

Navigating Educational Leadership among Rural School Heads: A Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research explored the lived realities of rural school heads as they navigated the intricacies of educational leadership in resource-limited settings. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study uncovered the core of rural school heads' leadership experiences, highlighting the challenges they faced, opportunities encountered, and the meanings they attributed to their roles. We navigated their different experiences with school leaders in some remote areas of Davao del Norte and Davao de Oro, and how they addressed difficulties, including scarce resources, remote locations, and minimal exposure to new practices.

As leaders, they employ adaptive strategies including community engagement, innovative problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making. Through partnership with the community, rural school heads can enhance educational outcomes, promote student success, and contribute to community development.

Keywords: Navigating, educational leadership, rural school, school heads, Davao Del Norte, Davao De Oro

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership in rural areas presents unique challenges that differ significantly from those in urban settings. Rural principals often grapple with limited resources, geographic isolation, and a lack of professional development opportunities. These challenges can impact their ability to lead schools and support student achievement effectively. Rural principals must navigate community expectations and cultural dynamics that can influence their leadership practices. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing strategies to support and empower rural principals in their roles.

In the global context, according to Ghamrawi (2023), issues such as inadequate instructional support for teachers, limited opportunities for professional development, and the prevalence of top-down management approaches pose significant barriers to effective leadership. Moreover, it encompasses a spectrum of responsibilities, ranging from pedagogical leadership aimed at enhancing teaching and learning practices to administrative duties focused on operational efficiency (Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020).

Gaining insight into the viewpoints, strategies, and obstacles encountered by school leaders both internationally and within local contexts is essential for effectively addressing leadership and management issues in education worldwide. These challenges include the lack of established qualifications for school leaders, gender disparities in leadership positions, centralized decision-making structures, and excessive administrative burdens (Mushi et al., 2021).

Additionally, principals are responsible for managing their administrative staff and educators (Nadeem et al., 2020). Attracting new teachers to the institution can be a complex task for principals, as it demands careful consideration to ensure that candidates are chosen based on their skills, performance, and professionalism.

In research conducted in the Philippines, specifically within the Schools Division of La Union, teachers assigned to last-mile schools exemplified the crucial role they play in reaching underserved communities. These educators shared that their experiences were a mix of fulfilling and challenging moments, often testing their dedication, particularly in their pursuit of delivering quality education. Working in geographically isolated areas with limited resources proved to be a significant hurdle. School leaders and teachers initiate different strategies and programs to ensure the accessibility of the students to the resources and the education that they deserve (Directo & Damaco, 2020).

Meanwhile, teacher-principals face unique challenges in Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines, as they juggle teaching duties with complex administrative duties. Limited resources, geographical constraints, and the legacy of natural disasters often exacerbate common burdens like time management and role conflict (Casinillo & Suarez, 2022). While challenges are evident (Gallos & Bolman, 2021), the strategic management techniques employed by these teacher principals remain unclear. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the firsthand experiences of rural school leaders, the obstacles they encounter, and the methods they employ to handle their diverse responsibilities. By capturing and analyzing these narratives, the research adds meaningful insights to the body of work on educational leadership.

Locally, our rural school heads, specifically in Region 11, face the same educational leadership struggles. They often face unique challenges compared to their urban counterparts but show remarkable resilience and dedication. Their adaptability, community leadership, dedication, resilience, and resourcefulness will be the pillars of a significant impact on the lives of their students and contribute to the overall development of rural areas in the Philippines.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how rural school heads in the divisions of Davao Del Norte and Davao De Oro managed rising expectations for school accountability and educational change while fulfilling their leadership roles. As accountability measures increased administrative demands, many rural principals reported having insufficient support to complete the extensive documentation required of them. Data-driven decision-making and student assessment practices have required rural school principals to devote more time to these areas, often without additional support staff (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

School heads and principals consistently encountered evolving professional challenges and often gained valuable insights and guidance through the experiences shared by their peers. Like teachers, principals make significant improvements in their first few years in a leadership role and then make more modest improvements in the following years (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012). The study aimed to identify the critical leadership challenges encountered by seasoned principals and examined how they navigated these difficulties to become stronger leaders. By highlighting the experiences and skills that contributed to success in the principal role, the research provided both aspiring and veteran principals with lessons from others' experiences, enabling them to avoid costly mistakes.

This qualitative study examines navigating educational leadership among rural school heads. Analysis of additional variables such as transportation issues, limited resources, innovations, and a smaller pool of qualified teachers are characteristics of the phenomenon. The researcher developed an in-depth interview instrument based on information found in the literature review on the topic. Data was collected through interviews and artifact collection from rural areas in Davao City and Tagum City.

The design of this phenomenological study sought to provide deeper insight into the factors that influenced how educational leadership was navigated within the participating school districts. Discussions with teachers and

cultural expectations, as well as personal insights shared by rural school heads, may help to understand the phenomenon of school.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of rural school heads in navigating educational leadership?
2. How do school heads cope with the challenges in educational leadership in rural schools?
3. What insights can be drawn from the experiences of rural school heads in addressing educational challenges?

Theoretical Lens

School leaders are critical in creating and providing the conditions and environment to foster and ensure high student learning and outcomes. A framework that begins with a deductive assumption that a problem exists and applies processes, procedures, functional approaches, models, or theories may be used for problem resolution (Zackoff et al., 2019). It emphasized that these practices needed to be responsive and adaptable to the specific local context, drawing on personal experience, professional knowledge, a clear sense of purpose, attentiveness to individuals, and an understanding of the community. The study described these elements in detail and connected relevant concepts and variables to illustrate their potential relationships. Likewise, it serves as a guide for assessing which aspects of the data are relevant and specifying how the research question is being answered, Klar and Huggins (2020) added.

