

# Thriving from The Challenges Through Adaptive Leadership: Experiences of Basic Education Teachers in the Public Schools

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## Abstract

Deficient adaptive leadership posed challenges in schools. This study unfolded the adaptive leadership experiences of teachers in response to change, complex, and uncertain situations. Guided by Adaptive Leadership Theory, I conducted interviews and focus group discussions with my 12 participants, who were purposely sampled. I analyzed their experiences using thematic analysis. I affirmed the value of the themes discussed in the theory and identified emerging sub-themes. Five sub-themes emerged under tough challenges and five others under adaptive leadership, where three belonged to leader behavior and two belonged to adaptive work. Three more emerged under thriving in adaptive leadership. A mediation study may be done using the themes identified in this research as variables and the sub-themes as indicators. Finally, overcoming challenges in educational institutions recognized adaptive leadership as a means.

*Keywords:* Thriving from the challenges; adaptive leadership; experiences of basic education teachers in the public schools

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## 1. Introduction

Deficient adaptive leadership in response to change, complexity, and uncertainty posed challenges in schools. As schools navigate this era of unprecedented circumstances, teachers' capacity to manage effectively and adapt to changes is crucial to their work inside and outside their classrooms (Collie & Martin, 2016).

In China, there are records of teachers' inability to adapt to their new working environment (Xu, 2016). In the United States, educational leaders have faced adaptive challenges (Ackerman et al., 2018), while some teachers are concerned about adaptability and adaptive space (Floyd, 2023). In Romania, teachers have no option but to become adaptive in continuing education amidst the crisis (Vulpe & Pribac, 2021).

In the Philippines, literature reviews revealed that public sector education management faced several challenges in keeping pace with the dynamic demands of the 21st century (Parinasan et al., 2024). These

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include but are not limited to the need for continuous adaptation to emerging trends (Bouckaert & Jann, 2020), organizational changes (Yacon & Cayaban, 2023), and curriculum changes and/or reform as part of their role as curriculum policy implementers (Bongco & David, 2020).

As constant changes confronted teachers on their work and its potential impact (Floyd, 2023; Collie & Martin, 2018), a critical gap persisted in adaptive leadership in education, especially teacher-specific practices. Only limited education research has explored this area, which can be considered critically unexplored (Pujiyanto et al., 2023). Thus, this qualitative study directly addressed this significant gap by investigating the complex dynamics of teacher adaptability in public basic education. Through teachers' experiences, I aimed to uncover the tough challenges experienced by the teachers, their adaptive leadership experiences and their experiences in thriving the challenges they have faced in times of change, uncertain, and complex situations.

### *1.1. Research Questions*

This study aimed to unfold the adaptive leadership experiences of teachers in response to change, complex, and uncertain situations. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the tough challenges experienced by teachers in times of change, complex and uncertain situations?
2. What are the adaptive leadership experienced by teachers in times of change, complex and uncertain situations?
3. What are the experiences of teachers thriving in adaptive leadership in times of change, complex, and uncertain situations?

### *1.2. Theoretical Lens and Paradigm*

This study was anchored on Adaptive Leadership Theory as proposed by Heifetz (1994) with Linsky (2009), which posited that adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2004; Heifetz et al., 2009) by focusing on situational challenges, leader behaviors and adaptive work (Northouse, 2022). Adaptive leadership is characterized by the ability to navigate and respond effectively to the changes, complexities, and uncertainties of contemporary organizational environments (Chaudhry, 2024).

Figure 1 presents the paradigm of the study. The study paradigm considered adaptive leadership theory as a guiding lens that explored teachers' experiences with adaptive leadership while responding to change, complexities, and uncertainties in public basic education schools. This framework suggests that adaptive teachers recognize situational challenges, possess leader behavior, and perform adaptive work in motivating, mobilizing collective action, and engaging stakeholders to tackle tough challenges and thrive amidst problems, challenges, and changes.

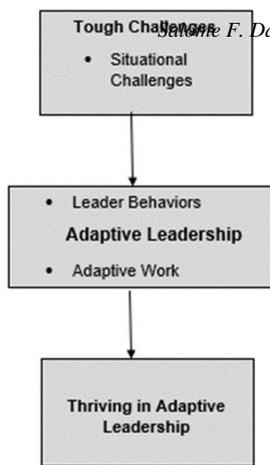


Fig.1. Paradigm of the Study

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

In this qualitative study, I employed a phenomenological research design to explore the adaptive leadership of teachers. This detail was established by talking directly to the participants and allowing them to tell their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024).

