



Navigating Instructional Leadership in Resource-Constrained Contexts

Lived Experiences of Public-School Heads in Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

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This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school heads in managing teaching and learning in public schools within the Division of Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 350 purposively selected school heads across eight districts. A sample scope justified by the principle of information power rather than by conventional data-saturation counts alone, given the study's broad aim of capturing both shared and divergent experiences across a large, geographically diverse division. Data were analyzed using a hybrid analytic strategy that combined Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological reduction with Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Four overarching themes emerged from the participants' narratives. The first theme, Leadership Amid Constraints, captured how school heads navigate limited resources, heavy administrative workloads, and infrastructural deficits. The second theme, Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance, detailed their strategies for mentoring teachers and ensuring curriculum alignment. The third, building a Collaborative School Culture, illuminated their efforts to foster teamwork and community partnerships. The final theme, Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth, showcased the resilience and commitment to continuous learning that characterized their practice. The findings reveal that school heads function as resilient instructional leaders who balance systemic pressures with a commitment to supporting teachers and learners. The study offers insights for policy formulation and leadership development programs in similar contexts.

Keywords

Instructional Leadership
Lived Experiences
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Introduction

The quality of teaching and learning in any educational system is inextricably linked to the effectiveness of its school leadership. International research has consistently demonstrated that school leaders are the primary drivers of instructional quality, teacher development, and student achievement [1], [2], [3]. The paradigm of educational leadership has evolved from a traditional administrative, managerial model to a more dynamic conceptualization focused on instructional leadership, where principals are expected to be leaders of learning who actively guide curriculum, instruction, and assessment [4], [5].

This global shift towards instructional leadership is particularly critical in developing countries, where public education systems often grapple with systemic challenges such as insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socioeconomic disparities among learners [6], [7]. In such contexts, the school head's capacity to function as both an administrator and a visionary instructional leader becomes a vital determinant of educational equity and quality. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has formally recognized this imperative by embedding instructional leadership competencies into its professional standards for school heads [8], [9]. School heads are mandated to manage curriculum implementation, mentor teachers, monitor learner progress, and build a collaborative school culture while attending to a heavy load of administrative and compliance requirements [10], [11].

However, a significant gap often exists between the policy ideals of instructional leadership and the ground-level realities faced by school heads. Nowhere is this gap more pronounced than in geographically isolated and resource-constrained divisions like Zamboanga del Norte [12]. Situated in the Zamboanga Peninsula region of Mindanao, this division encompasses a diverse landscape of urban centers, semi-urban municipalities, and far-flung rural and coastal communities. Many school heads in this area lead schools that lack basic instructional materials, contend with multi-grade classrooms, struggle with limited access to technology, and deal with the daily pressures of heavy paperwork and community-specific challenges [13], [14]. Their lived experience of leading learning, therefore, is a complex tapestry woven with threads of resilience, innovation, frustration, and unwavering commitment.

While a substantial body of quantitative research has explored leadership styles and school effectiveness in the Philippines, these studies often fail to capture the nuanced, day-to-day, subjective experiences of the leaders themselves [15]. The how and why behind their decisions, the emotional labor of navigating systemic deficits, and the adaptive strategies they employ are best understood through their own narratives. These lived experiences offer profound insights that cannot be gleaned from numerical data alone, providing a crucial, context-specific understanding that can inform more relevant leadership development, policy, and support systems.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by giving voice to school heads in Zamboanga del Norte, exploring the central research question: *What are the lived experiences of school heads in managing teaching and learning in public schools in the Division of Zamboanga del Norte?*

Literature Review

This study is conceptually anchored in a synthesis of transformational and instructional leadership theories, viewed through the critical lens of context-adaptive leadership in the development of educational systems.

