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VOICES FROM THE GROUND: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ON LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored public elementary teachers' lived experiences of school leadership practices, their coping mechanisms in addressing workplace challenges, and the educational management insights derived from their narratives from Carmen District Division of Davao del Norte. The findings revealed that school leadership is characterized by a combination of democratic, supportive, and transformational practices alongside some authoritarian tendencies and leadership challenges, all of which significantly influence teachers' motivation, job performance, and professional growth. Teachers reported that supportive and participative leadership fosters confidence, instructional effectiveness, and stronger professional commitment, while inconsistent leadership practices, limited participation in decision-making, and heavy administrative workloads contribute to stress and reduced instructional focus. In response to these challenges, teachers employed various coping mechanisms, including emotional regulation and self-management, collaborative and social support strategies, professional commitment and task focus, cognitive reframing and personal motivation, and adaptive communication and engagement, which enabled them to maintain resilience and sustain effective teaching practices despite workplace difficulties. Moreover, the study identified key educational management policy domains such as leadership and governance, communication and school climate, teacher support and well-being, workload and task management, professional growth and development, integration of coping mechanisms, and instructional leadership impact. These domains collectively provide a comprehensive framework for strengthening school effectiveness and enhancing teacher development. The findings emphasize that inclusive, supportive, and transformational leadership practices, combined with structured institutional support systems and teacher-centered policies, are essential in promoting teacher resilience, improving instructional quality, and fostering sustainable school improvement in public elementary education settings.

KEYWORDS: *Teachers' narratives; leadership; practices; school principals*

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership practices are widely recognized as essential in ensuring the efficient operation of schools and the attainment of positive student learning outcomes. However, school heads continue to encounter complex and multifaceted challenges in fulfilling their leadership and administrative responsibilities. These include inadequate planning and organization, limited institutional resources, inconsistent supervision of teachers, and difficulties in effectively implementing policies and programs that are responsive to both curricular standards and the needs of the school community. Educational leadership challenges are evident across different global contexts, reflecting their pervasive and persistent nature. In Myanmar, school principals experience difficulties in sustaining Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) due to time limitations, budget constraints, and teacher resistance, which ultimately affect student learning outcomes (Zaw, 2024). In Pennsylvania, school leaders face pressures in modernizing curricula to align with evolving educational demands, despite efforts to use assessment tools to evaluate and enhance reforms (Smith & Jones, 2023). Similarly, in India, despite near-universal access to primary education, persistent weaknesses in school leadership continue to contribute to poor learning outcomes, as highlighted in UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2024–25 (UNESCO, 2025).

In the Philippine context, school heads continue to face enduring challenges in implementing key education reforms such as the K to 12 curriculum and learning continuity policies developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these reforms aim to improve educational quality, their implementation is often hindered by resource constraints, curriculum misalignment, and resistance to change among stakeholders (Bautista et al., 2023). Furthermore, the ongoing implementation of the MATATAG curriculum reform has intensified demands on school leaders, particularly in terms of preparedness, monitoring, and evaluation. Many school heads report difficulties in ensuring effective curriculum implementation due to limited training, insufficient support systems, and the abrupt nature of policy transitions, which may leave teachers and learners inadequately prepared (Manila Bulletin, 2023).

At the local level, similar challenges are observed among newly promoted school heads in Central Mindanao University, where they often struggle with the demands of leadership practice during the early stages of their appointment. These challenges include managing stakeholder relationships, formulating school policies, and navigating multiple administrative responsibilities at the beginning of the school year. (Castañeros et al., 2024). These difficulties contribute to significant stress among school administrators, which in some cases has led to attrition and loss of leadership positions. Comparable observations had been noted by the researcher within the Carmen District of the Davao del Norte Division, where school heads similarly experience leadership-related stressors and implementation challenges.

