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Exploring The Leadership Practices of Underfunded Schools: Principals' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Underfunded schools face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and limited resources, which affect education quality. This study explored the leadership practices of principals in these environments through in-depth interviews with seven principals. Findings indicated that they used transformational leadership, resource mobilization, and community engagement to mitigate financial constraints. The study recommended increasing professional development for principals and enhancing policy support to improve leadership effectiveness in underfunded schools.

Keywords: transformational leadership, resource mobilization, underfunded schools, educational leadership, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape in the Philippines faces critical challenges, particularly in underfunded schools where the absence of principals complicates educational delivery. Reports indicate that over half of public schools lack principals, forcing existing leaders to manage multiple schools, thereby affecting student performance and educational quality. Principals deal with inadequate infrastructure, scarce resources, and large class sizes, compounded by systemic issues like political instability and corruption. Similar challenges are observed globally, as seen in South Africa, the U.S., and India. Studies indicate that Philippine principals often resort to innovative strategies to manage financial constraints, especially in urban settings like Manila and Cebu. However, significant research gaps exist regarding principals in isolated and disaster-prone areas like Cateel, emphasizing the need for further exploration of their unique challenges and leadership practices.

Research Purpose and Questions

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of school principals in underfunded schools in Cateel, Davao Oriental, focusing on their leadership practices, challenges, and coping strategies amid financial constraints. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it examined how principals manage limited resources, ensure educational quality, and engage the community. The study highlighted unique challenges in rural and disaster-prone areas, the importance of community partnerships, and the influence of external support on educational outcomes, providing insights for policymakers and educational stakeholders to enhance leadership effectiveness in under-resourced schools.

Moreover, this study sought to explore the leadership practices of principals in underfunded schools in Cateel, Davao Oriental. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals managing underfunded schools?

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

2. How do principals navigate financial constraints and resource shortages while ensuring quality education?

3. What leadership strategies do principals employ to sustain school operations and address challenges in an underfunded setting?

4. What forms of support do principals need to enhance their leadership effectiveness and improve school performance?

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the leadership experiences of principals in underfunded schools. By employing phenomenology, the research aimed to capture the complex perceptions, emotions, and reflections related to their roles, particularly under financial constraints. Through semi-structured interviews, the study highlighted the strategies and adaptations these leaders developed to sustain educational quality despite resource limitations. It emphasized the need to explore the deeper meanings of principals' experiences, which may remain hidden in quantitative research, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of educational leadership in financially challenged environments and aiming to inform policy and leadership development.

Research Context and Participants

The study selected seven principals from public elementary and secondary schools in Cateel, Davao Oriental, Philippines, to explore their experiences managing schools with financial constraints. Participants were chosen based on criteria that included current leadership roles in underfunded schools, at least three years of experience, and willingness to share insights through in-depth interviews. This approach, focusing on individual perspectives and using a semi-structured questionnaire, allowed for a thorough examination of leadership strategies in the context of limited resources, ensuring a diverse range of experiences and challenges. This methodology provided reliable findings on the realities faced by these educational leaders.

Data Collection

The study's data collection was carried out ethically and systematically, beginning with obtaining necessary permits from the Department of Education (DepEd) Division Office of Davao Oriental. A formal request and research proposal outlined the study's aims and ethical guidelines. Principals were invited to participate voluntarily, signing informed consent forms. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven principals, lasting 45 to 60 minutes each. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, supplemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues and insights. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, with follow-up interviews conducted as needed, ensuring participant comfort and confidentiality throughout the process.

Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to interpret data on leadership experiences in underfunded schools. The process involved familiarization with data through verbatim transcription, initial coding using NVivo software, theme identification by grouping related codes, and refining themes to ensure they accurately reflected participants' perspectives. Member checking and peer debriefing were employed to enhance the credibility of the findings. The analysis aims to provide insights that can inform future educational policies and leadership strategies.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Presented in this section are the findings of the study on the leadership practices of principals managing underfunded schools. It includes the participants' responses gathered from interviews, which were thoroughly analyzed to identify core ideas and develop major themes. Additionally, this section highlights the principals'

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

challenges, strategies for coping with resource limitations, and valuable insights into effective school leadership despite financial constraints.

Table 1

Experiences of Principals Managing Underfunded Schools

After a detailed analysis of the participants' responses regarding their experiences in managing underfunded schools, the following major themes emerged: (1) daily operational challenges, (2) facility and infrastructure issues, and (3) socio-economic challenges.