Moreover, a theory by Burke, W. W. (2018), A well-known psychologist recognized for significant contributions to organizational change and development, introduced the Revolutionary Change Theory, which was particularly suitable for this context. This theory explains how organizations alternate between gradual (evolutionary) and rapid (revolutionary) transformations. In educational settings, schools might undergo leadership transitions, staff changes, adjustments in programs or curricula, or facility expansions during times of relative stability.

On the other hand, navigating educational leadership among rural school heads as a phenomenon includes transportation issues, limited resources, and innovations. Moreover, rural school heads are at the forefront of navigating these complex challenges, requiring them to be adaptive, resourceful leaders. The ability to inspire and drive innovation in the face of transportation issues, limited resources, and staffing difficulties. Collaborative efforts, community engagement, and advocacy for better resources and support are the challenges faced for the sustainability and growth of these leaders. With the necessary tools and support systems, they will ultimately improve educational outcomes for students in rural communities.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that supported the study, illustrating how rural school heads navigated educational leadership from a phenomenological perspective, as their leadership challenges include transportation issues, limited resources, and innovations. Moreover, rural school heads are at the forefront of navigating complex challenges, requiring them to be adaptive, resourceful leaders, and have the ability to inspire and drive innovation amid transportation issues, limited resources, and staffing. Collaborative efforts, community engagement, and advocacy for better resources and support are among the challenges to the sustainability and growth of leaders. With the necessary tools and support systems, leaders will ultimately improve educational outcomes for students in rural communities.

The findings of this study can be interpreted through the lens of Revolutionary Change Theory (Burke, 2018), which posits that organizations oscillate between incremental (evolutionary) and rapid (revolutionary) transformations. In rural school contexts, participants' experiences of resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and policy demands necessitate adaptive shifts that resemble revolutionary change processes.

For instance, school heads' reliance on community partnerships and innovative problem-solving reflects non-linear, transformative responses rather than gradual improvements, highlighting the dynamic nature of leadership in rural settings.

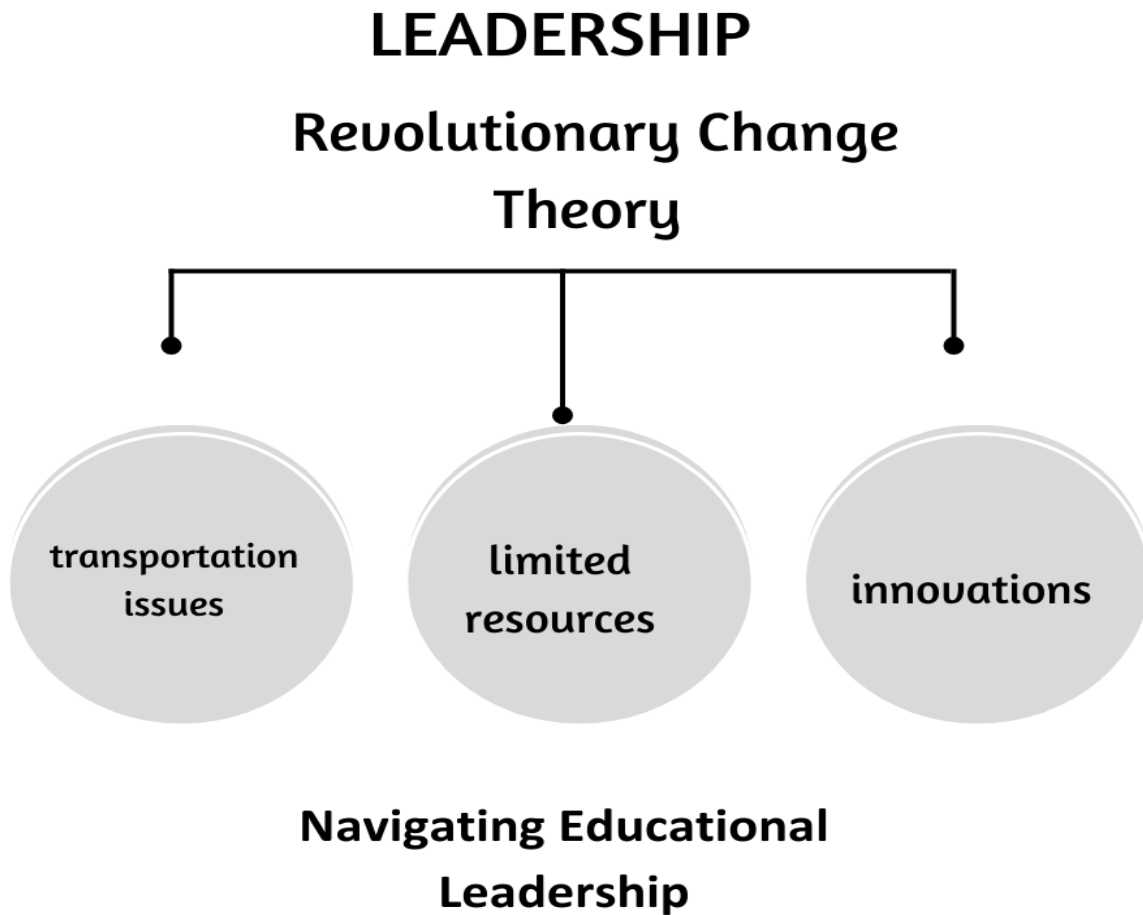


Figure 1 Revolutionary Change Theory and Educational Leadership Conceptual Framework

Transportation Issues

Difficulties related to transportation, such as long travel distances to schools and limited access to public transportation, created barriers to participation in school activities for school heads, teachers, parents, and students. According to Lidbe et al. (2020), while urban school commutes typically span 3 to 5 miles, those in rural areas often exceed 6 miles. Rural school leaders face transportation issues such as distance to school, road quality, and funding.