### 2.2. Participants and Sampling

My study was composed of 12 teacher-participants from selected basic education public schools in Davao del Norte, Region XI, Mindanao, Philippines. The key informants were eight teachers who underwent the in-depth interview and four teachers who participated in the focus group discussion. These participants were purposely sampled to gather relevant and detailed information about the phenomenon.

### 2.3. Research Instrument

I utilized a validated semi-structured interview guide questionnaire carefully designed to answer the research questions. It comprised a sequence of open-ended questions and probing questions which allowed them to share their detailed experiences, explore their thoughts, and express their feelings about the experiences, challenges, and difficulties.

### 2.4. Data Gathering Procedure

I utilized in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and my personal observations to triangulate gathered relevant data. I used thematic analysis to analyze the collected data.

### 2.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique used to identify recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The qualitative study achieved trustworthiness by demonstrating that the findings are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, I ensured that trustworthiness was established between the participants and the researcher by allotting them ample time to review the informed consent and reiterating confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. I used a pseudonym for each participant to ensure their identities were not disclosed throughout my study.

3. Results

I presented the results of my study. My presentations include the modified paradigm of the different themes mentioned in the Adaptive Leadership Theory of Heifetz and Linsky, which include the tough challenges experienced by teachers, adaptive leadership experiences, and the experiences thriving in adaptive leadership. I also presented the emerging sub-themes and the viewpoint and standpoint of my study.

In Figure 2 below, I illustrated the modified paradigm on the adaptive leadership experiences of basic education teachers in public schools.

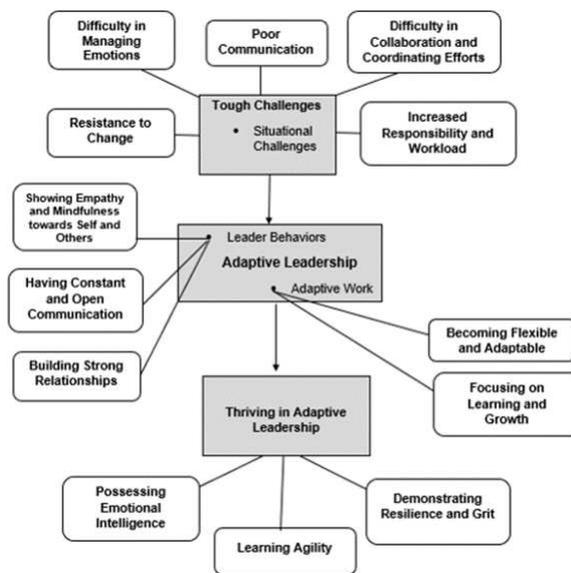


Fig. 2. Modified Paradigm of the Experiences of Teachers

3.1. Tough Challenges Experienced by Teachers

Tough challenges are one of the themes or components mentioned in the theory. This refers to problems or issues that do not have clear solutions and cannot be solved by an expert or authority alone. It requires leaders and people within the organization to learn, adapt, and change their beliefs, values, and behavior since these challenges are emotionally charged, complex, and involve uncertainty. I have generated five emerging sub-themes. These are difficulty managing emotions, poor communication, difficulty in collaboration and coordinating efforts, resistance to change, and increased responsibility and workload.

### 3.2. Adaptive Leadership Experiences of Teachers

Adaptive leadership is a process in which a leader guides the people through the tough challenges that they have faced. This adaptive leadership involves two categories, which are leader behavior and adaptive work. These two categories also focus on how leaders mobilize people to embrace change. From the responses of the participants, I generated three emerging sub-themes for leader behavior. These are showing empathy and mindfulness towards self and others, having constant and open communication, and building strong relations with stakeholders. For adaptive work, I have generated two emerging sub-themes, which are becoming flexible and adaptable and focusing on learning and growth.

### 3.3. Experiences of Teachers Thriving in Adaptive Leadership

Another theme mentioned in adaptive leadership theory was thriving against tough challenges through adaptive leadership. Through the thematic analysis, I generated three emerging sub-themes. These are possessing emotional intelligence, learning agility, and demonstrating resilience and grit.