Despite the recognized importance of school heads in shaping instructional quality and overall school effectiveness, much of the existing literature predominantly focused on quantitative assessments of leadership outcomes, administrative efficiency, or policy implementation. This indicated a critical gap in the literature, particularly the limited exploration of the lived experiences of teachers regarding educational management practices. There was insufficient qualitative evidence that captured how teachers perceived, interpreted, and responded to the leadership approaches and managerial decisions of school heads in their daily professional contexts. This gap highlighted the need for an in-depth understanding of the human and relational dimensions of school leadership, particularly how these practices influence teacher motivation, engagement, coping mechanisms, and instructional effectiveness.

Addressing this gap was essential, as it provided a more nuanced and context-rich perspective on educational management that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how leadership practices are enacted and experienced at the school level, and how these, in turn, shape teaching practices and learning environments. The findings are expected to inform the development of more responsive leadership training programs, improved administrative strategies, and evidence-based policy interventions that strengthen school effectiveness.

This study highlighted the perspectives of teachers regarding the leadership and administrative practices that directly influence teaching effectiveness and student learning. By documenting these narratives, the research offered valuable insights for school heads, administrators, and policymakers in refining educational management systems, fostering supportive school climates, and enhancing teacher motivation and performance. To ensure meaningful utilization of the findings, results may be disseminated through educational workshops and seminars for school leaders and teachers, publication in peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs for education stakeholders, and online academic platforms. This comprehensive dissemination strategy would ensure that the study contributes not only to academic discourse but also to practical improvements in school leadership and educational management.

THE STUDY'S OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding the leadership
practices of their school heads. Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. describe the experiences of teachers in relation to the leadership practices of their school heads.
2. identify the coping mechanisms employed by teachers in addressing the challenges they encounter arising from school heads' leadership practices.
3. propose an educational management policy framework based on the lived experiences and coping strategies of teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the method used, followed by the sources of data and the data gathering instrument. It also discusses the sampling technique and the procedure of the study, including the step-by-step process of data collection. Furthermore, it explains the data analysis employed in interpreting the findings, as well as the ethical considerations observed in the conduct of the study. Finally, it outlines the trustworthiness of the study, highlighting the measures taken to ensure the credibility, dependability, and rigor of the research outcomes.

Method Used

The study employed a qualitative research approach (Naeem et al., 2023; Lim, 2024), which focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences in their natural context. It aims to generate rich, descriptive, and interpretive data that capture how individuals make meaning of their lived realities, particularly in complex social settings such as schools.

In addition, the study specifically utilized a phenomenological research design (Frechette et al., 2020; Dodgson, 2023). Phenomenology is concerned with uncovering the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals who have directly encountered it. In this study, it enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences regarding the leadership practices of their school principals, including their perceptions, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

The use of qualitative research and phenomenology is justified by the need to capture the depth and complexity of teachers' narratives on leadership practices. Qualitative inquiry allows for a detailed understanding of meanings, experiences, and context, while phenomenology provides a focused lens for interpreting the essence of those experiences as lived by the participants. These approaches ensure that the study moves beyond surface-level description and instead provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how teachers experience and interpret leadership practices in public elementary schools.

Sources of Data

The primary source of data for this study was the in-depth interview, which was conducted with the nine (9) informants who were public elementary school teachers. Through this method, the researchers were able to gather rich, detailed, and first-hand accounts of the informants' lived experiences regarding the leadership practices of their school principals. The in-depth interviews allowed the informants to freely express their perceptions, challenges, and coping mechanisms, thereby generating comprehensive qualitative data essential for phenomenological analysis.

In addition, secondary sources of data were drawn from relevant journals, articles, and other scholarly literature. These materials provided theoretical grounding and contextual background for the study, supporting the interpretation of findings from the informants' narratives. They also helped establish connections between the lived experiences of the informants and existing studies on leadership practices, thereby enhancing the depth, credibility, and academic rigor of the research.