According to Afolabi, O.J. et al. (2016), the significance of transportation infrastructure increased with greater remoteness, since rural areas often experienced limited utilization of resources and peripheral economic activity. Issues such as the distance to school can make daily commutes long and arduous for school heads because poor road quality exacerbates them. Furthermore, limited funding for transportation services can hinder the ability of schools to provide adequate buses and drivers or maintain vehicles.

Limited Resources

Insufficient Funding compared to urban schools leads to budget constraints that affect everything from staff salaries to student materials, staff resources, educational resources such as limited library and learning materials,

fewer local businesses or organizations to partner with for resources, support, or sponsorship and participating in advocacy initiatives across local, state, and national platforms to bring attention to the distinct issues confronting rural schools and to promote essential policy reforms. Hence, Abenawe (2022) says that even though schools lack essential resources and infrastructure, principals still develop and implement plans to teach the curriculum effectively.

Innovations

Improved access to technology had the potential to address challenges in rural schools, such as limited resources and difficulties in forming partnerships with higher education institutions. Utilizing innovative technologies fostered collaborative learning environments, enabled students to earn post-secondary credits through distance education, and encouraged a shift away from traditional teacher-centered methods like lectures and independent assignments. Moreover, rural school leaders implemented creative staffing solutions to address teacher shortages, including multi-grade classrooms, sharing teachers across districts, and developing “grow-your-own” programs to help local residents become qualified educators. Another study by Khaola and Oni (2020) found that the school head’s leadership style influences educators’ innovative work behaviors.

As cited by Fix et al. (2021), the lack of commitment to innovation is cited as one reason behind the poor sustainability of innovations. Educator buy-in and the school heads’ leadership are some of the factors that influence the sustainability of innovation (Prenger et al., 2022).

Research Design and Participants

This study involved seven (7) rural school heads from the Divisions of Davao del Norte and Davao de Oro. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possessed direct experience in leading schools within geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas.

Inclusion criteria included:

- (1) currently serving as a school head in a rural public school,
- (2) with at least two years of leadership experience, and
- (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, wherein no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) asserts that the foundation of qualitative research is the rigorous collection of data from many sources of information. The researchers comprehended the data by working inductively from details to a broader viewpoint, leading to the emergence of categories, codes, and themes (Polit & Beck, 2009).

It was employed with patterns, themes, and insights within the data, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation. The participants’ core concepts (codes) that share common meanings will be combined to create distinct themes. After initial coding, the codes were organized into broader themes or categories that reflected the underlying meanings within the data.

This approach proved valuable for examining intricate, subjective issues and for gaining insight into how individuals understand and interpret their experiences. Coding typically served as the starting point for qualitative data analysis, not only in thematic analysis but also in various other qualitative methods. As a widely used practice, coding was a foundational part of the qualitative research analysis process. Researchers can break down their data through coding to produce novel insights and new understandings (Elliott, 2018).

Trustworthiness of the Study

The most important factor influencing the rigor of qualitative research investigations is trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016; Eryilmaz, 2022). It is widely recognized that qualitative research designs must establish credibility to support the generalizability of their findings and the effectiveness of their methods. The diligence and skill demonstrated by researchers in such studies contribute significantly to the trustworthiness of the results. Researchers must uphold trustworthiness by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformity.

Creswell and Miller (2000) emphasize the importance of establishing credibility and trustworthiness, and should focus on strategies that enhance the validity and reliability of their findings.

Transferability refers to how well research findings can be applied to other contexts or situations (Riazi, A.M. et al., 2023). Qualitative researchers strive to present thorough and nuanced descriptions of the study's setting, participants, and processes to support the potential for transferability. By offering rich and detailed accounts, researchers enable readers to determine the relevance of the findings to comparable circumstances.

Dependability relates to the consistency and stability of research findings over time. To ensure reliability, researchers employed thorough and systematic procedures throughout the study, documenting their approaches, data-gathering techniques, and analysis procedures (Amin, M.E.K. et al., 2020).

Confirmability, referring to the neutrality and objectivity of the results, ensures that the findings are not influenced by the researchers' personal biases or inclinations. Furthermore, trustworthiness in qualitative research plays a significant role in shaping and implementing effective policies.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations played a crucial role in shaping the design of this research. As the researcher, I was responsible for carefully addressing various ethical issues related to participants' perspectives, which required thoughtful planning and attention. Maintaining strict confidentiality for all information and data collected, whether from interviews, photographs, or informal discussions, was a fundamental moral and professional duty. Upholding ethical standards was understood to mean complying with the ethical guidelines established by the UIC Research Ethics Committee (REC).

Social Value. This study's social value would focus on navigating educational leadership among rural school heads, a phenomenology. This study was conducted explicitly among rural school leaders in public schools of Region XI. Thus, the social problem that piques my interest is rural school heads' navigating educational leadership and could serve as a basis for the higher authorities to create more programs and resolutions from which rural school heads could benefit.

Informed Consent. Each participant received an informed consent form prior to scheduling interviews and taking part in the phenomenological research process. Participants were asked to sign the form to acknowledge their understanding, consent, and willingness to join the study. The informed consent letter outlined the purpose of the research, provided contact details, described the study's objectives, invited voluntary participation, and specified the type of information expected from informants. Before the focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDI) began, the moderator reviewed the consent form, thoroughly discussing and explaining participants' rights.

Voluntary Research Participants. The participants in this study, serving as rural school heads, were considered well-qualified to respond to the research instrument due to their professional backgrounds and experience in managing public schools in rural settings. To address any questions or concerns about the study, we ensured that the researchers could be readily contacted through the provided phone number and address.

Data Privacy and Confidentiality. While measures are taken to maintain confidentiality, certain challenges can arise. Qualitative data often contain rich detail and depth, making it possible for participants to be identified through contextual clues or the nature of their responses, even when direct identifiers are omitted or altered.

