ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 5| May 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

HARMONY ON THE TIGHTROPE: WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELL-BEING THROUGH THE LENS OF SCHOOL LEADERS

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra21878
DOI No: 10.36713/epra21878

ABSTRACT

As educational challenges evolve in the 21st century, there is an increasing focus on prioritizing educators' well-being. This study explored the challenges, coping strategies and insights of school leaders in managing work-life balance and well-being. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, engaging seven school leaders from elementary, secondary, and higher education levels in Davao Region, Philippines through in-depth interview. The findings revealed that school leaders are challenged on the overlapped and extended time of administrative responsibilities, clashed human resource concerns, struggled with emotional and mental strain in leadership roles, interfered rest and personal time and neglected career development. To cope with these challenges, school leaders emphasized on strategies including cultivating awareness through self-care and reflection, strengthening family bonds, optimizing productivity through strategic scheduling, fostering positive relationships and delegation of work. School leaders highlighted valuable insights such as holistic well-being and sustainability, time management, work-life boundaries and career fulfillment. Notably, findings recommend for future research to address generational differences, enhance leadership effectiveness, promote holistic well-being, and harmonize responsibilities even in challenging tightropes.

KEYWORDS: *Work-Life Balance, Well-Being, Qualitative Phenomenological Approach*

INTRODUCTION

In addressing the 21st-century challenges, there is a growing emphasis on the well-being of educators as the education sector becomes increasingly complex (Bayucot & Grana, 2024). The quality of working life and its relationship to overall quality of life has long been the focus of debate (Kalai, Odisa, & Okoth, 2021). For school administrators who usually balance demanding professional commitments with personal and family responsibilities, it has become a significant burden (Dunn, 2020). Over the past few decades, school leaders' duties have evolved in response to the growing demands and difficulties they encounter. The challenge to finding life balance is amplified across generational cohorts of school leaders. In the study of Ray, Pijanowski, and Lasater (2020) revealed that school leaders work longer hours, are more sleep deprived, more dehydrated, have poorer diet practices, exercise less regularly, and spend less time with their friends and family than the general population. Moreover, struggled to find ways within their control to improve their self-care behavior.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) showed that 11% of public-school principals in the United States departed from the profession between the school years 2020 to 2022 owing to employment pressures. Meanwhile, in China, school leaders often struggle with a poor work-life balance due to heavy workloads, long working hours, and a strong emphasis on achieving high academic results, leading to significant stress and limited personal time, particularly in urban areas where the pressure to perform is even greater (Cui, et al., 2021). Whereas, New Zealand generally ranks high for work-life balance globally, school leaders in the country often report struggling with a manageable workload, with many working significantly long hours, particularly during term time, indicating a potential imbalance between their professional and personal lives (Jain, 2021).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, Department of Education underscores the importance of balancing work and personal life for educators through various memoranda and guidelines. These policies include the removal of administrative tasks for teachers (DepEd Order 2, 2024) and the promotion of professional growth opportunities (DepEd Order 42, 2017). The National Economic and Development Authority's (NEDA) Ambisyon *Natin* 2040 policy, initiated in 2017, emphasizes work-life balance for all Filipinos. However, in the Division of Gingoog City, workload pressures and time management challenges, difficulties in the work environment, and frustrations related to DepEd policies are still uprising factors that hinder school leaders and even teachers work-life balance (Bayucot & Grana, 2024).

Thus, Dalagan Jr. (2018) strongly recommended that school heads who play an imperative role must apply collaborative leadership skills to increase the level of happiness a person in

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derives for his career, which will promote a congenial environment at the workplace. Besides, Verano, et al. (2024) on their study on school heads administrative tasks and multiple ancillary functions in the Divisions of Davao City and Davao Occidental also recommended that establishing work-life balance policies must be intensified to enhance the effectiveness of school heads and improve overall educational outcomes.

There have been several studies pointed out educator's work-life balance and well-being in relation to job performance and organizational commitment (Libit & Callo, 2024; Honorario & Gempes, 2022; Munda, 2024) but have limited studies on the lived experiences, coping strategies and insights of educators as school leaders in the context of different generations in both public and private schools. Moreover, there is an increasing volume of research studies on work-life balance and well-being in Davao region, but which are limited on quantitative approaches. Therefore, it is essential that this study be conducted.

The study will offer valuable insights that school leaders can use to develop future programs and policy decisions and support strategies for school leaders aimed at enhancing their work-life balance and well-being. Additionally, the findings may help school leaders implement personal interventions, especially in areas that can be addressed at an individual level. Furthermore, this research will serve as a foundation for future researchers interested in exploring work-life balance and well-being of school leaders in the context of generational cohorts.