## 4. Discussions

### 4.1. Tough Challenges Experienced by Teachers

Adaptive leadership is increasingly fundamental for teachers in today's evolving school environment. However, its significance presents various challenges regarding interpersonal and intrapersonal relations among school stakeholders, particularly in stakeholder engagement, motivation, and mobilization of collective action. Various situational challenges stemmed from resistance to change of both internal and external stakeholders while dealing with interpersonal challenges in adaptive tasks.

#### 4.1.1. Difficulty in Managing Emotions

Managing emotions posed a tough challenge, particularly situational challenges in times of change and uncertain situations. This affirmation was emphasized by Tai and Kareem (2019), who state that individuals exhibit varying types and degrees of emotions in response to change. People may appreciate change efforts on a cognitive level, but on an emotional level, they may resist because of misunderstandings, mistrust, or simply a low tolerance for change. This means that teachers may exhibit profound emotional responses to oppose change.

Participants revealed on difficulty handling their emotions and balancing their personal feelings, which may affect how they dealt with others. This is asserted by the study of Frenzel et al. (2021), which signifies that teachers who are emotionally exhausted or overwhelmed by negative emotions are likely to become less tolerant and less caring to others, affecting the quality of their relationships.

#### 4.1.2. Poor Communication

One situational challenge the participants mentioned during our engagement was poor communication. This was affirmed by Lewis (2019), who pointed out that communication is important in organizational change initiatives, yet it can be a source of significant challenges.

The participants revealed that poor communication existed due to a lack of clarity, which may cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This key finding was attested by Newton (2020), Bahrain et al. (2023), and Hadar et al. (2020), in which the authors expounded that lack of clarity may result in conflicting

messages. Unclear instructions lead to misinterpreting expectations, resulting in errors and inefficiencies such that misunderstandings will also arise when the receiver misinterprets the sender's intended message. Hence, a deficiency in communication can obstruct the seamless exchange of information and ideas which can greatly affect motivating stakeholders to participate and to support change initiatives and programs of the school. This was confirmed by Errida and Lotfi (2021), who cited that change initiatives and projects suffered due to poor communication. These findings suggest that ineffective communication can significantly hinder change efforts. When information is not conveyed, stakeholders may feel excluded, confused, and resistant to the proposed changes. Consequently, ineffective communication and infrequent interaction create significant barriers to effective leadership (Colwell, 2024).

#### 4.1.3. *Difficulty in Collaboration and Coordinating Efforts*

Teachers also revealed challenges in engagement and collaboration. In the interviews, teachers divulged a lack of cooperation and support for initiatives from other departments or groups within the institution or organization. This was attested by Benavides et al. (2020), who mentioned that at the organizational level, cultural barriers existed. This was associated with the changes in organizational values and is affected by the resistance to change in mindsets and behaviors, not only on the part of people as individuals but also as an entity.

Additionally, the lack of participation of stakeholders was mentioned as a challenge in engagement and collaboration. However, Girelli et al. (2020) argued that parents are committed to collaborating and reinforcing the school-family partnership necessary for successful teaching and learning. Also, some situations may hinder parents' involvement in schools. Lase et al. (2022) explained that it cannot be denied that in times of uncertainty, inadequate involvement and support of the parents in their children's learning activities is predominant due to limited time and busyness in finding ways to meet family needs. Parents experienced increased economic, psychological, and social burdens during trying times.

#### 4.1.4. *Resistance to Change*

Resistance to change was a significant challenge mentioned by the participants during the interview and focus group discussions. This was validated by Cheraghi et al. (2023), emphasizing that teachers' resistance is a natural human response, especially when the change impacts their professional lives and classroom practices. Resistance is a typical reaction to a challenge to the existing order or a normal response to a threat to the status quo.

Participants cited their reasons for resisting, which stemmed from adhering to established routines and resisting stepping outside their comfort zones. This assertion was reiterated by Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) and Felder and Brent (2024), saying that the resistance to abandon established methods and routines contributes significantly to resistance to change because people, as a rule, are reluctant to abandon their comfort zone. Both faculty and staff may exhibit this resistance, feeling comfortable with current practices and perceiving little need for change.