Plagiarism and Fabrication. As researchers, we demonstrated respect for the work of others by properly citing sources and paraphrasing ideas in our own words, ensuring a clear understanding of the study’s context and avoiding direct copy-pasting from reference materials. When quoting directly, we used quotation marks to indicate borrowed text. We also committed to maintaining honesty and integrity throughout the research process, avoiding any intentional misrepresentation, fabrication of data or results, or drawing inaccurate conclusions. All data were handled and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Access to the information was limited exclusively to the researcher and, where applicable, members of the research team. Both written and audio records were kept in a secure but accessible location.

RESULTS

This chapter outlines the study's findings, focusing on the lived experiences of rural school heads as they navigate leadership and confront challenges. It also highlights insights gathered from these school leaders regarding the educational obstacles faced by participants in both the Davao De Oro and Davao del Norte Divisions. The research is grounded in a phenomenological approach guided by the interview questions used throughout the study. The results are organized into themes and core ideas that align with the research questions. Additionally, the data presentation is reinforced by transcripts from in-depth interviews, in which the data are described, analyzed, and interpreted within this section.

Navigating Educational Leadership Among Rural School Heads

As shown in Table 1, the essential themes highlight the lived experiences of rural school heads as they navigate educational leadership. Leaders of rural schools encounter challenges, including isolation, limited resources, and cultural diversity. To address these issues, they cultivate coping strategies such as collaboration, resilience, and active community involvement. Additionally, a phenomenological study reveals the lived experiences of rural school leaders in managing educational leadership, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities they face. Stakeholders can more effectively support rural education and foster leadership practices that improve student outcomes in these distinctive settings.

Table 1 shows that rural school heads navigate educational leadership through their lived experiences and insights within their respective schools.

Table 1 Essential Themes and Core Ideas on the Lived Experiences Of Rural School Heads As They Navigate Educational Leadership

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Fostering teamwork among teachers to improve student learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● scheduling time for teachers to meet and discuss ideas, progress, and challenges. ● fostering open communication to build trust and collaborative strategy ● Promoting the importance of teamwork and collaboration despite of having small pool of faculty ● empowering teachers to make informed, data-driven decisions regarding their teaching practices
Cultivating strong relationships with parents, community members, and other stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● establishing a clear communication with parents and the community through diverse channels ● Collaborating with parents and community members to share accountability for student success and school

	<p>improvement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintaining professionalism and respect in all interactions.
<p>Having fewer resources in rural schools</p> <p>Facing financial limitations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inequitable funding occurs, resulting in resource disparities ● Having difficulty in gauging students’ authentic learning ● Lacking resources due to geographic isolation ● having a lack of budget and a financial plan ● incurring unexpected expenses ● Providing an update on financial transparency.

Rural school leaders leverage their unique experiences in fostering teamwork among teachers to improve student learning outcomes, cultivate strong relationships with parents, community members, and other stakeholders, fewer resources and hindering financial limitations.

Fostering Teamwork Among Teachers to Improve Student Learning Outcomes

To boost student learning outcomes, teamwork among teachers involves setting shared goals, fostering open communication, building trust, and using collaborative strategies, leading to a more effective learning environment. The school heads emphasized the importance of teamwork and collaboration among his faculty to achieved the quality education for children in the rural areas.

IDI 1 said that:

Isip usa ka school diring dapita we spend taas taas na time sa mga administrative na trabaho ug mga paperworks ug parehas anang mg apil ug mga meeting ug ahmmm kanang kabalo naka pina live na mga reports hehehe. Ug ang teamwork need jud na sya to maintain the quality outcomes sa learning sa mga bata.

“As a school head in rural area, we often spend too much time on administrative tasks and paperworks, including attending meetings and preparing urgent reports. And our teamwork with my faculty is very important to maintain quality outcomes of the pupils’ learning..” (P01)

IDI 4 also said that:

Another is my human resource, gamay ra akong member sa faculty dli parehas sa uban school however , maski gamay ra mi diri naa mi teamwork ug collaboration para mahatag jud ang quality learning sa mga bata.

“Another is my human resource—my faculty members are few compared to other schools.However, despiteof the number of my teachers, we have our teamwork and collaboration to give quality learning to the pupils”.(P04)

Similar view with IDI 6 that stated:

Ako being a leader sa rural school, I implemented democratic leadership wherein my colleagues can do their task fully as long As they follow the curriculum mandated to us. Importante jud ang teamwork with the teachers kay sila important part sila sa pag deliver and pag implement sa mga programa sa DepEd).

As a leader in a rural school, I implemented democratic leadership, wherein my colleagues can fully carry out their tasks as long as they follow the curriculum mandated to us.

Teamwork with the teachers is very important because they play a significant role in delivering and implementing DepEd's programs.(P05)

The participants believe despite of the numerous administrative tasks, their teachers plays important roles in improving student learning outcomes.

Therefore, teamwork between school heads and teachers is a cornerstone for creating a thriving learning environment.

Cultivating Strong Relationships with Parents, Community Members, And Other Stakeholders

Strong relationships with parents, community members, and other stakeholders emphasize the importance of effective communication, active listening, collaboration, and trust-building. These partnerships empower schools to address challenges, improve resources, and foster a sense of collective responsibility for students' success. The participants' responses indicate that they find it challenging to establish a strong relationship and rapport with the parents and community members despite of different culture.

In connection, IDI 5 stated that:

....Being a leader dapat flexible jd ka. Kblo pd makisama labi na sa community.

As a leader, you really need to be flexible and know how to build good relationships, especially within the community.(P05)

Also, IDI 7 had a similar experience as she stated:

As a school head in remote area, first importante sa akoo ang pakikisama labi sa mga stakeholders. Although layo akong school pero factor kaayo ng naay maayong relasyon sa mga tao na nakapalibot because ahmmm sa ila man ta nagakuha ug suporta gud.

