



The School Principal According to the Perceptions of Primary and Middle School Students: A Metaphorical Analysis

İlkokul ve Ortaokul Öğrencilerinin Algılarına Göre Okul Müdürü: Metaforik Bir Analiz

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Abstract: This study was conducted to examine how primary and middle school students perceive the image of their school principal through metaphors. The study group consisted of 673 students selected from primary and middle schools using criterion sampling. However, 307 participants were excluded from the analysis as they did not meet the study criteria, resulting in a final sample of 366 students. Data were collected by asking participants to complete the sentence: "The school principal is like ... because ...". The collected data were analyzed through content analysis, and the metaphors were categorized to systematically examine students' perceptions. The findings revealed that primary school students generated 69 metaphors, while middle school students produced 112 metaphors. These metaphors were grouped under two main themes and five categories. The results demonstrated developmental differences in the perception of principals across grade levels. Primary school students predominantly viewed the principal as a protective and supportive figure, whereas middle school students emphasized authority and control, showing more pronounced negative attributes. According to the findings, student perceptions were primarily concentrated in the categories of "Leadership" and "Emotional Support," while fewer metaphors were associated with the categories of "Communication" and "Ethics." Although primary school students frequently likened the principal to a "teacher" or "president," middle school students more often used metaphors such as "father" and "president." Overall, the results indicate that the school principal is perceived primarily as both a leader and a protective figure.

Key words: School principal, primary school students, middle school students, metaphorical perception

Özet: Bu çalışma, ilkökul ve ortaokul öğrencilerinin gözünde okul müdürünün nasıl bir imaja sahip olduğunu metaforlar aracılığıyla ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubuna ölçüt örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen ilkökul ve ortaokul kademelerinde öğrenim gören toplam 673 öğrenci katılmıştır. Ancak ölçütlere uygun olmayan 307 öğrenci elenmiş, 366 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Bu araştırmada veriler, katılımcılardan "Okul müdürü... gibidir, çünkü..." cümlesini kendi düşüncelerine göre tamamlamaları istenerek toplanmıştır. Toplanan bu veriler, içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılarak kategorilere ayrılmış ve öğrencilerin okul müdürüne ilişkin algıları sistematik bir şekilde analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmada; ilkökul öğrencilerinin 69, ortaokul öğrencilerin 112 metafor ürettikleri sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Üretilen metaforlar 2 tema ve 5 kategoriye ayrılmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, ilkökul ve ortaokul öğrencilerinin okul müdürü algılarında gelişimsel farklılıklar olduğunu göstermektedir. İlkokul öğrencileri müdürü daha çok koruyucu ve destekleyici bir figür olarak algılamakta, ortaokul öğrencilerinde otorite ve denetim vurgusunun öne çıktığı, ayrıca olumsuz niteliklerin daha belirginleştiği görülmüştür. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, öğrencilerin okul müdürüne ilişkin algıları en çok "Liderlik" ve "Duygusal Destek" kategorilerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Buna karşılık, "İletişim" ve "Etik" kategorilerinde daha az metafor üretilmiştir. İlkokul öğrencileri, müdürü genellikle "başkan" ve "öğretmen" benzetmeleriyle ifade ederken, ortaokul öğrencileri ise "baba" ve "başkan" metaforlarını daha sık kullanmıştır. Bu bulgular, okul müdürünün öncelikle bir lider ve koruyucu figür olarak algılandığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul müdürü, ilkökul öğrencileri, ortaokul öğrencileri, metaforik algı

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Introduction

Education is one of the fundamental needs of society, and this process is largely carried out through schools (Yanar, 2021). As educational organizations, schools play a critical role in social development and individual transformation. Within this process, school principals emerge as key actors who guide, motivate, and coordinate teachers, students, and other stakeholders in line with organizational and educational objectives (Başaran, 1994). Lunenburg and Ornstein (2013) define the duties of principals as being shaped by the geographical and social context of the school, but essentially involving responsibility for the functioning of the institution and the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes.

In today's educational systems, the roles expected of school principals have diversified and deepened considerably. Beyond traditional administrative tasks, principals are expected to demonstrate competence in instructional leadership, strategic planning, institutional communication, community relations, and professional development (Balyer, 2012). As effective instructional leaders, principals should possess strong knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy supported by research, play a motivational role in learning processes, and create an environment that promotes the continuous growth of teachers, students, and themselves (Yavuz, 2015). Leadership styles and managerial approaches adopted by principals must align with the core goals of the educational system and its legal framework. Leadership goes beyond administrative duties and constitutes a vital element that directly shapes the quality of education and students' academic success (Hıraoğlu & Hıraoğlu, 2023).