Data Gathering Instrument

Qualitative data were collected through various approaches, including interviews, observations, and audio-visual materials; however, this study specifically utilized in-depth interviews as the primary technique to explore the phenomenon and generate rich, contextually grounded insights from informants (Bazen et al., 2021). The informants responded to carefully prepared open-ended questions that allowed them to share detailed accounts of their experiences and perspectives. These narratives supported a deeper understanding of school leadership practices and facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, concepts, and themes within the data.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews served as the central method for data gathering, enabling the researcher to obtain comprehensive information directly from the informants (Monday, 2020). Each interview was guided by clearly defined research objectives to ensure that the responses contributed meaningfully to the research questions. In this process, informants were regarded as experts of their own lived experiences, while the researcher assumed the role of a reflective listener. Open-ended questions encouraged informants to provide thoughtful, detailed, and nuanced responses that illuminated their experiences with school principals' leadership practices.

Moreover, within this phenomenological study, informants articulated their lived experiences in their own words through in-depth interviews. The researcher adjusted the sequence and wording of questions and provided follow-up prompts when necessary to clarify responses and deepen understanding. This approach ensured that the essence of the informants' experiences was captured while maintaining the credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness of the data. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher remained neutral, avoiding verbal or nonverbal cues that could influence informants' responses. This helped ensure that the narratives reflected their genuine perspectives and interpretations of leadership practices in their school context.

Sampling Technique

This phenomenological study involved nine informant who met the selection criteria established to align with the research objectives and engaged in in-depth interviews (IDIs). The determination of this sample size follows the guidance of Subedi (2021), which indicated that phenomenological research typically includes between three and nine participants to generate rich and meaningful insights. This number was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, ensuring that the lived experiences of participants are thoroughly explored and accurately represented within the study.

In addition, the study employed purposive sampling as the strategy for participant selection, as it provided a focused and effective method for qualitative inquiry. This approach involves the intentional selection of individuals who possess specific characteristics or qualifications relevant to the research focus. As a non-probability technique, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to identify participants whose experiences are likely to yield rich and meaningful data, without being constrained by a predetermined theoretical framework or fixed sample size (Campbell et al., 2020).

Moreover, clear inclusion, exclusion, and withdrawal criteria had been established to ensure that the data collected are credible, relevant, and aligned with the study objectives. Only public elementary school teachers serving with fifteen years of teaching experience were included, as their professional roles and experiences were expected to provide valuable insights into participation in school decision-making processes. Teachers who did not meet these criteria, including those from other grade levels or with fewer or more than fifteen years of service were excluded to maintain focus and integrity. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point, safeguarding their autonomy and ensuring that their involvement

remained fully voluntary. This selection framework ensured that participants were well-positioned to provide informed, authentic accounts that contributed meaningfully to the aims of the research.

Procedure of the Study

The collection of research data from informants was conducted in multiple stages to ensure systematic and comprehensive documentation of their lived experiences. As indicated by Lau and Bratby (2023), qualitative data may be gathered through direct observation of professional contexts, and the use of audio-visual materials, all of which contribute to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Before the data collection process began, approval was secured from the Ethics Committee to ensure that the study complied with established ethical standards. A complete research proposal outlining the study's objectives, methodology, and possible risks to informants was submitted for review. The committee evaluated the proposal to ensure that the rights, welfare, and confidentiality of informants were fully protected. Upon receiving ethical clearance, the researcher proceeded with the data collection process while consistently observing ethical principles and research integrity.

Following ethical clearance obtained on November 11, 2025, formal approval was secured from the Dean of the Graduate School at Rizal Memorial Colleges (RMC) on November 22, 2025, and an authorization letter was issued by the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS) of Carmen District, Davao del Norte Division on January 6, 2026. Subsequently, written requests were submitted to the participating schools detailing the study's objectives, target informants, and procedures, which were approved on February 18, 23, and 26, 2026. These approvals ensured institutional support and legitimized the conduct of the study.

An interview guide was developed as the primary tool for data gathering. It consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore how informants experienced and responded to the leadership practices of their school principals. The guide was carefully crafted to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with informants' lived experiences. After development, it was validated by field experts to confirm its content accuracy and ability to elicit rich and meaningful responses.

Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all informants to ensure voluntary participation. They were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. This process ensured that participation was based on free will and that ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study.

