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School Administrators' Perceptions of Mediation: A Metaphorical Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to explore school administrators' metaphorical perceptions of the concept of mediation. A qualitative research design based on phenomenology was employed. The study group consisted of 76 school principals and vice-principals working at public primary, middle, and high schools in Antalya, Türkiye, during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participants were selected using maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling strategy. Data were collected online via Google Forms using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers and analysed through content analysis. The valid metaphors produced by the participants provided a rich source for understanding their perceptions of mediation. These metaphors were grouped under eleven themes: facilitating communication and unity, neutrality, reflection, balancing, leadership and authority, peaceful approach and reconciliation, flexibility, analytical thinking skills, conflict resolution skills, protection and prevention, and guidance. Representative metaphors included bridge, scale, mirror, mother, lion, dove, chameleon, owl, Swiss Army Knife, seat belt, and compass. These metaphors reflect a perception of the mediator as a communication facilitator, an impartial and fair actor, a balancer, a leader, a peaceful problem solver, an adaptable thinker, a protector, and a guiding figure. Overall, the findings suggest that school administrators conceptualize mediation as a

multidimensional leadership practice that integrates relational, ethical, and managerial competencies.

Keywords: Conflict management, educational leadership, organizational culture, organizational communication, interpersonal relations.

1. Introduction

Conflicts are inevitable in schools, which function as microcosms of the broader society. While traditional perspectives often perceive conflict as a negative and destructive phenomenon, contemporary management theories increasingly view well-managed conflicts as opportunities for growth, transformation, and institutional effectiveness (Özmen & Aküzüm, 2010). In educational organizations, the critical issue is not whether conflict exists, but how it is managed. In this regard, effective conflict management by school administrators plays a key role not only in ensuring the smooth operation of the school but also in achieving institutional goals (Arslantaş & Özkan, 2012). Effective administrators are those who can identify the sources of conflict and employ appropriate resolution strategies. In particular, a school leader who embraces the role of mediator and facilitates reconciliation between conflicting parties enhances both their own leadership capacity and the overall atmosphere of cooperation and mutual satisfaction within the school (Karip, 2022).

Nir and Hameiri (2014) emphasize that the influence of school principals on the functioning of schools is undeniable; however, they argue that this influence is often exerted indirectly, emerging through various strategies that principals employ to enhance school efficiency. The use of power is considered a significant factor in ensuring staff compliance with administrative directives and is also viewed as a key mechanism for improving school effectiveness. Despite this, the educational leadership literature lacks sufficient studies that specifically explore how different bases of power used by school principals—particularly within the context of their mediation roles—affect overall school performance.

At this point, metaphors serve as a powerful research tool for understanding administrators' mental representations of their roles. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that the human conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and that metaphorical concepts are shaped by individual experiences. Moreover, they assert that such concepts are indispensable for making sense of most of what happens in our world.

1.1. Mediation

Mediation is a conflict resolution process in which a third party—accepted by both sides and lacking the authority to impose binding decisions—intervenes in a dispute to help the conflicting parties improve their relationship, strengthen communication, and voluntarily reach mutually acceptable understandings or agreements using

effective problem-solving and negotiation techniques (Moore, 2014). The perceived neutrality of the mediator significantly enhances the quality of the mediation process (Rahman, 2012). A mediator's ability to establish trust with the parties depends on their capacity to present the process and their role clearly and persuasively, demonstrate genuine interest in the conflict, empathize with each party, and act with fairness (Coleman et al., 2014).

According to Coleman et al. (2014), although mediation is a natural and fundamental part of everyday life—as seen, for instance, in parents intervening in disputes between their children—formal mediation has increasingly emerged in recent years as an effective method for resolving conflicts across nearly all major areas of societal tension. In this context, mediation has gained growing visibility in various domains, including divorce proceedings, peer conflicts in schools, community-based disputes, victim-offender relationships, conflicts over public resources, intra-organizational disagreements, and both international and domestic conflicts.

According to Tjosvold (1991), rather than suppressing conflicts or imposing their own solutions, administrators should act as neutral mediators. Karip (2022) notes that this role is increasingly embraced by contemporary administrators within organizations. In conflict situations between subordinates, administrators are expected to guide the resolution process, carefully listen to all parties, and direct them toward constructive strategies. It is essential to create an environment where individuals can express their views openly, engage in mutual communication, and feel that their interests are respected. This approach not only facilitates agreement but also fosters healthy working relationships and enhances the administrator's role as a trusted resource. Ultimately, it reduces the administrator's conflict burden and empowers employees to manage similar situations more independently in the future.

In the past, organizations were often viewed as closed systems that were largely unaffected by their external environments. However, Scott and Davis (2016) note that many contemporary scholars now conceptualize organizations as open systems—entities that interact with their environments by receiving inputs and producing outputs. As schools are also organizations, they should likewise be considered open systems with permeable boundaries. These boundaries allow for reciprocal influence: the external environment affects the school, and the school, in turn, influences its environment (Mitchell & Tarter, 2011). Within this framework, the school principal can be viewed as a figure positioned at the interface between internal and external environments. Kelchtermans et al. (2011) define the external environment of a school as encompassing official institutions to which the principal and staff are accountable, parents, national and local education policy-makers, and the broader local community in which the school is situated. Conversely, the internal environment comprises teachers, administrators, and students. Ewy (2009) emphasizes that internal and external stakeholders often have differing—and at times conflicting—goals, expectations, and demands. In this context, Louis and Robinson (2012) propose viewing school principals as mediating actors who must delicately balance the needs

and capacities within the school against the demands of the external environment—a conceptual framework that helps illuminate the unique complexities of the principalship.