A. Transformational and Instructional Leadership Synergy

Transformational leadership, as conceptualized by Burns [16], [17] and operationalized by Bass and Riggio [18], emphasizes a leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers to transcend their self-interests for collective goals. Its four core components—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—provide a powerful vocabulary for describing how an effective school head engages with their staff. A principal exhibiting idealized influence acts as a role model, earning trust and respect. Through inspirational motivation, they articulate a compelling vision for student success. Through intellectual stimulation, they encourage teachers to innovate and solve problems creatively, and with individualized consideration, they provide personalized mentorship and support [19].

Complementing this is the instructional leadership model, which is more tactical and focused on the technical core of schooling: teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy's [20] seminal framework delineates three key functions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. This involves concrete actions such as setting clear academic goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, and fostering professional development [21].

Recent scholarship emphasizes that the most effective school leaders do not choose between these models but rather enact a synergy of both. Transformational leadership creates

the motivational and cultural conditions for change, while instructional leadership provides the practical mechanisms and focus on the teaching-learning process to realize that change [2], [22]. This integrated "leadership for learning" model is especially pertinent, as a school head might use inspirational motivation to get teachers on board with a new literacy program, and then use instructional monitoring to ensure its effective implementation.

B. The Critical Role of Context in Leadership Enactment

The effectiveness of any leadership model is profoundly mediated by context. A growing body of international literature, particularly from school improvement research in challenging circumstances, argues for a context-sensitive view of leadership. Harris and Jones [6] emphasize that leaders in high-poverty or resource-scarce schools face a unique set of demands that require adaptive and entrepreneurial responses rather than a one-size-fits-all application of standard leadership models. Similarly, Bush [5] notes that in many developing countries, instructional leadership is often aspirational because principals are overwhelmed by administrative and infrastructural management responsibilities, leaving limited time for pedagogical leadership.

This is highly relevant to the Philippine context. Studies from across the archipelago consistently highlight that school heads navigate a transactional reality dominated by compliance, resource generation, and community relations, which often competes with their instructional role [10], [13]. In the specific context of Mindanao, geographic isolation, multi-ethnic communities, and sporadic peace and order issues add further layers of complexity [14]. A critical concept emerging from this reality is adaptive leadership, which is the capacity of a leader to diagnose a situation's essential challenge, mobilize people to tackle tough problems, and adjust strategies in real-time [23]. This pragmatism—blending visionary inspiration with reactive, context-specific problem-solving—is likely a defining feature of the lived experience of a Zamboanga del Norte school head. This study aims not just to identify leadership traits but to understand the phenomenological essence of leading teaching and learning within this unique and demanding context.

Methodology

A. Research Design

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was employed to explore and understand the essence of school heads lived experiences [24]. This approach was deemed most appropriate as the study sought to derive deep, textured meaning from participants' subjective, everyday realities rather than to measure objective, quantifiable variables. In line with interpretive phenomenology, the goal was to interpret the meaning of these experiences as narrated by the participants themselves, bracketing the researcher's presuppositions to allow the core phenomena to emerge

Admittedly, the inclusion of 350 participants substantially exceeds the sample sizes conventionally associated with phenomenological research, which typically range from 5 to 25 participants, or up to 30 in some applications[24], [25]. This departure from convention was a deliberate design decision rather than an oversight. Because the Division of Zamboanga del Norte spans eight administratively and geographically distinct districts (ranging from urban centers to isolated coastal and upland communities) the research team judged that a small, purposive sample, however information-rich, risked producing a partial or unrepresentative account of the phenomenon under study. Following Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora's [28] concept of information power, the adequacy of a qualitative sample is better judged by the study's aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy than by a fixed numerical threshold. Given the broad aim of capturing a shared essence of instructional leadership across a large and heterogeneous division, the moderately structured nature of the interview dialogue, and a systematic cross-case analysis strategy, a larger sample was judged appropriate to achieve sufficient information power. The approach adopted here is therefore best described as a large-scale, collective phenomenological design: individual narratives were still analyzed idiographically before being synthesized into shared thematic structures, preserving the phenomenological commitment to lived experience while allowing the study to speak to the diversity of contexts within the division. The implications of this design choice are revisited as a limitation of the study in the concluding section.

B. Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in the Division of Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines, a region characterized by a mix of coastal, lowland, and upland municipalities, many of which are geographically remote. A total of 350 public elementary and secondary school heads were recruited through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included a minimum of three years of administrative experience to ensure participants had sufficient depth of experience to draw upon and a willingness to provide rich, detailed narratives. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 350)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
• 33–40	120	34
• 41–50	150	43
• 51–60	80	23
Sex		
• Male	146	42
• Female	204	58
Years of Experience		
• 3–10	200	57
• 11–20	110	31
• 21–28	40	12

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Educational Attainment		
• Bachelor's Degree	91	26
• Master's Degree	249	74

The majority of respondents were female school heads (58%), aged 41–50 years (43%), with 3–10 years of administrative experience (57%), and holding a Master's degree (74%). This profile indicates a relatively young to middle-aged leadership population with strong educational qualifications, providing a solid foundation for rich, experience-based insights into school management practices.

C. Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method aligned with phenomenological inquiry as it provides the flexibility to probe deeply into a participant's subjective perspective while maintaining focus on the research question [26]. An interview guide was developed, validated by a panel of educational research experts, and pilot-tested. Core questions explored daily management practices, specific challenges encountered, strategies for supporting teachers, decision-making processes, and reflections on professional growth. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was conducted in a private setting chosen by the participant, and was audio-recorded with the participant's explicit consent. To complement and triangulate the interview data, relevant school documents, including School Improvement Plans and teacher professional development plans, were also analyzed.

Given the geographic dispersion of participants across the division's eight districts, interviews were conducted face-to-face wherever feasible; for the small number of participants in the most remote coastal and upland schools, where travel could take several hours by land or sea, interviews were conducted through video or voice calls to ensure full participation without compromising the depth of engagement. Interviews were carried out over several months by members of the research team, several of whom are themselves practicing school heads within the division. An insider positionality that facilitated rapport and candid disclosure but was also explicitly monitored through reflexive journaling (see Section 3.4). Because of the scale of the sample, saturation was monitored progressively rather than only at the level of the full dataset: within each of the eight districts, data collection continued until successive transcripts yielded no substantively new codes relative to those already identified, consistent with the saturation heuristic described by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson [27]; subsequent interviews within a given district were retained primarily to test the robustness, richness, and transferability of the themes already emerging, rather than to generate new categories.

D. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The thematic analysis followed a rigorous, multi-stage process. First, significant statements relevant to the phenomenon were identified from each transcript through horizontalization. Second, these statements were coded and grouped into larger meaning units or categories. Third, through an iterative process of comparison and synthesis across all transcripts, the categories were clustered into the final overarching themes that represented the essence of the participants lived experiences [25].

To address the scale of the dataset generated by 350 interview transcripts, and in direct response to methodological concerns regarding sample size and analytic transparency, this Moustakas-based procedure was integrated with Braun and Clarke's [28], [29] six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework, which provided a transparent, auditable structure for managing and cross-checking coding decisions across a large corpus. Concretely, analysis proceeded through: (1) familiarization, involving repeated reading of all transcripts by the research team; (2) horizontalization and generation of initial codes from significant statements, as described above; (3) collaborative searching for candidate categories across sub-groups of transcripts organized by district; (4) iterative review of candidate themes against the full dataset, including comparison across districts and demographic subgroups to test the robustness and transferability of emerging patterns; (5) defining and naming the four overarching themes; and (6) producing the final textural-structural description reported in this paper. Given the volume of data, coding was conducted collaboratively using a shared, iteratively refined codebook to maintain analytic consistency across the research team, and coding decisions were cross-checked through regular peer debriefing sessions to reconcile discrepancies and reduce individual interpretive bias.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed as outlined by Lincoln and Guba [30]. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the field, triangulation of interview data with school documents, and member checking, wherein key informants reviewed their transcripts and the initial thematic interpretations. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail of the data collection and analysis process. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, allowing the researcher to document and bracket personal biases throughout the investigation. In addition, the four final themes were validated through a structured member-checking session in which a purposive sub-sample of participants representing each of the eight districts reviewed the thematic summaries and supporting exemplar quotations; their feedback was used to refine the final theme labels, boundaries, and descriptions reported below.