Students' perceptions of the school principal stand out as a crucial factor influencing their attachment to school and academic motivation (Kazak & Yaylalı, 2023). In this regard, the leadership behaviors demonstrated by principals significantly affect students' learning processes, teachers' professional motivation, and the overall school climate (Aktaş & Özgenel, 2020).

The Concept of Metaphor in Educational Research

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Understanding how students perceive their school principals requires not only examining leadership behaviors but also exploring the conceptual frameworks through which these perceptions are formed. One effective approach for analyzing such perceptions is metaphor analysis, as metaphors enable individuals to articulate abstract ideas and complex experiences in more concrete and relatable forms.

According to the Turkish Language Association (2021), the word "metaphor" is used synonymously with "analogy" or "borrowing." The term originates from the Greek word *metaphora*, which combines *meta* (beyond) and *pherein* (to carry), meaning "to transfer from one place to another" (Corbett & Connors, 1999). In the literature, the concept of metaphor has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Forcenville (2002) explains it as the way a person expresses a concept through analogies, while Aristotle (2008) describes it as attributing a new meaning to a word beyond its literal sense. Lakoff and Johnson (2005) define metaphors as "mental mechanisms that shape our everyday lives," whereas Saban (2008) emphasizes that a metaphor is "worth a thousand words" because it provides a conceptual framework for making sense of complex phenomena. Cerit (2008) underlines metaphors as tools that enable individuals to explain how they perceive events and phenomena around them through analogies. All these definitions highlight the critical role of metaphors in individuals' processes of understanding and mentally structuring the world (Arslan & Bayrakçı, 2006). Similarly, Shuell (1990) noted that "if a picture is worth a thousand words, a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures," emphasizing their power in learning processes.

Fundamentally, metaphors serve as cognitive tools that link two distinct elements through language. In this process, a similarity is established between a well-known concept and a less familiar one. Therefore, as both conceptual and cognitive tools, metaphors play an important role in language learning and teaching (Miao, 2023). The use of metaphors as tools in problem-solving today lies in their ability to foster free thinking, encapsulate complex ideas in a single term, and provide easier access to affective data (Koç, 2014). According to Balcı (2008), metaphors contribute to understanding organizations by reflecting diverse perspectives. In the field of educational administration, metaphors serve as an important tool for comprehending the organizational structure of schools and evaluating administrators' behaviors (Balcı, Demirkasımoğlu, Erdoğan, & Akın, 2011). Yalçın and Erginer (2012) further suggest

that they allow an understanding of how administrators are perceived by members of the organization. Metaphors are commonly classified into eight types: structural, orientational, ontological, conceptual, abstract-concrete, mixed, implicit, and dead metaphors (Atahan, 2023). The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, however, categorizes them under three main types: structural (conceptual), ontological, and orientational metaphors (Keçeci, 2020).

In Türkiye, metaphorical studies on education began to spread widely in the late 1990s (Balcı, 2011). These studies mainly focused on concepts such as students, teachers, administrators, and school culture (Cerit, 2008; Yalçın & Erginer, 2012; Özdemir, 2012). On the other hand, research specifically analyzing perceptions of school principals through metaphors has been limited. International studies such as Heffernan (2019) and Hernández-Amorós and Martínez Ruiz (2018) demonstrate that perceptions of principals are shaped by cultural and contextual factors. This study is therefore expected to fill an important gap in the field by offering a comprehensive and up-to-date comparison of students' perceptions across different educational stages in Türkiye using metaphor analysis. It is also anticipated to serve as a guide for future studies. The findings may contribute to principals' development of effective communication strategies with students at different grade levels. Highlighting the differences in students' expectations of principals across developmental stages may guide administrators in adopting age-appropriate communication approaches, thereby supporting a positive school climate. Furthermore, the Ministry of National Education can utilize these findings to enrich in-service training programs for school principals, especially in areas such as student psychology, effective communication, and leadership strategies aligned with developmental stages. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide significant contributions to the effective management of schools and the creation of learning environments sensitive to student needs. Accordingly, the research seeks to answer the following central questions:

1. What metaphors do primary and middle school students hold regarding the concept of the school principal?
2. Under which conceptual categories can these metaphors be grouped according to their shared characteristics?

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Methodology

This study aimed to explore primary and middle school students' perceptions of their school principal through metaphors. The research was designed within a qualitative framework, and qualitative research methods were employed throughout all stages—from data collection to interpretation of findings.

Study Group

The study group was formed using criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. This method enables the selection of participants who meet predetermined criteria (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014). The key criterion in this study was that students must have been acquainted with their school principal for at least one academic year. For this reason, first and fifth grade students, who were likely to have known their principals for less than a year, were excluded from the study. The research was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year in Balıkesir province, Türkiye, with a total of 673 students from primary (2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades) and middle (6th, 7th, and 8th grades) schools. However, 307 students who did not meet the criteria were excluded, resulting in a final study group of 366 participants.