1.2. Metaphor

In this context, metaphor analysis provides an effective means for exploring school administrators' mental representations of the concept of "mediation," the meanings they attribute to this role, and the attitudes reflected in their leadership orientations. As Arslan and Bayrakçı (2006) emphasize, metaphors play an active role in how individuals make sense of the world and construct cognitive frameworks. In this regard, metaphors make visible the deeper meanings that principals associate with the mediation role and offer rich, multilayered insights into their leadership approaches.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study is a qualitative inquiry designed to explore school administrators' perceptions of the concept of "mediation" through the use of metaphors. The research employed a phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approaches. Phenomenology focuses on investigating phenomena that individuals are familiar with but may not fully understand in detail. Such phenomena may include events, experiences, perceptions, orientations, concepts, and situations encountered in daily life. Although individuals may encounter these phenomena in various contexts, they may not necessarily grasp their full meaning. Phenomenology offers a suitable and systematic approach for studying phenomena whose meanings are only partially known and not yet thoroughly clarified (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Originating from psychology and philosophy, phenomenological research seeks to understand participants' lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon in their own words. This approach aims to uncover the essence of those experiences by examining the accounts of a small number of individuals who have directly encountered the phenomenon in question (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

2.2. Participants

The study group consisted of 76 school administrators working in public primary, middle, and high schools in Antalya Province, Türkiye, during the 2025–2026 academic year. The participants included school principals and vice-principals. Participants were selected through maximum variation sampling, which is one of the purposive sampling strategies commonly used in qualitative research.

Maximum variation sampling was preferred to include school administrators with different institutional and professional characteristics and to reveal both common and contrasting perceptions of mediation. In determining the participants, two main variation criteria were considered: school level and administrative role. Accordingly,

administrators working at primary, middle, and high school levels were included in the study. In addition, both school principals and vice-principals were represented in the study group. This approach prevented the study from being limited to administrators working at a single school level or holding a single administrative position.

The inclusion criteria were being employed as a principal or vice-principal in a public school in Antalya during the data collection period and completing the online data collection form. Potential participants representing different school levels and administrative roles were contacted, and the link to the online form was shared with them through direct messaging. The purpose of this sampling strategy was not to obtain statistical representation or generalize the findings to all school administrators, but to explore the diverse ways in which administrators working in different educational settings and positions conceptualized mediation.

2.3. Data Collection Process

To explore the participants' metaphorical perceptions of mediation, a semi-structured online interview form was developed by the researchers using Google Forms. The form included the following open-ended question: "If you were to compare mediation to a living or non-living entity, what would you compare it to? Why? Please explain." Through this question, participants were asked not only to produce a metaphor for mediation but also to explain the reasoning underlying their metaphorical association. The request for an explanation enabled the researchers to examine the meanings attributed to the metaphors and to categorize them according to their shared conceptual characteristics.

Before completing the form, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason. They were also informed that the collected data would be used solely for scientific research purposes. Participants proceeded to the research question only after providing informed consent electronically. This study was conducted in accordance with the decision of the Akdeniz University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, dated 08.01.2026 and numbered 09.

After the form was prepared, its link was shared with potential participants through direct messaging. Once the data collection process was completed, access to the form was closed, and the collected responses were stored for subsequent analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the participants were analysed using content analysis. The analysis process consisted of five stages: preliminary examination of the responses, identification and coding of the metaphors, development of conceptual categories,

examination of inter-coder reliability, and interpretation and reporting of the findings.

First, all responses obtained through the online form were read several times to gain familiarity with the data. Each response was examined by considering both the metaphor produced by the participant and the explanation provided for that metaphor. Responses that did not contain a clearly identifiable metaphor, lacked a meaningful explanation, or did not establish a logical relationship between the metaphor and the concept of mediation were excluded from the analysis. Following this screening process, 76 valid metaphor responses were included in the final analysis.

During the coding stage, each response was examined as a combination of the metaphorical expression and the participant's justification. Participants' explanations were considered essential because the same metaphor could convey different meanings depending on the rationale provided. Therefore, the metaphors were categorized according to the conceptual meanings expressed in the participants' explanations rather than solely according to their literal meanings.

Metaphors reflecting similar conceptual meanings were compared and grouped together. Preliminary categories were created by identifying the common characteristics and shared meanings of the metaphors. Category labels were then assigned to represent the central meaning of each group. As a result of this process, the metaphors were classified under 11 thematic categories: facilitating communication and unity, neutrality, reflection, balancing, leadership and authority, peaceful approach and reconciliation, flexibility, analytical thinking skills, conflict resolution skills, protection and prevention, and guidance.

To examine the reliability of the coding and categorization process, two independent experts reviewed the metaphors, participants' explanations, and category definitions. Each expert independently assigned the metaphor responses to the relevant thematic categories. The coding decisions of the two experts were then compared, and inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The analysis yielded a Cohen's kappa coefficient of $\kappa = 1.00$, indicating perfect agreement between the experts. Therefore, no disagreement was identified regarding the placement of the metaphors within the thematic categories.

