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SILENT NAVIGATORS: UNVEILING SCHOOL HEADS' JOURNEY IN THE NEW NORMAL SELF-PACED MODULAR INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction during the new normal in education. As educational institutions faced unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders were tasked with adapting to a modular learning approach designed to ensure continuity of education while adhering to health protocols. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with ten elementary school heads in Davao Region, Philippines, the study reveals several core themes. These include adherence to school policies, strategic resource management, the creation of supportive work environments, and the necessity of flexibility and adaptability in leadership. The findings highlight the importance of effective policy implementation, resource allocation, and community engagement in overcoming the challenges of modular instruction. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing insights into how school leaders navigate these new educational realities, emphasizing the role of strong leadership and resilience. Practical implications include the need for targeted training and support for school leaders, improved resource management strategies, and fostering collaborative community partnerships. Theoretical implications reinforce the importance of leadership theories that emphasize flexibility and support. The study's limitations include the small sample size and regional focus, suggesting the need for further research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal approaches.

KEYWORDS: *modular instruction, educational leadership, phenomenology, new normal education, resource management, school leadership*

I.INTRODUCTION

The global education landscape has undergone unprecedented transformations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, precipitating a shift towards modular instruction as a critical strategy for sustaining educational continuity during the new normal. This shift has posed significant challenges and opportunities for school leaders, who are pivotal in navigating the complexities of this emergent instructional paradigm. The modular approach, characterized by self-contained units of instruction designed to facilitate remote or blended learning, has become a prevalent model in elementary education as schools grapple with disruptions and constraints imposed by the pandemic [4; 13].

As the primary custodians of educational quality and management, school heads have been at the forefront of implementing modular instruction. However, adopting this instructional model has revealed various issues and concerns that merit closer examination. Recent studies have highlighted several challenges associated with modular instruction, including the adequacy of resources, the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, and the impact on student engagement and learning outcomes [25; 33]. Moreover, the effectiveness of modular instruction is often contingent upon the support systems available to school leaders and their capacity to adapt to rapidly evolving educational contexts [22].

Despite the growing body of literature on instructional strategies during the pandemic, there still needs to be a notable gap in understanding the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction. Existing research has focused mainly on the experiences of teachers and students, with less attention given to the perspectives of school leaders who are integral to the successful execution of these instructional models [19; 32]. As school heads navigate the demands of modular instruction, their insights and experiences are crucial for identifying best practices, addressing challenges, and informing future educational policies and practices.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring and describing the lived experiences of school leaders in the context of modular instruction in elementary schools. By focusing on these leaders' personal and professional journeys, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the implementation process, uncovering the strategies employed, the obstacles encountered, and the lessons learned. The findings will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how school heads can effectively manage and lead modular instruction, ultimately enhancing the quality of education in the new normal.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in two vital theoretical frameworks: Transformative Leadership Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory. Transformative Leadership Theory emphasizes the role

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of leaders in inspiring and guiding their teams through significant changes [6; 2]. School heads are expected to lead their institutions through the complexities of adapting instructional practices to new realities in modular instruction. This theory provides a lens to understand the dynamic leadership strategies and challenges school leaders face in implementing modular approaches during the new normal.

Constructivist Learning Theory underpins the modular instructional approach by emphasizing the importance of learner-centered, flexible educational experiences. Modular instruction aligns with constructivist principles by allowing students to engage with content self-directedly, promoting active learning and individualized pacing [26; 34]. This theoretical perspective helps to frame the study's focus on how school leaders facilitate and manage the implementation of modular instruction in a way that aligns with constructivist ideals.

Recent literature highlights several aspects of implementing modular instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have reported educators' and administrators' challenges adapting to remote and modular learning environments. For instance, one research explores the transition from traditional to remote learning, noting significant technological access and pedagogical adjustment difficulties [19]. Similarly, another study emphasizes the uneven implementation of online and modular strategies, revealing disparities in resource availability and support systems [32].