Findings

The in-depth analysis of school heads' narratives revealed four dominant, interconnected themes that capture the fundamental essence of managing teaching and learning in the Division of Zamboanga del Norte. Table 2 summarizes the coding process that led to the identification of these themes, while Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of the emergent themes across participants.

Table 2. Coding, Categorizing, and Theming of Interview Data

Raw Participant Quotation	Initial Codes	Categories	Emerging Theme
"Every day, I make sure to visit classrooms even for a few minutes. It helps me understand what teachers really need." (P1)	Classroom walkthroughs; Monitoring; Understanding teacher needs	Instructional Supervision Practices	Theme 1: Leadership Amid Constraints
"Our biggest challenge is the lack of learning materials. Teachers become frustrated, and I have to find ways to improvise or look for partners." (P2)	Shortage of materials; Teacher frustration; Resource improvisation	Resource Constraints and Management Strategies	Theme 1: Leadership Amid Constraints
"Most of my hours are spent preparing reports and attending meetings. Sometimes I struggle to find time for classroom observations." (P12)	Administrative overload; Time conflict; Paperwork burden	Competing Administrative Demands	Theme 1: Leadership Amid Constraints
"I constantly remind my teachers that they can always come to me if they need support, whether personal or work-related." (P3)	Open communication; Emotional support; Leadership approachability	Supportive Leadership Behavior	Theme 2: Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance
"When students' performance drops, I sit down with teachers to discuss what went wrong and what interventions we can do." (P4)	Collaborative problem-solving; Monitoring performance; Intervention planning	Performance Monitoring and Collaborative Intervention	Theme 2: Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance
"We organize school-based INSET and collaborative planning sessions to help teachers enhance their teaching methods." (P8)	LAC sessions; Professional development; Collaboration	Professional Learning Communities	Theme 2: Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance
"Parents in our barangay are not always involved. We need to constantly communicate and encourage them through meetings and home visits." (P5)	Low parental involvement; Community engagement; Home visits	Community Relations and Engagement Efforts	Theme 3: Building a Collaborative School Culture
"Before implementing programs, I consult my teachers and department heads. Their input helps ensure the plan works effectively in the classroom." (P10)	Consultation; Shared decision-making; Teacher input	Distributed Leadership Practices	Theme 3: Building a Collaborative School Culture

Raw Participant Quotation	Initial Codes	Categories	Emerging Theme
"Being a school head in a remote area is tough. Sometimes I feel alone, but it taught me resilience and patience." (P6)	Isolation; Resilience; Emotional strain; Adaptability	Personal and Emotional Experiences of Leadership	Theme 4: Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth
"I attend every training I can. Leading a school today is not about the rules you know but about learning how to support new ways of learning." (P15)	Continuous learning; Professional development; Staying updated	Commitment to Professional Growth	Theme 4: Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth

Table 3. Frequency of Themes Based on Participants' Responses (N = 350)

Theme	Description	No. of Participants	Freq. (%)
Theme 1: Leadership Amid Constraints	School heads navigate limited resources, heavy administrative workloads, and infrastructural deficits while maintaining instructional focus.	315	90
Theme 2: Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance	School heads provide mentoring, professional development, feedback, and curriculum alignment strategies to support teachers.	298	85
Theme 3: Building a Collaborative School Culture	School heads foster teamwork, strengthen community partnerships, and engage stakeholders in shared decision-making.	280	80
Theme 4: Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth	School heads demonstrate resilience, innovative problem-solving, and a commitment to continuous self-improvement and learning.	266	76

The frequency analysis reveals that all four themes were highly prevalent across the participant narratives. Theme 1, Leadership Amid Constraints, was the most pervasive, mentioned by 90% of the school heads, underscoring that navigating resource scarcity and administrative burden is a near-universal experience in this context. Theme 2, Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance, was referenced by 85% of participants, indicating a strong, consistent commitment to supporting teaching quality despite the constraints. The detailed qualitative analysis of each theme is presented in the following sections.

