

Reflections on School Governance: The Lived Experiences of School Heads

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Abstract. Effective school governance is a critical foundation for achieving quality education, particularly in resource-constrained environments prevalent in many regions of the Philippines. However, the experiences of school heads in these challenging contexts remain inadequately explored. This phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of six elementary school heads from Siaton Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4 in the Division of Negros Oriental to understand better the leadership challenges they encounter. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring a strong alignment with the research focus. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method to extract significant statements, formulate meanings, and identify overarching themes. The findings revealed that school heads confronted multifaceted barriers, including limited physical resources, multi-grade instructional demands, administrative burdens, and struggles to establish authority among older teaching staff. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience through continuous professional development, strategic adaptability, mentorship engagement, and collaborative leadership practices. Their narratives underscored the importance of sustained training, supervisory support, and community partnerships in enhancing the effectiveness of governance. This study highlights the pressing need for comprehensive interventions, including structured leadership training, mentorship programs, policy reforms, and improved resource allocation, to empower school heads in marginalized communities. By addressing these gaps, educational policymakers and institutions can strengthen the leadership capacities of school heads, ensuring that they are better equipped to manage schools effectively, promote inclusive learning environments, and contribute to long-term educational improvement, particularly in underserved areas.

Keywords: Resource-constrained schools; School governance; School head; School leadership.

1.0 Introduction

Leadership is recognized globally as a fundamental pillar of educational success, shaping both the organizational climate and learner outcomes within schools (Bush, 2021). Effective school governance is crucial for maintaining high-quality education and operational efficiency. However, school heads across the world face immense challenges in balancing instructional leadership, administrative duties, and community engagement while adapting to evolving educational demands. Supriadi et al. (2021) emphasize that school leaders today are expected to be visionaries, instructional guides, and resource managers capable of building external partnerships to advance school performance. Valmores (2021) similarly asserts that competencies in strategic decision-making, instructional supervision, and stakeholder collaboration are critical for enhancing educational

outcomes. The integration of these leadership models is essential for creating resilient, inclusive, and high-performing school systems worldwide.

In the Philippine context, school heads operate in a particularly complex environment marked by socio-economic disparities, resource limitations, and evolving educational policies. The Department of Education (DepEd) acknowledges the vital role of school leadership in improving teacher performance and student outcomes. Nevertheless, Filipino school heads often find themselves overwhelmed by the need to balance administrative tasks with instructional leadership, especially in schools characterized by large class sizes, scarce resources, and heightened community expectations. Manolong et al. (2024) highlight the bureaucratic and financial challenges that rural school heads face when implementing programs, securing necessary resources, and maintaining stakeholder participation. These realities underscore the urgent need for responsive, context-sensitive leadership strategies that empower school heads operating in resource-constrained settings.

Despite extensive research on school leadership, a significant gap persists in understanding the lived experiences of Filipino school heads, particularly those working in rural and under-resourced environments. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on leadership models within urban, well-funded schools (Kinkley, 2019; Piyaman et al., 2017; Shaked, 2021), often neglecting the realities of those leading in marginalized communities. Furthermore, while leadership styles and policy compliance have been widely examined, few studies have explored how cultural values such as *bayanihan* (community cooperation) and *malasakit* (compassion) are embedded in governance practices. Addressing this gap requires a research approach that prioritizes the voices and experiences of school heads themselves, going beyond prescriptive leadership models. Therefore, this study employs a transcendental phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of school governance as experienced by school leaders in resource-constrained Philippine schools.

The need for this study is further magnified by the global educational commitment embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. School governance plays a crucial role in achieving this goal, as effective leadership has a direct impact on teacher motivation, student learning, and overall school sustainability. By focusing on the authentic experiences of school heads, this study aims to capture how leadership is exercised amidst systemic limitations and cultural contexts, providing insights that quantitative measures alone cannot reveal. The use of phenomenology ensures that the study foregrounds the human dimensions of leadership—resilience, adaptability, and values-based decision-making—thus offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of governance in rural educational settings.

Ultimately, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of elementary school heads in the 3rd Congressional District of Negros Oriental, specifically in Siaton Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4. By adopting a phenomenological lens, this research captures the meanings that school heads assign to their leadership journeys, highlighting their challenges, triumphs, and values in managing schools under difficult circumstances. Beyond its academic contribution, this study aims to amplify the voices of rural school leaders, inform leadership development programs, and advocate for policy reforms that support sustainable, equitable, and culturally rooted school governance. In doing so, it aspires to make a meaningful contribution to the advancement of quality education for all Filipino learners.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative, descriptive, transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of school heads in school governance. Colaizzi's seven-step method was utilized for data analysis, ensuring a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives.

2.2 Research Participants

The participants in this study were six school heads from the Siaton District, each with a minimum of eight years of experience in school governance. They were purposefully selected to ensure extensive knowledge and experience relevant to the study. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged, confirming the completeness of the data set.

