



# NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION BETWEEN K TO 12 AND MATATAG CURRICULUM: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF SCHOOL LEADERS' DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

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## ABSTRACT

*This grounded theory study delves deeply into the complex and nuanced process by which school leaders navigate and make decisions amid educational policy changes. In focusing on their lived experiences, the study aims to capture not only the challenges and obstacles that these leaders face but also the strategies, perspectives, and contextual factors that shape their responses to policy shifts. The study involved 8 school leaders selected through purposive sampling from public schools in Davao City. The selection will be based on specific criteria to ensure that participants have relevant experience and insight into the policy implementation process. The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational practice, policy, and leadership, particularly within the context of low-performing schools. The lived experiences of teachers and school leaders reveal that education must be understood as a deeply relational and adaptive process one that goes beyond academic instruction to address the holistic development of learners. The emphasis on mentorship, resilience, community engagement, and responsive teaching underscores the necessity of a more flexible and empathetic educational framework.*

**KEYWORDS-** Navigating the Transition, K to 12, Matatag Curriculum, Grounded Theory Study, School Leaders, Decision-Making Processes

## INTRODUCTION

School leaders face increasingly complex challenges as they navigate rapid educational policy changes while maintaining effective leadership in their institutions. The dynamic nature of educational reform, coupled with diverse stakeholder expectations and limited resources, creates a decision-making environment that demands careful investigation. Despite the critical role of school leaders in implementing policy changes, there remains limited understanding of the cognitive and practical processes they employ when making crucial decisions in response to new educational policies.

Previous research has extensively documented the impacts of educational policy changes on student outcomes, teacher effectiveness, and school performance. However, the intricate decision-making processes that school leaders undergo when interpreting, adapting, and implementing these policies within their unique institutional contexts remain understudied. Understanding these processes is vital for developing more effective policy implementation strategies and supporting school leaders in their critical role as change agents in educational reform.

Australian researchers Matthews and Wilson (2022) investigated the decision-making processes of school leaders during the implementation of national assessment reforms. Their findings highlighted that school leaders' decisions were significantly influenced by local context, available resources, and stakeholder expectations. The study emphasized the importance of adaptive leadership strategies in managing educational change.

Moreover, in a comprehensive study conducted in Finland, Taipale (2021) examined how school principals navigated the implementation of the new national curriculum reform. The study revealed that successful policy implementation heavily relied on principals' ability to create collaborative decision-making structures and maintain open dialogue with teachers. Finnish school leaders who adopted a distributed leadership approach reported more positive outcomes in policy implementation and staff buy-in.

Also, a large-scale study in Singapore by Chen et al. (2023) offers valuable insights into how school leaders skillfully balanced autonomy and accountability in the face of ministry directives. The research revealed that effective leaders employed systematic, adaptable approaches to interpret and implement policies. Rather than merely enforcing top-down directives, these leaders developed frameworks that thoughtfully aligned national mandates with the unique needs, goals, and resources of their individual schools. This approach allowed them to maintain a sense of ownership and flexibility while meeting ministry expectations. The study underscores the importance of strategic planning, contextual adaptation, and proactive leadership in navigating complex policy landscapes, highlighting the potential for school-specific frameworks to address the tensions between policy adherence and institutional priorities.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, Dela Cruz and Santos (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study examining how Filipino school principals implemented the K-12 curriculum reforms. Their research revealed that school leaders faced significant challenges in resource allocation and teacher preparation, necessitating innovative decision-making approaches to bridge policy expectations with ground-level realities.



In a comprehensive analysis of Philippine basic education governance, Ramos and Mendoza (2023) highlighted the crucial role of school leaders in translating DepEd policies into actionable plans. The study identified key competencies needed by school leaders to effectively implement policy changes while maintaining institutional stability. Among these competencies were the ability to foster collaborative decision-making, adapt policies to local contexts, and maintain open communication channels with stakeholders. The researchers found that successful school leaders acted as mediators, balancing the demands of policy implementation with the realities of day-to-day school operations. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of continuous professional development to equip leaders with the skills necessary to navigate evolving educational reforms.