Additionally, Konakli and Akdeniz (2022) validated the participants' statements by highlighting teachers' reasons for resistance to change at the personal and organizational levels. Teacher resistance to change arose from personal concerns such as lack of perceived reason or benefit, anxiety, and life disruption. This also stemmed from logical concerns such as insufficient information, unclear purpose, fear of repeated failures, and doubts about feasibility.

#### 4.1.5. *Increased Responsibility and Workload*

The teachers expressed feelings of increased responsibility and workload. They felt their roles had become more demanding with additional tasks and time commitments. This was explained by Pollock (2020), that

adaptive leaders simultaneously expand their roles in complex and uncertain situations. This revolves around safe schooling, setting the context for future schooling, and extending from instructional leader to digital instructional leader. This was elaborated by Obrad (2020), pointing out that the dynamic changes increased the professional demand for teachers to learn new technologies and new tools and adopt new materials for teaching delivery. The myriad adjustments under uncertainty induced stress among teachers.

Anderson et al. (2021) attested to this issue, citing circumstances during the transition to remote learning. Teachers reported an increase in workload and expectations, particularly in creating online learning materials, learning new technologies, and new learning modalities, which added to their stress. Also, Wang (2024) stressed that increasing demand on the roles of teachers inside and outside the school, including higher academic standards, integration of technology, and the need to address diverse student needs, often with limited resources and support, posed additional challenges to their work assignments. This heightened workload may result in burnout, tension, and emotional fatigue. Hence, this confirmed Colwell's (2024) claim that increased responsibilities intensified school leaders' workloads, interfered with their leadership, and induced emotional stress.

## **4.2. Adaptive Leadership Experiences of Teachers**

In addressing the tough challenges identified, teachers shared their adaptive leadership experiences with me. Teachers could share their leader behaviors and adaptive works as strategies and mechanisms that allow them to adapt and sustain their roles as educators in the face of change, uncertainty, and complexity.

### **4.2.1. Showing Empathy and Mindfulness toward Self and Others**

Teachers shared that despite the tough challenges that they have faced, they tried to be adaptive leaders. According to Chaudhry (2024), adaptive leadership requires unique skills and a distinct mindset that enable leaders to navigate the complexities of uncertain environments effectively. This necessitates emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. Leaders with high emotional intelligence can understand their own emotions and reactions amidst uncertainty while also empathizing with the experiences and perspectives of others.

Participants recognized the importance of empathy in connecting with others personally. This is asserted by Khan (2021) that empathy is essential, and even people are overwhelmed by the pace of change and its impact on their personal lives. Mutual empathy is key to ensuring that difficulties are managed efficiently and effectively. Accordingly, Hubbart (2023) reiterated that leaders must exhibit empathy throughout change projects to mitigate aversion and resistance. It is about empathy, cultivating a culture of transparency, and promoting the sharing of views and ideas.

It was also mentioned that teachers need to be mindful of managing their own emotions and understanding the emotions of others. It emphasizes the importance of deeply understanding one's emotions and how they impact behavior. Issah (2018) cited that leaders must develop the skill of treating people according to their emotional reactions. Leaders can improve organization and institutional effectiveness if they empathize with coworkers. In addition, Ivanova (2023) emphasized that leaders must manage their anxieties and fears while remaining empathetic and attuned to the emotions of their team members. This creates a safe space for open communication and enables collective resilience in adversity.

#### 4.2.2. Having Open and Constant Communication

Teachers shared that open and constant communication is important when dealing with school stakeholders. This is confirmed by the findings of Salamondra (2021), which emphasized that communication is essential to maintain healthy relationships between students, faculty, and parents.

Teachers shared that it is important to foster open and constant communication with the parents and other stakeholders to explain the objectives and goals of the program, project, or initiatives. Piliyesi et al. (2020) affirmed this, emphasizing that establishing open communication and clear goals are fundamental for successful collaboration.

Additionally, Bartolome et al. (2020) emphasized that sharing information was a way to express openness to parents. Teachers also felt that showcasing the results of parental involvement encouraged parents and acknowledged their valuable contributions. This was also affirmed by Kfukfu et al. (2024), who stated that communication from leadership is consistently clear and easy to understand. Clear communication facilitates a more accurate flow of information since there is less opportunity for misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Teachers created communication channels employing digital platforms for easy and fast access to information and dissemination. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) asserted that reliable communication channels or platforms should be created to ensure easy access to information, clear protocols for information sharing, and feedback mechanisms. Information and communication channels include websites, emails, workshops, networking events, and regular meetings which provide updates, enhance skills, encourage shared learning, and coordinate decision-making.