Data Collection Tool

To reveal primary and middle school students' perceptions of the school principal through metaphors, a data collection form developed by the researcher was used. The form consisted of a single open-ended prompt: "The school principal is like ... because ..." The study was conducted with volunteer participants from various public schools in Balıkesir province during the 2024–2025 academic year, provided they met the criterion of having known their school principal for at least one year. Data were collected through face-to-face sessions, and students' metaphorical expressions were recorded directly from their written responses.

Data Analysis

The metaphors generated by students in response to the prompt "The school principal is like ... because ..." were analyzed using content analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique. In the first stage, all responses were reviewed; those that did not constitute a metaphor, lacked justification, or were logically inconsistent were excluded. Accordingly, responses from 307 participants were eliminated, leaving 69 valid metaphors from primary school students and 112 from middle school students for analysis.

In the second stage, the metaphors produced by students were examined in detail based on their common characteristics. Themes and categories were established by considering the subject, source, and rationale of each metaphor. To ensure reliability, the list of metaphors and categories were independently evaluated by two field experts. The experts' categorizations were compared using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for inter-rater reliability, yielding a high agreement rate of .94, which confirmed the consistency and reliability of the categorization. To directly reflect student perspectives, direct quotations from participants' responses were included in the analysis. The codes "P2.1, P2.2, ..." were used to represent primary school students, while "S6.1, S6.2, ..." were assigned to middle school students.

Findings

In this section, data reflecting primary and middle school students' metaphorical perceptions of the school principal were analyzed in accordance with the study's objectives. The results are summarized below. The themes and categories derived from student responses, along with their interrelationships, are presented in Figure 1.

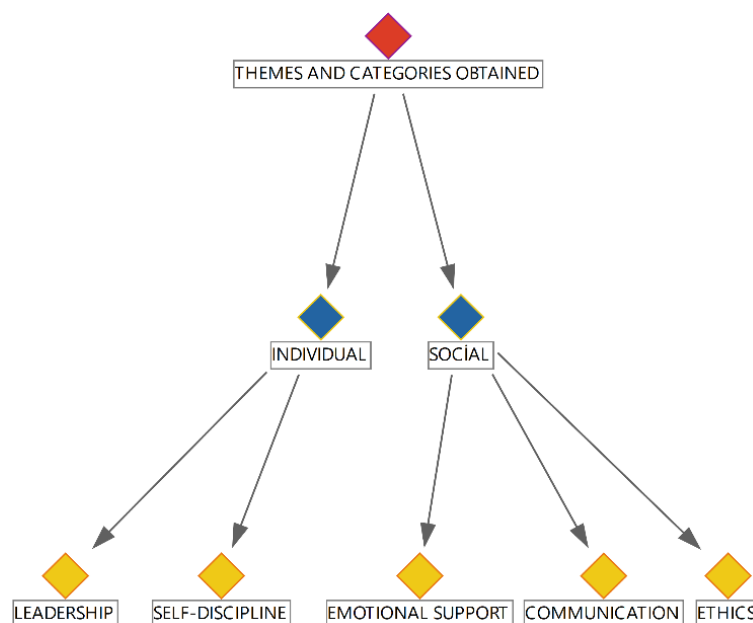


Figure 1. Themes and categories derived from students' metaphorical perceptions of the school principal

First, the metaphors generated by primary and middle school students were categorized and are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Metaphors produced by primary school students regarding the school principal

Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f
teacher	15	commander	2	film founder	1	book	1
president	14	king of the forest	2	powerful person	1	sultan	1
lion	8	agent	1	referee	1	clown	1
king	6	friend	1	ghost	1	cotton	1
bee	4	soldier	1	speedometer	1	cotton candy	1
father	4	lion king	1	chocolate-filled mint candy	1	robot	1
brain	4	lawyer	1	emperor	1	warm house	1
president	4	baklava	1	guardian angel	1	spiderman	1
mother	3	mayor	1	captain	1	coach (sports)	1
parents	3	computer	1	orchestra conductor	1	cleaning robot	1
hero	3	protector	1	funny singer	1	scale	1
ant	3	plane tree	1	mole	1	traffic police	1
guardian	3	flower bud	1	queen bee	1	ladybug	1
angel	3	shepherd	1	little girl	1	helpful person	1
boss	3	genius	1	school father	1	intelligence game	1
tree	2	state	1	school captain	1		
flower	2	man like a wall	1	film founder	1		
cat	2	thoughtful person	1	powerful person	1		

Primary school students produced a total of 69 distinct metaphors to describe the school principal. The most frequently used metaphors were "teacher" (f = 15) and "president" (f = 14).