Significantly, a nationwide study by Garcia et al. (2021) examined the decision-making processes of school leaders during the transition to distance learning, highlighting several critical insights. Their findings underscored the importance of a deep contextual understanding, as leaders needed to consider the specific challenges and resources unique to their schools. Effective policy implementation relied heavily on proactive stakeholder engagement, allowing leaders to address concerns from teachers, parents, and students and adapt policies accordingly. The study also pointed to the value of flexibility in decision-making, as leaders who adjusted their approaches based on ongoing feedback and local needs tended to foster smoother transitions and maintain school stability during periods of change.

Lastly, Villafuerte and Abella (2023) conducted an in-depth case study of five public school principals in Davao City, focusing on their leadership approaches in implementing the Basic Education Development Plan 2030. The research brought to light distinct local challenges these principals faced, including limited resources, varying levels of community engagement, and infrastructure constraints. The principals demonstrated adaptability by developing tailored strategies to align national policy goals with the unique needs and capacities of their communities. These strategies included fostering partnerships with local organizations, actively engaging parents and community members in school activities, and prioritizing resource allocation to meet specific school needs. This study illustrates how localized, context-driven leadership can facilitate effective policy implementation, especially in diverse and resource-limited environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A study in Finland by Tian and Risku (2019) found that school leaders' personal educational philosophies and values significantly impacted how they implemented national curriculum reforms. Leaders who strongly valued student-centered learning tended to prioritize aspects of policies that enhanced individualized instruction and classroom autonomy. This alignment between personal values and policy objectives not only shaped the direction of reforms within their schools but also influenced how these leaders allocated resources, supported professional development, and engaged with teachers. Their prioritization of student-centered strategies often resulted in fostering environments where students' unique needs, interests, and learning styles were central to instructional practices.

Another research conducted in Australia shed light on the significant role that resource availability and local community context play in how school leaders interpret and implement educational policies. Heffernan's findings revealed that school leaders, particularly in disadvantaged areas, often face unique challenges that require them to modify or adapt policy implementation strategies to meet the practical constraints of their environments and the specific needs of their students. In schools located in economically disadvantaged regions, leaders are frequently confronted with limited resources, whether in terms of funding, teaching materials, or access to specialized staff. These constraints make it difficult to fully adhere to policy mandates as intended by central authorities. As a result, school leaders in these areas are compelled to exercise flexibility in policy interpretation, making adjustments to ensure that policies are both feasible and relevant to the context of their schools, (Heffernan, 2018).

Moreover, being part of a professional learning community allowed school leaders to build stronger relationships with other educators, which in turn enhanced their problem-solving capabilities. When confronted with policy changes or challenges, they could rely on the collective knowledge and expertise within their networks, drawing on peer support to make informed decisions and implement policies effectively. This collaborative approach not only helped to ensure the success of policy changes but also created a culture of innovation and shared leadership within schools. A UK-based study by Harris and Jones (2020) highlighted the significant role that school leaders' professional networks and peer relationships play in shaping their interpretation and implementation of educational policies. The research found that leaders who were actively engaged in professional learning communities (PLCs)—which consist of collaborative groups of educators who share resources, insights, and strategies—tended to approach policy implementation with greater creativity and innovation. These networks provided school leaders with access to diverse perspectives, enabling them to discuss challenges, share best practices, and explore alternative solutions to policy demands.

Meanwhile, research conducted in Metro Manila schools by Santos and Cruz (2022) demonstrated that school leaders' interpretation of the K-12 reforms was heavily influenced by their prior experience with curriculum changes and the technological capacity of their schools. Their study highlighted how these two factors shaped the way school leaders navigated and adapted the reforms, particularly in the context of implementing distance learning policies during the pandemic. School leaders who had prior experience with curriculum changes were more adept at understanding and adjusting to the demands of the K-12 reforms. Their previous encounters with educational shifts allowed them to approach the new policy changes with greater confidence and flexibility.