After consent was secured, in-depth interviews were conducted in a safe and comfortable environment to encourage open and honest sharing. Informants were given the opportunity to narrate their experiences, strategies, and perceptions of school leadership practices. All interviews were audio-recorded, with permission, to ensure accurate and complete documentation of responses.

Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of informants' responses. Statements expressed in the local language were translated into English to ensure clarity and consistency. The transcribed data were then analyzed using a phenomenological approach, focusing on identifying recurring themes and meaningful patterns.

After preliminary analysis, the findings were reviewed by a qualified data analyst to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with the collected data. Feedback from the analyst was incorporated, and revisions were made to strengthen the credibility and reliability of the results before final presentation.

Throughout the research process, strict measures were implemented to protect informants' confidentiality. All audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files, and identifying information was removed through the use of pseudonyms. The data were used solely for research purposes and were properly disposed of after completion of the study to ensure privacy and ethical compliance.

Data Analysis

Humble and Mozelius (2022) identified five essential stages in qualitative data analysis: data logging, anecdotes, vignettes, data coding, and thematic analysis. In this study, particular emphasis was given to data coding and thematic analysis to systematically organize and interpret the narratives shared by the informants. In addition, the study employed environmental triangulation by gathering data from informants coming from different public elementary schools. This strategy allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon across varied school environments and leadership contexts, thereby strengthening the credibility, consistency, and contextual richness of the findings. By collecting insights from multiple school settings, the study was able to capture diverse experiences and perspectives regarding school principals' leadership practices.

Data coding served as a method for organizing qualitative data by reducing extensive raw information into smaller and meaningful units directly connected to the research questions. This process enabled the researcher to divide the data into manageable segments from which recurring ideas and patterns emerged. Kiger and Varpio (2022) emphasized that repeatedly occurring codes are more likely to represent significant themes. In this study, the researcher utilized highlighters and colored pens to identify recurring and important ideas within the interview transcripts. Segments marked with the same color were grouped together and assigned concise labels that reflected emerging thematic categories. Informants were also assigned code identifiers to maintain organization and ensure confidentiality throughout the analysis process.

Furthermore, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the data. This process enabled the researcher to organize related responses into coherent categories and themes that reflected the lived experiences of the informants. McLeod (2024) explained that thematic analysis allows researchers to move from broad concepts to more specific interpretations in understanding qualitative data. In this study, responses that conveyed similar meanings were clustered into themes, with each theme supported by at least three core ideas to establish consistency and validity. The analytical procedure followed the framework proposed by Colaizzi (1978, as cited in Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021), which involved reviewing transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and organizing these meanings into thematic clusters. This approach ensured that the authenticity and depth of the informants' lived experiences regarding school leadership practices were preserved throughout the analysis.

For this study, Colaizzi's framework was applied to analyze interviews with teachers. This approach facilitates the extraction of rich and nuanced insights from the qualitative data. By adhering to Colaizzi's step-by-step process, the analysis remained faithful to the teachers' narratives, accurately reflecting the core of their experiences while maintaining the reliability, consistency, and credibility of the study's findings.

Analyzing the Interviews. The initial stage of Colaizzi's analytical method entailed a comprehensive examination of the collected interview data. In this study, I began by thoroughly reviewing the transcribed interviews, paying close attention to the participants' narratives to gain a deep understanding of their lived experiences. Each transcript was read several times to ensure full familiarity with the content and to appreciate the broader context of the responses. This meticulous review allowed for the recognition of nuanced meanings and intricate details within each teacher's account, providing a solid foundation for subsequent stages of analysis.

Identifying Key Phrases. Following the analysis of the interview data, I pinpointed and extracted significant phrases and meaningful statements that captured the essence of teachers' experiences and perspectives concerning how school management addresses their needs. Special emphasis was placed on responses that highlighted the challenges teachers faced in securing support and the strategies they employed to navigate these obstacles. Concentrating on these key statements facilitated the identification of the most relevant and insightful elements within the dataset, ensuring a thorough and nuanced understanding of teachers' views on management support.