One study indicates that while modular instruction offers flexibility, it also presents challenges in maintaining student engagement and ensuring consistent learning outcomes [13]. Their study underscores the need for effective leadership in managing these challenges and adapting instructional practices. Another research further elaborates on the importance of robust leadership in facilitating online and modular learning environments, highlighting that school leaders play a critical role in addressing the needs of both teachers and students during transitions [25].

However, a notable gap in the literature is the need for more focus on the experiences of school heads specifically. Most studies have concentrated on the perspectives of teachers and students [22; 33], with more attention being given to the unique challenges and strategies of school leaders in implementing modular instruction. This oversight is significant, as school heads are crucial in orchestrating the shift to modular education and ensuring its effective execution.
The existing body of research provides valuable insights into the challenges and strategies associated with modular instruction. However, there needs to be more clarity concerning the lived experiences of school leaders. While there is extensive literature on instructional practices and student outcomes, less emphasis has been placed on understanding how school heads navigate the complexities of implementing modular instruction. This study aims to address this gap by focusing specifically on the experiences of school leaders, providing a nuanced understanding of their roles, challenges, and strategies in the context of the new normal.

By exploring the lived experiences of school heads, this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of modular instruction, offering insights critical for improving educational practices and supporting school leaders in future crises. This research will thus fill an essential gap in the literature, offering valuable implications for policy and practice in elementary education.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction during the new normal. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this study as it focuses on understanding how individuals experience and interpret their social realities [8]. By delving into the personal experiences of school leaders, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of their perspectives on the challenges and strategies associated with modular instruction.

The study targeted ten elementary school heads from Davao de Oro, Philippines. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that ensures the inclusion of individuals with specific characteristics relevant to the research question [24]. School heads were chosen based on their direct involvement in implementing modular instruction, ensuring that their insights would be pertinent to understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain detailed, personal accounts from each school head regarding their experiences with modular instruction. These interviews allowed for a thorough exploration of individual perspectives and provided rich, nuanced data [28]. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

Focus group discussions were also employed to facilitate interactive dialogue among participants. FGDs enabled the exploration of common themes and collective experiences, offering a broader perspective on implementing modular instruction [23]. The FGDs were conducted in a group setting with 4-5 participants per session, lasting 90-120 minutes each. Like the interviews, these discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent.

The collected data were analyzed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model, which is well-suited for examining how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds [30]. The IPA model involves several key steps, which are as follows: 1) Transcription: Audio recordings from the interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim; 2) Initial

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Reading and Noting: The transcripts were read multiple times to familiarize the author with the content and note initial impressions; 3) Coding: Significant statements and themes were identified and coded; 4) Theme Development: Codes were grouped into themes reflecting the core experiences and perceptions of the participants; 5) Interpretation: Themes were interpreted with the research question and theoretical framework to understand the phenomenon comprehensively.

Several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study to ensure the integrity of the research and the protection of participants:

A. *Informed Consent:* Participants were provided detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks before involvement. Consent was obtained in writing from all participants before data collection [16].
B. *Confidentiality*: Participants' identities and responses were kept confidential. Data were stored securely, and personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts to protect privacy [11].
C. *Voluntary Participation:* Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. They were informed of their right to withdraw and the study's implications [14].
D. *Data Handling:* Audio recordings and transcripts were handled carefully to prevent unauthorized access. Only the researcher and authorized personnel had access to the data [5].

By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the study aimed to ensure that participants' rights were respected and that the research was conducted with the highest standards of ethical integrity.

IV. FINDINGS

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction during the new normal reveals several themes that encapsulate their experiences, challenges, and rewards. These themes provide a nuanced understanding of how school leaders navigated the complexities of modular learning. The following themes emerged from the core ideas and responses provided by the participants:

A. Navigating Policy and Procedural Adherence

School heads experienced a sense of accomplishment and stability in adhering to policies and procedures designed for modular instruction. This adherence provided a clear framework that guided their efforts and ensured consistency in implementation. One participant shared, "Adhering to the set guidelines and protocols was essential. It helped align our strategies and maintain order amidst the chaos."