2.3 Research Instrument

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, which were designed to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences in school governance. The interviews were recorded using the Voice Memos application to ensure secure and accurate data storage for analysis.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered between December 2024 and February 2025. After obtaining formal authorization, the researcher coordinated with district supervisors to identify participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, which were scheduled at convenient times and conducted in a comfortable setting. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was audio-recorded for accuracy.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis followed Colaizzi's phenomenological method, beginning with verbatim transcription of the interviews. Significant statements were extracted, formulated into meanings, and categorized into themes. These themes were refined through iterative processes, with participant validation ensuring accuracy and relevance in capturing their lived experiences.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines by informing participants about the study's purpose, their rights, and the assurance of confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without consequence. The researcher minimized biases through bracketing and reflexivity, providing privacy and accurately representing the participants' experiences.

3.0 Results and Discussion

After a thorough analysis of the transcripts, significant statements, and formulated meanings, the researcher identified an emergent theme encapsulating the lived experiences of school heads in governance. This theme highlights the various factors influencing their leadership, decision-making processes, and administrative challenges within the Siaton school districts. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of school governance, offering insights into how school heads navigated, balanced, and adapted to the demands of their multifaceted roles.

Emergent Theme: The Journey of a Trailblazer

This theme illustrates the progression of school heads as they transition from classroom teachers to administrative leaders, confronting new demands and expectations. Participants described the challenges they encountered in managing schools in remote areas, emphasizing the necessity for resilience, adaptability, and collaborative leadership. Through in-depth interviews, the study revealed that school heads consistently faced the task of balancing instructional leadership with administrative management while ensuring the delivery of quality education in environments characterized by limited resources. Participants emphasized the crucial role of training, mentorship, and ongoing learning in enhancing their leadership capabilities and refining their governance skills. Within this emergent theme, there are four sub-themes: a) Navigating the Leadership Horizon, b) The Unwavering Pursuit of Knowledge, c) Braving the Storms of Early Leadership, and d) Pillars of Wisdom and Influence.

Theme 1: Navigating the Leadership Horizon

This theme highlights the complex transition from being a classroom teacher to assuming the role of a school head, emphasizing the need for resilience, adaptability, and continuous professional development. Participants faced significant challenges, including managing inadequate school facilities and handling diverse staff personalities, which required them to develop strong and flexible leadership strategies. Through these experiences, they recognized that effective leadership extended beyond administrative efficiency to fostering collaboration, humility, and a supportive learning environment.

Participant 1 reflected on his initial experience as a school head in Olambid Elementary School:

"Our problem before was the school building. Our school building, which were makeshifts used as classrooms, are in our area. We have a DepEd with two classrooms, a one-story building, where I'm teaching Grades 1 and 2. So, Grades 3 and 4 are combined, and 5 and 6 are also combined. I'm handling two grades, Grade 3 and Grade 4, even though I'm a school

head."

Participant 2 shared her struggle in transitioning from a teacher to a school principal. She said:

"And then, speaking of leadership style and how I manage my school, it takes a village to make everyone-or rather, everybody in the school—follow you, right? Because we are managing different kinds of personalities. They have different characteristics—some will oppose you, some will support you, and some will remain neutral."

Similarly, Participant 6 shared his experience in transitioning from a classroom teacher to a school head in a hinterland school. He narrated:

"When I first joined DepEd, I was immediately assigned as a school head. Imagine preparing to be a classroom teacher and suddenly managing an entire school in a remote area. I had to learn from my fellow school heads, and they provided valuable input on how to manage a school. I learned a lot from them—how to be humble, open to teachers' suggestions, and how to handle challenges and problems in school leadership."

These statements from the participants highlight the challenges that school heads face, including infrastructure limitations, leadership transitions, and governance issues. The lack of adequate facilities has led to multi-grade setups, requiring school heads to manage both administrative and instructional roles. This finding aligns with those of Manolong et al. (2024) and Navarro (2024), who also found that resource constraints hinder school management, necessitating strategic planning and infrastructure improvements. Whang (2021) highlighted the uncertainty school heads face in balancing instructional and administrative responsibilities, while Jacobsen et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of mentorship and professional networks in fostering leadership resilience. Without proper support, school heads struggle with governance and instructional quality. Taole (2022) noted that teaching principals often find it challenging to balance administrative and instructional duties, while Valmores (2021) linked effective leadership to improved school performance and teacher efficiency. These findings underscore the importance of providing leadership training, adequate resources, and robust mentorship programs to support school heads in addressing these challenges.