Research Questions

Specifically, this research sought to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the challenges encountered by school leaders in maintaining work-life balance?
(2) What coping strategies do school leaders use to maintain work-life balance and well-being?
(3) What valuable insights on work-life balance and maintaining well-being that can be share to other school leaders?

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is based on the Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964) of which suggests that individuals hold multiple roles, can create role conflict, strain, or enrichment to school leaders and often experience tensions between their leadership duties and personal lives. Furthermore, Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) posits that workplace well-being is influenced by the balance between job demands and job resources.

In the context of this study, the theories stressed the school leadership roles may create conflict or tensions when not properly carried out by the school leaders between their professional roles and personal responsibilities. This may be influence by the type of leadership styles and practices they may employ and as to how they view balance on their work and life roles and still maintain their well-being, able to achieve wellness not just only physically but also mentally.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the fundamental essence of lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenology seeks to uncover universal characteristics that define an experience, emphasizing its indispensable nature for understanding human perceptions and realities (Husserl, 1969; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Site and Participants

This qualitative-phenomenological study involved seven school leaders from Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y (Millennial) cohorts across elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions in private and public schools in Davao Region. Following Creswell's (2013) recommendation of five to twenty-five participants for phenomenological studies, purposive sampling was utilized to intentionally select individuals with rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be school leaders (Dean, Principal, or Head Teacher) with at least six months of professional experience in school leadership and belonging to one of the identified generational cohorts.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis to interpret the collected data, employing Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method (Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015). The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim within 24 hours, analyzed them alongside memos, and immersed themselves in participant accounts to identify significant statements reflecting school leaders lived experiences. Meanings were then formulated while reflexively bracketing presuppositions, ensuring alignment with participants' perspectives. These meanings were clustered into consistent themes, leading to an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. This description was further refined into a concise statement capturing its essential structure, which was validated by returning it to participants to confirm accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to key ethical principles, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity. Participants had the freedom to join or withdraw without pressure, while the research was designed to address real community needs, promoting positive outcomes. Transparency and accountability were upheld throughout the process, with careful consideration given to the vulnerability of participants—school leaders from public and private institutions—who were not deemed at risk.

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Prior to conducting the study, the researcher submitted the proposal and questionnaires for approval to assess potential risks. Anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy were prioritized, following the Data Privacy Act of 2012, with measures such as assigning random identification numbers to protect participants' identities. The researcher demonstrated necessary qualifications, including intellectual capacity and cultural sensitivity, and sought guidance from experts when needed. Community involvement was emphasized, with formal communication before engaging participants and minimal disruption to their routines during the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1
Themes and Core Ideas on the Challenges Encountered by School Leaders in Maintaining Work-Life Balance

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Overlapped and Extended Time of Administrative Responsibilities	• demanding administrative work and responsibilities • overlapping activities • create scheduling conflicts
Clashed Human Resource Concerns	• having difficulty in constant communication • having conflicts due to varying principles • addressing personnel crises and concerns
Struggled with Emotional and Mental Strain in Leadership Roles	• the emotional weight of decision-making • mental strain on creating positive culture • feeling emotionally and mentally overwhelmed due to unfinished work
Interfered Rest and Personal Time	• growing expectation to respond quickly • interfering rest and personal time • losing focus when adapting to new technologies
Neglected Career Development	• neglecting major decisions in life • cannot be in the same places at the same time • achieving balance through a little of everything

Overlapped and Extended Time of Administrative Responsibilities

The nature of the work of school leaders demands significant time, energy, and flexibility. This workload often exceeds standard working hours due to its complexity and unpredictability. It highlights challenges like extended hours, scheduling conflicts, and the mental effort required for decision-making, suggesting a potential impact on work-life balance and overall well-being.

During the interviews, the participants elaborated that:

> *... as the demands of administrative work, meetings, and academic responsibilities can sometimes extend beyond office hours. Overlapping activities, ..., can create scheduling conflicts. (P01_IDI)*

> *Early mornings, late meetings, seminars, trainings and evening school events often extend my workday, making it difficult to carve out personal time consistently. (P02_IDI)*

Wang, Pollock, and Hauseman (2023) highlighted that the demanding nature of school leadership, including fast-paced work, long hours, and time constraints, contributes to emotionally exhausting situations for principals. Similarly, Verano et al. (2024) emphasized that school heads face challenges in balancing administrative duties, ancillary responsibilities, and personal well-being, particularly with the increased workload, resulting in limited opportunities for work-life balance.