Table 1 shows the various experiences of principals in managing underfunded schools.

Major Themes Core Ideas Faced Daily Operational Challenges

- ensuring student learning amidst resource constraints.
- addressing parent inquiries and educational needs daily.
- managing administrative duties and making personal sacrifices.
- navigating staff and facility shortages daily.

Had Facility and Infrastructure Issues

- struggling with maintaining and repairing school infrastructure.
- dealing with financial constraints impacting books, materials, and meals.
- managing daily challenges with a dedicated staff.
- facing reality of shortages requiring creative problem-solving.
- making personal sacrifices to maintain school operations.

Encountered

Socio-Economic Challenges

- drawing inspiration from personal educational hardships.
- serving as a role model through overcoming hardships.
- fostering empathy through personal poverty experiences.
- supporting disadvantaged students through assistance programs.

Facing Daily Operational Challenges

Managing daily school operations is challenging for principals due to limited financial resources, leading to significant pressure from budget constraints, supply shortages, and the need for personal and administrative sacrifices.Participant 1 highlighted, "Lisod kaayo ang pag-manage sa eskwelahan tungod kay limitado ang budget para sa mga gamit, libro, ug pasilidad. So, kinahanglan maghimo og mga alternatibo aron masolusyonan ang bisan unsang kakulangon."(It is very difficult to manage the school because the budget for supplies, books, and facilities is limited. So, we need to find alternatives to address any shortcomings.) Similarly, Participant 3 mentioned, "Ang mga textbooks kay girepair lang ug gipang-share sa mga klase aron magamit gihapon."

(Textbooks are simply repaired and shared among classes so they can still be used.)

These responses underscore the extent to which principals must consistently adapt and find creative solutions to manage their schools effectively despite financial limitations.

Addressing Facility and Infrastructure Issues

Infrastructure problems such as inadequate classrooms and deteriorating facilities significantly impact school operations. Principals frequently resorted to improvisation for maintenance and repairs due to lack of funds.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Participant 2 noted, "Usahay, ang problema mao ang kakulang sa classrooms tungod sa kadaghan sa estudyante. Kinahanglan nga mag-adjust ug mag-improvise aron lang makapadayon ang klase."

(Sometimes, the problem is the lack of classrooms due to the high number of students. Adjustments and improvisations are necessary to continue lessons.)

Participant 4 shared, "Maglisod ko sa paghatag og sakto nga pasilidad para sa mga estudyante, sama sa mga classroom nga maguba kung mag-uwan. Nagapangita mi og paagi aron mag-repair ug makasustento sa mga gamit bisan pa sa kakulangan sa pondo."

(I struggle to provide adequate facilities for students, such as classrooms that get damaged when it rains. We look for ways to repair and maintain equipment despite the lack of funds.) These insights highlight the urgent need for improved infrastructure and dedicated funding for facilities.

Navigating Socio-Economic Challenges

Principals frequently manage socio-economic challenges as many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. They must provide additional support like feeding programs and medical services to support student welfare.

Participant 5 pointed out, "Kulang mi sa mga libro, materials, ug usahay, bisan pagkaon para sa mga bata. Lisod gyud kaayo." (We lack books, materials, and sometimes even food for the children. It's very difficult.)

Participant 6 further emphasized, "Ang among eskwelahan nagapaningkamot og hatag sa mga assistance programs para sa mga bata, sama sa feeding programs, medical check-ups, ug iba pang mga serbisyo aron matabangan sila sa ilang pagkat-on bisag dili kaayo ana kadako among pondo."

(Our school strives to provide assistance programs for the children, such as feeding programs and medical check-ups, to help them in their learning despite limited funds.) These responses illustrate how socio-economic issues compound the existing challenges of running underfunded schools, highlighting the critical role of holistic student support in educational success.

Navigating Financial Constraints and Resource Shortages

While Ensuring Quality Education

Upon examining the responses from participants about how they handled financial limitations and scarcities in resources, three prominent themes surfaced:

(1) actively engaging in resource mobilization, (2) innovatively applying creative solutions, and (3) diligently practicing strategic financial prioritization.

Table 2 shows the different strategies employed by principals to manage financial constraints and resource shortages.