Significantly a study of school administrators in Cebu City by Flores et al. (2021) highlighted the significant role of local political support and community engagement in shaping how school leaders prioritized and implemented Department of Education (DepEd) policies, particularly those related to mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). The research revealed that school leaders who received strong political backing from local government officials and stakeholders were better positioned



to successfully implement MTB-MLE programs in their schools. Political support provided the necessary resources, advocacy, and policy alignment that allowed school leaders to address challenges and mobilize efforts to meet policy goals effectively.

Additionally, A case study of public schools in Quezon City by Reyes and Garcia (2021) revealed that school leaders' interpretation of inclusive education policies was significantly influenced by their schools' existing special education programs and the availability of trained personnel. The availability of trained personnel played a crucial role in shaping how these policies were interpreted and applied. Schools with well-established special education programs and a dedicated team of trained special education teachers were better equipped to implement inclusive education policies. As a result, these principals were more adept at navigating the complexities of policy implementation and were proactive in adopting strategies that promoted diversity, equity, and accessibility for all students, including those with special needs.

Locally, the study found that the availability of resources for teacher professional development played a crucial role in how school leaders navigated policy changes. Schools with adequate funding for professional development programs were better equipped to support their teachers in adapting to new policies and improving their pedagogical practices. This allowed teachers to stay updated on best practices, enhance their skills, and be more effective in delivering the curriculum. On the other hand, schools with fewer resources for teacher training faced challenges in providing ongoing professional development, which impacted teachers' ability to successfully implement new policies and adapt to educational reforms. The lack of infrastructure, teaching materials, and access to technology required school leaders to make strategic decisions, such as prioritizing certain aspects of policy implementation over others, to align with the school's available resources, (Mendoza, 2023).

### Research Questions

The ever-evolving landscape of educational reform, combined with varied stakeholder expectations and constrained resources, forms a decision-making context that calls for thorough examination. School leaders encounter growing complexities as they steer through swift educational policy changes while striving to sustain strong leadership within their institutions. The following central research question guides this study:

1. How do school leaders navigate the transition between K-12 to Matatag Curriculum?
2. How do school leaders navigate the decision-making approaches based on implementation outcomes between K-12 to Matatag Curriculum?
3. How do school leaders implement Grounded theory in decision making based from the outcomes between K-12 to Matatag Curriculum?
4. What new theory can be developed from the lived experiences of school leaders in navigating the transition between the K-12 and Matatag Curriculum, focusing on decision-making approaches and implementation outcomes?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative grounded theory research design to explore and understand the decision-making processes of school leaders as they navigate educational policy changes. Grounded theory is particularly well-suited for this research as it focuses on developing a theory grounded in the participants' lived experiences, offering insights into the underlying patterns, strategies, and considerations that shape leaders' responses to policy changes. In employing grounded theory, this study aims to uncover the key processes and concepts that school leaders use in interpreting and implementing policies, while acknowledging the diverse and context-specific challenges they face.

The approach enables the generation of a dynamic, contextually relevant theory that reflects the complexity of school leaders' decision-making, capturing the iterative and evolving nature of policy implementation within educational settings. Through this design, the study seeks to develop a robust theoretical framework that can guide future practices in educational leadership and policy adaptation.

The selection of grounded theory aligns with the study's objective to move beyond mere description to develop explanatory frameworks that illuminate how school leaders make sense of and respond to policy directives. This methodology's systematic yet flexible nature allows for the emergence of theoretical insights through constant comparative analysis, where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and inform each other. The iterative process of data gathering, coding, and theory development enables the researcher to identify patterns and relationships that might not be immediately apparent through other methodological approaches.

Furthermore, the constructivist orientation of grounded theory acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants, recognizing that school leaders' decision-making processes are shaped by their unique contexts, experiences, and interpretations. This perspective is crucial for understanding the nuanced ways in which leaders navigate the complex interplay between policy mandates, institutional constraints, and stakeholder interests. The design also emphasizes the importance of context in understanding school leaders' decision-making processes. It recognizes that leadership practices and policy implementation strategies are deeply embedded in specific institutional, cultural, and social contexts. This contextual sensitivity allows for the development of theoretical insights that are both practically relevant and theoretically sophisticated.

