

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF SCHOOL HEADS IN LAST MILE SCHOOLS: COMPREHENSIVE EXPLORATION

Geralline E. Marci¹, Genesis B. Naparan, PhD²

¹ Graduate Student, Saint Columban College, Pagadian City, 7016, Philippines

² Graduate School Faculty, Saint Columban College, Pagadian City, 7016, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership in last-mile schools requires navigating persistent geographic, social, and economic challenges. While school heads play a crucial role in sustaining education in these contexts, their leadership practices remain largely underexplored. The study explored the leadership practices employed by school heads, the challenges they encountered, and the coping strategies they used to manage and sustain school operations in last-mile schools. This qualitative study employed Merriam's single-case study approach, purposively selecting ten school heads from last-mile schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, supported by triangulated insights from teachers, parents, and district supervisors. Findings revealed that school heads practiced collaborative and reflective decision-making, data-informed classroom supervision, and context-based teacher mentoring. They fostered student-centered and culturally responsive learning, actively engaged communities, and promoted transparent resource management. Participants faced challenges, including geographic isolation, resource scarcity, and socio-cultural barriers, which disrupted operations and strained leadership. To cope, they relied on personal resilience, social and spiritual support, and stress-relief practices. It was concluded that school heads in last-mile schools demonstrated adaptive leadership by adopting diverse roles to maintain educational delivery despite severe constraints. It was recommended that leadership development programs and institutional support systems be enhanced to empower school heads in last-mile schools.

Keyword: adaptive, explore, last-mile schools, leadership practices

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of teaching and learning within a school (Marzano et.al., 2005). Republic Act No. 9155, also known as the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, mandates decentralization by assigning school heads dual roles as both instructional leaders and administrative managers. They are responsible for setting school objectives, supporting teaching and learning, implementing curricula, and ensuring improved educational outcomes. As vital drivers of educational change, school heads manage resources, oversee teacher performance, and lead their schools toward better quality education.

In the Philippine educational landscape, considerable attention has been given to schools located in geographically isolated and socio-economically disadvantaged areas, commonly referred to as "last-mile schools." Categorized under DepEd Memorandum No. 59, s. 2019, these schools are found primarily in Geographically

Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), where both school heads and teachers face persistent challenges such as inadequate classroom materials, unreliable digital access, insufficient transportation, and geographic isolation (Baynosa et al., 2024; Ballenas et al., 2024). These conditions strain teachers, who often handle multigrade classrooms with limited resources, while school heads grapple with bureaucratic hurdles, minimal financial support, and weak community engagement. Magistrado et al. (2024) further highlight interpersonal dynamics, lack of formal training, and limited community backing as significant concerns for leaders in these last-mile schools.

Leadership in these settings is especially critical due to the compounded difficulties. Unlike well-resourced urban schools, leaders in last-mile schools must adopt adaptive, innovative, and resilient strategies to address unique challenges, support teaching staff, and actively engage communities. They are tasked with creating

environments that mitigate resource deficiencies, promote collaborative decision-making, and creatively leverage scarce resources to ensure sustainable education (Heifetz et al., 2009; Cahapay, 2022). This view is echoed by UNESCO (2021) and the World Bank (2022), which emphasize that leadership matters most where needs are greatest, requiring school leaders to innovate under constraints and act as pillars of hope and stability. The OECD (2018) reinforces this by linking effective policies, teacher development, and school success directly to the quality of school leadership.

In response to these challenges, the Department of Education (DepEd) launched the Last Mile Schools Program in 2019 to address educational inequities by allocating resources for building classrooms, providing solar power solutions, and distributing ICT tools through its Computerization Program. Between 2020 and 2022, DepEd planned to construct 260 last-mile schools with a total budget of Php 4.4 billion.

While prior research on school leadership has mainly focused on urban and accessible schools—highlighting instructional leadership, management practices, and community involvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007)—there remains a significant gap in understanding how leaders in last-mile schools confront their unique challenges and influence school performance. This study is motivated by the researcher's direct experience in rural educational leadership, witnessing the challenges, sacrifices, and unwavering dedication of school heads who persevere despite adversity. It aims to explore the leadership practices of school heads in last-mile schools in the Division of Misamis Occidental during the 2024–2025 school year, focusing on their implementation of decision-making, classroom supervision, teacher mentoring, student-centered learning, performance management, school improvement planning, school-community engagement, school operations and management, and personal and professional effectiveness, as well as the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ.

2. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a case study approach based on Merriam's (1998) methodology, to investigate

the leadership practices of school heads in last-mile schools in the Division of Misamis Occidental. The case study method was chosen for its capacity to explore complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, offering a detailed and contextualized understanding of school leaders' experiences, practices, challenges, and coping strategies in resource-constrained settings.

B. Research Environment

This study was conducted in the researcher's designated district, specifically in the Aloran District and nearby last-mile schools within the Division of Misamis Occidental. These locations were relevant as they represented schools classified under the DepEd's Last Mile Schools Program, often characterized by having fewer than four classrooms, makeshift or substandard facilities, an absence of electricity, a lack of infrastructure funding for at least four years, difficult access requiring over an hour of travel or passage through challenging terrain, multigrade classes, fewer than five teachers, a student population of less than 100, and more than 75% Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. Conducting the research in this environment enabled firsthand exploration of leadership experiences under challenging circumstances.

C. Research Participants

The study involved ten school heads from last-mile schools in the Aloran District and its nearby districts within the Division of Misamis Occidental. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, each having at least one year of experience in managing last-mile schools.

D. Research Instrument

The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. The guide included open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' leadership practices in last-mile schools thoroughly. The participants' responses served as preliminary data subject to analysis and interpretation. The instrument focused on eliciting detailed responses regarding the practices, challenges, and coping strategies of school heads in last-mile schools. Follow-up questions were posed to clarify further and support their statements.

E. Data Gathering Procedure

This research sought to examine in exploring the leadership practices of school heads in last-mile schools. The researcher first secured approval by sending a formal letter of request to the Schools Division Superintendent of Misamis Occidental. Upon approval, coordination was made with the Public Schools District Supervisor (PSDS) and the selected school heads to explain the study's purpose, scope, and process. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted face-to-face in confidential settings with ten participants. Before each interview, the researcher obtained informed consent. Additional insights were gathered from teachers, parents, and PSDS to support methodological triangulation. While conducting the interviews, the researcher also took field notes, observing non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to support interpretation. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was then carried out by categorizing the data and identifying patterns relevant to leadership practices in last-mile schools.

F. Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and field notes were carefully examined and coded to identify emerging patterns and themes. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, all school heads were assigned pseudonyms (SH1–SH10). To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing and cross-verifying data gathered from three key stakeholder groups: teachers, parents, and Public Schools District Supervisors (PSDS).

G. Ethical Considerations in Conducting Research

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the rights of all persons involved, particularly the research participants, were respected as collaborative partners in the research process (Knight, 2023). Voluntary Participation, Informed Consent, Confidentiality, Right to Withdraw, Non-Maleficence, Respect for Privacy, and Results communication were observed during the conduct of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Practices Employed by School Heads in Decision-Making

The participants reported that their decision-making practices involved a collaborative, reflective, and developmental process. Their strategies are shaped by the realities of their context, requiring careful alignment between institutional goals and community needs.

Theme 1: Stakeholders' Collaboration

Participants described decision-making as collaborative, involving teachers, parents, the SGC, and barangay officials. SH1 shared, "It should be from the body. We all agree... At least everyone knows." SH6 emphasized, "We really strive to make everyone happy," while SH4 stated, "I really coordinate... I will not be the only one making decisions." SH5 said, "I will ask for suggestions and follow the consensus." SH7 added, "Planning first, not just me... so we can have a win-win solution." SH10 confirmed, "I will really attend the barangay session before deciding." These responses show that school heads rely on consensus, coordination, and participation to make context-aware and inclusive decisions.

Teachers affirmed this by noting regular meetings and consensus-based decisions. Parents reported clear communication and active involvement. Supervisors observed that school heads engaged teachers, parents, and barangay officials. This reflects Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership, where responsibility is shared to promote inclusivity. Harris (2013) found that stakeholder engagement improves trust and school effectiveness. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) emphasized that collective leadership is crucial for sustainable improvement, especially in marginalized settings.

Theme 2: Reflective Decision Making

Reflective decision-making among school heads centers on having a clear vision, consulting stakeholders, and prioritizing learners. SH2 stresses the need for a strong yet flexible vision, considering both internal and external stakeholders. SH9 shares how they "gather inputs" from other school heads to improve outcomes, while SH6 insists that decisions must benefit students and ensure "no one is at a disadvantage." SH1 approaches conflicts by listening to all sides and prays for unbiased decisions. These responses show a unified commitment to inclusive, student-centered, and well-considered leadership, where reflection,

consultation, and moral integrity guide every decision.

