

Teacher Leadership and Situated Assessment: Key Factors for Academic Strengthening in Southern

Magdalena Liderazgo docente y evaluación situada: claves para el fortalecimiento académico en el Sur del Magdalena

ABSTRACT

This study examined how teacher leadership practices and situated assessment contribute to academic strengthening within educational institutions in Southern Magdalena. Adopting a qualitative approach with a phenomenological-hermeneutic design, the research analyzed the narratives of seven teachers regarding their pedagogical praxis. Findings reveal a persistent tension between instruction conceived as an art form and the external pressure of standardized bureaucratic models. The study concludes that teacher leadership, when integrating territoriality and subjectivity, functions as a driver of innovation that enhances student motivation and confidence during external assessments, such as the national Saber 11 tests.

Keywords: Teacher leadership; Situated assessment; Motivation; Education as art; Territorial context; Southern Magdalena.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio fue comprender cómo las prácticas de liderazgo docente y evaluación situada contribuyen al fortalecimiento académico en instituciones educativas del Sur del Magdalena. Bajo un enfoque cualitativo con diseño fenomenológico-hermenéutico, se analizaron las narrativas de siete docentes sobre su praxis pedagógica. Los resultados revelan una tensión entre la enseñanza concebida como arte y la presión de modelos burocráticos estandarizados. Se concluye que el liderazgo docente, cuando integra la territorialidad y la subjetividad, actúa como motor de innovación que eleva la motivación estudiantil y la confianza frente a evaluaciones externas como las pruebas Saber 11.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo docente; Evaluación situada; Motivación; Educación como arte; Contexto territorial; Sur del Magdalena.

INTRODUCTION

The Saber 11 tests are a standardized instrument designed to measure the competencies of students finishing secondary education. These assessments, developed by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES), have become a national benchmark for assessing educational quality and a mandatory requirement for accessing higher education. According to the 2025 report by the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, results show a persistent gap between central and peripheral regions, evidencing historical inequalities in educational access, relevance, and quality (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2025).

Specifically, the department of Magdalena clearly reflects this issue, as its official scores of 225.3 remain below the national mean of 277 in areas such as critical reading, mathematics, and natural sciences. This represents a performance gap of 45.9 points relative to the mean, which limits opportunities for youth and perpetuates social inequality (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2025). In this context, the need to rethink the teacher's role as a central actor in educational transformation emerges. Pedagogical leadership, understood not merely as administrative management but as passion, creativity, and ethical commitment becomes a determinant factor in raising academic indices in the Saber 11 assessments.

From this perspective, the problem cannot be reduced to a lack of material resources or institutional precariousness, though these factors remain relevant. Fullan (2016) maintains that profound educational change does not depend on managing infrastructure or external resources, but on leadership capable of inspiring cultural and pedagogical shifts among process actors. Through a phenomenological and hermeneutic lens, this article proposes analyzing how teacher leadership and situated assessment can become decisive factors in improving ICFES test results.

Methodologically, phenomenology, following the tradition of Husserl (1989) by focusing on the description of lived experiences, allows for capturing the essence of leadership as a subjective and embodied phenomenon. Correspondingly, hermeneutics, under Van Manen's (2016) perspective, provides a framework to understand how those experiences are inscribed within territoriality and intersubjectivity by interpreting emerging meanings. In this way, the study seeks to broaden the scope toward a methodological proposal that not only describes teaching practices but resignifies them in terms of academic strengthening, integrating the lifeworld as a horizon of meaning.

Consequently, it is imperative to note that a teacher who instructs with passion and creativity does not merely transmit knowledge; they build community, strengthen trust, and motivate students to confidently face academic aptitude tests like the ICFES. Situated assessment, in dialogue with Miguel Angel Santos Guerra (2014, 2024), emerges as an alternative to standardized models that render territorial diversity invisible. Under this view, the recognition of local realities is not an obstacle but a bridge: by contextualizing evaluative processes, students achieve a greater appropriation of knowledge, allowing them to develop the necessary competencies to significantly improve their performance on standardized tests, thus closing the achievement gap through meaningful and relevant training.

