student relationships. In a very detailed study on student safety in schools was conducted by Savolainen (2023) it was confirmed that the safety of the psychosocial learning environment was considered a very important element of an overall safe learning environment. The importance of a good atmosphere in the classroom was particularly essential from a safety perspective. In the other hand, during the self-confrontation interviews, principals confirmed that he needed to persevere in this relationship because it reflected his success in his work, and that the fact that they came to greet him meant that they trusted him and that he had to respond to them with the same warmth. The aspect of reliability was addressed in the research by Mehmood et al. (2023), which considers it a key element of effective educational leadership, in addition to other interpersonal skills such as listening, honesty, empathy, and conflict management, also considered by Majluf and Abarca (2021) as one of the most important factors for a principal's success.

With the parents

Concerning the parents, training programs could address situations connected to meetings with parents, based on two main categories of situated knowledge: Ensuring parental involvement in the educational process, as evidenced by the emphasis principals place during interviews on their role and the importance of parental support for the school's work. Another aspect of parental involvement is ensuring that their relationship with teachers is always optimal. This is why principals emphasize the importance of parents attending meetings or, ideally, being the ones to greet the teacher in order to avoid any disagreements. The principal describes himself as a firefighter ready to rescue any situation that could escalate. Epstein (2007) shows that when parents are actively involved in their child's education, students tend to be more motivated and have higher self-esteem (Epstein et al., 2011). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) further emphasize this conclusion and argue that parental involvement is essential to academic success, explaining that when parents show a sincere interest in their child's education, it sends a strong message: learning is important. By working together, parents, teachers, and the school community can create a powerful support system that enables students to achieve their academic goals and reach their full potential. Parents are key partners in a child's education, working alongside teachers and the school community to help students reach their full potential.

Taken together, our findings contribute to the literature on educational leadership in three ways. First, by adopting an enactive and phenomenological approach, we move beyond self-reported descriptions of leadership styles to document the actual knowledge-in-action that principals construct and mobilize in real time an aspect that remains largely undocumented in existing empirical studies (cf. Spillane et al., 2008; Lord & Shondrick, 2011). Second, by situating our study in Morocco, we respond to calls for contextualizing educational leadership research (Hallinger, 2026; Bellibaş et al., 2025) and contribute to the still-limited body of empirical work on school leadership in African educational systems. Third, the distinction between situated, theoretical and procedural knowledge offers a practical framework for rethinking principal training programs not as the transmission of decontextualized knowledge, but as the design of environments in which situated competencies can be constructed through engagement with authentic professional situations.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the findings revealed by this study enrich our understanding of school leadership through the lens of knowledge mobilized and constructed, showing that it manifests differently depending on the categories of actors involved, and that it relies on continuous adaptation to the situations encountered, requiring principals to interpret circumstances, adapt strategies, and respond in real time to emerging challenges.



The results point to a misalignment between existing leadership training and the practical demands of the role, suggesting the need for greater integration of situated competencies related to school climate management, family engagement, and teacher professional support. Understanding the knowledge used in these interactions not only helps to better conceptualize school leadership, but also to develop training programs rooted in real-life situations, thereby strengthening school leaders' ability to act appropriately and effectively.

In summary, understanding the characterization of situated knowledge mobilized and constructed by Moroccan principals is essential for appreciating their role in school management and the learning environment. Their leadership not only shapes the operational aspects of schools but also profoundly influences the educational experiences of students and teachers alike. By focusing on principals' knowledge enacted in practice, this article contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical models of leadership and the lived reality of school management. It offers a categorization that can support both future research and the refinement of professional development programs. Therefore, this study is limited by the small number of situations observed and the contextual specificity. Although hexadic analysis provides detailed information about activity, the results of the study should be tested on a larger and more diverse sample to assess their generalizability. Future research could include long-term observation and training interventions to explore how situational knowledge develops over time. Identifying the knowledge enacted in practice makes it possible to create training programs based on authentic and relevant professional practices rather than simply theoretical transmission. Thus, designing training courses that take into account the context and the knowledge actually mobilized enhances their effectiveness and the learners' ability to adapt to what they have learned.

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