Identifying Meanings and Coding. After identifying the significant phrases, I analyzed their meanings and assigned corresponding codes to each relevant segment of data. These codes acted as markers that represented the core ideas and emerging themes within the participants' responses. This step was crucial for organizing and structuring the collected information, facilitating a more systematic and comprehensive analysis. Through coding, recurring concepts and patterns across the interviews were detected, providing a solid basis for deeper interpretation of the data.

Organizing Codes into Groups. After completing the coding process, I categorized the codes into clusters according to their similarities and interconnections. This step allowed for the identification of overarching themes that reflected the different dimensions of the teachers' experiences. Organizing the codes in this way strengthened the structure of the analysis and highlighted the primary factors shaping teachers' interactions with school management. This approach ensured that all relevant data were incorporated, providing a coherent and comprehensive representation of the participants' perspectives.

Describing the Phenomenon. At this stage, the emphasis was on developing a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon based on the teachers' lived experiences. The themes and significant insights identified in the previous stages were synthesized to create a coherent and comprehensive narrative. This account highlighted the challenges teachers encountered in obtaining support from school management and the strategies they employed to meet their professional needs. Building this thorough description allowed for a richer and more meaningful understanding of their experiences within the school environment.

Identifying the Fundamental Structure. In this stage, the focus was on identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon by examining the key aspects that shaped how teachers navigated and responded to the challenges of obtaining support from school management. The themes generated from the analysis were carefully reviewed, with particular attention to the most significant elements of their experiences. This process facilitated the extraction of core insights regarding the teachers' lived experiences. Recognizing this fundamental structure provided a clearer understanding of the factors influencing their

professional adaptation and highlights the critical elements that contributed to effective engagement within the school environment.

Validating the Findings. In the final stage, the findings were validated through feedback from both the participants and subject-matter experts. The identified themes and detailed narratives were shared with the participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately represented their lived experiences. Additionally, experts or peer reviewers assessed the analysis to ensure its accuracy, validity, and methodological rigor. This validation process strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the results, ensuring they are firmly grounded in the participants' actual accounts. Conducting this review enhanced the dependability of the study's outcomes and guaranteed that the conclusions were well-supported by the data. Following Colaizzi's method, the interview data were carefully examined to uncover meaningful insights and provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of teachers about leadership practices of school heads.

Figure 1 illustrates the steps of Colaizzi's thematic analysis as applied in this study's data examination. Each stage, reviewing interview transcripts, extracting significant statements, interpreting meanings, grouping themes, and developing a comprehensive narrative, offers a systematic and thorough approach to analysis. Applying Colaizzi's method ensures that the teachers' own words remain central to the interpretation, maintaining the authenticity of their lived experiences while uncovering recurring patterns and themes. This structured process captures the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences, providing a clear and credible understanding of how teachers navigate challenges in securing management support and fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

Ethical Consideration

This study ensures that faculty members of the school in Panabo City were treated with respect, fairness, and care throughout the research process. Ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, transparency, and risk minimization guide all procedures to protect participants' rights, well-being, and privacy.

Social Value. The study aimed to examine the relationship between faculty members' leadership skills and their collaborative decision-making practices at the school in Panabo City. The findings provide insights that help academic leaders, department heads, and administrators strengthen leadership development programs, improve collaborative structures, and promote shared governance within the institution. Beyond the local setting, the results may also inform policies and strategies that enhance faculty leadership and collective decision-making in other higher education institutions.
Informed Consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participating faculty members prior to data collection. Participants are clearly informed of the study's purpose, scope, and procedures. Participation is voluntary, with no associated risks, and individuals may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The consent form uses clear, accessible language, and participants are encouraged to ask questions to ensure full understanding before agreeing to take part.

Vulnerability of Respondents. Faculty members of the school in Panabo City were not classified as a vulnerable population. However, reflecting on personal leadership practices or collaborative experiences may cause slight discomfort. To address this, the study uses non-intrusive survey questionnaires, and participants may skip any item they find sensitive or withdraw at any point without negative consequences.