In this regard, while the administrative dimension of the teaching-learning process is important, it is equally vital to configure it as a subjective and existential phenomenon

involving the teacher's identity, emotions, and vocation. Michael Fullan (2016) underscores that educational leadership cannot be reduced to managing structures; it must inspire processes of cultural and pedagogical change. Therefore, the way teaching is conceived, rooted in ethical commitment and passion for the craft, becomes the core from which methods and strategies are mobilized to impact knowledge construction and the preparation of students for standardized assessments like Saber 11.

Furthermore, Freire (2017) views teacher leadership as an implication of political and ethical commitment to student emancipation. The teacher's subjectivity is manifested through their capacity to dialogue, listen, and support, recognizing that teaching is also an act of personal and collective transformation. In this framework, methods and strategies are not neutral; they respond to a worldview and a pedagogical intentionality that can either reproduce structures of domination or open paths toward liberation. Situated assessment, as both a method and a strategy, proposed in a critical light by authors like Miguel Angel Santos Guerra (2024), becomes a space where teacher subjectivity and motivation intertwine.

Building on this, from Santos Guerra to Carless (2020), evaluating is not merely measuring, but interpreting and supporting learning processes from the uniqueness of each student and each territory. For this reason, assessment serves as an early warning indicator that, in regions like Southern Magdalena, must allow for the recognition of diversity and deficiencies to strengthen final student preparation. This approach is particularly relevant for standardized tests, as it prepares students not only in content but in skills of reflection, analysis, and contextualization, as seen in the Critical Reading component. Carless (2020) defines it as a dialogic process to develop the student's evaluative judgment, becoming a tool to strengthen autonomy and self-efficacy—factors that directly impact academic performance.

Moreover, the notion of critical interculturality developed by Catherine Walsh (2018) provides a framework for understanding how teacher leadership and situated assessment must engage with local realities. The teacher's subjectivity, their methods and strategies, and their capacity to innovate and motivate become existential factors that define whether teaching is lived as a routine job or as a transformative art. In this sense, critical interculturality invites the recognition that improving results in tests like Saber 11 cannot be achieved solely through technical training, but rather through pedagogical practices that integrate the cultural and territorial richness of the students.

Accordingly, hermeneutic phenomenology applied to education, as developed by Max Van Manen (2016), offers an ideal framework for interpreting teacher narratives and understanding how passion, motivation, and creativity become engines of pedagogical practice. Van Manen posits that researching educational practice implies attending to the teacher's subjective and existential dimension, recognizing that teaching is a way of being in the world. In the case of Southern Magdalena, this perspective allowed for an understanding of how teachers configure their leadership in dialogue with students, families, and communities, and how situated assessment becomes a mirror reflecting not only student learning but also the passion and art of the educator supporting the process.

On the other hand, Alfred Schutz's (1962) social phenomenology introduces the notion of intersubjectivity as a key to understanding how meanings are constructed in daily interaction. Regarding teacher leadership, this perspective illuminates the importance of

human relationships: trust, shared authority, and the co-construction of learning. This vision is supported by Gunter (2021), who maintains that leadership must be understood as a relational and political practice, where intersubjectivity allows the teacher to act as an agent of change, transcending simple technical instruction to generate a real impact on the social fabric of the classroom.

Under these premises, this study aims to understand the leadership and assessment experiences of teachers in Southern Magdalena to propose situated academic strengthening routes that respond to the particularities of the territory. This research does not merely seek to identify existing gaps regarding the Saber 11 tests, but rather to make visible those innovative practices that, born from passion and teacher commitment, succeed in transforming learning into an act of emancipation. It is anticipated that this analysis will serve as a reference for designing more human institutional policies, where assessment is not a punitive end but a means for holistic growth and the closing of educational inequality gaps in the region.