Supporting accounts from teachers, parents, and supervisors validate this approach. Teachers note that school heads consult with staff and reflect before making decisions; a parent emphasizes transparency; supervisors observe a balance between school direction and community needs. These findings are consistent with Heifetz et al. (2009), who link adaptive leadership to vision, reflection, and responsiveness to changing contexts. The participants' practices embody these principles, reinforcing the value of reflective decision-making in driving effective and sustainable leadership in last-mile schools.

Theme 3: Capacity Building in Decision Making

Participants emphasized the importance of capacity building in decision-making by training and mentoring Teachers-in-Charge (TICs) and involving teachers in leadership roles. SH8 shared, "I train my TIC in making plans... but she is really used to always asking permission from me." SH3 stated, "You really need support from your TIC... I trust her in that area." SH5 noted, "Even in my absence, they can develop effective plans because we've received training." SH7 added, "I gradually involve the teachers... to develop their confidence." These statements reflect a clear strategy of empowering teachers through training, trust, and gradual involvement to enhance shared leadership and build resilience in schools with limited personnel.

Teachers confirmed that school heads mentor TICs and build their confidence to take initiative. Parents observed that school leaders listen to their inputs, creating an inclusive culture. Supervisors noted that school heads are democratic and willing to seek help. This aligns with Northouse (2021), who describes adaptive leaders as those who develop others' leadership capacity. Mentoring and delegation strengthen leadership continuity and help schools respond to challenges more effectively.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Classroom Supervision

Participants emphasized the importance of supervising classroom instruction effectively, even in the face of limited resources and logistical difficulties in last-mile schools.

Theme 1: Structured Instructional Supervision

Participants highlighted the importance of clear, structured methods in supervising teachers, with regular, scheduled classroom observations using tools like the STAR Observation tool. SH1 said, "We really have a structured plan, our classroom observation is scheduled." SH7 noted, "I regularly observe classes, especially for new teachers... to ensure quality." SH6 shared, "I schedule instructional supervision, give technical assistance, conduct STAR Observation, and provide one-on-one feedback." SH8 described following a formal Instructional Supervision Plan with pre- and post-conferences, emphasizing targeted support. SH2 stressed, "There really is pre and post conference" to ensure teacher mastery. These responses show supervision as a strategic leadership tool focused on continuous teacher development and maintaining teaching standards.

Teachers confirmed regular, structured observations and acknowledged supervisory schedules, which district supervisors also verified through documented monitoring. This approach aligns with leadership theories emphasizing systematic instructional management. Glickman et al. (2018) support that structured, systematic instructional supervision is critical in challenging environments to sustain teaching quality and improve teacher effectiveness. Such practices promote instructional leadership and foster ongoing professional growth, especially important in resource-limited last-mile schools

Theme 2: Providing Constructive Feedback

Participants emphasized that providing constructive feedback is a crucial part of classroom supervision, focusing on reflection and professional growth rather than criticism. SH2 said, "My feedback is not criticism but constructive so they will not be discouraged." SH4 explained, "I first ask them to share what they observed in their own class" before giving corrections. SH10 noted, "I help them find ways to improve their teaching," while SH6 shared, "I ask them what their plans are to improve their class" in a friendly manner. SH1 uses questions and reflection sessions to help teachers discover needed improvements before providing feedback. SH9 balances pointing out areas for improvement with appreciating efforts to keep teachers motivated. These approaches foster a supportive

culture focused on continuous improvement and teacher morale.

Teachers confirmed that feedback sessions emphasize reflection over direct correction, supporting their growth and motivation. This aligns with leadership theories highlighting feedback as a developmental tool rather than purely evaluative. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007) assert that effective instructional leaders prioritize developmental feedback to enhance ongoing teacher improvement. Constructive and reflective feedback promotes teacher efficacy, professional satisfaction, and sustained instructional quality, which is essential in last-mile schools' efforts to maintain and improve teaching standards.