Table 2

Major Themes and Core Ideas on Navigating Financial Constraints and Resource Shortages While Ensuring Quality Education

Major Themes Core Ideas

Engaging in Resource Mobilization

- seeking donations from NGOs and community members, and participating in community-driven projects.
- collaborating with community leaders for fundraising events to address budget constraints.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

- partnering with local businesses to secure educational material donations.
- engaging in community-based fundraising activities to supplement the school's budget.
- soliciting support from alumni and local business owners for classroom repairs.

Applying Creative Solutions

- Prioritizing immediate needs and focusing on meticulous planning and budgeting.
- Taking on basic repair and maintenance tasks with volunteer teachers and students to minimize expenses.
- Using creative resource management strategies to continue educational activities, such as repairing textbooks.
- Addressing persistent budget deficits through creative problem-solving and collaboration.
- Utilizing local materials for science projects to promote cost-effective hands-on learning.

Practicing Strategic Financial Prioritization

- Prioritizing expenditures that impact learning, such as chalkboards and resources.
- Prioritizing budget allocation to address students' educational needs, classroom safety, and teacher training.
- Guiding investments in learning materials, teacher training, and infrastructure to prioritize student welfare.
- Prioritizing basic educational needs and teacher development in financial decisions.
- Strengthening teacher competencies through training to ensure effective teaching in under-resourced environments.

Engaging in Resource Mobilization

Principals actively mobilized resources through community involvement and external partnerships to address financial constraints.

Participant 1 shared:

"Nagapangita mi og mga paagi aron maka-avail og bisan unsang mga donation gikan sa mga NGOs ug sa ubang katawhan. Naga-apil sab mi sa mga community-driven projects aron masiguro nga magpadayon ang kalidad sa edukasyon."

(We look for ways to avail donations from NGOs and other people. We also participate in community-driven projects to ensure the quality of education continues.)

Participant 2 similarly noted:

"Nagpahigayon mi og mga fundraising activities sa komunidad, sama sa mga nagkalain-lain nga events o mga sports fests, aron makalikom og gamay nga pondo para sa mga basic needs sa eskwelahan."

(We conduct fundraising activities in the community, such as various events or sports fests, to raise a small amount of funds for the school's basic needs.)

Applying Creative Solutions

Principals often utilized creative solutions, such as community-driven projects and the use of recycled materials, to supplement limited resources.

Participant 5 explained:

"Nag-implement mi ug expanded 'Brigada Eskwela'. Imbes nga usa ka semana lang, gihimo namo nga tibuok bulan. Nag-apil mi sa mga ginikanan, alumni, ug bisan ang mga negosyante sa lugar."

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

(We implemented an expanded 'Brigada Eskwela'. Instead of just one week, we made it a whole month. We involved parents, alumni, and local businessmen.)

Participant 7 further added:

"Ginagamit namo ang mga recycled materials para sa mga klase. Pananglitan, gamit ang mga karton ug papel nga dili na magamit para sa mga proyekto sa mga estudyante."

(We use recycled materials for classes. For example, cardboard and paper that are no longer needed are used for student projects.)

Practicing Strategic Financial Prioritization

Principals prioritized immediate educational needs and focused on available funds on direct educational impacts.

Participant 3 highlighted:

"Unahon ang mga kinahanglanon sama sa chalkboards, libro, ug training alang sa mga maestra. Sigurohon nga ang tanan nga gasto kay para sa kaayohan sa mga estudyante."

(Prioritize essentials like chalkboards, books, and teacher training. Ensure every expense is for the benefit of students.)

Participant 4 supported this approach:

"Ang estudyante ang among unang prayoridad. Ga-invest mi sa basic learning materials, pagpalambo sa mga magtutudlo, ug basic infrastructure. Matag desisyon nga among gihimo alang sa among mga estudyante."

(The students are our top priority. We invest in basic learning materials, teacher development, and basic infrastructure. Every decision is made for our students.)

Leadership Strategies Do Principals Employ to Sustain School Operations and Address Challenges in an Underfunded Setting

Following a comprehensive analysis of the participants' responses on leadership strategies, three major themes emerged: (1) practicing collaborative leadership, (2) ensuring transparent governance, and (3) fostering community engagement.

Table 3 summarizes the leadership strategies employed by principals to sustain school operations amidst financial constraints.