METHOD

This research utilizes a situated phenomenological-hermeneutic design within a qualitative framework. This approach is pertinent because it aims to describe the essence of the lived experience of teacher leadership while simultaneously interpreting the meanings educators attribute to such praxis within their socio-territorial context, following the postulates of Van Manen (2016). Unlike external descriptive models, this study focuses on interpreting the structures of meaning that teachers construct from their daily experiences, capturing the "pedagogy of alterity" and the subjectivity emerging in the school setting— aspects frequently omitted by quantitative methods.

Regarding the target population, it comprised secondary education teachers from three public educational institutions in the Southern Magdalena subregion. The study group consisted of seven (N=7) teachers selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required: (a) a minimum career trajectory of five years in the classroom, (b) active participation in pedagogical innovation or situated assessment processes, and (c) a willingness to share reflective accounts of their praxis within the context of the region's socioeconomic tensions. This selection ensured a rich phenomenological depth based on subjects who experience teaching as a sociological and existential phenomenon.

Data analysis followed a rigorous coding and categorization process, divided into three analytical phases. During the Reduction Phase, conversational-anecdotal interviews were exhaustively transcribed; following Husserl's (1989) epoché, meaning units or narrative "incidents" related to leadership, territory, and assessment were identified, filtering information to focus on the essence of the lived phenomenon. In the Categorization Phase, meaning units were grouped through inductive logic into emerging categories: situated knowledge, territorial consciousness, subjectivation, and resistance, providing a polyhedral view of how teachers recognize themselves as "feeling-thinking subjects." Finally, in the Integration Phase, dialectical relationships were established between these categories and theoretical exponents such as Schutz, Freire, and Santos Guerra. The final findings emerged as deep interpretations of pedagogical reality, where learning manifests as a complex and relational phenomenon.

To ensure qualitative validity and scientific rigor, the study employed triangulation of methods (narratives vs. observation), participant validation, and constant epistemic vigilance over the researcher's role, alongside expert validation in the development of the interview instrument. Ethically, the study was governed by the following principles: (a) Informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation; (b) Anonymity, through the use of pseudonyms to safeguard identities; (c) Non-maleficence, ensuring that reflection did not cause emotional harm; and (d) Reciprocity, through the dissemination of results to the participating institutions. As recent authors note, situated research must ensure that the participants' voices are resignified as an act of social and pedagogical justice.

RESULTS

The presentation of results is articulated through a thematic structure derived from the phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis of teacher narratives. Following the logic of reduction proposed by Van Manen (2016), findings are not presented as isolated survey responses but as dimensions of lived experience that account for the complexity of leadership and assessment in Southern Magdalena. This organization allows for transcending mere factual description to reach an ontological understanding of teaching, where emerging categories act as core meanings that intertwine teacher subjectivity with educational system demands. The following sections describe the essential categories that emerged from the process of coding and dialectical integration with the seven key informants:

The Duality of Praxis: Between the Creative Act and the Mechanization of the Craft. Teaching in Southern Magdalena is revealed as a constant tension between creativity and routine. For a significant group of teachers (DOC_01, 03, 05, 07), pedagogical practice is configured as a "work of art" where planning seeks the student's discovery and wonder. This subjective stance is not merely aesthetic; it translates into the strengthening of curiosity and critical capacity, competencies evaluated by the ICFES (2025) in the Critical Reading test. In contrast, the figure of the "office-clerk teacher" emerges (DOC_02, 04, 06), whose narrative is marked by bureaucratization and program compliance. This vision reduces teaching to an administrative procedure that, according to the accounts, stifles innovation and limits actual preparation for standardized tests by prioritizing memorization over analysis.

This reveals a dialectical tension that echoes the propositions of Fullan (2016), who warns that educational leadership cannot be reduced to the management of external structures. For Fullan, true educational change resides in the leader's capacity to inspire a cultural and pedagogical transformation; when the teacher succumbs to the mechanization of the craft, the "passion for improvement" is lost, which is the core from which methods that truly impact academic success and standardized test preparation are mobilized.

Territoriality and Innovation: The "Lifeworld" as a Classroom. A powerful category in the findings is Situated Innovation. Five of the seven teachers agree that the territory, the river, the neighborhood, the community, acts as the primary pedagogical resource. Narratives describe how moving learning from the physical classroom into the geographical context improves the understanding of concepts in Social and Natural Sciences.