Finally, the frequencies of the individual metaphors and thematic categories were calculated. Representative participant quotations were selected to illustrate the conceptual meaning of each theme. Participants were identified using codes such as P1, P2, and P3 to protect their confidentiality. The findings were presented through thematic explanations, frequency tables, and direct quotations.

3. Findings

In this section, the participants' metaphor-based expressions were analysed and categorized into eleven thematic groups. The identified themes are as follows:

(i) Facilitating communication and unity, (ii) Neutrality, (iii) Reflection, (iv) Balancing, (v) Leadership and authority, (vi) Peaceful approach and reconciliation, (vii) Flexibility, (viii) Analytical thinking skills, (ix) Conflict resolution skills, (x) Protection and prevention, (xi) Guidance.

The findings related to each theme are presented below in detail.

3.1. Facilitating Communication and Unity

Within this theme, participants described the concept of mediation using metaphors such as *bridge, human, rope, dog, paperclip, electrical wire, zipper, dough kneading machine, table, money, chessboard, and screw with a nut*. An analysis of these metaphors suggests that mediation is perceived as a process that repairs broken or weakened relationships, brings opposing sides together, and builds bridges of communication between them. The most frequently cited metaphor, *"bridge,"* illustrates the mediator's key role in enabling safe and neutral passage between the parties, thereby facilitating conflict resolution. For example, one participant stated, *"I can liken mediation to a bridge because a bridge connects two different continents and brings two sides together"* (P6), highlighting the unifying function of mediation. Similarly, another participant remarked, *"I would compare mediation to a bridge because a bridge connects two separate shores, allowing people to cross safely and in balance"* (P42), emphasizing that mediation creates a secure and trustworthy environment for communication.

The metaphor of *"human"* reflects the perception of mediation as a process grounded in empathy, understanding, and emotional intelligence. One participant expressed this view by stating, *"It would be a living being, and it could only be a human. Because in nature, everything exists in balance, and it is only humans who disrupt and complicate this balance. Therefore, it is not possible for any being other than a human to understand and resolve these disagreements between people"* (P59). This statement underscores the idea that mediation is inherently dependent on human qualities.

The metaphor of *"rope"* was associated with the function of re-establishing broken connections. One participant emphasized this restorative aspect of mediation by stating, *"I would liken it to a rope, because it is used to tie together what has come apart"* (P38).

Similarly, the metaphor of a *"dog"* was used to represent feelings of trust, loyalty, and fairness. One participant noted, *"A Golden Retriever, because I believe a mediator should embody trust and fairness for both parties"* (P1), highlighting the mediator's responsibility in establishing trust between conflicting sides.

The *"paperclip"* was perceived as a simple yet effective tool for bringing things together, as reflected in the statement, *"A paperclip. A tool that connects"* (P72).

In the *"electrical wire"* metaphor, mediation was described as an invisible yet powerful connector: *"Although it appears to be a lifeless cable joining two sides, it*

actually transmits energy” (P52). This reflects the idea that mediation plays a subtle but essential role in enabling communication and resolution.

The “*zipper*” metaphor also emphasized the unifying function of mediation by bringing different sides together. One participant explained this by saying, “*I would compare it to a zipper because of its unifying and integrating qualities*” (P50).

The metaphor of a “*table*” was described as both a physical and symbolic space where face-to-face communication occurs and joint decisions are made. One participant stated, “*I would compare it to a table because a table is where people come together*” (P17).

“*Money*” was viewed as a tool for negotiation and exchange in social relationships. One participant noted, “*Money is a unique invention that enables people to reach agreements with one another*” (P10), emphasizing the communicative function of mediation.

The “*chessboard*” metaphor highlighted mediation as a process that involves strategic thinking, empathy, and understanding the opposing side. One participant explained, “*A chessboard. Mediation requires the presence of two sides. Like in mediation, the chessboard creates a space where both sides are present by their own will*” (P71).

The “*screw with a nut*” metaphor suggests that a mediator should ensure a lasting and solid integration between parties using appropriate tools: “*I liken it to a screw with a nut, because it can be selected and adjusted according to the condition of the objects to be assembled and mounted*” (P64).

The “*dough kneading machine*” metaphor highlights the mediator’s role in bringing the parties together, blending them, and guiding them toward a common solution, as simply stated “*Dough kneading machine*” (P14).

Table 1.

The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of facilitating communication and unity

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Facilitating Communication and Unity	bridge (11), human (2), rope (2), dog (2), paperclip (1), electrical wire (1), zipper (1), table (1), money (1), chessboard (1), screw with a nut (1), dough kneading machine (1)	25

3.2. Neutrality

Within the theme of neutrality, participants frequently described the concept of mediation through metaphors such as *scale, lawyer, double-headed eagle, the color gray, rabbit, goddess of justice, and saw*. The content analysis of these metaphors reveals that mediation is perceived as a position that maintains equal distance from both sides, upholds a sense of justice, and adopts a balanced and impartial approach.

The most dominant metaphor, “*scale*”, illustrates a direct association between mediation and the principles of justice, equality, and balance. One participant summarized this by saying, “*The scale represents balance and justice in mediation*” (P32). Another remarked, “*I compare it to a scale. It carries the burden and tries to maintain balance. It approaches both sides under equal conditions*” (P67).

Similarly, the statement “*I liken mediation to a scale — it is a process that maintains equal distance from both sides and seeks to ensure balance objectively*” (P39) emphasized the principle of neutrality.