As a school head in a remote area, it is very important for me to maintain good relationships, especially with stakeholders. Although my school is far, having a positive relationship with the people around is a major factor because we rely on them for support.

By engaging parents, collaborating with community members, schools can create lasting bonds that promote inclusivity, innovation, and shared vision. Such relationships not only enhance the quality of education but also build a foundation for sustainable growth and mutual trust.

Having Fewer Resources In Urban Schools To Provide Quality Education And Support

Rural schools frequently struggle to deliver quality education and support due to limited resources, which negatively impacts student outcomes and teacher effectiveness. This challenge can hinder the ability to deliver effective education and comprehensive support systems for students and teachers alike. These factors are evident in the participants' responses.

IDI 6 answered:

So as a leader for me, resourcefulness is very important , para ma sustain ang quality learning sa students diria ug strategic mmm solutions to maintain continuity.

As a school head in rural I faced challenges in addressing the financial needs of school because it is not enough and I need to initiate to raise funds. So as a leader, for me, resourcefulness is very important to sustain the quality learning of students and strategic solutions to maintain continuity.(P02)

IDI 4 supported this statement by having said that:

So in the context of rural area lisod sya of course ky first ang distance usually ang rural areas lahi jd sya labi na sa pag implement of projects ug it affect pd pagmanage sa school mmmm ...medyo dako jd ang expenses ug kulang ang budget.

So in the context of rural areas, it's challenging, of course, because, first, the distance—rural areas are really different, especially when it comes to implementing projects, and it also affects the learning of the pupils due to the geographical location of the school. Managing the school requires significant expenses since it really lacks of budget.

These challenges can hinder the ability to deliver effective education and comprehensive support systems for students and teachers alike. Moreover, geographical isolation also as an impact in administrative tasks like causing delays.

IDI 2 proved that:

As a school leader diri sa remote areas, sa pagcomply ug report medyo struggle kay there are delays because of the distance of station, and nay struggle sa I internet connections. Medyo lisod para sa akoo as school head because of the distance.

As a school leader in remote areas, I have difficulty in complying the reports because of the distance of my station and struggling in internet connections. It is hard for me as a school head because of the distance .(P02)

Facing Financial Limitations

Financial limitations is a perennial challenge to the rural school heads. These constraints often hinder progress, innovation, and the ability to provide necessary resources. The participants faced different challenges regarding funds in providing school needs.

IDI 6 manifested that:

As a school head in rural, I faced ahmmm many challenges in addressing the financial needs of the school kay kulang jd. Need jd mag initiate para mka raise ug funds.

As a school head in rural I faced challenges in addressing the financial needs of school because it is not enough and I need to initiate to raise funds.(P06)

Also IDI 5 also said:

Because we all know pag diri sa remote areas,ahhhmm the school budget is not sufficient to cover all expenses.

Because, as we all know, in remote areas, the school budget is not sufficient to cover all expenses. (P05)

Lastly, IDI 7

...kay pag diri sa remote man gud kulang jud mi sa resources labi na sa financial.

Being in a remote area, we often lack resources, especially financial ones. (P07)

By acknowledging financial constraints, the participants continue to find solution and resources as school leaders. They seek strategic planning and by securing community partnerships, leveraging grants, and optimizing available resources.

Coping Mechanisms of Rural School Heads in Navigating Challenges

During the interview, the rural schools have implemented various coping strategies and navigated challenges to sustain positive outcomes during the transition to in-person instruction. Notably, these schools have emphasized the importance of collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders, leveraging the interconnected relationships within rural communities and small organizations to navigate challenging circumstances effectively.

Table 2 presents the essential themes and core ideas related to the coping mechanism employed by rural school heads in navigating challenges in educational leadership within the school community, which they encountered while administering assessments and providing feedback.

Table 2 Essential Themes and Core Concepts on How Rural School Leaders Utilize Coping Mechanisms to Overcome Challenges

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Being adaptable and flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being open to new ideas and approaches, even if they differ from the norm. • maintaining a positive attitude, viewing failures as valuable lessons rather than barriers. • continuous learning and improvement, constantly seeking new ways to enhance their skills and knowledge. • consistently pursuing opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge
Providing financial support from the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having an honest and open communication about financial resources • Providing with the tools and resources to become financially-sufficient • Involving collaboration among stakeholders within the community
Managing challenges related to geographic isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resulting in higher transportation costs due to longer distance • having limited access to essential services • lacking diversification, isolated areas often experience • sacrificing of being afar from family and loved ones

Being Adaptable and Flexible

Adaptable and flexible entail the ability to swiftly adjust to new circumstances, welcome changes, and modify plans as needed to address shifting conditions. This includes being open-minded, responsive to feedback, and ready to explore alternative approaches to achieve goals. Leaders who embrace change, remain open to new ideas, and adjust their approaches based on shifting circumstances foster resilience and long-term success. In rural education, where unexpected challenges and resource limitations often arise, being adaptable enables school leaders to implement innovative solutions, maximize available resources, and create sustainable improvements. Through a flexible mindset, leaders can empower their teams, encourage collaboration, and drive meaningful change, ensuring that challenges become opportunities for growth. The participants' responses:

As IDI 2 said:

To cope with the challenges ahhh I should mmmm always stay adaptable ahhh and composure. (P02)

To cope with the challenges, I should always stay adaptable and composed.

(P02)

Moreover, IDI 3 also proved that:

Well, para sa akoo always stay flexible sa tanan na mga challenges sa leadership. Dapat kabalo jud ko mo handle labi na sa mga negative na sitwasyon. Ahmmm flexibility is necessary in dealing negative situation in the school.

Well, for me, it's always important to stay flexible in facing all the challenges in leadership. I need to know how to handle negative situations, especially. Flexibility is essential when dealing with challenging situations in the school. (P03)

And also IDI 4 stated:

Mmmm to cope with these challenges need jud na ug taas na pasensya ug sakripisyo and adaptable sa mga sitwasyon.