However, this intentionality clashes with material limits: technological precariousness and deficient infrastructure act as "anchors" that occasionally force teachers to return to traditional methods such as dictation, evidencing the struggle between pedagogical leadership and structural constraints.

In this regard, Catherine Walsh (2018), from the perspective of critical interculturality, maintains that improving academic results in peripheral contexts is not achieved through technical training, but with practices that integrate cultural and territorial richness. The situated innovation found here confirms that the students' lifeworld is the necessary horizon of meaning for learning to be meaningful and to close the inequality gaps identified in regional reports and results analyzed by both the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (2025) and the ICFES.

Corporeality and Affectivity: Burnout versus Sustained Motivation. Phenomenology allowed for capturing that teacher leadership is a bodily phenomenon. Motivation manifests in gestures of care and vital energy when the student achieves learning. Nonetheless, the narratives also reveal a deep emotional exhaustion derived from the administrative burden (DOC_06). It is observed that teacher self-efficacy, their belief in their own capacity to generate change fluctuates according to the meaning they assign to tasks: while classroom projects generate enthusiasm, "filling out forms" erodes passion, indirectly affecting the quality of academic preparation offered to students.

As can be seen, burnout as a counterpoint to motivation is an existential dimension central to the work of Max Van Manen (2016), who posits that researching educational practice implies attending to the teacher's subjective and affective dimension. According to the author, phenomenologically speaking, teaching is a way of being-in-the-world where motivation and creativity are the engines of praxis; when the bureaucratic system ignores this corporeality, exhaustion is generated that not only affects the teacher but weakens the learning ecosystem necessary for academic strengthening (Van Manen, 2016).

Situated Assessment: From Control to the Ethics of Recognition. Results show an unfinished transition in the way of assessing. Some teachers (DOC_04, 05) have begun to implement learning journals and social cartography as assessment tools. These practices are perceived as a "mirror" reflecting student subjectivity and strengthening their autonomy. Under this view, situated assessment is not opposed to the Saber 11 test but strengthens it by developing the capacity for judgment. Nevertheless, an institutional tension persists (DOC_07) where the pressure for the "number" and statistical results generates a contradiction between what the teacher considers valuable, the process, and what the system demands, the grade, configuring a space of struggle between assessment as support and assessment as control.

This finding engages with Miguel Angel Santos Guerra (2024), who proposes assessment as a space where subjectivity and motivation intertwine. In accordance with Carless (2020), situated assessment becomes a process of dialogue that develops evaluative judgment and self-efficacy. For the author, situated assessment data confirm that when evaluation is conceived as learning and not as a sanction, the student is equipped with tools for reflection and contextualization essential for areas such as Critical Reading, as was the case for the significant group of teachers in the first dimension who conceived the process as a creative act.

Relational Dimension: Shared Authority and Co-construction. Teacher leadership revealed itself as a relational practice grounded in trust. When the teacher yields portions of authority and allows students to participate in evaluative decision-making, greater involvement and confidence in the face of academic challenges are observed. Authority, from the perspective of applied hermeneutics, ceases to be a sanction and becomes care, generating a classroom environment conducive to academic strengthening and the improvement of educational indices in the region. Specifically, shared authority not only democratizes knowledge but constitutes an act of curricular justice that recognizes the student as a subject capable of self-regulating their learning and responding with greater proficiency to the demands of external evaluations.

This vision is supported by Alfred Schutz's (1962) social phenomenology and the contemporary perspectives of Gunter (2021), who define leadership not as an individual or administrative attribute, but as a relational, ethical, and deeply political practice. Intersubjectivity in the classroom allows the teacher to act as an agent of change capable of transcending technical instruction to inhabit the lifeworld of their students. By building shared meanings through trust and reciprocity, the educational act is humanized, and the social capital necessary to raise academic performance indices is woven. Ultimately, this relational configuration demonstrates that strengthening for tests like Saber 11 is not a mechanical process but the result of a pedagogical ecosystem that protects territorial identity while enhancing the subjects' intellectual excellence.