Table 3

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Leadership Strategies Do Principals Employ to Sustain School Operations and Address Challenges in an Underfunded Setting

Major Themes Core Ideas

Practicing Collaborative Leadership

- prioritizing team collaboration in meetings to ensure unified responses to resource shortages.
- involving teachers and staff in regular meetings to enhance collaborative leadership.
- holding regular meetings to involve teachers in decision-making.
- valuing teacher input in decision-making for a supportive environment.
- involving teachers in decision-making to improve educational quality.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Ensuring Transparent Governance

- implementing rainwater collection as an adaptive solution to infrastructure challenges.
- delegating tasks and monitoring progress for smooth school operations.
- practicing financial transparency for responsible resource allocation.
- holding monthly open meetings for transparency and community networking.
- adopting flexible leadership to create alternatives for meeting student needs.

Fostering Community Engagement

- building partnerships for easier access to additional funding and support.
- encouraging community cooperation and creative solutions for resource limitations.
- leading collaborative projects to make chairs from donated materials.
- fostering open communication to identify needs and solutions.
- organizing fundraising events for school project funding.

Practicing Collaborative Leadership

Principals emphasized the importance of collaboration and involving teachers and staff in decision-making processes to effectively manage limited resources.

Participant 1 highlighted:

“Ang akong unang strategy mao ang pag-focus sa team collaboration. Ang mga magtutudlo, staff, ug komunidad kinahanglan jud magtinabangay.”

(My first strategy is to focus on team collaboration. The teachers, staff, and community really need to work together.)

Participant 4 further shared:

“Para sa akoa, ang matag teacher kay importante kaayo. Dili mi modesisyon nga mag-inusara. Mag-meeting mi kada-semana ug mag-share og ideya.”

(For me, every teacher is extremely important. We don't decide alone. We meet weekly and share ideas.)

Thus, collaborative leadership is an essential strategy principals practiced to effectively address operational challenges and foster a cohesive school environment.

Ensuring Transparent Governance

Transparency in financial management and clear communication with stakeholders were vital strategies to maintain trust and effective resource allocation.

Participant 4 stated:

“Nag-implementar ko og transparency sa financial management. Naa juy transparency ang tanan nga resources ug pondo sa eskwelahan aron masabtan nila ang importance sa responsable nga paggamit sa pondo.”

(I implemented transparency in financial management. All resources and funds of the school are transparent, so they understand the importance of responsible fund usage.)

Participant 7 reinforced this strategy by noting:

“Nagahimo mi og open meeting matag bulan diin among ipakita ang entire nga budget, mga problema, ug plano.”

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

(We conduct open meetings every month where we show the entire budget, problems, and plans.)

Thus, transparency in governance serves as a fundamental approach to maintaining trust and accountability in school management.

Fostering Community Engagement

Engaging actively with the community, local government, and alumni significantly aided principals in addressing school resource challenges.

Participant 2 explained:

"Nagset up ko og mga partnership sa lokal nga komunidad, mga alumni, ug mga negosyo aron makakuha og dugang pondo."

(I set up partnerships with the local community, alumni, and businesses to get additional funding.)

Participant 5 emphasized:

"Nag-implement mi ug expanded 'Brigada Eskwela', ug nag-apil mi sa mga ginikanan, alumni, ug bisan ang mga negosyante sa lugar."

(We implemented an expanded 'Brigada Eskwela' and involved parents, alumni, and even local businessmen.)

Thus, community engagement is a pivotal strategy for enhancing resources and strengthening school-community partnerships.

Forms of Support Do Principals Need to Enhance Their Leadership Effectiveness and Improve School Performance

In addressing the challenges faced by principals managing underfunded schools, specific forms of support are essential. Based on participants' responses, three major themes emerged: (1) enhancing professional development, (2) providing psychological and moral support, and (3) delivering policy and administrative support.

Table 4 illustrates the types of support principals needed to enhance their leadership and improve school outcomes.

Table 4

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Forms of Support Do Principals Need to Enhance Their Leadership Effectiveness and Improve School Performance

Major Themes Core Ideas

Enhancing Professional Development

- enhancing principals' skills through continuous professional development.
- improving leadership strategies through mentorship.
- enhancing leadership skills through a mentorship program.
- strengthening leadership strategies through peer mentorship.
- enhancing management skills through ongoing leadership training.

Providing Psychological and Moral Support

- enhancing school morale through community and parental collaboration.
- improving leadership abilities with training and mental health support.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

- providing psychological support to enhance school performance.