To cope with these challenges, I really need a lot of patience and sacrifice and being adaptable in every situation.(P04)

Providing Financial Support from the Community

In rural education, where unexpected challenges and resource limitations often arise, being adaptable enables school leaders to implement innovative solutions, maximize available resources, and create sustainable improvements. Through a flexible mindset, leaders can empower their teams, encourage collaboration, and drive meaningful change, ensuring that challenges become opportunities for growth.

Engaging the community in financial support for schools is a powerful approach to fostering sustainable education. In rural settings, where resources may be limited, mobilizing local stakeholders can bridge financial gaps and create lasting educational impact.

As mentioned by IDI 1:

I prioritized resource allocation, mao jd ni akong iuna hehehe kay mao ni ang life jd. I seek external support for the school needs. Through the help of the stakeholders and community officials. Dako jud na tabang para sa akoang school.

I prioritized resource allocation—this is really my main focus, because it's essential. I seek external support for the school's needs through the help of stakeholders and community officials. Their support has been a great help to my school.(P01)

IDI 5 also said:

So.....sa strategies I foster relationship and community members to secure resources, expertise, and support. Ug I foster positive school culture.

So, in terms of strategies, I foster relationships with community members to secure resources, expertise, and support. And I foster positive school culture.(P05)

So with IDI 6 expressed that:

Resourcefulness ia importante na factor para ma sustain anf life sa school. Need jud na mag initiate , mag ask support sa mga stakeholders and community officials. Ingon ani diri sa rural po. Diskarte taman para maka survive.

Resourcefulness is an important factor in sustaining the life of the school. It is necessary to take the initiative and seek support from stakeholders and community officials. This is how it is in rural areas—we rely on strategy and creativity to survive.(P06)

Engaging the community in financial support for schools is a powerful approach to fostering sustainable education. In rural settings, where resources may be limited, mobilizing local stakeholders can bridge financial gaps and create lasting educational impact. Through proactive engagement, strategic fundraising, and sustainable initiatives, communities can take an active role in shaping the future of education.

Managing Challenges Related to Geographic Isolation

Geographic isolation presents unique obstacles for rural schools, affecting access to resources, professional development, and community engagement. School leaders in these environments must embrace adaptability, innovation, and collaboration to ensure quality education despite logistical constraints. Proactive leadership are key to transforming geographic challenges into opportunities for growth and resilience.

As IDI 4 stated:

The distance and the location sa akong school ang isa sa mga challenge jud kay aside na layo sa family and dalan ug transportation ky struggle kaayo. Mmmm to cope with these challenges need jud na ug taas na pasensya ug sakripisyo and adaptable sa mga sitwasyon.Unsaon man na diri man akong station but hoping na perme jud akoang good health good health.

The distance and location of my school are really one of the challenges, especially being far from family and the struggle with roads and transportation. To cope with these challenges, I really need a lot of patience and sacrifice and being adaptable in every situation. There's nothing else to do since this is where I'm stationed, but I'm always hoping for good health.

(P04)

Moreover IDI 3 mentioned that:

.....tungod kay layo ang akong school, so go lang hehehe. Deal with it.

Since my school is far, I just keep going. You deal with it.(P03)

And lastly IDI 7 also expressed:

Unang una and kalayuon sa school..Para ma cope ni na challenge dapat lig on ko kay lisod kaau na malayo gawas sa gasto sa pamasaha mingaw pd hahaha. I need to adjust gyud even sa environment dria.

First of all, the school is far. To cope with this challenge, I need to be strong because it's very difficult to be far away—not only because of the transportation costs but also because it can feel lonely, haha. I really need to adjust, even to the environment here.

Aside from being away from family, school leaders in these settings demonstrated resilience and adaptability to navigate logistical constraints, including transportation costs and limited infrastructure. Overcoming geographic barriers requires a dynamic mindset, collaboration, and creative problem-solving to ensure that students and teachers continue to thrive despite the distance.

Insights Drawn from the Experiences of the Rural School Heads

The participants shared their insights, drawn from experience in addressing educational leadership challenges faced by rural school heads, providing a valuable lens through which to understand the complexities of this role.

These lessons emerge from navigating obstacles. Rural school heads, such experiences serve as both a test of leadership and an opportunity for growth.

Table 3 presents the themes and core ideas derived from the insights shared by the participants during the interview.

Table 3 Essential Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights I Drawn From The Experiences Of The Rural School Heads

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Enhancing leadership resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fostering positive relationship • being more committed to goals and values to stay focused and motivated • showing optimism in navigating obstacles in leadership
Promoting shared-purpose through collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthening the relationship with the faculty and community through strategic collaboration • sharing responsibility among school leaders and teachers in workplace • maintaining open communication
Creating a supportive and effective educational environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing good rapport among students, parents, teachers and community members • utilizing a variety of perspectives and reference materials to enrich the learning environment. • involving stakeholders in decision-making

Enhancing Leadership Resilience

In navigating the challenges of education, particularly in rural settings where school leaders encountered such as financial constraints, geographic isolation, and limited resources require adaptability and perseverance.

Strengthening leadership resilience involves fostering a growth mindset, embracing collaborative problem-solving, and implementing sustainable strategies to overcome obstacles. By staying composed under pressure, learning continuously, and engaging the community, leaders create lasting impact and inspire teams, keeping schools resilient despite challenges.

As IDI 1 said:

I realized na ang leadership requires resilience and responsibility. Ang mga challenges actually help me grow and become more resourceful. Taz ang teamwork importante para ma overcome ang mga obstacles. And.....commitment pd to my visions for the school.