The “*lawyer*” metaphor reflects the view of a mediator as a fair, non-judgmental, and representative figure. One participant simply stated, “*Lawyers mediate between parties*” (P16), while another added, “*A lawyer or judge — because they observe and assess objectively*” (P18), indicating that neutrality requires objectivity.

The “*double-headed eagle*” metaphor was used to represent a figure capable of observing both sides equally at once: “*I would compare it to a double-headed eagle — a fair, reliable, and equal communicator who establishes balanced communication with both sides and solves problems*” (P53).

In the “*gray*” color metaphor, mediation was depicted as a reconciliatory position between two extremes: “*Gray. Because each side sees a part of themselves in it. Transitioning from black to white, or vice versa, is difficult; gray is an in-between shade that requires time*” (P25).

The “*rabbit*” metaphor captured neutrality through a lens of equal caution: “*A rabbit fears everyone, so it keeps the same distance from everyone*” (P60), highlighting the mediator’s effort to remain equally distant from both sides.

The “*goddess of justice*” metaphor connected mediation with symbolic representations of justice: “*I compare it to the woman holding the scale of justice — someone who approaches both sides equally, maintains balance, and carries a nurturing, mother-like quality*” (P37).

Finally, the “*saw*” metaphor was used to illustrate impartial impact on both sides: “*It can be likened to a saw — every time it cuts, it affects both sides equally*” (P75).

Table 2. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of neutrality*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Neutrality	scale (8), lawyer (2), double-headed eagle (1), gray color (1), rabbit (1), goddess of justice (1), saw (1)	15

3.3. Reflection

Within the theme of reflection, participants explained the concept of mediation through metaphors such as *mirror*, *soil*, and *pen*. When the shared meaning of these metaphors is examined, it is evident that mediation is associated with the function of

directly reflecting and interpreting the emotions, thoughts, and attitudes between the parties. In particular, the metaphor of a “mirror” illustrates the mediator’s role as an agent who does not interfere with events but helps the parties better understand their own situation and each other. One participant emphasized this reflective and impartial aspect by stating, *“I compare mediation to a mirror. Because a mirror reflects what stands before it as it is, but it does not directly intervene in events”* (P51). Another participant similarly remarked, *“I would liken it to a mirror. If a person can confront themselves, they can better understand the other side”* (P21), highlighting the mediator’s role in fostering empathy and insight between conflicting parties.

The metaphor of “soil” demonstrates the reflective nature of mediation as a process that directly responds to the attitudes and behaviors of the parties. One participant explained, *“I can say soil, because however it is treated, it responds in the same way”* (P11), thus emphasizing this characteristic.

In the “pen” metaphor, the mediator was described as a tool that records, makes visible, and externalizes the parties’ statements. For example, one participant noted, *“A pen, because writing is permanent and everyone can read it”* (P15), pointing to mediation’s role in structuring and clarifying discourse. Another participant added, *“A pen. It writes whatever is intended to be written”* (P57), describing mediation as a function that enables the expression and reflection of the parties’ thoughts and feelings.

All these metaphors reveal that mediation is positioned as a reflective tool that facilitates confrontation, awareness, and insight between the parties.

Table 3. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of reflection*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Reflection	mirror (4), soil (2), pen (2)	8

3.4. Balancing

Within the theme of balancing, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *mother*, *Türkiye*, and *wasp*. The common thread among these metaphors is the perception of the mediator as someone who maintains balance between parties, preserves harmony, and undertakes the task of softening conflict situations. The frequently cited metaphor of a “mother” highlights the protective and conciliatory nature of the mediator. For example, one participant explained, *“I would liken it to a mother, because she constantly takes on the role of mediator to reconcile between siblings”* (P26), transferring the mother’s natural role in conflict resolution to the mediator. Similarly, another participant stated, *“It resembles a mother. She tries to keep everyone in balance”* (P8), pointing to the sensitive role of mediation in establishing balance between sides. In another statement, a participant noted, *“It is like a mother and father. Because they determine right and wrong, justice and injustice, value and worthlessness, and reality and artificiality, transferring them to the new*

mind, and in the face of situations they provide outcomes and guidance along the axis of cost-benefit balance” (P54), thus describing the mediator’s just and protective role simultaneously.

The metaphor of “*Türkiye*”, though expressed with a single word, symbolically refers to the country’s ability to balance and hold together its different segments (P9).

In the “*wasp*” metaphor, the mediator was viewed as an element that balances the ecosystem and contributes to the functioning of the system. One participant expressed, “*I can liken mediation to a wasp. Wasps ensure balance in nature by carrying out pollination among plants*” (P62), emphasizing the mediator’s role in maintaining harmony and cooperation within complex systems.

Together, these metaphors illustrate that mediation is perceived not only as a means of resolving conflicts but also as a mission of establishing balance on emotional, social, and systemic levels.

Table 4. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of balancing*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Balancing	mother (3), Türkiye (1), wasp (1)	5

3.5. Leadership and Authority

Within the theme of leadership and authority, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *lion and orchestra conductor*. These metaphors indicate that the mediator is perceived not only as a reconciler but also as a leader who directs the process, possesses decision-making power, and demonstrates authority. The frequently cited metaphor of the “*lion*” represents qualities such as authority, justice, and determination. For example, one participant stated, “*I would liken it to a lion, because a lion always stands on the side of the rightful and never compromises with injustice. It occupies a leadership position and is oriented toward solutions*” (P40), drawing attention to the mediator’s decisive and leading role. Another participant added, “*The mediator, with a dignified appearance and a character open to communication, can be described as solution-oriented. I liken it to a lion, the king who governs the forest rightfully in children’s stories without committing injustice*” (P24), thereby associating mediation with both respect and fair governance.