#### 4.2.3. Building Strong Relationships

Teachers believed collaborative relationships with colleagues, parents, and students created a supportive environment where ideas were shared, challenges were addressed collectively and fostered professional growth. This is in line with the claim of Piliyesi et al. (2020) that school leaders must proactively engage parents through targeted strategies, balancing parental involvement with educator autonomy. Collaboration should be inclusive, responsive, and empowering, and parent contributions should be recognized.

Moreover, Tai and Omar (2018) pointed out that building partnerships entails collaboration, focusing on leadership practice, in which the relations among school leaders, staff, and stakeholders relate more to interactions than actions. Successful schools assume that school improvement and effectiveness is a collective rather than an individual enterprise. Ivanova (2023) further stressed that adaptive leadership cultivates shared ownership and collaborative problem-solving by empowering teams to express concerns, question assumptions, and experiment. This requires building trust, fostering open communication, and actively valuing diverse perspectives.

Assefa and Zenebe (2024) emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts such as engaging families and communities, collaborating with parents and guardians, and partnering with community organizations and resources. These build strong home-school partnerships, facilitate cultural understanding, and provide valuable support to meet diverse needs.

Teachers shared that they recognized parents' contributions and engagement by giving them awards and recognitions. This is in line with the claim of Piliyesi et al. (2020) that school leaders and teachers should honor parents by validating and recognizing any level of involvement or contributions they make. Personal reward incentives motivate stakeholders to become involved and tie personal advancement to the broader success of the project. This is also in line with the findings of Doten-Snitker et al. (2021) that positive reinforcement, such as recognizing and acknowledging contributions, fosters a sense of belonging and motivates individuals to continue collaborating effectively.

#### 4.2.4. Adaptive Work: Becoming Flexible and Adaptable

Teachers embrace flexibility and adaptability and recognize constant change. They remained open to new ideas and willing to adjust their plans and embrace new approaches. According to Gao and Zhang (2020), teachers must be flexible, resilient, and ready to learn new skills to overcome unexpected challenges. Flexibility allows school leaders to adjust their strategies and approaches to changing circumstances while focusing on long-term goals. Leaders foster confidence and stability within their teams by cultivating these qualities, encouraging individuals to embrace change and proactively seek innovative solutions to emerging challenges (Chaudhry, 2024).

Additionally, Ansell et al. (2023) pointed out that public institutions and programs must be more flexible and agile so that teachers can adapt to new circumstances and scale their problem-solving efforts. Added to this suggestion, Dunn (2020) cited that leaders must cultivate specific personal skills that improve adaptive performance to make an organization more adaptable.

#### 4.2.5. Focusing on Learning and Growth

One of the adaptive leadership of teachers was focusing on learning and growth. They believed that to be an effective leader; they prioritized professional development to stay updated on the latest educational trends and acquire new skills. In affirmation of this idea, Ivanova (2023) has reiterated that teachers, as adaptive leaders, are lifelong learners. They actively seek new knowledge, critically reflect, and stay updated on emerging trends and technologies. They must constantly adapt and acquire new knowledge and skills to navigate complexities and effectively guide their teams. This is in line with the findings of Dunn (2020), pointing out that adaptive leaders continue to search for hurdles that may hinder growth. Teachers believed in the importance of professional growth and development in leading with purpose. This was affirmed by Chis and Simion (2019), saying that it is necessary for teachers to apply the essential elements they have acquired from professional training, seminars, and school learning action cell sessions. This corroborated Garcia and Weiss's findings (2019), highlighting that the ever-changing demands of teaching require continuous adaptation. Failing to provide teachers with adequate access to effective training, professional development, and learning communities where their professional judgment is valued directly harms their effectiveness, diminishes their sense of purpose, and limits their career advancement opportunities.

### 4.3. Experiences of Teachers Thriving in Adaptive Leadership

Teachers recognized the dynamic nature of education and the inevitability of change. Teachers' adaptive leadership can manage change, face challenges, and thrive. Teachers' experiences in thriving through adaptive leadership include possessing high emotional intelligence, learning agility, and demonstrating resilience and grit.