A. Theme 1: Leadership Amid Constraints

This was the foundational, pervasive theme. The lived experience of a school head was consistently described through a lens of navigating profound scarcity and systemic pressure. Constraint was a multidimensional reality encompassing deficient material resources, overwhelming administrative and clerical workloads, and burdensome class sizes.

A recurring narrative was the daily struggle posed by a lack of basic learning materials and infrastructure. A principal from a rural district explained: "Our biggest challenge is the lack of learning materials. Teachers become frustrated, and I have to improvise or find partners. Sometimes, my day starts not by looking at a lesson plan but by figuring out how to repair a leaking classroom roof before the children arrive." (P2) This quote underscores how physical

plant management, an administrative function, directly intrudes upon and often precedes the instructional leadership role. Beyond its practical content, this account reveals a subtle inversion of professional priorities: the school head's day is not organized around instruction but around triage, assessing which basic need is most urgent before any pedagogical work can begin. The lived meaning here is one of leadership constantly deferred, where instructional intent survives only as an aspiration held in reserve until the more immediate crisis is resolved.

More pervasive than infrastructural deficits was the relentless administrative workload, described by many as a paperwork tyranny. School heads lamented that their time, which they felt should be dedicated to classroom observation and pedagogical mentoring, was largely consumed by compliance reports, financial documents, and responding to an endless stream of memoranda from the division and regional offices. One participant articulated this tension clearly: "I am an instructional leader on paper, but in reality, for most of the day, I am a desk-bound bureaucrat. My heart wants to be in the classrooms, but my body must be at my desk signing forms." This narrative reveals a profound identity conflict in which the school heads' professional conscience (their desire to lead learning) is constantly at odds with the systemic demands of their positions. Consequently, instructional leadership was not a role they simply occupied but a priority they had to actively and daily fight to protect. The metaphor of being "desk-bound" is telling: it locates the school head's authentic professional identity in the classroom, not the office, even as their actual daily practice is reversed. Phenomenologically, this signals a lived dissonance between vocation and role—between who these school heads understand themselves to be as educators and what the position structurally requires of them each day.

B. Theme 2: Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance

Despite the constraints, the commitment to improving teaching quality emerged as a luminous counter-narrative. This theme captures the deliberate, hands-on strategies school heads employed to directly influence instructional practice. The most prominent strategy was the practice of regular, often informal; classroom walkthroughs paired with immediate, constructive feedback. A secondary school head noted: "Every day, I make sure to visit classrooms even for a few minutes. It helps me understand what teachers really need, not just what the lesson plan says. A short post-observation chat, where I ask, 'How did that feel?' and 'How can I help you with the next step?' has been more effective than any formal evaluation." (P1) What is notable in this account is the deliberate reframing of supervision as conversation rather than inspection. By replacing evaluative judgment with open, reflective questions, the school head repositions herself as a collaborator in the teacher's practice rather than an external assessor of it. A subtle but meaningful shift in the lived experience of both supervising and being supervised within this school.