Table 2. Metaphors produced by middle school students regarding the school principal

Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f
father	21	inspector	2	discipline (the word)	1	highway	1
president	11	prison	2	strict commander	1	final boss in a game	1
commander	9	rooster	2	bricklayer	1	game developer	1
king	9	pen	2	elden ring final boss	1	cotton	1
head of state	8	camera	2	apple	1	daisy	1
constitution	7	ant	2	diamond	1	roasted chestnut	1
grandfather	5	queen bee	2	soccer referee	1	guide	1
sun	5	spicy raw meatball	1	ship captain	1	clock	1
book	5	spicy lahmacun	1	entrepreneur	1	prosecutor	1
parents	4	tree root	1	group manager	1	angry person	1
bee	4	tree	1	security guard	1	hot-tempered person	1
brain	4	heavy stone	1	prison warden	1	commentator	1
leader	4	alarm	1	coconut	1	sponge	1
parrot	4	car key	1	hitler	1	superhero	1
judge	3	soldier	1	first aid kit	1	candy	1
cell nucleus	3	lion	1	businessman	1	devil	1
rulebook	3	intestine	1	head	1	toolbox	1
angel	3	minister	1	capital owner	1	coach (sports)	1
budgerigar	3	our flag	1	captain	1	anger (inside out)	1
teacher/head teacher	3	computer	1	kettle	1	maneless lion	1
police	3	player who controls us	1	frightening person	1	airplane	1
eraser	3	bull	1	dog	1	master	1
family	2	regional director	1	rule-enforcer	1	warning signs	1
mother	2	end-of-level boss	1	rules	1	judge	1
guard	2	ice cube	1	tangerine	1	youtuber	1
refrigerator	2	witch	1	scary king in fairy tales	1	director/filmmaker	1
seed/core	2	ruler	1	core of the school	1	puzzle game	1
exam/test	2	shepherd	1	discipline (the word)	1	highway	1

Middle school students produced a total of 112 distinct metaphors to describe the school principal. The most frequently used metaphors were "father" ($f = 21$) and "president" ($f = 11$).

Overall, the metaphors generated by students were grouped under two main themes and five categories. Metaphors were most frequently associated with the Individual theme ($f = 257$) and least frequently with the Social theme ($f = 109$). When examined by category, the majority of metaphors pertained to Leadership ($f = 223$), while the fewest were related to Ethics ($f = 18$).

The themes and categories identified based on student perspectives in the subsequent phase of the study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and categories identified in students' perceptions of the school principal

Theme	Individual		Social	
Category	Primary School	Middle School	Primary School	Middle School
	f	f	f	f
Leadership	85	138	Emotional Support	29
Self-Discipline	12	22	Communication	7
-	-	-	Ethics	6
Total	97	160	Total	42
				67

The metaphors associated with the Individual theme and its Leadership category, produced by primary and middle school students, are presented in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4. Categories within the individual theme - leadership (primary school students)

Category	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f
Leadership	president	13	film founder	1
	teacher	11	emperor	1
	lion	7	hero	1
	king	5	captain	1
	head of state	4	book	1
	brain	4	commander	1
	mother	3	speaker	1
	father	3	mole	1
	boss	3	queen bee	1
	tree	2	angel	1
	agent	1	pomegranate	1
	parents	1	school father	1
	soldier	1	school captain	1
	lion king	1	orchestra conductor	1
	lawyer	1	sultan	1
	mayor	1	coach (sports)	1
	computer	1	cleaning robot	1
	shepherd	1	traffic police	1
	state	1	ladybug	1
	genius	1	puzzle game	1

The metaphors produced by primary school students regarding the school principal were categorized under the Individual theme and the Leadership category. Within the Leadership category ($f = 85$), participants generated 40 distinct metaphors. Analysis revealed that the most frequently used metaphors were "president" ($f = 11$), "teacher" ($f = 11$), and "lion" ($f = 7$). The metaphors employed by primary school students within the Leadership category are presented below :

P4.6. *The school principal is like a teacher because he always gives us advice, such as keeping nature clean.*" (Teacher)

P2.9. *The school principal is like a president because he is the one who governs the school.* (President)

P4.49. *The school principal is like a lion because in the forest, the lion manages the animals and makes announcements, just as the principal does.* (Lion)

P3.12. *The school principal is like a book because he is knowledgeable, serves as an example for us, and provides us with various illustrations.* (Book)