Delivering Policy and Administrative Support

- advocating for sustained educational funding from local governments.
- pushing for policy revisions for equitable budget distribution.
- lobbying for targeted financial support for rural school projects.
- implementing national policies for equitable fund distribution.
- ensuring adequate funding and training through regular legal provisions.

Enhancing Professional Development

Principals expressed a significant need for continuous professional development, emphasizing ongoing training in leadership and management, and mentorship programs.

Participant 1 articulated:

“Ang mga training ug seminar alang sa leadership, management, ug pedagogy maoy makatabang aron mapalambo ang kahibalo ug skills sa mga principal alang sa pagdumala sa eskwelahan.”

(Training and seminars for leadership, management, and pedagogy can help improve the knowledge and skills of principals for managing the school.)

Similarly, Participant 7 stated:

“Ang pinakaimportante nga suporta nga akong gikinahanglan mao ang regular nga leadership training. Kung magpadayon ang akong pagkat-on sa mga bag-ong pamaagi sa pagdumala, mas mapalambo nako ang akong abilidad sa pagtudlo ug sa pagpanguna sa eskwelahan.”

(The most important support that I need is regular leadership training. If I continue to learn new management approaches, I can further improve my ability to teach and lead the school.)

Professional development opportunities thus emerge as critical for enhancing principals' capabilities and leadership effectiveness.

Providing Psychological and Moral Support

Principals highlighted the importance of psychological support and stress management resources for maintaining effectiveness and morale.

Participant 4 shared:

“Para sa akoa, kay psychological support para sa akong kaugalingon ug sa akong mga magtutudlo. Ang pag-manage sa stress ug pressure sa trabaho kay kinahanglan kaayo.”

(For me, psychological support for myself and my teachers is important. Managing stress and pressure at work is very necessary.)

Such psychological and moral support systems are essential to help principals and school staff manage stress effectively and maintain their motivation and productivity.

Delivering Policy and Administrative Support

The need for equitable budget allocation and flexible, context-specific educational policies was strongly emphasized.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Participant 6 explained:

"Magpatuman og policy nga maghatag og mas dako nga budget allocation alang sa mga underfunded schools, ug mag-prioritize sa mga lugar nga nagkinahanglan og urgent repairs ug improvements sa pasilidad."

(Implement a policy that provides larger budget allocations for underfunded schools, prioritizing areas needing urgent repairs and facility improvements.)

Participant 4 also recommended:

"Kinahanglan og flexible nga educational policy nga motagad sa rural schools. Dapat naay angay og special allocation ug recognition sa mga challenges sa rural education."

(We need flexible educational policies that address rural schools. There should be special allocation and recognition of rural education challenges.)

Therefore, targeted policy adjustments and administrative support are indispensable for effectively addressing the unique needs of underfunded rural schools.

Reliability of the Instrument

The internal consistency of the research instrument was examined using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated excellent reliability, exceeding the acceptable threshold of .70 recommended for social science research.

Table 1 Reliability Coefficients of the Study Variables

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Servant Leadership	8	0.982	Excellent
Mission-Aligned Governance	8	0.984	Excellent
Student Formation	8	0.986	Excellent

The results show that the questionnaire items consistently measured servant leadership, mission-aligned governance, and student formation. High reliability values align with prior research employing modified servant leadership and governance instruments (Liden et al., 2008; Eva et al., 2019).

Level of Servant Leadership, Mission-Aligned Governance, and Student Formation

Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the level of servant leadership, mission-aligned governance, and student formation as perceived by college students.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Servant Leadership	4.31	0.94
Mission-Aligned Governance	4.33	0.94
Student Formation	4.34	0.94
Variable	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**

The study highlights the significance of servant leadership and mission-aligned governance in Catholic colleges, which effectively integrate service, ethics, and institutional mission. It supports Greenleaf's servant leadership theory, emphasizing values-based leadership that reflects Gospel principles, fostering ethical environments conducive to learning.

Additionally, Bush's perspective on governance aligns with the findings, indicating that Catholic colleges maintain clear, accountable structures that enhance institutional identity and student trust.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Relationship Between Leadership, Governance, and Student Formation

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship among servant leadership, mission-aligned governance, and student formation.