Similarly, the statement “*A lion, whose word is obeyed*” (P20) briefly but powerfully emphasized the authoritative aspect of mediation.

On the other hand, in the “*orchestra conductor*” metaphor, the mediator was perceived as a leader who manages all elements of the process in harmony. One participant remarked, “*I compare it to an orchestra conductor. Sounds come from all sides, and we try to manage these sounds. Even a minor mistake can disrupt the harmony of the entire performance*” (P43), underlining the necessity for mediators to manage the process carefully, maintain balance, and provide direction.

Together, these metaphors demonstrate that mediation is also perceived as an authoritative figure who guides the process, inspires trust, and achieves results.

Table 5. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of leadership and authority*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Leadership and Authority	lion (3), orchestra conductor (1)	4

3.6. Peaceful Approach and Reconciliation

Within the theme of peaceful approach and reconciliation, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *dove and olive branch*. These metaphors represent the peaceful orientation underlying mediation, its role in fostering compromise, and its function of resolving conflict by softening tensions. The frequently cited metaphor of the “*dove*” highlights the mediator’s qualities of listening in silence, providing trust through presence, and symbolizing peace through posture. One participant stated, “*Dove: Because it demonstrates silence with its listening, its posture, and its dominance. And also, perhaps, because it is a symbol of peace*” (P12), defining the dove both as a peace symbol and as an effective communication figure. Another participant simply remarked, “*White dove*” (P13), briefly yet powerfully associating one of the universal symbols of peace with mediation.

The “*olive branch*” metaphor was similarly evaluated as a symbol of tolerance and reconciliation. One participant noted, “*Olive branch*” (P19), directly linking mediation to peace, while another emphasized its cultural and symbolic power by stating, “*The first thing that comes to mind is the olive branch. It symbolizes traditional peace and tolerance*” (P30).

Taken together, these metaphors reveal a strong perception of mediation as a capacity to reduce hostility in conflict settings, foster understanding between parties, and create a ground for peaceful resolution.

Table 6. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of peaceful approach and reconciliation*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Peaceful Approach and Reconciliation	dove (2), olive branch (2)	4

3.7. Flexibility

Within the theme of flexibility, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *chameleon, rainbow, ping-pong ball, and snake*. These metaphors emphasize the mediator’s ability to adapt to changing conditions, adjust their stance according to different parties, and manage the process dynamically.

The “*chameleon*” metaphor represents the mediator’s capacity to develop attitudes and strategies according to circumstances. One participant simply stated,

“Chameleon” (P58), associating the animal’s ability to adapt to its environment with mediation.

Similarly, the *“rainbow”* metaphor conveys a structure that can accommodate diversity. As one participant explained, *“I would liken it to a rainbow. Since a rainbow contains every kind of color, if mediation is to succeed, the mediator must also embody such diversity”* (P33), emphasizing the need for mediators to adopt a versatile approach open to different perspectives and needs.

On the other hand, the *“snake”* metaphor defines flexibility from a different perspective. One participant remarked, *“Snake, because they try to persuade both sides cunningly”* (P65), suggesting that mediators sometimes develop careful and skillful discourse between parties.

Finally, the *“ping pong ball”* metaphor implies the mediator’s flexible and dynamic stance by moving back and forth between the two parties, as simply stated: *“Ping pong ball”* (P2).

Overall, these metaphors highlight that mediation is perceived as a process not bound by rigid patterns but rather one that is agile, adaptable, and responsive to both the parties and the situation.

Table 7. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of flexibility*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Flexibility	chameleon (1), rainbow (1), snake (1), ping-pong ball (1)	4

3.8. Analytical Thinking Skills

Within the theme of analytical thinking skills, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *owl and monkey*. These metaphors highlight the mediator’s ability to examine issues in depth, evaluate information, develop strategies, and respond appropriately at the right time.

The frequently cited metaphor of the *“owl”* was associated with wisdom, silence, and strong analytical ability. One participant stated, *“Owl, because it is an animal with a strong sense of hearing, and it develops strategies by analyzing (reasoning) what it hears”* (P29), emphasizing the mediator’s skills in listening, analyzing, and producing solutions. Another participant remarked, *“If mediation were compared to an animal, it would probably be an owl. Because the owl symbolizes wisdom, neutrality, and calmness”* (P31), underscoring the mediator’s intellectual depth and ability to establish balance.

The *“monkey”* metaphor, on the other hand, reflected multidimensional observation, selective behavior, and the ability to refrain from interference when necessary. As one participant explained, *“Monkey, because it should listen to everyone, speak when appropriate, and sometimes not see, so that it can analyze events more objectively”*

(P70), highlighting the need for mediators to act contextually and make objective evaluations.

Together, these metaphors reveal a strong perception that mediators should be equipped with intellectual flexibility and solution-oriented reasoning skills.

Table 8.

The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of analytical thinking skills

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Analytical Thinking Skills	owl (2), monkey (1)	3

3.9. Conflict Resolution Skills

Within the theme of conflict resolution skills, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *Swiss Army Knife*, *descaler*, and *puzzle*. These metaphors emphasize that a mediator should be able to analyze complex problems, generate diverse solutions, and integrate separate parts into a coherent whole.