Table 5. Categories within the individual theme - leadership (middle school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Leadership	president	10	intestine	1	captain	1
	king	9	minister	1	scary person	1
	head of state	7	our flag	1	rule-enforcer	1
	constitution	7	guard	1	rules	1
	father	7	computer	1	tangerine	1
	book	5	player who governs us	1	budgerigar	1
	commander	4	regional director	1	school core	1
	leader	4	end-of-level boss	1	lion, king of forest	1
	brain	4	seed/core	1	highway	1
	cell nucleus	3	detector	1	final boss in a game	1
	rulebook	3	test/exam	1	game developer	1
	queen bee	2	strict commander	1	teacher	1
	camera	2	puzzle game	1	parrot	1
	sun	2	elden ring final boss	1	police	1
	judge	2	apple	1	guide	1
	prison	2	soccer referee	1	prosecutor	1
	rooster	2	ship captain	1	eraser	1
	inspector	2	entrepreneur	1	angry person	1
	mother	2	group manager	1	commentator	1
	parents	2	security guard	1	sponge	1
	bee	2	prison warden	1	coach (sports)	1
	grandfather	2	hitler	1	maneless lion	1
	spicy lahmacun	1	head	1	airplane	1
	alarm	1	pen	1	warning sign	1
	soldier	1	capital owner	1	director	1

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Middle school students produced 75 distinct metaphors within the Leadership category ($f = 138$). The most common were "president" ($f = 10$) and "king" ($f = 9$). Representative responses include:

S6.22. *The school principal is like a president because he makes all the decisions and sets the rules.* (President)

S7.24. *The school principal is like the nucleus of a cell because just as the nucleus manages the cell, the principal manages the school.* (Nucleus)

S6.59. *The school principal is like a guide because he shows us the right path, points out our mistakes, and sometimes teaches, warns, or congratulates us.* (Guide)

S8.43. *The school principal is like a disciplined commander because he inspects the school, monitors the students, and works to maintain a good student profile.* (Commander)

The metaphors associated with the Individual theme and its Self-Discipline category, produced by primary and middle school students, are presented in Table 6 and Table 7."

Table 6. Categories within the individual theme - self-discipline (primary school students)

Category	Metaphor	f
Self-Discipline	bee	4
	ant	3
	robot	1
	speedometer	1
	commander	1
	teacher	1
	genius	1

The metaphors produced by primary school students regarding their principal were categorized under the Individual theme and the Self-Discipline category. Participants generated 7 distinct metaphors within the Self-Discipline category (f = 12). Analysis revealed that the most frequently used metaphors were "bee" (f = 4) and "ant" (f = 3). The metaphors employed by primary school students within the Self-Discipline category are presented below:

P4.14. *The school principal is like a bee because he is hardworking, generous, and responsible.* (Bee)

P2.3. *The school principal is like a robot because he works hard and follows his work plan.* (Robot)

P3.20. *The school principal is like a commander because he is orderly and disciplined.* (Commander)

Table 7. Categories within the individual theme - self-discipline (middle school students)

Category	Metaphor	f	Metaphor	f
Self-Discipline	commander	4	devil	1
	bee	2	craftsman/master	1
	ant	2	bricklayer	1
	heavy stone	1	businessman	1
	grandfather	1	clock	1
	discipline (the word)	1	shepherd	1
	bull	1	president	1
	test/exam	1	devil	1
	ruler	1		

The metaphors produced by middle school students regarding the school principal were categorized under the Individual theme and the Self-Discipline category. Within the Self-Discipline category (f = 12), participants generated 7 distinct metaphors. Analysis revealed that participants most frequently described the school principal using the metaphors of "commander" (f = 4), "bee" (f = 2), and "ant" (f = 2). The metaphors employed by middle school students within the Self-Discipline category are presented below.

S8.24. *The school principal is like a commander because he is disciplined and his leadership is prominent.* (Commander)

S6.55. *The school principal is like a shepherd because he brings order to the school.* (Shepherd)

S7.18. *The school principal is like a bee because bees are hardworking, and our principal works and strives for the school and students.* (Bee)

The metaphors associated with the Social theme and its Communication category, produced by primary and middle school students, are presented in Table 8 and Table 9.

Table 8. Categories within the social theme - communication (primary school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Communication	lion	1
	father	1
	ghost	1
	clown	1
	funny singer	1
	teacher	1
	little girl	1

The metaphors produced by primary school students about their principal have been organized under the theme of Social and the category of Communication. Within the Communication category ($f=7$), participants produced 7 different metaphors. The metaphors used by primary school students related to the Communication category are given below:

P4.16. *The school principal is like a ghost because they are very rarely seen.* (Ghost)

P3.25. *The school principal is like a clown because you are very fun for the school.* (Clown)

P3.23. *The school principal is like a funny singer because the principal is very entertaining; on Fridays we do "hands up, 1, 2, 3".* (Funny singer)

Table 9. Categories Within the Social Theme - Communication (Middle School Students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Communication	parrot	3	spicy raw meatball	1
	budgerigar	2	kettle	1
	refrigerator	2	witch	1
	sun	2	anger in inside out	1
	angry person ("ball of anger")	1	ice cube	1
	scary king in fairy tales	1	youtuber	1

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The metaphors produced by middle school students about their principal have been organized under the theme of Social and the category of Communication. Within the Communication category ($f=17$), participants produced 12 different metaphors. Within this category, it is seen that participants most frequently expressed the school principal using the metaphors of a parrot ($f=3$), a parakeet ($f=2$), a refrigerator ($f=2$), and the sun ($f=3$). The metaphors used by middle school students related to the Communication category are given below:

S8.74. *The school principal is like the sun. Because he is a very warm person.* (Sun)

S7.55. *The school principal is like a parakeet. Because he talks a lot and repeats himself a lot.* (Parakeet)

S6.47. *The school principal is like a refrigerator. Because he is a very cold person.* (Refrigerator)

The metaphors associated with the Social theme and its Emotional Support category, produced by primary and middle school students, are presented in Table 10 and Table 11.