Through employing this research design, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical knowledge in educational leadership. The resulting theory will not only illuminate the complex processes involved in school leaders' decision-making but also provide actionable insights for improving policy implementation in educational



settings. This approach ensures that the research findings will be valuable for both scholars seeking to understand leadership processes and practitioners working to navigate policy changes effectively.

### Research Participants

The study involved 8 school leaders selected through purposive sampling from public schools in Davao City. The selection will be based on specific criteria to ensure that participants have relevant experience and insight into the policy implementation process. Purposive sampling also enhances the study's ability to capture the diversity of experiences among school leaders. For example, leaders who have encountered policy changes in environments with differing levels of resources or community involvement will provide contrasting yet complementary insights into how such factors influence their implementation strategies. According to Patton (2002), purposive sampling is particularly effective in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to select information-rich cases that illuminate the central themes of the study. This purposive sampling approach ensures that the study will gather rich, varied insights into how school leaders across different settings interpret and implement educational policies.

### Research Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study will be a semi-structured interview protocol, designed to encourage in-depth responses from participants and provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The interview protocol will consist of open-ended questions that allow for the exploration of various facets of school leaders' decision-making processes in the context of educational policy changes.

### Data Analysis

In a grounded theory study, data analysis is a systematic and iterative process that aims to generate theory directly from the data. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns, concepts, and relationships within the data, which are then used to develop a grounded theoretical framework. The process typically follows several key stages:

**Open Coding:** This is the initial stage of analysis, where the researcher reads through the data (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes) line by line and identifies discrete concepts or themes. Each segment of data is labeled with codes that reflect the content or meaning. These codes are then grouped into categories that represent broader themes. During open coding, the researcher remains open to all potential themes without predefined expectations.

**Axial Coding:** In the axial coding phase, the researcher begins to link the categories identified during open coding. This step involves identifying relationships between categories, refining concepts, and exploring how they connect to one another. The aim is to organize the data into coherent structures that reveal deeper insights into the phenomena being studied. Researchers may look for patterns, causal relationships, and conditions that affect the outcomes or experiences of participants.

**Selective Coding:** In selective coding, the researcher identifies the core category or central theme that ties all the other categories together. This central theme is the main focus of the grounded theory and represents the overarching concept that explains the phenomenon being studied. Once the core category is identified, the researcher refines the theory by continually comparing the data to the emerging concepts, ensuring that the theory is grounded in the data and accurately reflects participants' experiences.

**Constant Comparative Method:** Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher continuously compares new data with existing data, codes, and categories. This process of constant comparison helps to refine and develop the theory by ensuring that it is grounded in the participants' actual experiences and that it evolves as new data is analyzed. It also enables the researcher to identify gaps or inconsistencies in the data and adjust the theory accordingly.

**Memo Writing:** As part of the analysis, researchers write memos to record their thoughts, reflections, and insights during the coding process. Memos are essential for capturing the researcher's evolving understanding of the data and how the theory is developing. They help clarify ideas, identify patterns, and link concepts, providing a foundation for the final theory.

**Theoretical Saturation:** Data collection and analysis continue until theoretical saturation is reached, meaning no new insights or categories are emerging from the data. At this point, the researcher has gathered enough data to support the developed theory and can stop collecting data. The theory at this stage should be fully grounded in the data and offer an explanation of the phenomenon under study.

Throughout the entire process, the researcher remains flexible and open to the evolving nature of the data and theory. Grounded theory is an inductive approach, so the researcher does not begin with a hypothesis but instead allows the theory to emerge directly from the data. The final result is a grounded theory that provides a rich, data-driven explanation of the research phenomenon.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the implications of the findings derived from the lived experiences and insights of teachers, school leaders, and stakeholders within low-performing school contexts. The study revealed how education, when rooted in compassion, resilience, and contextual responsiveness, transforms into a purposeful and empowering force for both learners and educators. Grounded in themes such as purpose-driven teaching, expanded educator roles, and the belief in students' potential beyond academic metrics, the findings emphasize the need for education systems to move beyond standardized expectations and towards more inclusive, flexible, and community-responsive practices.