Theme 2: The Unwavering Pursuit of Knowledge

This reflects the participants' dedication to continuous learning as they navigate the challenges of school leadership. Through professional training programs like NEAP trainings and school head capability building, they have gained valuable insights into effective administration. They also recognize that learning does not stop after assuming leadership roles, as they constantly seek new strategies applicable to their schools and rely on the mentorship of supervisors who provide both technical assistance and consistent follow-ups. These experiences reinforce that leadership is an ongoing process of growth, adaptation, and refinement.

Participant 1 shared his training experience and how it shaped his leadership. He said:

"Yes, and with the help of the supervisor, I was able to join NEAP training in Cebu, where I also received training in school head compatibility building. In a way, I was trained to be a school head."

Emphasizing the ongoing nature of learning, Participant 3 shares:

"But that's why I always keep looking for good strategies that apply to other schools as well, because I believe that a person's education-the learning of each individual-is continuous."

According to Participant 6, mentorship from supervisors played a crucial role in shaping his administrative role:

"That's where you feel challenged because they have a high standard. You can truly see them as a "working supervisor." That's how skilled they are. And of course, it's not just about providing technical assistance—after giving it, they follow up. It's not just a one-time thing where they give technical assistance and leave it at that. When they provide guidance, they say, "This is what needs to be done," and then they come back to check, "How is it going?" That's when you realize, "Ah, this is how it should be." It's not just about giving instructions and not following up."

These statements from the participants highlight the importance of training, continuous learning, and mentorship in school leadership. Leadership development programs, such as NEAP trainings and professional development initiatives, strengthen school heads' ability to lead effectively, preparing them for both administrative and instructional duties. However, leadership growth is an ongoing process, requiring school heads to seek new strategies and adapt to evolving challenges. This aligns with Jacobsen et al. (2023), who

emphasized that mentorship fosters leadership development, and Guillergan (2024), who found that supervisory guidance enhances leadership effectiveness. Similarly, Augusto (2019) highlighted that solution-focused supervision promotes continuous improvement, reinforcing the need for structured mentorship in school governance.

Furthermore, Lachica (2024) highlighted that school heads' leadership and supervisory skills are central to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and academic excellence, aligning with the participant's experience of seeking new strategies for school leadership. Tino (2024) emphasized that leaders who engage in continuous professional development and mentorship programs build stronger coping mechanisms, allowing them to navigate challenges more effectively. Additionally, Eyana et al. (2024) found that peer support networks contribute significantly to leadership resilience, as shared experiences help school heads develop problem-solving skills and adaptability.

Theme 3: Braving the Storms of Early Leadership

In this theme, one participant expressed the difficulty of overseeing much older teachers, noting the challenge of gaining their respect as a fresh graduate while also juggling teaching duties. Another participant emphasized the need for adaptability, stressing that maintaining a good relationship with subordinates requires open communication, motivation, and a willingness to accept new ideas. These insights demonstrate that effective leadership requires both resilience and humility to navigate authority effectively. At the same time, fostering collaboration highlights the challenges school heads face as young leaders, particularly in managing senior colleagues, balancing multiple roles, and navigating long-term leadership challenges.

Sharing the challenges of working with senior teachers and managing multiple responsibilities, Participant 4 stated:

"We are - we're about 7, all in all. To put it another way, I am the school head, and at the same time, I teach. So, during that time, being the school head, it's challenging, Ms. A. Why? You must consider that your colleagues and your parents are already over 40 years old. You, fresh, just graduated."

Participant 5 emphasized the importance of long-term adaptability in leadership.

"So, in leading a school and maintaining a good relationship with your subordinates, you need to have open communication. Motivate your teachers and colleagues and lead by example. You must also be open to feedback and new ideas from your teachers because no one has a monopoly on knowledge."

Leading a school while also teaching can be overwhelming, especially for new school heads working with more experienced teachers. Establishing authority and gaining respect from senior colleagues requires effective communication, motivation, and openness to collaboration. Additionally, leadership demands long-term adaptability, where school heads must maintain open communication, encourage feedback, and embrace new ideas to create a supportive work environment. This supports the conclusion of Whang (2021), who noted that young school leaders often struggle to balance instructional oversight with administrative duties, particularly when managing older colleagues. Similarly, Thompson (2021) found that building credibility among senior staff is a significant hurdle for new leaders, requiring strong interpersonal and leadership skills. Al Makhamreh & Stockley (2019) emphasized that effective school governance depends on transparent decision-making and collaboration, ensuring that leadership remains inclusive and adaptive. Tino (2024) stressed that continuous professional development strengthens school heads' coping mechanisms, allowing them to lead more effectively. These findings underscore the need for mentorship, leadership training, and a collaborative work culture to help school heads manage responsibilities, foster teamwork, and create an environment of mutual respect and continuous improvement.