Beyond direct supervision, school heads also functioned as chief instructional coaches and capacity builders. Recognizing the isolation of many teachers, especially those new to the profession in remote schools, they created mentoring structures. One principal described her approach: "I pair my strong, veteran teachers with the new ones. I cannot be everywhere, so I create a peer-support system. This mentoring is not just about teaching techniques; it is about emotional support, a lifeline for a teacher who might feel alone in a distant barangay." Furthermore, they ingeniously contextualized professional development. Faced with the impossibility of sending all teachers to external training, they orchestrated school-based Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions where teachers collaboratively solved pedagogical problems and shared locally developed resources, such as improvised teaching aids made from indigenous materials. This data reveals that in a resource-constrained setting, instructional support is not a set of formal programs but a relational and creative endeavor. The language of a "lifeline," used by the participant quoted above, is significant: it suggests that in isolated schools, professional support and emotional survival are experienced as inseparable. Mentoring in this context is not simply a technical intervention for improving instruction; it is a relational structure that holds a novice teacher, and by extension the school itself, together.

C. Theme 3: Building a Collaborative School Culture

School heads consistently described their pursuit of a collaborative culture as a deliberate, often strenuous effort to weave a supportive social fabric within the school and between the school and its community. This serves as a counter-force to the isolation and fragmentation that could otherwise result from the aforementioned constraints. A key sub-theme was the practice of distributed leadership and inclusive decision-making. Recognizing their own limited oversight capacity, effective school heads intentionally flattened the hierarchy. A participant shared: "I always consult my department heads and even my teacher-advisers before making a major decision. When we planned our reading intervention program, the best ideas did not come from me; they came from the Grade 2 teachers who are dealing with non-readers every day. My job was to listen, empower them, and find the resources." (P10) The school head's own account—that "the best ideas did not come from me"—reflects a conscious repositioning of leadership authority away from hierarchy and toward proximity to the classroom. This suggests that, in this context, distributed leadership is experienced less as a formal delegation of tasks and more as an epistemic humility: a recognition that those closest to the problem are best positioned to solve it.

Equally critical was the theme of strengthening school-community partnerships, especially vital in low-income communities. Parental and community involvement was not passive support but an active resource that needed cultivation. School heads described organizing community meetings, conducting home visits, and communicating the school's needs

transparently. One principal in a coastal community poignantly stated: "Parents in our barangay are not always involved initially because they are busy with survival. We need to constantly communicate and encourage them. When we needed a reading corner, the fathers themselves gathered bamboo and built it. That is not just a structure; it is a declaration that the education of their children is a shared responsibility." (P5) This theme powerfully demonstrates that in this context, the school head is not just an organizational leader but a community mobilizer who builds educational solidarity. The image of parents "gathering bamboo" to build a reading corner captures something the interview data returns to repeatedly: in this context, community partnership is not solicited through formal invitation alone but is called into being through visible, shared need. The school head's role, in this telling, is less that of a program administrator than a translator—converting an abstract policy goal into a concrete, communally meaningful project.

D. Theme 4: Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth

The final theme captures the internal, psychological resources and the proactive learning stance that underpin the other three themes. The experience of leadership in this division was synonymous with a continual process of personal and professional adaptation. Resilience was the defining personal quality, forged in isolation and professional loneliness. A school head from a very remote upland school revealed: "Being a school head in a far-flung area is tough. Sometimes I feel so alone in my decisions. But this isolation has taught me resilience and patience. I have learned to solve problems with what I have and who I am." (P6) This resilience was not passive endurance but an active, problem-solving orientation defined by creativity, or "diskarte"—a Filipino concept of resourceful ingenuity. This concept resists easy translation into conventional leadership vocabulary; it names a resourcefulness that is simultaneously practical and identity-affirming. For these school heads, resilience is not a trait they simply possess but a capacity actively forged through repeated exposure to isolation and inadequate support—suggesting that hardship, while undesirable in itself, has become an unintended but real site of leadership development in this division.