#### 4.3.1. Possessing Emotional Intelligence

Teachers revealed emotional intelligence and self-awareness when I asked them how they overcame challenges and thrived. This confirmed Northouse's claim (2023) that emotional intelligence is a set of personal and social competencies. Personal competence includes social awareness, emotional regulation, social competence, empathy, and social skills.

Teachers shared that it is important to control one's emotions, remain calm, and not be impulsive when reacting to untoward situations. This affirmed the findings of Chaudhry (2024) that emotional regulation empowers leaders to think thoughtfully and strategically rather than reacting impulsively or emotionally. Adaptive leaders can understand their emotions and those of others, fostering effective communication, conflict resolution, and strong team relationships. This was elaborated by Drigas and Papoutsis (2019), saying

that people with emotional intelligence and empathic skills can express their emotions, understand themselves and their colleagues, deal with positive and negative emotions and difficult situations, and they can build a constructive environment where cooperation and collaboration exist.

The emotional intelligence of leaders helps them build strong connections with students and educators, adapt teaching approaches with empathy, and create positive and inclusive environments (Tañajura & Orongan, 2024). The level of emotional intelligence will determine the emotional stability among colleagues and the degree to which they cooperate for better results (Bansal, 2021). Leaders with high emotional intelligence excel at navigating challenges, building strong teams, and fostering positive learning environments.

Hence, emphasis on emotional management in leadership is a pivotal advancement in comprehending the expansive aspects of educational leadership and practice, which is essential for fostering a widespread culture of effective teaching and learning inside schools (Tai & Kareem, 2019).

#### 4.3.2. Learning Agility

Teachers shared how teachers quickly learn from their experiences and apply this learning to unfamiliar situations by reflecting on every action to evaluate the experiences and lessons learned from the experience. This was asserted by Kross et al. (2023), who said that reflection improves performance by allowing people to draw lessons from past experiences and take personal accountability for what has happened.

Additionally, Lee and Song (2022) emphasized that learning agility acknowledges faulty experiences as important and is not afraid of new challenges and strange experiences. Reiterating that feedback on performance was found to be a major factor in learning agility.

#### 4.3.3. Demonstrating Resilience and Grit

Teachers shared that they become flexible, adaptive, and resilient when facing unexpected challenges to thrive. In line with this, Chaudhry (2024) reiterated that flexible and adaptive leaders embrace ambiguity, remain open to new ideas, and adjust their strategies to stay aligned with evolving goals and conditions. They have a growth mindset that embraces change as an opportunity and fosters innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement instead of clinging to the status quo. Cultivating this capacity allows leaders to build resilience and agility, enabling effective responses to emerging challenges. Oledan and Limjap (2024) emphasized teachers' adaptability and innovative thinking by creating various instructional strategies to promote student creativity.

Embracing the discomfort of growth requires acknowledging vulnerabilities, accepting failure and using them as steppingstones, and acknowledging success was built from numerous failures to promote the idea of a growth mindset, which in turn developed an innovative culture, prompting employees to experiment, embrace risks, adaptability, and continuous learning (Ivanova, 2023; Hashimy et al., 2023). Thus, school leaders demonstrate persistence and optimism by responding to adversity and challenges positively and productively (Bagwell, 2020).

## 5. Future Directions

### 5.1. Implications for Practice

While challenges exist in implementing adaptive leadership, its practical implications are significant, particularly in navigating change and uncertainty. It shifts the focus from traditional approaches to more collaborative, flexible, and responsive approaches. Teachers will continue to make advancements, redefining teacher leadership by shifting the focus of teacher leadership from solely delivering instruction to facilitating

learning and growth, creating conditions for learning rather than simply transmitting knowledge, rethinking teacher professional development, prioritizing the development of adaptive capacity in teachers, including skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, agility, and resilience.

Moreover, Adaptive leadership has significant implications for teacher leadership to cultivate empathy, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence and foster collaboration among colleagues or teams.

### 5.2. Implications for Further Research

Considering the foregoing findings of the study, I look into future research that employs quantitative design, particularly mediation analysis, to investigate the mediating effect of adaptive leadership on the tough challenges and thriving experiences of teachers. Furthermore, future research used the emerging themes identified in my study as indicators and variables in such quantitative research.

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