Clashed Human Resource Concerns

Managing working relationships can be challenging. Differences in principles and values often lead to conflicts among personnel of different generations, requiring school leaders' tact and diplomacy to navigate and resolve effectively. It was stated by the school leaders of which they are tasked to maintaining constant communication across their faculty, staff, and even students.

During the interviews, the participants emphasized that:

... managing working relationships, as effective leadership involves constant communication with faculty, staff, and students. (P01_IDI)

Biggest challenge ..., when I find my major decision or my priority not the same with the priority of my School Head, because ...I have personally had my own principles also... (P05_IDI)

It is difficult to maintain work-life balance as a school administrator since there is always the push of administrative

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responsibilities, such as personnel crises especially they are from different generations. (P04_IDI)

Su (2022) emphasized that school administrators should adopt a people-oriented approach in managing interpersonal relationships, fostering a harmonious, relaxed, and supportive environment within schools. Similarly, Barnes, Barniso, and De Guzman (2025) emphasized that handling generational gaps requires school heads to understand the needs of every generational cohort for independence and autonomy.

Struggled with Emotional and Mental Strain in Leadership Roles

The responsibility of ensuring a positive school culture further compounds mental strain, as leaders, they strive to balance organizational goals while maintaining morale, a task that often spills over into personal time.

During the interviews, the participants mentioned that:

…, there's also the emotional weight of decision-making, supporting staff, handling student issues… and ensuring a positive school culture. This mental strain can make it hard to fully disconnect from work (P02_IDI)

My biggest challenge is that work never feels 'done'. My daily "to-do" list often remains incomplete, accumulating over time. This situation leaves me feeling emotionally and mentally overwhelmed. (P03_IDI)

Wang (2025) highlighted that resilience, organizational support, policies, and external influences play a crucial role in enhancing principals' emotional well-being. Similarly, Wittmers and Maier (2023) explored the impact of work intensification and emotional demands on leaders' mental health, emphasizing the moderating effect of organizational support in mitigating these challenges.

Interfered Rest and Personal Time

The boundless connectivity, driven by modern technology, has significantly reshaped the demands placed on school leaders. This was agreed by most of the participants especially those belonging to Generation X and Baby Boomer:

…challenge is technology and constant connectivity. … I am always connected – emails, calls, and messages follow me home. There's a growing expectation to respond quickly and always be available, making it harder to draw the line between work and personal life… (P02_IDI)

… the ability to work anytime and anywhere, even beyond normal working hours, can interfere with rest and personal time. (P03_IDI)

Being a millennial School Principal, …, the connectivity brings the lines of demarcation between work and life into uncertainty, and thus, it becomes difficult to switch off completely. (P04_IDI)

Keshwani and Patel (2023) highlighted that constant connectivity contributes to work-related stress, making it difficult for individuals to disengage from work and focus on non-work activities. The constant accessibility provided by digital tools has created an expectation for them to respond swiftly and remain perpetually available, which often blurs the boundaries between their professional and personal life.

Neglected Career Development

Making thoughtful choices to maintain harmony between family and work, often require sacrifices or forgoing certain opportunities. One of the participants pointed out that recognizing the impossibility of being in two places or fulfilling all roles simultaneously, individuals focus on prioritizing what truly matters in each domain, thus, one neglected career development for the sake of family.

… after passing the National Qualifying Examination for School Head. I opted not to be a principal; that's the major decision made me decide for my family… I cannot be in the same places at the same time; I cannot be two persons at the same time… (P05_IDI).

D'Silva and Samo (2024) highlighted that school leaders juggle multiple roles at home and in their professional leadership positions, striving to meet the demands of both domains at a fulfilling level. Rather than seeking perfection, achieving balance involves integrating small, mindful actions across various aspects of life to foster a sense of equilibrium and overall well-being.

Table 2

Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Strategies of School Leaders in Work-Life Balance and Well-Being

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Cultivating Awareness through Self-Care and Reflection	• prioritizing self-care by getting enough rest • engaging in physical activity • setting time for hobbies or relaxation • taking deep breathing exercise • prioritizing self-reflection and gratitude • focusing on spiritual aspects
Strengthening Family Bonds	• fostering meaningful connections with family, friends and colleagues • taking breaks

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	• prioritizing quality time with loved ones
Optimizing Productivity Through Strategic Scheduling	• establishing clear work hours through setting deadlines • using planning tools and calendars to maintain a structured schedule • using technology to reduce tasks and automate processes
Fostering Positive Relationships and Delegation of Work	• delegating tasks among capable team members • ensuring good rapport with colleagues • establishing support system and collaboration

Cultivating Awareness through Self-Care and Reflection
Prioritizing adequate rest allows the body to recharge and enhances overall productivity, ensuring individuals can perform at their best in both personal and professional spheres.