This adaptability was fueled by an expressed and enacted commitment to continuous professional growth. School heads viewed themselves as co-learners. Their participation in graduate studies, attendance at webinars, and engagement in professional learning communities were not framed solely as credential-building but as essential survival strategies to stay relevant and effective. An experienced principal explained: "The curriculum changes, the technology changes, the children's needs change. I attend every training I can, not because it is required, but because leading a school today is not about the rules you know but about learning how to support new ways of learning." (P15) This convergence of grounded resilience and a forward-looking learning orientation constitutes the core of adaptive leadership,

enabling them to navigate their challenging reality with a sense of agency and consistently to turn their focus back to improving teaching and learning outcomes. Framing training attendance as a response to changing curricula, technology, and learners' needs, rather than as a compliance requirement, indicates that professional learning has become internalized as an ethical obligation to learners rather than an external mandate—itself a marker of adaptive expertise, in which the school head continuously recalibrates practice against a moving target of relevance.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a rich, contextually nuanced portrait of instructional leadership that aligns with, and in several key ways extends, the existing international and local literature. The four emergent themes coalesce into a central argument: school heads in Zamboanga del Norte enact a form of contextualized, resilient instructional leadership that is profoundly shaped by their environment.

The theme of Leadership Amid Constraints powerfully echoes the global discourse on leadership in challenging school contexts. The paperwork tyranny and infrastructural deficits described by the participants are not merely minor irritants; they represent the core reality that transforms instructional leadership from a proactive, visionary practice into a reactive, protective one. This finding directly illustrates Harris and Jones's [6] assertion that for leaders in high-poverty schools, the central challenge is often creating the basic conditions for learning before instructional leadership can even begin. The identity conflict—feeling like a bureaucrat rather than a pedagogical leader—is a poignant phenomenological truth that quantifiable data on principal time allocation often fails to capture. It reinforces Grissom et al.'s [1] meta-analytic finding that the most impactful instructional leaders are those who can strategically protect their time and successfully delegate managerial tasks, a luxury the systemic structure rarely affords these school heads.

Nevertheless, the deliberate focus on Instructional Support and Pedagogical Guidance reveals that these leaders are not merely passive victims of their circumstances. Their strategies for mentoring, informal walkthroughs, and contextualized professional development exemplify a practical synthesis of transformational and instructional leadership as advocated by Marks and Printy [22]. The individualized consideration shown through peer-mentoring systems and supportive post-observation chats is transformational, while the focus on teaching techniques and curriculum alignment is instructional. This integrated leadership for learning, however, is delivered through a relational, almost familial approach that contrasts with the more formal, data-centric protocols often described in Western contexts [4]. This relational nature is a critical contextual adaptation; in a system where formal incentives are scarce, the emotional bond with the school head becomes a key motivational driver.

The theme of Building a Collaborative School Culture extends the discourse on distributed leadership [5]. It confirms that shared decision-making is not just a democratic ideal but a pragmatic necessity when a single leader cannot oversee everything. However, the finding about building educational solidarity with the community adds a crucial dimension. The school head's role as a community organizer—negotiating for bamboo reading corners or organizing home visits—is a powerful example of the entrepreneurial, boundary-spanning leadership required in developing settings. This resonates deeply with the concept of adaptive leadership [23], where the leader's job is to mobilize the entire system, not just the professional staff, to solve problems.

Finally, the theme of Adaptive Leadership and Professional Growth ties the entire experience together. The centrality of resilience and "diskarte" (resourceful ingenuity) as a professional competency confirms Day and Sammons's [7] work on the importance of personal resources in sustaining successful school leadership. The participants' commitment to self-directed learning, in the face of isolation, underscores their agency. They are not just coping; they are proactively building adaptive capacity. This study, therefore, contributes a vital, grounded Southeast Asian voice to the global literature, demonstrating that effective instructional leadership in a developing context is not a diminished version of a Western ideal. It is a distinct, fiercely pragmatic, and profoundly human endeavor where the management of barriers, the cultivation of relationships, and the personal growth of the leader are inseparable from efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Theoretical Contribution