In light of these insights, this chapter outlines practical and policy-oriented implications for the Department of Education (DepEd), school administrators, teachers, and future researchers. These directions aim to inform more meaningful educational reforms, foster sustained professional growth, and encourage collaborative school leadership and instructional innovation grounded in the real-time needs and aspirations of students and communities.

### Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational practice, policy, and leadership, particularly within the context of low-performing schools. The lived experiences of teachers and school leaders reveal that education must be understood as a deeply relational and adaptive process one that goes beyond academic instruction to address the holistic development of learners. The emphasis on mentorship, resilience, community engagement, and responsive teaching underscores the necessity of a more flexible and empathetic educational framework.

These implications point toward the need for systems-level changes that support teachers as mentors and community collaborators, encourage context-based innovations, and recognize diverse forms of student growth. Furthermore, the data suggest that effective school leadership involves not only implementing policies but also co-constructing solutions with stakeholders through continuous feedback and reflective practice. In the sections that follow, these insights are translated into actionable directions for various educational actors, setting the stage for more equitable and transformative approaches to learning in challenging school environments.

Curricular reforms, particularly those that require systemic change, demand more than compliance they call for visionary and transformational leadership. The findings emphasize that school leaders are not mere implementers of top-down mandates, but architects of transitional ecosystems. By establishing transitional structures and committees, leaders provide clarity, stability, and direction during periods of educational flux. These committees serve as feedback loops and action teams, translating national policies into locally appropriate initiatives.

The phased implementation strategies employed suggest a preference for gradual adaptation, allowing room for continuous assessment and contextual alignment. Moreover, capacity building and teacher empowerment emerge as central tenets, where leaders invest in teachers not just as implementers but as co-designers of change. Professional development, mentoring, and inclusion in decision-making processes foster a sense of ownership, reducing resistance and improving morale.

This code reflects how school leaders intentionally cultivate readiness, coherence, and resilience, positioning their schools to thrive in the face of curricular transformation.

This code underscores the learning orientation of effective leadership. Rather than simply enforcing policy, school leaders in this study demonstrate a cyclical, reflective approach to leadership. They consistently review and adjust strategies based on implementation outcomes both successful and problematic.

Stakeholder feedback, particularly from teachers and parents, plays a central role in evaluating what works and what doesn't. This not only democratizes decision-making but also ensures policies are responsive to lived experiences. It becomes evident that effective reforms are built from the ground up, shaped by those who live and breathe their daily consequences.

Teacher development and self-reflection are also prominent. Leaders provide opportunities for professional reflection, using learning experiences to refine teaching practices and leadership approaches. The emphasis on collaborative problem-solving promotes a culture of openness where challenges are met collectively, and solutions are co-created.

In sum, this theme presents a model of leadership that honors experience, listens deeply, and acts deliberately, leading to more sustainable and meaningful educational change.

The third code introduces the centrality of data-informed leadership in modern school governance. The metaphor of “measured seasons” emphasizes that timing, context, and evidence guide school operations. Instructional practices are adjusted based on student performance data, promoting targeted interventions and remediation. This ensures no learner is left behind and that teaching is responsive, not generic.

Beyond academics, leaders analyze behavioral and structural patterns, making operational reforms to address attendance issues, classroom management concerns, or systemic inefficiencies. Flexible learning modalities, including hybrid setups and differentiated instruction, are employed to reach diverse learners, especially in the post-pandemic context.

What strengthens this code further is the consistent engagement of stakeholders not merely as recipients of data but as interpreters and co-owners of decisions. Parents, community leaders, and teachers collaborate in making sense of the data and co-developing action plans, enhancing transparency and accountability.

This demonstrates that data-driven leadership, when humanized through stakeholder involvement, leads to holistic school development—where operations are not only efficient but also equitable and inclusive.