During the interviews, the participants revealed that:
I make self-care a priority by getting enough rest, engaging in physical activity, and setting aside time for hobbies or relaxation. Whether it's exercising, reading, or spending time with family... (P02_IDI)

I practice self-care by doing stress-relief activities such as visiting nature spots, which helps me keep my mental clarity... (P04_IDI)

For stressful mornings, I practice deep breathing exercises to keep myself grounded before stepping into the fast-paced school environment. I prioritize self-reflection and gratitude. (P02_IDI)

Beyond work, I prioritize … spiritual well-being, knowing that a strong personal foundation allows me to be more effective in my leadership role. (P01_IDI)

Rice and Williams (2022) emphasized that principals who practice self-care strategies may improve their professional success by addressing their physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs. Engaging in physical activity not only improves physical fitness but also boosts mood and reduces stress, serving as a powerful tool for maintaining mental resilience. Setting aside time for hobbies or relaxation fosters creativity and provides a much-needed break from daily routines, helping to rekindle energy and focus.

Strengthening Family Bonds
Fostering emotional resilience and overall well-being as school leaders build meaningful connections with family, friends, and colleagues through intentional interactions. This nurtures trust and a sense of belonging.
During the interviews, the participants voiced that:

As a school head with a lot of tasks, for me to maintain my sanity I always do the following, have coffee or ice cream with my friends or colleagues together with a lot of chitchats sessions. (P04_IDI)

…I take a bit of breaks, like taking mandatory leave and special leave. (P06_IDI)
During summer or before it ends, I have already traveled or gone out of town. On birthdays, my wife and I just eat together, stay at a hotel, and then return to work afterward. (P07_IDI)
Smith et al. (2021) provided empirical evidence for an important link between principal leadership practices and family engagement. Furthermore, dedicating quality time to loved ones through shared activities and celebrations strengthens relationships, creating cherished memories. These practices collectively enhance personal fulfillment and empower individuals to return to their roles with renewed focus and energy.

Optimizing Productivity Through Strategic Scheduling
Creating clear work hours by setting deadlines, ensuring structured time management can reduce stress from disorganization. Utilizing planning tools such as calendars and task management apps helps prioritize tasks, maintain a visual roadmap, and adapt schedules for efficiency.

During the interviews, the participants asserted that:
Prioritizing tasks, setting deadlines, and maintaining a structured schedule help me stay on top of responsibilities without letting work take over my personal life. (P01_IDI)

I use planning tools and calendars to structure my day efficiently, I have this organizer to block my times, and automated notifications to remind me that I have commitments, so I will not miss anything … (P02_IDI)

As a millennial principal, I achieve work-life balance using technology to reduce tasks, automate processes, and effectively delegate responsibilities through making schedules and disseminate it using our group chats. (P04_IDI)

School leaders boost productivity by ensuring that time is allocated to tasks that align with one's goals and priorities. By managing time effectively, individuals can minimize distractions and focus on completing tasks efficiently (Conley, 2025).

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Fostering Positive Relationships and Delegation of Work

Delegating tasks to capable team members not only empower individuals but also enhances team efficiency by leveraging diverse skills and expertise.

During the interviews, the participants explained that:

Delegate when my plate is full – I don't hesitate to distribute tasks among capable team members ... (P01_IDI)

At the workplace, I ensure a good rapport with colleagues by taking time to eat out occasionally and celebrating small wins together. (P01_IDI)

... I've come to realize that effective leadership means empowering others. By delegating responsibilities to my leadership team, I can reduce unnecessary stress and focus on the bigger picture. P02_IDI

Establishing a support system with my millennial colleagues makes it easier for us to exchange insights and strategies, and cooperating makes leadership burdens less emotionally draining. (P04_IDI)

The importance of relationships reinforces the idea that collaborative and supportive environments are essential for effective leadership. These findings also align with literature emphasizing the value of peer support and mentorship in reducing isolation and stress among school leaders (Williams-Hines & Latanya, 2025).