The “*Swiss Army Knife*” metaphor represents the ability to provide multifunctional, practical, and flexible solutions. One participant stated, “*I liken it to a Swiss Army Knife. With its different features, it can produce different solutions to problems*” (P66), highlighting that mediation requires multiple approaches rather than a single method.

Similarly, the “*descaler*” metaphor was associated with directly producing solutions and removing blockages. As one participant remarked, “*Descaler. Because it solves the problem*” (P63), mediation was portrayed as an effective tool that intervenes directly to eliminate obstacles.

In the “*puzzle*” metaphor, the mediator was described as someone who dissects the process into parts, correctly places missing or misplaced elements, and thereby resolves disputes. One participant explained, “*It resembles a puzzle. If you put the right pieces in the right place and ensure the parties see it, the conflict will be resolved*” (P61).

Overall, these metaphors reflect a strong perception of mediation as a process that requires systematic, creative, and solution-oriented approaches to conflict resolution.

Table 9. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of conflict resolution skills*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Conflict Resolution Skills	Swiss Army Knife (1), descaler (1), puzzle (1)	3

3.10. Protection and Prevention

Within the theme of protection and prevention, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *seat belt*, *first-aid kit*, and *umbrella*. These metaphors

illustrate that mediation functions not only during conflict but also beforehand, by ensuring safety, offering protection, and preventing problems from escalating.

The “*seat belt*” metaphor defined mediation as a preventive and reassuring mechanism that provides protection against potential danger. One participant explained, “*I liken it to a seat belt. Before a danger or an undesirable outcome occurs, it serves a preventive function*” (P55).

Similarly, the “*first-aid kit*” metaphor reflected mediation as a tool that provides rapid and effective intervention during crises, preventing disputes between parties from growing. As one participant noted, “*I compare it to a first-aid kit. Because just as a first-aid kit provides vital intervention during a crisis, mediation offers quick and effective solutions for conflicting parties*” (P68).

The “*umbrella*” metaphor suggested that mediation protects the parties within a safe framework while also ensuring that personal boundaries are not violated. A participant illustrated this view by stating, “*I liken it to an umbrella. On one hand, it provides protection and gives the message that you are safe, while on the other hand, it sets boundaries and clearly indicates that others should not cross them*” (P41).

Together, these metaphors reflect a strong perception of mediation not only as a problem-solving tool but also as a preventive mechanism that creates a safe environment for communication.

Table 10. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of protection and prevention*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Protection and Prevention	seat belt (1), first-aid kit (1), umbrella (1)	3

3.11. Guidance

Within the theme of guidance, participants described mediation through metaphors such as *compass and guidance service*. These metaphors indicate that the mediator is perceived not as someone who directly provides solutions but rather as a figure who shows direction, draws a roadmap, and guides the decision-making processes of the parties.

The “*compass*” metaphor expressed the mediator’s role as a guide who indicates the right path without interfering in the decision-making process. One participant explained, “*We can liken the mediator to a compass. Because a compass shows the right way to someone who is lost or trying to find direction but walking that path depends on the person’s own decision and effort*” (P4), emphasizing that the mediator provides guidance while leaving responsibility with the parties.

Similarly, the “*guidance service*” metaphor was evaluated as a supportive mechanism, particularly in conflicts among students, where it intervenes not by offering direct solutions but by providing assistance. One participant explained this view by stating,

“It resembles the guidance service. For unresolved problems among students, it usually acts as a mediator. For example, in cases of peer bullying” (P22).

Together, these metaphors clearly reflect the perception of mediation as a role that focuses more on the process than on the outcome—supporting decision-making skills, offering direction, and empowering the parties.

Table 11. *The results of metaphoric analysis of theme of guidance*

Theme	Code (Metaphor)	n
Guidance	compass (1), guidance service (1)	2

4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, the most salient element in school administrators’ perceptions of the concept of mediation is facilitating communication and unity. Participants frequently defined mediation as a process that brings parties together, enables them to establish connections, and promotes mutual understanding. This indicates that the mediator is perceived not only as a conflict resolver but also as a relational facilitator within organizations such as schools. This perception is consistent with Van Slyke’s (1997) approach, which defines the mediator as an actor who regulates communication between parties, facilitates mutual understanding, and establishes the basic rules of communication to ensure compliance. In this context, Karip (2022) emphasizes that mediators guide parties toward healthy communication and that mediation processes are particularly effective and functional in conflicts stemming from communication deficiencies. In an international context, Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis (2016) argue that using mediation as a leadership strategy for handling disputes and resolving problems within schools may offer potential benefits for education. Similarly, Parcon and Pedroso (2025) found that effective mediation practices among private school principals involve proactive communication, active listening, impartiality, adaptability, collaboration, and problem-solving, and emphasized that conflict mediation is not merely a managerial responsibility but a vital leadership skill that contributes to a positive school climate. The findings of the present study are also consistent with those of Parcon and Pedroso (2025) in the Philippines, where school principals’ mediation practices were characterized by proactive communication, impartiality, adaptability, collaboration, and problem-solving. The similarity between the two studies suggests that communication, fairness, flexibility, and problem-solving may represent common dimensions of effective mediation across different educational and cultural contexts. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the prominence of communication- and unity-oriented metaphors in the present study reflects an understanding of mediation that extends beyond conflict resolution and positions it as a relational leadership practice that supports dialogue, mutual understanding, cooperation, and positive professional relationships within the school community.