Table 10. Categories within the social theme - emotional support (primary school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Emotional Support	protector/guardian	3	baklava (dessert)	1
	cat	2	cotton candy	1
	flower	2	someone who keeps us safe	1
	parents	2	warm house	1
	teacher	2	king	1
	hero	2	cotton	1
	strong as a wall	1	helpful person	1
	plane tree	1	thoughtful person	1
	spiderman	1	baklava (dessert)	1
	flower bud	1	cotton candy	1
	friend	1	someone who keeps us safe	1

The metaphors produced by primary school students about their principal were organized under the Social theme and the Emotional Support category. Within the Emotional Support category ($f=28$), participants produced 22 different metaphors. Within this category, it is seen that participants most frequently expressed the school principal using the metaphors of protector/protection ($f=3$), cat ($f=2$), flower ($f=2$), mother/father ($f=2$), teacher ($f=2$), and hero ($f=2$). The metaphors used by primary school students regarding the Emotional Support category are provided below:

P3.14. *The school principal is like a plane tree because they protect us.* (Plane Tree)

P3.30. *The school principal is like a protector because they often give us information to keep us safe. That is why I compare them to a protector.* (Protector)

P4.65. *The school principal is like a hero because they help us a lot, assist us in solving our problems, and build playgrounds for us.* (Hero)

Table 11. Categories within the social theme - emotional support (middle school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Emotional Support	father	14	toolbox	1
	police	2	cooked chestnut	1
	teacher/head teacher	2	lion	1
	eraser	2	pen	1
	family	2	tree root	1
	grandfather	2	guard	1
	parents	2	superhero	1
	first aid kit	1	angel	1
	dog	1	president (head of state)	1
	candy	1		

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The metaphors produced by middle school students for the school principal were organized within the Social theme and under the Emotional Support category. Within the Emotional Support category ($f=38$), participants produced 20 different metaphors. Within this category, participants most frequently used the metaphors father ($f=14$), police ($f=2$), teacher/head teacher ($f=2$), eraser ($f=2$), family ($f=2$), and grandfather ($f=2$). The metaphors used by middle school students in the Emotional Support category are listed below:

S7.35. *The school principal is like a grandfather because they are very sweet, kind-hearted, and calm. We love our school principal very much.* (Grandfather)

S6.10. *The school principal is like a toolbox because a toolbox contains a tool for every malfunction that arises. Similarly, the school principal has a solution for every problem that emerges at school.* (Toolbox)

S8.90. *The school principal is like a family because they try to fulfill all our requests, place great importance on education, and endeavor to utilize all available resources.* (Family)

The metaphors associated with the Social theme and its Ethics category, produced by primary and middle school students, are presented in Table 12 and Table 13.

Table 12. Categories within the social theme - ethics (primary school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Ethics	angel	2
	guardian angel	1
	chocolate-filled mint candy	1
	scale (balance)	1
	referee	1

The metaphors produced by primary school students about their principal were organized under the theme of Social and the category of Ethics. Within the Ethics category ($f=6$), participants produced 5 different metaphors. Within this category, it was observed that participants most frequently described

the principal using the angel ($f=2$) metaphor. The metaphors used by primary school students related to the Ethics category are given below:

P4.40. *The school principal is like an angel because they treat us very well. When they want to chat, even if they are in a bad mood, they always choose our class out of all the others.* (Angel)

P3.28. *The school principal is like an angel because they are kind to us and provide for our education.* (Angel)

P3.22. *The school principal is like a referee because referees manage the game fairly.* (Referee)

Table 13. Categories within the social theme - ethics (middle school students)

Category	Metaphor	<i>f</i>	Metaphor	<i>f</i>
Ethics	angel	2	judge	1
	cotton	1	justice (judge)	1
	sun	1	diamond	1
	daisy	1	coconut	1
	nucleus	1	tree	1
	car key	1		

The metaphors produced by middle school students about their principal were organized under the theme of Social and the category of Ethics. Within the Ethics category ($f=12$), participants produced 11 different metaphors. Within this category, it was observed that participants most frequently described the principal using the angel ($f=2$) metaphor. The metaphors used by middle school students related to the Ethics category are provided below:

S8.82. *The school principal is like an angel because they want what is best for everyone in their school.* (Angel)

S7.7. *The school principal is like a car key because just as a car cannot start without a key, balance cannot be maintained in our school without a principal.* (Car Key)

S6.40. *The school principal is like a judge because they pursue justice and never deviate from it.* (Judge)

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Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of metaphors produced by both primary and middle school students regarding the school principal carried positive connotations. The metaphors revealed that students perceive the school principal as an important role model and guide who contributes significantly to both personal development and academic processes. Specifically, metaphors emphasizing leadership, guidance, and protection underscored the positive impact of school principals in the educational process and their value in students' perspectives. These findings confirm that principals are perceived not only as administrative figures but also as essential actors who provide emotional, ethical, and communicative support.

In terms of quantity, primary school students produced 69 metaphors, while middle school students generated 112. These metaphors were grouped into five categories under two main themes: Individual and Social. The majority of metaphors fell under the Individual theme, while the fewest were associated with the Social theme. Among the categories, Leadership and Emotional Support were the most prominent, whereas Ethics and Communication were the least referenced. Specifically, primary school students most frequently used the metaphors "teacher" and "president," while middle school students used "father" and "president."

Under the Individual theme, the categories of Leadership and Self-Discipline were identified. Metaphors in the Leadership category suggested that principals are viewed as strong leaders, organizers, and protective figures. Consistent with previous studies (Akan, Yalçın, & Yıldırım, 2004; Özgenel & Gökçe, 2019), metaphors such as "brain," "commander," "king," and "president" emphasized principals' roles as decision-makers and authority figures. Developmental differences were also evident: primary school students often employed concrete and familial metaphors (e.g., "lion," "family members"), while

middle school students used more abstract or institutional metaphors (e.g., "constitution," "prison warden," "Hitler"), reflecting a more critical stance toward authority with age. This aligns with Baştan, Tetik, and Kasımay's (2014) findings, where students described principals as distant, serious, and seldom-smiling authority figures. Nonetheless, metaphors such as "sun" and "guide" indicated that the principal's role as a mentor remained salient across both groups.

Metaphors under the Self-Discipline category indicated that students view the principal as a figure who works diligently and responsibly to meet the needs of the school. Although this reflects principals' commitment and positive engagement, the relatively limited number of metaphors in this category suggests that principals' hardworking qualities may not be sufficiently visible to students. Prior research (Aydoğdu, 2008; Dönmez, 2008; Koçak, 2011; Pesen et al., 2015; Yalçın, 2012) similarly found fewer metaphors related to principals' diligence. This indicates a need for principals to make their dedication more apparent to students. For middle students, metaphors such as "commander," "ruler," and "clock" reflected discipline, rule-orientation, and control, whereas "heavy stone" or "devil" suggested that some adolescents perceive discipline as burdensome or oppressive.

Under the theme of social thema, the categories of Emotional Support, Communication, and Ethics have been identified. The metaphors in the Emotional Support category reveal that students perceive the school principal not merely as an administrative authority but as a source of emotional support and trust. Primary school students associate the principal with the affection of a "parent" and a love as sweet as "cotton candy." Furthermore, they view the principal as the protective shelter of a "warm home." Among middle school students, this perception evolves into a more mature supportive foundation, as seen in metaphors such as "father" and "root of a tree," and a healing role, as in the analogy of a "repair kit." This difference between grade levels indicates that students perceive the principal first as a compassionate figure during childhood and then as a trustworthy guide during the transition to adolescence. In conclusion, an ideal principal profile should be shaped around these protective, supportive, and healing concepts that touch the student's heart. When the literature is examined, the metaphors of "mother" and "father" emphasize the protective and reassuring aspect of school principals (Akin-Kösterelioğlu, 2014; Turhan & Yaraş, 2013). A study by Yalçın and Erginer (2014) revealed that students depict school administrators, whom they perceive as "elements of love," as affectionate, smiling, compassionate individuals who reward and motivate them with positive words. This finding suggests that the warm and sincere attitudes of principals can positively enhance students' school attachment and learning motivation. The metaphors of "flower" and "butterfly" emerging in Aydoğdu's (2008) study are highly significant in demonstrating how valuable and positive an impression school administrators can leave on individuals. The research revealed that administrators are genuinely embraced by the school community and evoke positive emotions such as love and joy. This finding aligns with metaphors like "mother," "cotton candy," and "warm home" highlighted in the present study and reiterates the importance of a loving and valued administrator image from the students' perspective.