Promoting a culture of compliance was also highlighted as a critical experience. School heads found that fostering an environment where staff and stakeholders followed organizational guidelines helped streamline the implementation process. As noted by another school head, "Encouraging everyone to adhere to the protocols created a sense of unity and clarity, making the transition smoother for everyone involved."

B. Resource Management and Financial Planning

Effective resource management emerged as a central theme. School heads took significant steps to procure supplies and allocate budgets to support modular instruction. This included budgeting for module production and distribution. One participant recounted, "Managing resources and ensuring we had the necessary supplies was challenging, but seeing the impact on our students was rewarding."

Securing additional resources through sponsors and donations was also a notable experience. School heads actively sought external support to address resource gaps. One school head explained, "Finding sponsors and receiving donations made a huge difference. It allowed us to provide better resources and support for our modular instruction."

C. Creating a Supportive and Positive Work Environment

Creating a supportive work environment for teachers was a significant theme. School heads prioritized managing personnel effectively, providing support, and fostering a sense of belonging among staff. This approach was crucial in maintaining morale and motivation. One participant noted, "Handling our staff with care and ensuring they felt valued was key to keeping their spirits up during these challenging times."

Listening to faculty concerns and offering positive reinforcement were essential to fostering a supportive environment. "Being available to listen to our teachers and offering encouragement helped them feel supported and less overwhelmed," another participant shared.

D. Flexibility and Adaptation

Flexibility in managing the modular approach was a recurring theme. School heads valued the ability to adapt schedules, instructional methods, and rules to fit the needs of the new normal. This flexibility extended to transforming school personnel to be adaptable in their roles. One school head commented, "Embracing flexibility allowed us to adjust our approach and address issues as they arose, which was crucial in maintaining continuity."

Implementing continuity plans amid various challenges also highlighted the importance of adaptability. As noted, "Despite the hurdles, having a plan and being flexible helped us ensure that learning continued effectively."

E. Building and Maintaining Community Partnerships

The theme of community engagement was prominent. School heads found it rewarding to build partnerships with parents, local officials, and community organizations to support modular instruction. These partnerships facilitated resource sharing and support. One participant observed, "Collaborating with parents

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and local organizations helped us mobilize resources and create a strong support network."

Establishing networks with government and non-government organizations (GOs and NGOs) further underscored the value of community engagement. "Securing support from various organizations and involving them in our efforts was a significant boost for our modular instruction program," another participant noted.

F. Exemplifying Strong Leadership and Resilience

Strong leadership and resilience were highlighted as crucial experiences. School heads took pride in their ability to lead their schools through the difficulties of modular instruction. This included making firm decisions and promoting resilience among staff and students. One participant reflected, "Leading through these times required strength and decisiveness, but seeing our efforts lead to positive outcomes made it worthwhile."

Promoting resilience in education, despite the pandemic, was also rewarding. "Encouraging a resilient mindset and focusing on continuity in education was essential for overcoming the obstacles we faced," another school had shared.

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction during the new normal. By analyzing the findings, we can connect these experiences to the research question: "What are the lived experiences of the school heads in implementing modular learning in the new normal?" The discussion below contextualizes these findings with relevant literature and examines their alignment with or divergence from previous studies. It explores practical, theoretical, and policy implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

The adherence to school policies and procedures and promoting a culture of compliance were highlighted as vital and rewarding aspects. This aligns with previous research, which suggests that structured policies are essential for the effective implementation of educational innovations [12]. Effective adherence to established guidelines helps to maintain consistency and clarity, which is crucial in managing the complexities of new educational approaches [17]. The finding that promoting a culture of compliance was beneficial reflects the importance of creating a shared understanding and commitment among school staff, consistent with studies highlighting the role of organizational culture in successful educational reform [20].