The second most frequently emphasized feature of mediation is neutrality. School administrators underlined that a mediator must maintain equal distance from all parties and avoid being judgmental or biased. Similarly, Douglas (2010) states that neutrality is a fundamental principle that must be preserved throughout the entire mediation process. Indeed, according to Karip (2022), if the mediator loses neutrality, it may undermine the trust of the parties in the process, potentially leading them to adopt destructive attitudes. Confidence in the mediator's impartiality and fairness is therefore critical to the success of mediation. Otherwise, if one of the parties perceives the mediator as biased, the likelihood of reaching an agreement is significantly reduced. Similarly, Poitras (2009) identified impartiality as the most frequently reported factor associated with parties' trust in the mediator and found that perceived partiality had a significant negative impact on trust. In this respect, the prominence of neutrality-oriented metaphors in the present study indicates that school administrators view impartiality as a key requirement for establishing trust, ensuring fairness, and sustaining the credibility of the mediation process.

Another theme highlighted by the participants is reflection. The ability of the mediator to reflect the perspectives of the parties without distortion and to foster internal awareness was considered important. This finding is consistent with Hart's (1990) view that reflection enables school administrators to develop a critical perspective on traditional practices, generate new insights through systematic analysis, and thereby make decision-making processes more effective. Reflection also requires the consideration of multiple possible courses of action, which enhances the quality of problem-solving processes. Similarly, Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) as well as Short and Rinehart (1993) emphasize that reflective practices improve school administrators' problem-solving skills and make them more competent in this area. Cappelletti and Sajon (2022) emphasize that systematic reflection is a key component of school change processes and identify leadership characterized by high levels of reflection as an important factor in navigating such processes. In this respect, the reflection-oriented metaphors identified in the present study suggest that school administrators may view mediation as a reflective leadership process that supports awareness, reconsideration of different perspectives, and more deliberate responses to conflict. The reflection theme is closely aligned with Bush and Folger's (2005) transformative mediation model. In this model, reflection is a specific mediator intervention that supports both empowerment and recognition by helping parties gain greater clarity and understanding.

The theme of balancing is another important dimension of mediation frequently emphasized by the participants. School administrators described the mediator as an actor who establishes balance among expectations, responsibilities, and power relations. Similarly, Güner (2020) argues that a mediator maintains equal distance from both parties, adopts a fair and impartial attitude, and thus brings balance to the process while also ensuring that all parties feel secure through diplomatic approaches to heightened emotions and interpersonal differences. In the same vein,

Poloogadoo (2023) states that mediators seek to balance power asymmetries in order to achieve fair agreements between conflicting sides. From this perspective, the balancing metaphors identified in the present study suggest that school administrators perceive mediation as requiring not only neutrality but also the careful management of unequal expectations, responsibilities, and power relations in order to maintain fairness between the parties.

Some participants highlighted the mediator's role in terms of leadership and authority. In the school context, mediation was described not only as ensuring communication but also as requiring constructive leadership to direct the process. However, Dagli and Sigri (2014) note that the authoritative power of leaders may at times prevent them from recognizing conflicts or from addressing them collaboratively to resolve personal differences. Nevertheless, leaders who employ scientific methods in addressing complex problems and who possess strong organizational skills can conduct the mediation process smoothly, thereby creating significant value for schools. The coexistence of neutrality- and authority-oriented metaphors reveals a potential tension in school-based mediation, as administrators are expected to remain impartial while simultaneously exercising formal organizational authority. This dual role suggests that effective mediation may require school leaders to balance their decision-making power with a facilitative and non-dominating approach.

The perception of mediation as a peaceful and reconciliatory approach also emerged as an important theme in participants' views. School administrators evaluated mediation as a process that reduces tensions, repairs broken relationships, and restores harmony. As Alikılıç (2017) emphasizes, the purpose of mediation is to enable parties to generate peaceful solutions; its essential nature is peace, and its most important element is the establishment of lasting harmony. A peaceful mediator, by considering different perspectives, helps parties to acknowledge past mistakes while supporting them in creating a shared vision for the future. In this regard, Dagli and Sigri (2014) argue that a conciliatory style highlights leaders' capacity to seek solutions and find common ground. Finding solutions that ensure mutual gain is not always easy. However, mediating leaders, through their ability to persuade parties to accept outcomes, can prevent potential losses from resurfacing as future conflicts. Accordingly, the metaphors related to peace and reconciliation suggest that school administrators perceive mediation as a process that helps resolve disagreements, restore relationships, and prevent unresolved tensions from re-emerging within the school community.

Another significant finding is the emphasis on the mediator's flexibility. Participants noted that mediators should be able to adapt their communication style, strategies, and timing to the emotional and contextual needs of the conflict. Wall and Kressel (2012) observe that mediators are often encouraged to be flexible in style, as different circumstances require different adaptive behaviors. However, they also note that the extent to which this recommendation is followed remains uncertain, partly due to

varied definitions of style and stylistic flexibility. Similarly, Shonk (2026) underscores that mediation is a highly flexible process that can be adjusted according to the interests of the parties, with the mediator helping them to find common ground through principles of cooperation and mutual gain. In this context, the emphasis on flexibility suggests that school administrators perceive effective mediation as a process in which communication and intervention strategies should be adapted to the characteristics of the parties, the nature of the conflict, and changing emotional conditions.