Theme 4: Pillars of Wisdom and Influence

This illustrates the crucial role supervisors play in shaping school heads' leadership styles and guiding them through professional challenges. Participants highlighted key leadership qualities in their supervisors. A balanced approach enabled structured yet flexible teacher management, while a problem-solving mindset emphasized persistence, strategic planning, and stakeholder collaboration. Moreover, a results-driven style reinforced accountability and follow-through. These findings suggest that effective leadership relies on balance, strategy, and accountability to support continuous growth.

Participant 2 described her supervisor as balanced and practical, demonstrating the ability to maintain structure while remaining adaptable to a younger team, efficiently managing tasks, and ensuring positive outcomes. She narrated:

"Our supervisor is okay. She is neither too relaxed nor too strict. She goes with the flow, especially since most of her subordinates are younger. She knows how to manage people efficiently, ensuring that tasks are accomplished with positive results."

Participant 3 praised her supervisor for focusing on solutions, emphasizing effort, positivity, and stakeholder engagement to maximize resources, improve facilities, and support teachers. She narrated:

"I also admire him because he truly showed effort... The problem is, if you take the time, focus, and stay positive, you will realize that there are many ways to achieve something. If there is a way, you can accomplish it. That's why he visited our school and took the opportunity to observe. Maybe, from his perspective, I understand that he doesn't fully grasp my situation. However, I took his words to heart – that we must continually develop and engage with stakeholders to maximize our resources. At the same time, this will help us improve our school more quickly, especially our physical facilities, so that we can better support our teachers in delivering their lessons effectively to our students."

Moreover, Participant 6 found his supervisor's practical approach inspiring. He stated:

"She is a supervisor who is very practical and realistic – direct to the point. Whatever needs to be done must be accomplished. When he says, 'Gino, I will visit the school,' that means you must make sure everything is in order. Because when he comes back and nothing has changed, that's not acceptable – that's the kind of leader he is."

These statements from the participants highlight the impact of balanced, solution-focused, and practical supervision in school leadership. Effective supervisors maintain a balance between flexibility and authority, ensuring that tasks are completed while fostering a positive and collaborative work environment. A solution-focused approach helps school heads maximize resources, engage stakeholders, and enhance school operations, while a practical, results-driven style ensures accountability and continuous improvement.

This aligns with the conclusions of Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2019), who suggest that supervisors who strike a balance between leniency and strictness foster positive outcomes through transparent decision-making and collaboration. Similarly, Augusto (2019) highlighted that solution-focused supervision promotes professional growth, allowing school heads to develop leadership strategies that improve school governance. Jacobsen et al. (2023) stressed that mentorship from supervisors helps establish high standards and resilience in leadership, ensuring that school heads are well-supported. Guillergan (2024) found that supervisory leadership has a significant influence on school heads' effectiveness, particularly when it includes structured feedback and technical support. Stephen (2024) emphasized that resilient leadership is strengthened by proactive and engaged supervision, helping school heads navigate challenges effectively. Additionally, Eyana et al. (2024) found that peer support networks and professional collaboration contribute to leadership adaptability, reinforcing the importance of ongoing engagement between supervisors and school leaders.

4.0 Conclusions

This study provided a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of elementary school heads navigating the complexities of school governance in resource-constrained environments. The journey, encapsulated through the emergent themes of Navigating the Leadership Horizon, The Unwavering Pursuit of Knowledge, Braving the Storms of Early Leadership, and Pillars of Wisdom and Influence, revealed that leadership development is a dynamic, continuous process marked by resilience, adaptability, and strong mentorship. The findings demonstrated that effective school governance extends beyond administrative competence; it is deeply rooted in relational leadership, cultural responsiveness, and moral stewardship. Filipino school heads embodied values such as bayanihan (community spirit) and malasakit (compassion), which shaped their decision-making and stakeholder engagement practices, offering a culturally grounded leadership model.

The study emphasizes the urgent need to institutionalize mentorship programs, leadership capability-building initiatives, and support mechanisms explicitly tailored for rural school contexts. Policymakers should prioritize equitable resource distribution, while leadership training programs should embed culturally responsive and values-driven approaches. Strengthening professional learning communities and supervisory mentorships is crucial in fostering leadership resilience and ensuring school sustainability.

These recommendations directly align with advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) by promoting inclusive and equitable quality education. Future research could explore longitudinal studies on the impact of mentorship and leadership development in various educational settings, or conduct comparative analyses across urban and rural contexts, to further refine leadership frameworks. Ultimately, this study reframes school leadership as a transformative journey of advocacy, stewardship, and moral courage. By amplifying the lived experiences of school heads, it makes a meaningful contribution to leadership scholarship. It offers actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and educational researchers committed to strengthening school governance in challenging environments.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors have confirmed that each contributed fairly to the creation of this academic paper. They divided their responsibilities among themselves: the first author wrote the manuscript, the second author proofread and edited the paper for improved clarity and quality. In contrast, the third author provided guidance and suggestions to enhance the content.

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