Privacy and Confidentiality. The study prioritizes the privacy and confidentiality of all respondents. Data are anonymized, and no identifiable information appears in reports or analyses. All collected data are securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. The study strictly follows data privacy guidelines to ensure that confidentiality is upheld throughout the research process.

Risk, Benefits, and Safety. The study poses minimal risk, as it involves only survey responses related to leadership skills and collaborative decision-making. Minor discomfort may occur when respondents reflect on professional behaviors or workplace interactions, but participation remains optional for every question. Benefits outweigh potential risks, as results may help improve leadership training, strengthen collaborative processes, and contribute to a healthier academic environment. Participants also gain access to summarized findings for personal learning and reflection.

Justice. The principle of justice was upheld by ensuring that all eligible faculty members of the school Panabo City have equal opportunity to participate in the study. Selection is impartial and free from discrimination. The dissemination of findings ensures that the benefits of the study are accessible to administrators, department heads, and faculty members alike.

Transparency. Transparency was maintained throughout the research process. Faculty members are informed of the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, and potential risks before participating. Administrators and academic leaders are periodically updated on the study's progress, and results are shared with stakeholders upon completion to support planning and institutional improvement.

Qualification of the Researcher. The researcher was a graduate of BSN in a private non-sectarian college school in Bukidnon, earned Education Units in a private non-sectarian college school in Panabo City. Gained years experience as the HR of the college and 8 years experience in classroom teaching in Tertiary level.Also she is trained in educational research and is grounded in ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible data handling, ensuring that the study is conducted professionally and with due respect for all faculty members of the college in Panabo City. Beyond formal training, the researcher's competence is strengthened by rich personal experiences as a teacher, which provide practical insight into the realities of teaching and learning in the field. Engagement in continuous professional development activities has further enhanced the researcher's understanding of current educational practices and research trends.

Conflict of Interest. The researcher declared no conflict of interest in conducting this study in the college school in Panabo City. The study was carried out independently and remains free from personal, professional, or financial bias. Any potential conflict that may arise is immediately disclosed to participants and institutional stakeholders of the school to uphold integrity, transparency, and ethical research practice.

Adequacy of Facilities. Data collection was conducted in safe and conducive environments within the school in Panabo City, such as faculty lounges, offices, or secure online platforms. Proper tools, equipment, and secure data storage systems ensure comfort, accuracy, and confidentiality throughout the research process.

Community Involvement. The study values the engagement of the academic community of the college in Panabo City. The research aligns with institutional goals of strengthening leadership capacity and improving collaborative decision-making. Feedback from administrators, faculty members, and academic leaders were considered in refining the research instrument. Results are shared with stakeholders to guide programs that enhance teamwork, shared leadership, and effective institutional governance.

RESULTS

This section presents the key findings on teachers' experiences with the leadership practices of their school heads, their coping mechanisms, and the proposed educational management policy derived from these experiences. The findings revealed that school leadership significantly shapes teacher motivation, instructional performance, professional growth, and workplace well-being.

Experiences of Teachers on the Leadership Practices of School Heads

Teachers experienced both positive and challenging leadership practices from their school heads. Democratic, supportive, and transformational leadership practices were evident through open communication, recognition, motivation, and collaborative decision-making. These practices helped teachers feel valued, encouraged professional growth, strengthened collegial relationships, and created a positive school climate.

However, teachers also reported authoritarian tendencies, such as rigid decision-making, limited consultation, unclear communication, micromanagement, and excessive workload demands. These challenges caused stress, reduced teacher autonomy, and affected their sense of participation in school matters. Despite these difficulties, teachers remained committed to their roles and continued to perform their instructional responsibilities.

Leadership was also found to influence teacher motivation, productivity, classroom management, and professional development. Supportive leadership encouraged teachers to attend seminars, improve teaching strategies, and perform with greater confidence. Clear guidance and constructive feedback contributed to better lesson planning, classroom organization, and instructional effectiveness.