Another essential quality of mediators, as emphasized by the participants, is analytical thinking skills. According to Tahrir et al. (2020), being analytical refers to the ability to recognize potentially problematic situations, foresee possible outcomes, and effectively solve problems by enhancing individuals' analytical capacities and enabling them to think more deeply. In line with this, O'Hare (2004) highlights that critically thinking individuals demonstrate qualities such as confidence in reasoning, a desire to seek truth, honesty and objectivity, analytical thinking skills, open-mindedness, maturity, and systematic thinking. Within this framework, the analytical thinking skills of a mediator not only allow them to understand the causes of conflicts but also enable them to analyze the interests of the parties in depth and develop the most appropriate solutions. This suggests that administrators may understand mediation as a cognitively demanding leadership task that requires them to move beyond surface-level disagreements, identify underlying interests, anticipate consequences, and evaluate alternative courses of action before intervening.

Similarly, mediation was also associated with conflict resolution skills. School administrators emphasized that mediation is not merely about discussing problems but also about producing concrete outcomes and preventing the recurrence of similar conflicts. According to Katz (2007), mediation is a problem-solving process rather than one focused on winning or losing. Indeed, problem-solving is a technical issue that requires attention and expertise (Erdoğan, 2004). By developing problem-solving skills, individuals are able to address new challenges with a more efficient and systematic approach (Lorenzo, 2005). Moreover, problem-solving skills are considered a valuable cognitive competence, as they enhance individuals' capacity to cope effectively with difficulties, facilitate intellectual growth, and ultimately lead to more productive resolution processes (Zincir et al., 2023). As Çakmak et al. (2024) point out, school administrators face numerous problems, ranging from curriculum changes to elective courses, from exam participation to social activities, and even to external conflicts and parental communication. Effectively managing such complex processes requires administrators with strong problem-solving skills. The prominence of problem-solving metaphors therefore suggests that school administrators conceptualize mediation as an active leadership competence aimed not only at settling immediate disputes but also at developing solutions that may reduce the likelihood of similar conflicts recurring.

Another perception developed by participants concerned the protective and preventive role of the mediator. The findings indicated that participants associated timely mediation with preventing conflicts from escalating, reducing relational harm, and fostering a greater sense of security among the parties. In this regard, Lipsky et al. (2003) note that the principle of privacy and protection of personal life is a key element that strengthens the protective and preventive function of mediation. Keeping issues confidential meets the parties' expectations of protection and ensures that the process proceeds within a safe framework, preventing potential negative outcomes. From a transformative mediation perspective, Bush and Folger (2005) suggest that when conflict interaction is patiently supported rather than tightly controlled, it is more likely to lead to greater calm and better communication rather than escalation or impasse. The preventive metaphors identified in the present study suggest that school administrators perceive mediation as a proactive leadership practice that can be used before conflicts intensify. From this perspective, mediation may help administrators recognize emerging tensions at an early stage, protect relationships among school stakeholders, reduce the risk of emotional and organizational damage, and create a safer environment for communication. This finding indicates that the value of mediation in schools may lie in resolving existing conflicts and preventing minor disagreements from developing into more serious and difficult problems.

Finally, school administrators also evaluated mediation in terms of its guidance function. This role highlights the mediator not as someone who directly provides solutions, but rather as a figure who shows direction, guides the decision-making processes, and supports the skills of the parties. In this respect, Tanriver (2006) describes guidance as the contribution of a neutral third party who brings the conflicting sides together and helps them reach a mutually acceptable solution. Similarly, Arneson (1988) emphasizes that mediators provide a framework within which agreement can be reached by guiding the process, while not producing the agreement themselves. Since agreements are based on voluntariness, they are more easily accepted by the parties; moreover, participation in the mediation process fosters more open and direct communication, reducing tension between the sides. In this sense, guidance-oriented metaphors indicate that school administrators may perceive effective mediation as empowering the parties to develop their own solutions rather than imposing administrative decisions on them.

The findings of the study reveal that educational administrators predominantly associated the concept of mediation with human-centered aspects such as communication, neutrality, reflection, and balancing. These metaphors can be interpreted as reflections of the essential leadership competencies required of an effective administrator. Overall, the eleven metaphorical themes indicate that school administrators conceptualize mediation as a multidimensional leadership practice rather than as a single conflict-resolution technique. Communication, reflection, reconciliation, and guidance emphasize its relational dimension; neutrality,

balancing, and protection highlight its ethical dimension; while leadership, flexibility, analytical thinking, and problem-solving reflect its managerial dimension. This multidimensional structure suggests that effective mediation in schools requires the integration of relational sensitivity, ethical impartiality, and strategic leadership competence. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening school administrators' knowledge and skills related to mediation through professional development activities. Training programs may therefore include effective communication, impartiality, reflective thinking, balancing power relations, developing context appropriate interventions, and problem-solving skills. In addition, it may be beneficial for schools to establish institutional mediation practices that support early intervention in conflicts, protect confidentiality, and promote constructive communication among stakeholders. At the policy level, educational authorities may consider incorporating mediation competencies into school leadership standards, administrator preparation programs, and continuing professional development frameworks. However, this study has certain limitations. First, it is limited to qualitative data collected from 76 participants, and thus the results cannot be generalized. In addition, the concept of mediation was assessed solely through metaphors. Future research could investigate the impact of mediation on organizational conflict resolution, the actual practices of administrators, and mediation experiences across different educational levels by employing mixed-method approaches.

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