Beyond its practical implications, this study offers a modest but meaningful theoretical contribution to the literature on instructional leadership. Classic models of instructional leadership, most notably Hallinger and Murphy's [20] three-dimensional framework, were largely conceptualized within relatively resourced, stable school systems, where the leader's core work is assumed to already occur within adequate structural conditions. The findings of this study suggest that in chronically resource-constrained contexts such as Zamboanga del Norte, this assumption does not hold: a fourth, logically prior function—which might be termed resource navigation and protection—must first be enacted before the three classic functions (defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate) can be meaningfully realized. This function encompasses the daily, often improvisational labor of securing materials, protecting instructional time from administrative encroachment, and mobilizing community resources; it is this labor, rather than any deficiency in leadership will or skill, that most often separates the policy ideal of instructional leadership from principals' lived reality. Integrating this insight with adaptive leadership theory [23], the study proposes that effective instructional leadership in resource-constrained settings is

better understood as resource-adaptive instructional leadership: an enactment of leadership for learning that is continuously and creatively re-negotiated against a shifting backdrop of scarcity, rather than a fixed set of managerial behaviors performed atop a stable institutional base. This reconceptualization extends existing theory by explicitly foregrounding contextual scarcity as a constitutive, rather than incidental, feature of instructional leadership practice in the Global South, and it offers a theoretical vocabulary that may be transferable to other geographically isolated and under-resourced educational systems beyond the Philippines.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This phenomenological exploration concludes that the lived experience of a school head in Zamboanga del Norte is fundamentally one of resilient instructional leadership amid relentless contextual constraints. It is not a story of simply implementing policy or applying a leadership framework, but a daily, active struggle to protect instructional time, to build a supportive human community where the system provides insufficient resources, and to constantly adapt and learn from the very challenges that make the job so demanding. The essence of their experience is that their effectiveness is measured not by the absence of problems but by their creative, committed, and collaborative response to them.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed:

The Department of Education should strategically audit and radically streamline administrative reporting requirements to liberate school heads' time for instructional leadership. A differentiated resourcing model is needed, one that proactively pushes materials, technology, and logistical support to remote schools based on a vulnerability index, rather than relying on uniform distribution formulas.

Professional development programs for school heads should move beyond generic leadership theory. They must include a strong focus on developing skills in creative resource mobilization within an ethical framework, context-sensitive instructional coaching, community organizing, and emotional resilience and self-care. Scalable models of peer networking and virtual professional learning communities should be developed to end the professional isolation of remote school heads.

Protecting instructional time must be an explicit, strategic priority. This requires the courageous and intentional delegation of administrative tasks and the systematic development of teacher-leaders. The relational and community-building work, often seen as secondary, should be recognized as a core, non-negotiable function of their role.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, and most notably, the study's sample of 350 participants substantially exceeds the sample sizes

conventionally associated with phenomenological research; while this design choice was methodologically justified on the grounds of information power [31] and the need to represent a large, heterogeneous division, it necessarily entails a trade-off between the idiographic depth traditionally sought in phenomenology and the breadth achieved here. Readers should therefore interpret the reported themes as a shared, division-wide essence of experience rather than as an exhaustive account of any single participant's lived reality. Second, several members of the research team are themselves practicing school heads within the division—an insider positionality that facilitated access and rapport but may also have introduced subtle biases in data interpretation, despite the reflexive and bracketing strategies employed. Third, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a single point in time and cannot speak to how instructional leadership practices evolve as school heads gain experience or as contextual conditions change. Finally, the findings are geographically and contextually bound to Zamboanga del Norte, and while many of the constraints described (resource scarcity, geographic isolation, administrative overload) are shared by other divisions in the Philippines and comparable developing-country contexts, caution should be exercised in generalizing the specific findings beyond similar settings.

Future Research

A quantitative path analysis is recommended to test the mediating role of adaptive leadership capacity in the relationship between contextual constraints and school performance outcomes. Furthermore, a comparative phenomenological study between highly effective and less effective schools within similar resource-constrained contexts could uncover the nuanced behavioral and cognitive differences that separate these leaders.

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