Theme 3: Adaptive Strategies for Instructional Improvement

Participants used adaptive strategies to overcome resource limitations and improve teaching effectiveness. SH5 said, "We conduct LAC sessions frequently to really improve the instructional strategies, especially in reading." SH2 integrated supervision into school visits despite distance, providing immediate feedback. SH6 did "walk-in" visits to observe teaching in natural settings when formal observations weren't scheduled. SH8 assigned master teachers to help monitor and give feedback, especially for new teachers. SH10 created a customized observation guide for multigrade classes, recognizing the need for tailored tools. These examples show resourcefulness, delegation, and innovation to meet unique classroom and school challenges.

Teachers noted that mentoring and coaching supported less experienced teachers, empowering them despite challenges. PSDS recognized consistent monitoring and follow-up coaching by school heads, reflecting adaptive practices. These adaptive strategies align with adaptive leadership theory, which emphasizes innovation and creative problem-solving in difficult contexts. Heifetz et al. (2009) describe adaptive leadership as involving innovative solutions in challenging circumstances, and participants' strategies exemplify this by enhancing instructional effectiveness through flexibility and responsiveness in resource-limited last-mile schools.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Teacher Mentoring

Participants highlighted the mentoring support they provided to teachers, especially focusing on new educators and those handling challenging classes, such as multigrade classrooms.

Theme 1: Targeted Mentoring through Professional Learning Sessions

The key themes highlight targeted mentoring through structured professional development, particularly via Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions. Participants stressed the importance of "consistent mentoring" tailored to teachers' needs, especially for new teachers facing "multigrade teaching" challenges. Mentoring sessions focused on specific instructional gaps like "reading and the MARUNGKO approach" for struggling readers, customized topics based on "feedback from observation," and adapting to "learner diversity and differentiated instruction" for Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. The approach is flexible, needs-based, and involves experienced teachers sharing strategies to support newer colleagues.

Supporting studies affirm that structured, targeted professional learning is critical for improving teaching capacity in challenging settings. Research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasizes that professional development focused on collaboration and addressing immediate instructional needs enhances teaching skills and student outcomes. The findings align with intentional leadership practices that prioritize contextual, responsive mentoring—especially crucial in complex multigrade classrooms—to build teacher effectiveness and confidence.

Theme 2: Emotional Encouragement. Participants

Participants highlighted emotional encouragement as a key mentoring theme, focusing on the need to address teachers' emotional health amid challenging environments. They stressed providing "counseling and moral support" especially for "newly deployed teachers in far-flung areas" prone to burnout. School heads regularly "ask them how they are, not just about the class," and offer encouragement when teachers carry a "heavy burden" to keep motivation high. Even "simple appreciation" was noted to significantly "boost" teachers facing difficult conditions. This shows mentoring extends beyond instruction to include emotional care and consistent guidance.

Supporting studies reinforce the importance of emotional intelligence in educational leadership. Fullan (2007) highlights that effective leaders address teachers' emotional and psychological needs to sustain morale and motivation. The participants' experiences align with this, demonstrating how emotional support enhances teacher resilience, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in demanding settings. This underscores the role of school heads in fostering a positive school climate through consistent emotional encouragement and guidance.

Theme 3: Promoting Professional Growth

Participants emphasized promoting professional growth by encouraging teachers to pursue continuous development opportunities that build confidence and leadership. Mentoring included pushing teachers to "attend trainings and seminars regularly" (SH2), "take masters, join professional networks" (SH8), and "lead school activities" (SH1) to hone leadership skills. Teachers were also urged to "participate in district and division level contests" (SH5), "share best practices in LAC" (SH6), and "facilitate training" (SH10) to gain leadership experience and confidence. This approach viewed mentoring as a catalyst for ongoing improvement and leadership development.

Supporting studies highlight that mentoring enhances professional confidence, motivation, and long-term growth. Bandura (1997) notes that increased self-efficacy helps teachers set higher goals, persist through challenges, and manage classrooms more effectively. The mentoring strategies reported align with leadership approaches promoting teacher autonomy and continuous development, which enhance teaching effectiveness and sustained student outcomes. These findings confirm mentoring as a key practice for cultivating emerging leaders and sustaining professional excellence in last-mile schools.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Student-Centered Learning

Participants in last-mile schools implemented student-centered learning strategies tailored to address the diverse needs of students, limited resources, and complex educational settings.

Theme 1: Sustaining Indigenous Culture through Contextualized Instruction

Participants emphasized sustaining Indigenous culture through contextualized instruction by integrating local dialects, preserving traditions, and promoting student leadership within Indigenous contexts. They shared practices such as gathering students weekly to share Subanen dialects and greetings to "preserve their culture" (SH10), "contextualizing teaching" to make lessons easier to understand and appreciate (SH4), and integrating the Subanen language while encouraging participation in leadership groups like SELG (SH7). Lessons were localized using community examples to ensure relevance for Indigenous learners (SH2).