The theme of strategic resource management aligns with the literature on the critical role of resource allocation in the successful implementation of educational initiatives. Research indicates that effective management of resources, including financial planning and securing external support, is pivotal in addressing the challenges of implementing new instructional methods [1]. The experience of school heads in procuring supplies and seeking sponsorships mirrors findings from studies emphasizing the need for comprehensive resource management to support innovative practices in education [16].

Creating a supportive work environment for teachers, including managing personnel and fostering a sense of belonging, aligns with the literature on leadership and organizational behavior. Studies show that influential school leaders who support and maintain a positive work climate contribute to better teacher performance and job satisfaction [9]. This finding corroborates research emphasizing the importance of supportive leadership in fostering a productive and motivated teaching staff [26].

The findings regarding flexibility in managing schedules, instruction, and adapting to new conditions align with the literature on the necessity of flexibility in educational leadership. Research highlights that the ability to adapt and be flexible is crucial for leaders managing educational reforms, especially during times of crisis [14]. The emphasis on adaptability and innovation in implementing modular instruction reflects broader discussions on the need for educational leaders to be responsive to evolving challenges [30].

The theme of community engagement and partnership aligns with the literature on the role of community support in educational success. Studies indicate that strong partnerships with parents, local officials, and community organizations are vital for the effective implementation of educational initiatives [11]. The positive experiences reported by school heads in securing community support and resources reflect the importance of collaborative efforts in achieving educational goals [28].

The theme of strong leadership and resilience resonates with existing research on the qualities necessary for effective educational leadership. Studies emphasize that resilient leaders who make firm decisions and navigate challenges effectively are critical for maintaining continuity and driving positive educational outcomes [19]. The experiences of school heads in demonstrating resilience amid the pandemic highlight the importance of robust leadership in times of crisis [7].

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

A. Practical Implications

1. *Enhanced Training and Support.* The findings suggest that training programs for school heads should emphasize policy adherence, resource management, and creating supportive work environments. Providing targeted support in these areas can enhance the effectiveness of modular instruction and other educational innovations.
2. *Resource Allocation.* Managing resources and securing external support are crucial. Schools should develop strategies for budgeting and sourcing additional resources to support modular instruction.
3. *Community Engagement.* Building and maintaining strong community partnerships can provide essential support for educational initiatives. Schools should

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actively engage with parents, local officials, and community organizations.

B. Theoretical Implications:

1. *Leadership Theories.* The study reinforces the importance of leadership theories that emphasize flexibility, support, and resilience. The findings support the application of transformational and adaptive leadership theories in the context of educational reform [3].
2. *Educational Innovation.* The experiences of school heads contribute to theoretical discussions on how educational innovations are implemented and sustained in practice. The study provides insights into the practical application of theoretical concepts related to educational change.

C. Policy Implications:

1. *Policy Development.* Policies should be developed to support school leaders in managing modular instruction, including guidelines for resource allocation and community engagement.
2. *Support Structures.* Governments and educational authorities should create support structures for school heads, including financial assistance, training programs, and resources to facilitate the implementation of modular instruction.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is based on a small sample of ten school heads from a specific province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could include a more extensive and diverse sample to enhance the applicability of the results. The study focuses on the context of Davao de Oro, which may only partially capture the experiences of school heads in other regions with different educational and socio-economic conditions.

Other researchers may conduct comparative studies involving school heads from different regions or countries to explore how contextual factors influence the implementation of modular instruction. Longitudinal research could examine how the experiences of school heads evolve and the long-term impacts of modular instruction on educational outcomes. Further research could investigate how implementing modular instruction affects student learning outcomes and engagement.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of school heads in implementing modular instruction. By connecting these experiences to existing literature, the study highlights the importance of policy adherence, resource management, supportive leadership, flexibility, community engagement, and resilience. These insights have practical, theoretical, and policy implications for enhancing the effectiveness of educational leadership and modular instruction. Addressing the limitations and pursuing further research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with modular education in diverse contexts.

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