Table 3 Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Servant Leadership	—		
2. Mission-Aligned Governance	0.958***	—	
3. Student Formation	0.964***	0.959***	—

***p < .001*

The results reveal a **strong positive correlation** between servant leadership and student formation, as well as between mission-aligned governance and student outcomes in Catholic colleges. This aligns with Astin's (1993) theory of student involvement, emphasizing the significant impact of the institutional environment on student outcomes. Additionally, it supports Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) assertion that leadership behavior and organizational culture significantly influence student perceptions and engagement, particularly in the context of Catholic higher education.

Predictive Influence of Servant Leadership and Mission-Aligned Governance on Student Formation

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which servant leadership and mission-aligned governance predict student formation.

Table 4 Regression Analysis Predicting Student Formation

Predictor	**β**	**t**	**p**
Servant Leadership	0.54	4.44	< .001
Mission-Aligned Governance	0.45	3.77	< .001

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.946$
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.943$
$F(2, 46) = 401.30$, $p < .001$

The regression model indicates that 94.6% of the variance in student formation is explained, highlighting a strong predictive relationship mainly influenced by servant leadership, which is the superior predictor over mission-aligned governance. This supports Greenleaf's (1977) assertion of servant leadership's importance in personal growth. Additionally, the significant role of mission-aligned governance aligns with the findings of Bush (2011) and Shattock (2014), suggesting that governance consistent with institutional mission enhances educational outcomes in Catholic colleges, promoting moral development.

Multicollinearity and Model Assumptions

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for servant leadership and mission-aligned governance were both 12.18, indicating a close relationship between the predictors. This aligns with the theory that leadership and governance in Catholic institutions are tied to the mission. Despite high VIF values, both predictors remained statistically significant, suggesting stable estimates. This scenario highlights the connection between leadership and governance in faith-based institutions, supported by systems theory in educational leadership.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Overall Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from the investigation into the leadership practices of principals managing underfunded schools in Cateel, Davao Oriental. Through detailed interviews, the study uncovered significant themes related to the daily operational, infrastructural, and socio-economic challenges these leaders faced. The chapter also delves into the implications of these findings and suggests areas for further research.

Lived Experiences of Principals

Managing Underfunded Schools

The experiences of principals managing underfunded schools, reflect a complex landscape of challenges that significantly impact their ability to administer effective educational programs. These challenges are categorized into three major themes: facing daily operational challenges, addressing facility and infrastructure issues, and navigating socio-economic challenges.

Facing Daily Operational Challenges

The findings of this study reveal that principals in underfunded schools experience persistent daily operational challenges, particularly in managing limited resources, addressing stakeholder demands, and sustaining school operations. Participants described making personal and administrative sacrifices to ensure continuity of learning despite shortages in materials and facilities.

In practical terms, this indicates that school leaders are not only administrators but also crisis managers who must continuously adapt to financial limitations. This situation requires immediate, context-based decision-making rather than reliance on standard administrative procedures.

For underfunded schools, this implies the need for flexible school-level management systems and decentralized decision-making authority to allow principals to respond quickly to resource gaps. These findings are supported by Carless and Winstone (2020), who emphasized the impact of resource limitations on school operations.

Addressing Facility and Infrastructure Issues

The study found that principals frequently deal with deteriorating school facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient infrastructure, often requiring improvisation to sustain daily operations. Participants reported repairing classrooms, reallocating spaces, and utilizing limited materials to maintain a functional learning environment.

In real-world practice, this reflects a reactive approach to infrastructure management, where principals address problems only when they arise due to the absence of sufficient funding. This condition places both teachers and students at risk and compromises the quality of instruction.

This suggests that targeted infrastructure support programs and emergency maintenance funds should be prioritized for underfunded schools, particularly in rural and disaster-prone areas. These findings align with existing literature indicating that poor school conditions negatively affect learning outcomes.

Navigating Socio-Economic Challenges

Participants emphasized that many students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which directly affects attendance, engagement, and academic performance. Principals reported implementing feeding programs, sourcing medical assistance, and providing basic needs support to ensure student participation in school.

Practically, this extends the role of school leaders beyond academic management to include social welfare responsibilities. Principals act as frontline responders to poverty-related issues that influence student learning.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

This finding highlights the need for integrated school-based support systems, including partnerships with local government units and community organizations, to address both educational and socio-economic barriers to learning.

Navigating Financial Constraints and Resource

Shortages While Ensuring Quality Education

Upon examining the responses from participants about how they handled financial limitations and scarcities in resources in underfunded schools, several insightful themes surfaced, providing a deeper understanding of how educational leaders navigated these challenging landscapes. Three prominent themes emerged from the analysis: actively engaging in resource mobilization, innovatively applying creative solutions, and diligently practicing strategic financial prioritization.