Coping Mechanisms of Teachers

Teachers used several coping mechanisms to manage leadership-related challenges. Emotional regulation and self-management were common strategies, as teachers tried to remain calm, professional, and patient despite stressful situations. Some avoided confrontation to preserve workplace harmony and maintain a positive classroom environment.

Collaborative and social support strategies were also important. Teachers sought advice from colleagues, shared experiences, and worked together to address school-related concerns. These practices helped reduce stress and strengthened professional relationships.

Professional commitment and task focus also helped teachers cope. Many remained focused on their duties, maintained classroom stability, and prioritized students' learning despite workplace challenges. Cognitive reframing and personal motivation were also evident, as teachers drew strength from family responsibility, prayer, emotional detachment, and personal growth. Lastly, communication and adaptive engagement allowed teachers to express concerns respectfully, adjust to leadership expectations, and remain professional in difficult situations.

Proposed Educational Management Policy

Based on the findings, an educational management policy is proposed to promote participatory, supportive, and instructional leadership in schools. The policy should institutionalize regular consultative meetings, teacher feedback systems, recognition programs, shared leadership roles, and transparent communication protocols.

The policy should also address leadership-related challenges by ensuring fair workload distribution, limiting non-teaching tasks, preventing micromanagement, and promoting respectful communication. Teacher well-being should be supported through peer mentoring, stress management training, counseling access, and resilience-building programs.

Furthermore, school heads should provide continuous professional development opportunities, instructional coaching, and clear guidance to improve teaching performance. Overall, the proposed policy aims to strengthen teacher voice, reduce workplace stress, improve leadership practices, and enhance instructional quality in public elementary schools.

Summary

This study focused on teachers' experiences with the leadership practices of their school heads, their coping mechanisms in addressing related challenges, and the educational management drawn from their experiences. Below were the summarized key findings.

1) The findings reveal that school leadership is characterized by a blend of democratic, supportive, and transformational practices alongside some authoritarian tendencies and leadership challenges, all of which significantly shape teachers' motivation, job performance, and professional growth.
2) Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers employ a range of coping mechanisms, including emotional regulation and self-management, collaborative and social support strategies, professional commitment and task focus, cognitive reframing and personal motivation, and adaptive communication and engagement, to effectively manage workplace challenges and sustain their professional practice.
3) Meanwhile, the identified policy domains for the educational management policy encompass leadership and governance, communication and school climate, teacher support and well-being, workload and task management, professional growth and development, integration of coping mechanisms, and instructional leadership impact, collectively providing a comprehensive framework for strengthening school effectiveness and teacher development.

Implications

The findings imply several concrete and actionable directions for educational management practice, particularly in strengthening leadership systems, teacher support structures, and institutional policies:

1) First, the mixed nature of leadership practices, combining democratic, supportive, transformational, and at times authoritarian tendencies, suggests the need for a standardized leadership development and coaching program for school heads**.** DepEd and school divisions should institutionalize continuous training on instructional leadership, participatory decision-making, and positive discipline approaches to reduce reliance on authoritarian tendencies and ensure consistency in leadership behaviors that promote teacher motivation and professional growth.
2) Second, the strong influence of leadership on teacher motivation and performance implies that teacher appraisal and performance systems should explicitly integrate leadership quality indicators. Feedback mechanisms such as 360-degree evaluations, anonymous teacher feedback surveys, and structured school climate assessments should be regularly implemented to ensure that leadership practices are responsive, transparent, and development-oriented.
3) Third, the presence of diverse coping mechanisms among teachers indicates that coping is currently largely individual-driven rather than system-supported. This calls for the establishment of institutionalized psychosocial support systems**,** including school-based wellness programs, peer support groups, mentoring systems, and access to counseling services to formalize emotional regulation and social support strategies as part of organizational culture rather than personal burden.
4) Fourth, teachers' reliance on emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and task focus highlights the need to restructure workload distribution and task management policies. School leaders should implement workload auditing systems, clarify role delineation between teaching and non-teaching tasks, and ensure equitable distribution of ancillary duties to reduce burnout and sustain instructional quality.
5) Fifth, the findings on communication and adaptive engagement imply that strengthening internal communication systems is essential. Schools should adopt structured communication protocols such as regular consultative meetings, digital coordination platforms, and clear cascading of directives to improve transparency, reduce ambiguity, and foster a more collaborative school climate.
6) Sixth, the identification of professional commitment and motivation as key coping strategies suggests that teacher motivation must be systemically reinforced through career progression pathways. Clear promotion tracks, merit-based incentives, and recognition programs should be strengthened to sustain intrinsic motivation and encourage long-term professional engagement.
7) Seventh, the emergence of coping mechanisms as a policy domain indicates the need to mainstream resilience-building and mental health literacy into teacher development programs. Pre-service and in-service training curricula