Supporting studies affirm that culturally responsive teaching enhances student engagement and learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) highlights that connecting lessons to students' lived experiences "validates their identity," fosters inclusivity, and improves academic outcomes. The participants' accounts demonstrate intentional efforts by school heads to adapt instruction in Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) settings, promoting cultural preservation while making learning meaningful and motivating for Indigenous students.

Theme 2: Active and Experiential Learning

Participants emphasized active and experiential learning as key to engaging students through hands-on activities, real-world experiences, and interactive methods. They described teaching outside for science lessons to "actually see things like what soil erosion is" (SH4), daily group and one-on-one reading sessions to reinforce literacy (SH7), and using "learning games or group tasks instead of constant lectures" to boost motivation (SH6). Students are encouraged to "demonstrate what they know" (SH1) and participate in activities like flag ceremonies to build confidence (SH9), highlighting the focus on practical application and student participation.

Supporting studies affirm that active learning enhances engagement and academic success. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue that experiential and hands-on strategies significantly improve student motivation, critical thinking, and practical skill development. The participants' approaches align with these findings, demonstrating how active learning fosters deeper understanding and confidence, especially in last-mile schools facing socioeconomic challenges.

Theme 3: Differentiated Instructional Methods

Participants highlighted differentiated instructional methods as essential to address diverse student needs, especially in multi-grade schools. They described tailoring activities and pacing to individual abilities: “I base my instruction on their level so they really understand” (SH2), and “different activities because it's a multi-grade school to cater to their needs” (SH6). Visual learners are supported through tools like TV (SH3), while struggling students receive simpler tasks to avoid overwhelm (SH7). Teaching strategies are chosen based on group suitability, not a one-size-fits-all approach (SH5), and school heads monitor teachers' use of differentiated approaches during observations (SH8).

Supporting studies emphasize that differentiated instruction is critical for meeting diverse educational needs. Tomlinson (2001) argues it creates individualized learning pathways, improves student performance, and fosters inclusivity. These practices align with the participants' reports, showing that tailored instruction in small, multi-grade classrooms enhances learning outcomes and helps all students succeed.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Performance Management

Effective management and enhancement of teacher and student performance in last-mile schools involve three key practices.

Theme 1: Systematic Monitoring and Evaluation

Participants emphasized the importance of structured and systematic monitoring to assess teaching quality and student progress regularly. SH5 said, “I really visit the class every week, to see if the teaching is consistent and if there is any improvement.” SH6 noted, “If there is underperformance, I do one-on-one coaching and immediately make an improvement plan.” SH1 reported, “I monitor the performance of teachers using standardized forms and classroom observations to identify their strengths and areas for improvement clearly.” SH2 added, “I review lesson plans and test results, then compare them with the actual classroom output of the child.” SH7 stated, “I include the teachers in the analysis of the results so they themselves can see where they can improve.” These practices ensure continuous

improvement and accountability through regular, informed assessments.

Supporting studies reinforce the value of these approaches. Marzano et al. (2005) recommend structured and regular evaluations as essential for effective performance management, helping sustain ongoing improvements in teaching and learning. The school heads' systematic use of observation tools, coaching, and data analysis aligns with this framework, demonstrating their commitment to maintaining educational quality in challenging school settings.

Theme 2: Motivational Strategies and Recognition

Participants emphasized motivation for improving performance through recognition, incentives, and professional growth opportunities. SH2 said, “Sometimes I treat the teachers to lunch so we can bond, and they can relax.” SH6 shared, “We recognize their achievements during the flag ceremony so everyone can appreciate them... it also motivates them.” SH1 reported, “You can see all of it on the school's Facebook page because we post their achievements there for proper recognition... it really gives them honor in school!” SH3 noted, “If there is good output, we share it during LAC so others are more motivated.” These strategies foster a positive environment that sustains morale and encourages continuous improvement.

Supporting studies link these strategies to established motivation theories. Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory (1959) highlights the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in enhancing job satisfaction and productivity. The school heads' use of public recognition, social bonding, and incentives aligns with this framework, demonstrating how motivation drives performance in challenging last-mile school contexts.