The findings of this study reveal a distinct duality in middle school students' perceptions of their school principals. Communication metaphors such as "refrigerator" and "rubik's cube" indicate the difficulties adolescents experience in their communication with school administrators. In contrast, emotional support metaphors like "warm home," "plane tree," and "family" suggest that some principals are able to establish a reassuring and trust-inspiring presence for their students. While these results partially align with existing research, they also diverge in certain aspects. For instance, the study by Karademir (2008) highlighted a significant communication gap, noting that nearly half of the student participants did not find their principals to be approachable or polite, thereby exposing the depth of communication issues within the school environment. Conversely, Bredeson (1987) emphasizes that communication is central to educational leadership and that the success of school administrators is dependent on this fundamental element. In this context, it is critically important for school leaders to re-evaluate their communication strategies with students to improve negative perceptions, particularly at the middle school level. Establishing a more sincere, transparent, and genuine dialogue appears to be a fundamental step toward positively altering these perceptions. The complex communication dynamics revealed by this study underscore the need for the subject to be discussed and examined in greater depth.

The findings in the "Ethics" category of this research present a meaningful and coherent picture that reflects the students' cognitive and emotional developmental stages. The metaphors used by primary

school students, such as "angel," "goodness angel," and "scale," indicate that this age group conceptualizes morality through a concrete, absolute, and black-and-white lens. For younger students, ethics is essentially about adhering to externally imposed, clear-cut rules and behaving "like an angel." In contrast, the metaphors used by middle school students diversify and gain depth; metaphors like "diamond," "coconut," "seed," and "car key" demonstrate their developing abstract thinking skills and their beginning to interpret ethics as a more complex and internalized value. The "diamond" and "coconut" metaphors reflect the idea that ethics possesses an intrinsic quality that is not immediately apparent from the outside but reveals itself as extremely valuable upon discovery, while the "car key" metaphor portrays the principal as an indispensable guide. A review of the literature reveals that a similar emphasis on "value" appears in different contexts; indeed, studies by Aydoğdu (2008) and Yalçın and Erginer (2012) also identified metaphors describing the school principal as a "valuable entity." Furthermore, the "scale" and "angel" metaphors reveal that students expect their principals to treat everyone equally and fairly, an expectation aligned with the moral dimension of paternalistic leadership (Farh & Cheng, 2000, as cited in Chan, 2014). Ultimately, the results of this study strongly support the critical importance of school principals structuring their leadership approaches to be developmentally appropriate, fair, and value-oriented, directly responsive to the moral understanding shaped by their students' developmental levels. As emphasized by Erdoğan (2006) and Özdemir, Bozkurt, & Aydın (2015), the human qualities of an effective school administrator form the foundation of leadership perception. In conclusion, school principals strengthening their communication skills, being emotionally accessible, and demonstrating their ethical stance will support students' both academic and personal development and positively transform the school climate. Principals reflecting values such as self-sacrifice, justice, and compassion in their behavior will establish them as genuine "role models" and reinforce students' sense of belonging to the school.

In summary, the association of the principal with powerful authority figures such as "president," "king," and "commander" in the Leadership category by both groups indicates that students' expectations from the principal are primarily focused on leadership qualities. The prominence of metaphors like "bee" and "ant" in the Self-Discipline category is an indicator that the principal is perceived with an emphasis on hard work and order. The production of more critical metaphors, such as "parrot" and "refrigerator," by middle school students in the Communication category suggests that the communication expectations of adolescents differ. In the Emotional Support category, the use of "protective" and "mother/father" metaphors by primary school students and "father" and "family" metaphors by middle school students shows that the principal is perceived as a trust and affection-based figure in both groups. Similarly, the prominence of the "angel" metaphor in both groups within the Ethics category reveals that the principal is seen as a fair and trustworthy role model. In conclusion, although there is diversity in the metaphorical perceptions of students according to their age groups, the principal is fundamentally positioned as a multifaceted figure identified with leadership, emotional support, and ethical values.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made;

1. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) may organize mandatory in-service training programs for school principals and candidates on the topics of "ethical leadership," "emotional intelligence," "conflict resolution," and "effective communication."
2. Regular meetings, workshops, and seminars should be organized to encourage experience sharing between public and private school principals. This would facilitate the dissemination of best practices.
3. Students should be actively involved in the process of determining classroom and school rules. By creating environments for discussion on the rationale behind rules, students can be encouraged to internalize them.
4. To deepen the metaphor analysis, mixed-methods studies employing both quantitative and qualitative research designs could be conducted, which would be beneficial for monitoring changes in perceptions.
5. Comparative studies that also include the perspectives of teachers and parents could be undertaken.

Ethical Statement

The study entitled "Perceptions of Primary and Middle School Students Regarding the School Principal: A Metaphorical Analysis" was conducted in strict compliance with scientific ethical standards and citation principles. No alterations were made to the research data, and this study has not been previously published nor submitted for evaluation elsewhere. The necessary ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of xxxx University, with the decision numbered 2024/11-1, dated November 29, 2024.

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