Table 3

Valuable Insights that School Leaders can share with other School Leaders as they maintain Work-Life Balance and Well-Being

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Holistic Well-Being and Sustainability	• striving continuously to uphold excellence in professional endeavors • leading effectively the school while also prioritizing personal well-being • giving time and effort to work as well as creating time for family • ensuring that one can lead with energy and enthusiasm
Time Management	• dedicating oneself with time to responsibilities • planning without neglecting professional duties • allowing to fulfill professional obligations • going home at 5:00 in the afternoon
Work-Life Boundaries	• setting clear boundaries • respecting the lines • establishing good work-life boundaries
Career Fulfillment	• accepting what is destined by God • embracing career as a passion • achieving balance between work life and personal welfare

Holistic Well-Being and Sustainability

Being a school leader, fostering a culture that prioritizes their physical, mental, and emotional health while integrating sustainable leadership practices enable them to manage professional responsibilities effectively without compromising personal well-being.

During the interviews, the participants described that:

...continuously strive to uphold excellence in professional endeavors while making time for personal growth, family, and well-being. (P01_IDI)

As a school head, the ability to effectively lead my school while also prioritizing my personal well-being, family, and personal growth... (P02_IDI)

Work-life balance is about sustainability, ensuring that one can lead with energy and enthusiasm while also nurturing own well-being and relationships. (P05_IDI)

Ray, Pijanowski, and Lasater (2020) explained that school administrators struggled to find ways within their control to improve their self-care behavior and offered suggestions regarding how the structure of the job itself might be changed to facilitate improving the health of school leaders. Similarly, Gülseven and Uslu (2023) stated that working life is as essential and indispensable as private life for people. Paying equal attention to work and private life is the way to balance these living spaces.

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Time Management
Effective time management is essential for school administrators in balancing responsibilities and reducing work-related stress

During the interviews, the participants said that:
Once step out of the office, attention must shift to the family, valuing quality time and personal commitments. Make the necessary arrangements to attend without neglecting professional duties, ... allowing me to fulfill professional obligations while also enjoying personal time…(P01_IDI)

Go home at 5:00 in the afternoon and focus on household chores after work. Do not open your laptop after dinner and can have quality time with your family. (P03_IDI)

Naparan and Tulod (2021) highlighted strategies such as delegating authority, setting priorities, managing distractions, making written plans, and establishing timetables. Similarly, Dakshinkar and Nimsarkar (2023) emphasized the role of time management in maintaining balance, while Clark and Knight (2020) underscored its significance in achieving work-life equilibrium and minimizing stress.

Work-Life Boundaries
The participants elaborated on work-life balance as setting clear boundaries between work and personal life, respecting the lines between professional responsibilities and personal time and establishing good work-life boundaries from the outset.

During the interviews, the participants accentuated that:
… One of the most important lessons I've learned is to set boundaries early. (P02_IDI)

… set clear priorities and boundaries. Respect the lines between professional responsibilities and personal. (P01_IDI)

To prospective school leaders, …establishing good work-life boundaries from the outset. (P04_IDI)

Hungo (2025) revealed that professional responsibilities significantly impact their personal lives, leading to strained family interactions and well-being, stressing the need for systemic support.

Career Fulfillment
Embracing a holistic approach to life, where faith, passion, and balance play integral roles. Accepting what is destined by God fosters a sense of gratitude and contentment, allowing individuals to find peace in their journey and appreciate the blessings they have. Pursuing a career as a passion further deepens this fulfillment, as work becomes a source of joy and purpose rather than merely an obligation.

During the interviews, the participants highlighted that:
I have accepted that this is my life, that this is what God has given me, and I do not long for more than this. I have achieved work-life balance, but there are challenges... (P07_IDI)

I see my career as a passion, but I also understand that my personal life is equally important for long-term success and happiness. (P02_IDI)

… I see my children, I find them...they have achieved some things in their career, so I think I had achieved balance between work and personal life. (P05_IDI)

Swen (2020) revealed that many principals expressed a view that their basic nature, hardwiring, or DNA predisposed them to a career in education. The vast majority (31 out of 35, 89%) expressed this path dependency. The inner sense of destiny gave sense and understanding to their motivation to become one.

Recommendation for Further Research
Future research on work-life balance and well-being among school leaders should employ qualitative longitudinal methods to examine evolving leadership challenges, shifts in perceptions, coping strategies, and institutional influences. Comparative studies across educational settings, demographics, and cultural backgrounds can identify unique stressors and resilience patterns, enhancing the understanding of sustainable leadership. Additionally, research should explore leadership resilience through thematic analysis, uncovering effective coping mechanisms and support systems. Narrative inquiries and case studies can provide practical insights for policy development and leadership training. Investigating digitalization, workplace expectations, and psychological well-being in leadership sustainability would offer valuable perspectives on fostering balance in high-pressure environments.

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