I realized that leadership requires resilience and responsibility. The challenges actually help me grow and become more resourceful. Also, teamwork is important in overcoming obstacles. And... commitment to my vision for the school as well.(P01)

Also, IDI 6 mentioned:

Isip usa ka school head, labi na diri sa rural areas, though dghan gyud challenges diri, ang kalig-on jud akong ginasandigan. Strong na mangita ug ways labi na sa mga financial support bisan pa man sa kalayo, ang dalan,ang kamingaw. Ana lng as a leader, mao jud ni ang isa sa mga character madevelop jud.

As a school head, especially in rural areas, despite the many challenges here, resilience is truly my foundation. Strength is essential in finding ways to secure financial support, even in the face of distance, difficult roads, and isolation. That's just how it is as a leader—this is one of the key traits that must be developed.(P06)

In connection, FGD 4 added:

Bilang school head, dapat flexible and kow how to handle sa ingon ani na challenges.

As a school head, it is important to be flexible and have knowledge in addressing challenges like these.(P04)

The participants emphasized the importance of resilience in addressing leadership challenges. Thus, resilience enables you to remain steadfast in the face of financial limitations, geographic isolation, and logistical hurdles.

Promoting Shared-Purpose Through Collaboration

In leadership, fostering a shared purpose is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable progress. A school thrives when its stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, and the community—work together with a unified vision.

Collaboration is the key to transforming aspirations into action, creating an environment where collective efforts drive success. The participants recognized the importance of this action:

As FGD 5 said:

As a school head of the school, it would be beneficial to encourage greater participation in extra curricular activities such as joining sports teams, academic competitions and choir club. Akoa gyud I promote ni na mga activities aron ma encourage tong mga bata na adunay mga talento, ingon man ang mga parents ma encourage pod na mo support ani na kalihukan.

As the school head, it would be beneficial to encourage greater participation in extracurricular activities such as joining sports teams, academic competitions, and the choir club. I will actively promote these activities to inspire students with talents to take part, while also encouraging parents to support these initiatives.(P05)

IDI 3 also mentioned:

Ug importante po as a school head ang communication ug involvement and collaboration with the community the internal and external stakeholders. Dapat strengthen jud ang linkages and relationship.

Also, communication, involvement, and collaboration with the community—both internal and external stakeholders—are crucial. Strengthening linkages and relationships is essential for success.(P03)

Furthermore, IDI 2 shared a similar experience:

Akong insight para ani is in facing challenges is that if improvement is achieved it will develop ahmmmm strong relationship and collaboration to the teachers ug sa community. Maintain lng open communication.

My insight on facing challenges is that when improvement is achieved, it helps build strong relationships and collaboration with teachers and the community.(P02)

Therefore, by nurturing teamwork, transparency, and open communication, leaders can align individual goals with the broader mission of the institution. This shared commitment strengthens relationships, enhances problem-solving, and builds a culture of resilience. In a collaborative setting, every voice matters, and each contribution plays a role in shaping a school community that is united, empowered, and driven toward excellence.

Creating A Supportive and Effective Educational Environment

A supportive educational environment is crucial for student success. It fosters inclusivity and collaboration, empowering learners through positive relationships and effective communication. These elements promote academic achievement and overall well-being, equipping students to thrive in a dynamic society. Similarly,

involvement of parents, teachers, and stakeholders can help them monitor their students' progress, academic achievement, and overall well-being of the school community.

IDI 5 expressed:

Akoa gyud I promote ni na mga activities aron ma encourage tong mga bata na adunay mga talento, ingon man ang mga parents ma encourage pod na mo support ani na kalihukan.

I will actively promote these activities to inspire students with talents to take part, while also encouraging parents to support these initiatives. (P05)

IDI 3 also shared:

Uhmmm as school head, una dapat na jud kay goal. To achieve ana na goal na jd kay monitoring and evaluation. With that dapat data updated ka for decision-making. Unya mkabuhat ta sa appropriate actions.

As a school head, the first priority must be setting a clear goal. To achieve that goal, monitoring and evaluation are essential. With updated data, informed decision-making becomes possible, allowing for appropriate actions to be taken. (P03)

Moreover, IDI 7 supports the claim by saying:

Aside from the delivery of quality education aside sa academic, it is good to implement more programs that engage the community and stakeholders. Kay importante sa akoa as a school na makita na magkahiusa ang tanan para kini sab makita sa mga bata ug ilahang mahimong model kung adult na sila. Ug ang future nila dapat muapadayon jud sila kay sila na pod ang mga future leaders diring dapita. Ingon sad ang pagiging open sa mga stakeholders ky para sa akoa in making decisions dapat labot jud sila. And in this way mka develop ta ug school na productive.

Aside from delivering quality education academically, it is also essential to implement more programs that engage the community and stakeholders.

For me, it is important that everyone in the school is united because students will see this unity and use it as a model when they grow up. Their future must continue progressing because they will be the future leaders in this place.

Openness to stakeholders is also crucial because, in making decisions, they should always be involved. In this way, we can develop a school that is truly productive. (P07)

Strong participation and involvement are crucial, as indicated by the participants' responses. Thus, it is one of the themes that emerged from the insights of rural school leaders.

Using accessible and user-friendly virtual platforms is very important because it affects both students and teachers in the delivery of assessments, as exploring the platform's interface can be complicated and challenging to navigate. Thus, easier platforms are more recommended.

All the transcriptions were thoroughly analyzed and reviewed, and different themes emerged. These themes help understand the nature of science teachers' experiences in giving assessments and feedback to students in the new normal. Furthermore, the insights derived from this study can help teachers employ them in addressing the challenges of assessment feedback practice

DISCUSSION

Educational leadership among rural school heads in Davao Del Norte and Davao de Oro, March 2025, aims to explore the lived experiences of these leaders, focusing on the insights and strategies they employ to navigate and overcome challenges in remote educational settings, as well as the meaning they attribute to their roles. Navigating challenges faced by rural school heads highlights the unique set of difficulties encountered in these settings. Rural school leaders frequently face challenges due to transportation issues, limited resources, and a lack of innovation. These constraints can hinder their ability to provide a good education and maintain student engagement.