DISCUSSION

The identified category of creative leadership links instruction with Eisner's (1995) vision regarding the aesthetic dimension of the classroom. Furthermore, this finding on the tension between artistic vocation and bureaucratic pressure coincides with results from a multiple case study in rural Chilean schools, where Martinez and Valdivia (2021) identified administrative overload as the primary factor in teacher demotivation. Similar to the situation in Southern Magdalena, teachers struggle between pedagogical creation and compliance with minimum standards. This convergence suggests that the bureaucratization of teaching is a transnational phenomenon threatening the innovative capacity necessary to improve performance on assessments such as the Saber 11 tests, ultimately turning creativity into an act of professional resistance.

Regarding evaluation as recognition, the results engage with the work of Santos Guerra (2024) and Freire's (2017) critical pedagogy. Narratives that resignify assessment as a narrative process confirm that evaluation can be an emancipatory act. However, contrasting this with recent Colombian research, such as that by Garcia and Lopez (2022), reveals a divergence: while they suggest that ICFES ranking pressure forces teachers to adopt purely behaviorist "training" models, our findings demonstrate a pedagogical vanguard in Magdalena that successfully "situates" assessment without abandoning technical rigor, although it remains insufficient to reach national mean scores.

In this sense, existential motivation and corporeality emerge as categories that recognize the teacher's vital energy. Aligned with Van Manen (2016), motivation is not merely a psychological state but a form of presence. Our findings on emotional exhaustion find support in research by Rodriguez-Moreno et al. (2023), who maintain that

teacher well-being is the strongest predictor of student academic performance. It is confirmed that when the system reduces teaching to an administrative procedure, the "teaching body" becomes exhausted, limiting the ability to prepare students for high-complexity challenges. This reinforces the notion that a teacher's emotional health is, in fact, a critical variable of systemic educational quality.

Furthermore, regarding pedagogical territoriality, the results converge with Walsh's (2018) critical interculturality. The territory is not merely a setting but a "living book" of learning. Comparing this finding with the study by Perez and Sanchez (2024) on situated education in riverine communities confirms that content contextualization in Critical Reading improves student comprehension. In addition, our results provide an original nuance: territoriality acts as a resistance mechanism against standardized examinations only if the lifeworld is established as the sole horizon of meaning from which learning acquires real value.

Similarly, the category of temporal educational change confirms that learning is constructed through duration rather than the immediacy of administrative calendars. This tension between organic learning time and the mechanical time of audits coincides with Hargreaves (2021), who argues that reforms fail by not respecting "pedagogical maturation." Our findings denounce an institutional fragmentation that interrupts long-term processes. It is established that improving Saber 11 results requires leadership stability that allows educational time to be lived as a historical process rather than a series of isolated events for indicator compliance.

Regarding the relational dimension of teacher leadership, grounded in trust, it finds solid support in Schutz's (1962) social phenomenology. The meaning of practice is constructed through daily interaction (intersubjectivity). This finding differs from the hierarchical leadership visions predominating in Latin American public management policies. By contrasting this with Gunter (2021), it is observed that distributed leadership and shared authority not only democratize the classroom but increase "collective self-efficacy." In Southern Magdalena, this trust translates into students who are more confident in their own knowledge, a determining emotional factor when facing the pressure of national standardized assessments.

When discussing material limits, the findings show a persistent gap that phenomenology interprets as a restriction on teacher intentionality. Unlike urban studies proposing total digitalization, such as those by Area-Moreira (2021), our results underscore that in peripheral areas, the lack of infrastructure compels resilient "analog innovation." Nevertheless, this deficiency is identified as an inequity factor that teacher leadership cannot resolve through "passion" alone. It is argued that the State, by utilizing the same assessment instrument for regions with deep technological gaps, exercises a form of institutional violence that teachers attempt to mitigate by using the territory as an alternative resource.