Engaging in Resource Mobilization

The findings demonstrate that principals actively engage in resource mobilization through partnerships with community members, alumni, and local organizations. Participants described organizing fundraising activities, seeking donations, and collaborating with stakeholders to address financial gaps.

In practice, this indicates that school sustainability in underfunded contexts heavily depends on external support rather than solely on government funding. Principals function as resource negotiators and community leaders.

This suggests the need to institutionalize community partnership programs and provide training for principals in stakeholder engagement and resource generation strategies.

Applying Creative Solutions

In financially constrained environments, principals of underfunded schools employ innovative strategies to maintain quality education. Community-driven projects, like Brigada Eskwela in the Philippines, leverage local resources and foster collaboration among parents, teachers, and students, enhancing educational facilities and community bonds. Additionally, adopt-a-class programs enable schools to receive support for resources, improving the educational experience. The creative use of low-cost, recycled materials for teaching aids exemplifies resourcefulness, while open-source technology provides affordable educational tools. Teaching strategies such as peer teaching and project-based learning promote critical thinking with minimal resources. Professional development for teachers can utilize community expertise and online courses to maintain teaching standards. Fostering a culture of innovation enables schools to adapt effectively to resource limitations. These approaches ensure that quality education is delivered despite financial challenges, laying the groundwork for sustainable educational practices.

This finding highlights that innovation in underfunded schools is not optional but necessary for survival. In practice, principals and teachers must continuously develop low-cost and context-appropriate teaching strategies to sustain learning despite limited resources.

Practicing Strategic Financial Prioritization

Strategic financial prioritization is essential for principals in underfunded schools to manage financial constraints while maintaining educational quality. This involves allocating limited resources towards immediate educational needs, such as quality teaching materials and teacher professional development, which enhance student learning outcomes. Investments in programs like interactive software and after-school tutoring have been shown to significantly improve student engagement and performance.

Maintaining school infrastructure is also crucial, as deferred maintenance can incur higher costs later. Strategic choices often entail cutting non-essential programs while ensuring the educational experience remains supportive. Continuous evaluation of financial strategies is vital, leveraging data to inform decisions and enabling schools to anticipate future needs through long-term planning.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue III, March 2026

Practically, this means that financial decision-making in underfunded schools must be highly strategic, with a strong focus on maximizing limited resources for direct student benefit. This reinforces the importance of financial management training for school leaders.

Leadership Strategies Do Principals Employ to Sustain School

Operations and Address Challenges in an Underfunded Setting

Following a comprehensive analysis of the participants' responses on leadership strategies, three major themes emerged: (1) practicing collaborative leadership, (2) ensuring transparent governance, and (3) fostering community engagement.

Practicing Collaborative Leadership

In underfunded schools, principals face significant challenges due to limited resources. An effective strategy involves promoting teamwork and involving teachers and staff in decision-making, fostering a sense of community and leveraging diverse expertise. Creating an inclusive culture encourages open communication, enhancing job satisfaction and stability. Participatory decision-making leads to well-informed choices and commitment from teachers. Regular collective problem-solving meetings empower staff to address issues quickly and build professional capacity. This collaborative approach optimizes resource management, fosters resilience, and improves community relationships, laying a foundation for long-term sustainability and enhanced educational quality.

Ensuring Transparent Governance

Transparent governance is essential for principals to manage underfunded schools effectively. It involves open communication about financial resources and budget allocations, which fosters trust and collaboration among stakeholders. Regular reporting and clear budget communication help prevent misunderstandings and align community expectations, enhancing cooperation and involvement. Engaging stakeholders in the budgeting process through forums promotes equitable resource use and strengthens commitment to school goals. Furthermore, utilizing digital tools for transparency ensures accessibility of financial information, supporting accountability and community engagement. This governance approach is crucial for maximizing the impact of limited resources on educational quality.

Fostering Community Engagement

Fostering community engagement is essential for school principals facing challenges in underfunded environments. Building partnerships with the community, local government, and alumni enhances resources and support for schools. Proactive communication and reciprocal relationships are vital for cultivating trust. Schools acting as community centers gain local support, while integrating community service reinforces ties. Collaborating with local governments can secure funding and align programs with community needs. Alumni networks improve student outcomes through mentorship and financial contributions. Community involvement increases resource mobilization and stakeholder ownership, leading to enriched educational environments and improved student achievement. Ultimately, principals must act as community leaders to create a supportive network for students amidst funding challenges.