should include stress management, emotional intelligence, and adaptive coping strategies to equip teachers with both personal and organizational resilience skills.

8) Finally, the inclusion of leadership, governance, school climate, and instructional leadership impact as policy domains implies the necessity of a holistic, integrated school improvement framework. Rather than isolated interventions, DepEd policy should align leadership development, teacher welfare, workload management, and instructional quality under a unified school governance system to ensure sustainable improvements in teaching and learning outcomes.

The findings of this study strongly support and extend the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985 as cited in Ugochukwu, 2025), which posits that effective leaders inspire, motivate, and empower individuals through vision-building, trust, and professional support. In this study, the lived experiences of teachers clearly illustrate how school heads' leadership practices influence their motivation, engagement, and performance in both instructional and organizational responsibilities. The emergence of themes such as democratic and supportive leadership practices, participative decision-making, communication and school climate, and opportunities for professional growth reflects the enactment of transformational leadership within the school context. These practices demonstrate how school leaders foster collaboration, shared responsibility, and a sense of collective purpose among teachers.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize that when school heads exhibit empathy, inclusivity, and encouragement, teachers experience greater professional value, emotional security, and commitment to their roles. This affirms the transformational leadership principle that relational trust and emotional connection are central to influencing positive follower behavior. The reported improvements in teacher collaboration, motivation, and professional confidence further reinforce the theory's assertion that transformational leadership enhances both individual performance and organizational effectiveness. Overall, the study validates Transformational Leadership Theory by demonstrating that leadership practices grounded in support, participation, and empowerment not only shape positive teacher experiences but also contribute to sustained professional growth and improved school outcomes.

Future Directions

Based on the findings, several future directions are proposed for school heads, teachers, and future researchers to strengthen leadership practice, teacher well-being, and educational management systems.

1) For school heads, future directions emphasize the need to further strengthen transformational and democratic leadership practices by consistently promoting participative decision-making, transparent communication, and inclusive governance. School leaders are encouraged to institutionalize structured feedback mechanisms, conduct regular consultation dialogues with teachers, and reduce authoritarian tendencies through reflective leadership practices and coaching. There is also a need to enhance instructional leadership by aligning school goals with teacher development plans, ensuring equitable workload distribution, and sustaining a supportive school climate that prioritizes teacher well-being and professional growth.
2) For teachers, the findings suggest the importance of strengthening adaptive coping strategies while also actively engaging in collaborative and professional learning communities. Teachers are encouraged to maximize peer support systems, participate in school-based decision-making processes, and engage in continuous professional development opportunities that enhance instructional competence and resilience. At the same time, teachers may benefit from further developing emotional regulation and cognitive reframing strategies to maintain motivation and effectiveness in managing workplace challenges, while also communicating concerns through appropriate institutional channels to support collective problem-solving.
3) For future researchers, the study highlights the need to further explore leadership dynamics and teacher experiences using broader and more diverse research designs. Future studies may examine the relationship between leadership styles and specific teacher outcomes such as burnout, retention, job satisfaction, or student performance using mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches. Researchers may also evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions derived from this study, particularly those focusing on coping mechanisms integration, workload management, and leadership development programs. In addition, comparative studies across different school contexts, levels, or regions may provide deeper insights into how leadership practices influence educational outcomes in varying institutional settings.

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