In this regard, the tension between evaluation as control and assessment as recognition opens a debate on alterity. For both Levinas and Skliar (2021), situated assessment represents the recognition of the "other" in their singularity. Our findings contrast with the global trend of educational "datification" analyzed by Williamson (2020). Despite the ICFES statistical data analyzed by the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, teachers in Magdalena prioritize humanized evaluation that values effort and trajectory, even though,

paradoxically, total results remain below the national mean.

Consequently, there is a need to continue forging a "Feeling-Thinking Subject" (Sujeto Sentipensante) as an emerging paradigm where the integration of emotional and cognitive dimensions, under Fals Borda's concept of "sentipensante," is validated in the collected narratives. This finding distances itself from teacher training proposals focused exclusively on disciplinary content. Contrasting with authors like Moraes and Navas (2022) on educational complexity, it is argued that leadership in Magdalena is successful when it manages to balance academic rigor with affective empathy. It is concluded that teacher education must evolve toward a model recognizing the interdependence between feeling and thinking, as this balance allows for comprehensive preparation for both life competencies and national exams.

Thus, the articulation of these categories enables the profiling of a Theory of Situated Teacher Leadership as an original contribution of this study. Unlike leadership theories imported from the Anglo-Saxon corporate world, this proposal is grounded in subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and critical territoriality, where academic strengthening in peripheral territories is not a problem of technical transfer but of meaning construction. This theory aligns with governmental and academic entities of educational quality in Colombia, recognizing that success in standardized tests is, in essence, the flourishing of a humanized pedagogical practice that knows how to read its territory to transform its reality.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the objective of understanding the leadership and assessment experiences in Southern Magdalena was achieved by identifying that teaching practice transcends simple technical instruction to become an existential phenomenon. It is evident that pedagogical leadership, far from being an administrative attribute, is a manifestation of the teacher's subjectivity and passion, factors that serve as the primary engine of innovation in vulnerable contexts. This human dimension allows the teacher, in their role as an agent of change, to transform school routines into significant learning events.

Secondly, the study confirms that the duality between teaching conceived as an art and mechanized craft defines the climate of preparation for the Saber 11 tests. It is concluded that when the teacher inhabits the classroom as a creative space, students' critical reading and analytical thinking skills are enhanced, surpassing the rote memorization of content. However, pressure from bureaucratic models and standardization acts as a regressive force limiting this creative potential, occasionally forcing a return to traditional pedagogy. This dialectical tension suggests that to raise educational indices, it is imperative to protect teacher autonomy and foster an aesthetic of teaching that awakens intellectual curiosity as the basis for academic excellence.

Likewise, the category of pedagogical territoriality emerges as a fundamental conclusion for the relevance of education in Magdalena. It is established that the territory should not be seen as an obstacle or a mere setting, but as the sole horizon of meaning that provides real value to learning. Therefore, the research concludes that situated assessment

represents an ethical alternative that can improve standardized control models. Transitioning toward evaluation understood as recognition and support allows students to develop greater self-efficacy and confidence when facing external academic challenges.

Moreover, the dimension of corporeality and teacher well-being is revealed as a determining yet invisible factor in systemic educational quality. It is concluded that teacher motivation is not an isolated psychological state but a form of physical and emotional presence that sustains the classroom ecosystem. Burnout derived from administrative burdens and technological precariousness represents a direct threat to the sustainability of pedagogical innovations. Regarding the phenomenological-hermeneutic methodological design employed, it is concluded that this was the ideal path to capture the essence of the teaching profession in its sociological complexity.

Ultimately, the triangulation of narratives and observations made visible the pedagogical resistance of teachers in Magdalena, who act as "feeling-thinking subjects" integrating rigor with empathy. This methodological approach allowed the findings to be more than mere statistical data, providing deep interpretations that humanize educational research. In this sense, the article culminates with the proposal of a Theory of Situated Teacher Leadership as an original and necessary contribution to the Colombian educational system. It is concluded that this theory, by articulating existential subjectivity, social intersubjectivity, and critical territoriality, offers a clear route to improve educational quality in peripheral territories to reduce the gap separating the Southern Colombian Magdalena from territories with a national general mean.

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