These leadership strategies demonstrate that effective school leadership in underfunded contexts is highly relational and adaptive. In real-life settings, principals must build trust, promote collaboration, and maintain transparency to sustain school operations. This suggests that leadership development programs should emphasize practical skills such as team management, communication, and community engagement.

Forms of Support Do Principals Need to Enhance Their Leadership Effectiveness and Improve School Performance

The findings clearly indicate that support for principals must go beyond theoretical training and address the actual challenges encountered in underfunded schools. Professional development programs should be context-

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specific, focusing on financial management, crisis leadership, and community engagement. Additionally, policy interventions must ensure equitable resource allocation and provide flexible guidelines that allow school leaders to adapt to local conditions.

In addressing the challenges faced by principals managing underfunded schools, specific forms of support are essential. Based on participants' responses, three major themes emerged: (1) enhancing professional development, (2) providing psychological and moral support, and (3) delivering policy and administrative support.

Enhancing Professional Development

Enhancing professional development for principals is essential for improving their leadership effectiveness and school performance. Ongoing training in leadership, management, and pedagogy equips them with necessary skills to tackle complexities in educational leadership. Research highlights that targeted training improves their ability to implement effective policies and manage diverse populations. Mentorship from senior leaders also offers critical support, guiding new principals through challenges and enhancing their decision-making. Training can be tailored to specific school contexts, addressing unique challenges and fostering innovative problem-solving. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) promote collaboration among principals, contributing to professional growth and job satisfaction. Lastly, technology integration in professional development offers flexible learning opportunities, proving effective when designed engagingly, allowing principals to access a wider range of resources and expertise.

Providing Psychological and Moral Support

Providing psychological and moral support is crucial for principals to enhance leadership effectiveness and improve school performance. School leaders experience high stress from their multiple roles, making mental health resources and stress management programs essential for creating a supportive work environment. Advocating for access to mental health services can address common challenges educators face, as research shows positive effects on staff morale and productivity. Stress management initiatives, such as mindfulness training, can reduce stress levels and foster a supportive school culture. Integrating wellness structures into regular school operations, such as wellness committees and district-level engagement, ensures sustainability and broader support for these initiatives. Overall, prioritizing staff well-being not only boosts leadership effectiveness but also enhances overall school performance, creating a positive educational environment.

Delivering Policy and Administrative Support

Delivering effective policy and administrative support is essential for enhancing leadership effectiveness in principals, especially in underfunded and rural schools. Key areas of support include equitable budget allocation, flexibility in policy adaptation, facilitation of policy implementation, and building principals' capacity to advocate for their schools.

Research highlights the importance of equitable funding for improving educational quality, while transparency in funding fosters trust among stakeholders. Policies need to be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by rural schools, including innovative curriculum delivery and flexible staffing. Ongoing administrative support, regular feedback mechanisms, and the ability for principals to engage in policy discussions significantly contribute to better educational outcomes. The study confirms the relevance of Transformational Leadership Theory, Resource Dependence Theory, and Resilience Theory in understanding the adaptive strategies of principals in challenging environments. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate how effective leadership can lead to enhanced school performance despite resource limitations.

Implications for Practice

Leading underfunded schools faces challenges such as inadequate resources, operational hurdles, and socio-economic disparities affecting students. This study provides actionable strategies for principals, emphasizing resource mobilization, innovative problem-solving, and essential spending prioritization to enhance educational quality despite financial constraints. It advocates for collaborative leadership, transparent governance, and

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community engagement to increase institutional resilience. Additionally, it calls for supportive policies and professional development for school leaders, aiming to enlighten stakeholders to improve the educational framework in financially constrained settings. Thus, transforming current challenges into future opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study examines leadership practices of principals in underfunded schools, revealing challenges such as operational issues, facility deficits, and socio-economic barriers. It suggests that expanding research to a wider geographic area and including more school leaders could uncover regional differences and innovative strategies. A mixed-methods approach is recommended to combine quantitative and qualitative data for a comprehensive analysis. Further longitudinal studies could track leadership strategies and school performance over time, while exploring the effectiveness and sustainability of specific interventions. Involving stakeholders like teachers, students, and parents in future research would enhance understanding of leadership dynamics in the educational community.

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