Additionally, they may encounter challenges related to community involvement, where varying levels of parental support and participation can impact school initiatives, as well as a lack of financial support. As stated by Quebec, Fuentes, and Jimerson (2020), effective educational leadership encompasses a spectrum of responsibilities, from pedagogical leadership aimed at enhancing teaching and learning practices to administrative duties focused on operational efficiency. Similarly, by fostering a culture of continuous improvement, instructional leaders play a pivotal role in driving educational success at both the individual and organizational levels (Johnson, N., 2023).

Lived Experiences of Rural School Heads

Educational leadership in rural settings demands resilience, empathy, and creativity. Leaders must strike a balance between the immediate needs of their schools and fostering long-term growth and equity.

The participants perceived it as a challenging responsibility to achieve quality education while facing obstacles such as limited resources, geographic isolation, and a lack of innovative opportunities. As Barcena (2018) stated, the challenges of being assigned to distant places, where inconvenient modes of transportation, such as "habal-habal" and even walking for long distances, are the standard. The rugged terrain and weather conditions can make the journey even more challenging, with public school principals often resorting to trekking due to the dangers of crossing rivers.

Coping With the Unique Challenges Experienced

Leading a school in a rural setting is a formidable undertaking, requiring courage, resourcefulness, and an unwavering commitment to education. Unlike their urban counterparts, rural school heads face a distinctive set of challenges that range from limited resources to geographical isolation and cultural complexities. These barriers demand not only adaptive leadership but also a deep understanding of the community's needs and aspirations. School leaders also face barriers to adequate education, including insufficient resources, inadequate financial support, and a lack of parental interest in their children's education, as noted by du Plessis and Mestry (2019).

However, the participants navigated ways to lighten the challenges. They responded that hardship became their motivation to do better in leading the school and community. Educators also faced the challenge of providing effective instruction for both in-person and remote students simultaneously, which required significant time and resources (Pressley et al., 2021).

Insights from the Experiences

Draws on the experiences of educational leaders to highlight insights gained from addressing challenges in collaboration and leadership. Effective leadership is crucial for fostering teamwork, as different leadership styles can significantly impact communication and goal achievement (Hsieh et al., 2023). Participants share their experiences overcoming challenges in rural areas and creating inclusive, resilient learning environments, offering inspiration and strategies. Their narratives underscore the transformative power of education in empowering individuals and driving collective progress.

Additionally, understanding the relationship between leadership and collaboration can help school leaders tailor their approaches based on team dynamics and objectives (Jamali et al., 2022).

Implications

The findings from the study, a phenomenological investigation of educational leadership among rural school heads, reveal that educational leaders face a distinctive array of challenges that significantly influence their effectiveness. These challenges typically include limited resources, teacher shortages, difficulties in community engagement, and infrastructural inadequacies, each presenting its own set of implications and necessitating targeted solutions.

The insights gained from addressing challenges in collaboration and leadership reveal that effective communication is crucial for aligning rural school leaders on goals and preventing misunderstandings. Strong relationships are foundational to successful teamwork, and challenges require trust-building activities that create a safe environment for sharing ideas and taking risks. Rural school leaders must demonstrate adaptability by embracing new collaboration methods and adjusting their styles to meet the needs of teachers and students. Likewise, lead with their hearts and are people-centered.

Therefore, organizations can develop resilient teams, promote a positive culture, and boost overall performance by applying these insights. Educational institutions should strengthen their collaborative initiatives and leadership capabilities to build a solid foundation for future success within the school community.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study have relevance to the lived experiences of seven (7) rural school heads of the Division of davao Del Norte and Davao de Oro. This research explores the complexities of rural school leadership by examining key obstacles such as limited resource allocation, geographical isolations and lack of innovations. By identifying these challenges and analyzing strategies that successful rural school leaders employ, we can develop sustainable solutions that enhance educational outcomes and empower communities.

However, the result of this study can be a basis for further research. In order to gather more substantial results, it is recommended to conduct further research in a wider location and a greater number of participants. It can also be done in quantitative research and gather more perspective from different entities such as students and parents.

Furthermore, research may be done by re-interviewing some of the participants to extract the parallelism of the said results and find out if their views have changed or not over a certain period. It is also suggested to conduct another study to further find out about the experience of rural school heads.

Concluding Remarks

This study offers a unique contribution by providing context-specific insights into rural school leadership in Region XI, Philippines, an area that remains underrepresented in existing literature. It advances understanding by linking phenomenological experiences with leadership theory, particularly within geographically isolated and resource-limited educational settings. The findings inform policy and practice by emphasizing the importance of community-based leadership strategies and adaptive governance in rural schools.

Addressing the challenges of rural school leadership requires resilience, collaboration, and strategic problem-solving. By fostering strong stakeholder engagement, leveraging community partnerships, and implementing sustainable resource management, school heads can drive meaningful change despite financial and geographic constraints.

Through ongoing professional development and policy support, rural education leaders can navigate obstacles while maintaining their commitment to equity and excellence. By embracing adaptability and teamwork, they not only improve school conditions but also set a lasting example for future generations of leaders.

This research underscores the importance of proactive strategies and collective effort in overcoming leadership challenges. With continuous learning and community involvement, rural school heads can shape schools that are both productive and united in purpose.

With this study, we realized as future leaders there are many factors to consider in addressing leadership challenges especially in rural areas. We have learned that it isn't easy to manage a school that is geographically distant with diversified culture. This study examines the stressors and complexities of rural school leadership. However, despite of the inevitable challenge, the participants have shown strong resilience in managing the faculty, learners, stakeholders and the community.

For future leaders like us, after conducting the study, the valuable insights we gained from the realities of rural school leadership and strategies for overcoming obstacles will be one of our greatest guide in the fut

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