Emergent Theoretical Insight: From the rich narratives and patterns drawn from the lived experiences of educators in low-performing schools, an emergent theoretical insight has crystallized education as a dynamic, context-responsive, and purpose-driven practice that thrives on relational trust, community engagement, and transformative commitment. Grounded in real-world



challenges and adaptive practices, this insight highlights how teachers and school leaders reimagine their roles beyond traditional academic boundaries to become mentors, collaborators, and agents of change.

Rather than being passive implementers of top-down mandates, educators actively shape educational realities through continuous reflection, flexibility, and an unwavering belief in the potential of every learner. This grounded perspective reveals that meaningful educational reform is not solely dependent on standardized metrics, but rather on localized, compassionate responses to learners' socio-emotional, cultural, and academic needs.

This emergent theory suggests that resilience, inclusive partnerships, and values-based leadership are foundational pillars in sustaining progress in under-resourced educational environments. It provides a framework for rethinking school transformation not just as a policy initiative, but as a lived, evolving, and human-centered journey.

#### The Theory of Relationally Adaptive School Leadership in Curricular Reform

This grounded theory posits that effective school leadership during periods of curricular and operational transformation is fundamentally relational and adaptive anchored in collaboration, informed by multifaceted feedback, and responsive to diverse data sources. It captures the dynamic interplay between leadership actions and the social context of the school community during times of significant change. The theory is built on three interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars:

**Strategic Structuring and Empowerment.** School leaders cultivate organizational growth through the intentional establishment of transitional structures and committees that facilitate clarity and shared ownership of reform initiatives. These structures serve as critical platforms for distributed leadership, where teacher empowerment is prioritized through capacity building, professional development, and active participation in decision-making. The phased and flexible implementation pathways enable schools to adapt gradually, ensuring that change is manageable, contextually relevant, and sustainable. Leaders recognize the importance of balancing top-down mandates with bottom-up innovation, creating an environment where empowerment fuels collective efficacy.

**Feedback Integration and Reflective Practice.** Leadership decision-making is enriched by continuous cycles of reflection, feedback assimilation, and collaborative sense-making. This pillar emphasizes that effective leadership is not static but a dynamic process involving iterative learning. Leaders systematically gather and incorporate qualitative insights from teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders, alongside quantitative performance data. This inclusive feedback loop fosters a culture of trust, openness, and shared responsibility, where challenges are addressed collectively and successes inform future directions. Reflection is embedded as a routine leadership practice, allowing for real-time adjustments and fostering professional growth among educators.

**Data-Driven Responsiveness and Inclusive Engagement.** Sustaining leadership effectiveness requires the integrated use of both quantitative and qualitative data to guide reforms and operational decisions. Leaders engage with performance metrics, behavioral data, and stakeholder perceptions to identify gaps, tailor interventions, and monitor progress. This data-driven approach is not technocratic but relational, as it is coupled with active stakeholder engagement ensuring that decisions are grounded in lived realities. Inclusive engagement creates a sense of shared agency, where community members contribute to shaping educational outcomes, reinforcing accountability and responsiveness. The leader's role is that of a facilitator of dialogue and co-creator of solutions, promoting equity and inclusion throughout the reform process.

#### ***Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications***

This theory advances the understanding that adaptive leadership in education extends beyond reactive problem-solving it thrives through deliberate collaboration, systemic evaluation, and shared agency, especially during times of profound change. It challenges traditional hierarchical leadership models by positioning relationality and adaptability as central to effective school governance in contemporary contexts.

Practically, this theory implies that leadership preparation and professional development should focus on cultivating skills in collaborative facilitation, data literacy, reflective inquiry, and stakeholder engagement. School systems should institutionalize mechanisms for inclusive feedback, distributed leadership, and phased implementation to support adaptive change processes.

Furthermore, this theory highlights the critical need for leaders to develop emotional intelligence and cultural competence, enabling them to navigate diverse stakeholder perspectives and foster trusting relationships that underpin successful reform.

This theory advances the understanding that adaptive leadership in education is not simply reactive but thrives through deliberate collaboration, systemic evaluation, and shared agency particularly during times of change.

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