Theme 3: Proactive Management of Performance Gaps

Participants emphasized proactive management of performance gaps through immediate identification and targeted interventions. They highlighted mentoring, remedial sessions, and ongoing support as key strategies. For example, SH7 said, “When I see a teacher struggling, I don't wait for the problem to get bigger. There should be immediate mentoring and support.” SH5 noted, “We really give remedial and intervention classes

for students who are low performing." Home visits were conducted to address absenteeism caused by external factors, as SH8 shared, "If a child is often absent because of farming, we really visit them at home to follow up." These responses show a focus on early detection, tailored interventions, and community involvement to close performance gaps.

Supporting studies reinforce this proactive approach. Fullan (2007) highlights proactive educational leadership as essential for timely interventions and sustained support to effectively manage performance challenges. The school heads' strategies align with this framework, emphasizing immediate mentoring, continuous monitoring, and engagement with families, which research suggests are critical for improving student outcomes in difficult contexts such as last-mile schools.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Terms of School Improvement Plan (SIP)

School heads in last-mile schools effectively implement School Improvement Plans despite resource constraints.

Theme 1: Collaborative Planning with Stakeholder Involvement

Participants highlighted the critical role of active collaboration and stakeholder involvement in the success of School Improvement Plans (SIP). SH2 noted, "We constantly review the SIP... to ensure shared responsibility and commitment." SH4 emphasized community participation led to their recognition as a regional HLI winner. SH3 said, "Before we finalize a plan, we consult the SGC to make sure everything is aligned with community needs." Others stressed early and ongoing engagement, such as presenting drafts at PTA meetings (SH7) and incorporating collective ideas from barangay, teachers, and parents (SH8). SIP reviews involve discussing progress and listening to stakeholder feedback (SH10), showing a strong culture of participatory governance.

Supporting studies align with these findings, particularly Bryk and Schneider's (2002) trust-based community framework, which underscores that relational trust among stakeholders—teachers, parents, and community members—is essential for effective school improvement. Their research demonstrates that such trust promotes cooperation, openness, and sustained

engagement, which enhances the impact of collaborative planning and shared ownership in school reforms. This framework validates the importance of inclusive stakeholder participation observed in the SIP initiatives.

Theme 2: Innovative Resource Mobilization

Participants stressed innovative and strategic resource mobilization as key to overcoming funding limitations in SIP implementation. SH1 said, "We are really resourceful; we don't rely on the government alone... through partnerships to continue our SIP projects." SH10 noted, "Good linkages with stakeholders, barangay, and LGU made our SIP successful despite limited DepEd funds." SH5 mentioned strengthening the school garden to support the feeding program. SH3 shared, "We have a project funded by the barangay because we presented the SIP during their session." These examples show creativity, community engagement, and strategic presentation as central themes in resource mobilization.

Supporting studies highlight the importance of these strategies. Fullan (2007) argues that effective school leaders creatively leverage partnerships to overcome resource constraints and sustain school improvement efforts. Fullan emphasizes that proactive external partnerships provide critical resources, enhance innovation, and support initiatives beyond traditional government funding. This framework validates the innovative approaches used by school heads to maintain SIP momentum despite financial challenges.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Terms of School-Community Engagement

Effective community engagement in last-mile school activities involves leveraging partnerships to support educational goals and student success.

Theme 1: Strengthening Stakeholder Participation through Community Partnerships

Participants highlighted the vital role of active participation and volunteerism from parents and community members in school improvement. SH9 stated, "The parents actively participate in all activities even without being asked. They volunteer because they are committed to helping." SH10 added, "Their volunteering contributed to the success of the activities and the improvement

of our school." SH1 mentioned parents helping with cleaning and event preparation, while SH3 noted, "The barangay itself volunteers manpower for school repairs." SH4 emphasized that "all stakeholders are present—parents, tanods, and SGC" during Brigada Eskwela, and SH6 shared that parents take turns cooking for the feeding program. These accounts show strong community partnerships and shared responsibility supporting school initiatives.

Supporting studies align with these findings, particularly Epstein's (2010) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which stresses that collaboration among families, schools, and communities significantly impacts student success and school effectiveness. Epstein highlights that active parental and community involvement, including volunteerism, is essential in fostering positive educational outcomes and sustaining school improvement efforts.

Theme 2: Building Sustainable Relationships through Trust and Transparency

Participants stressed the importance of trust and transparency in building and maintaining sustainable relationships with the community. SH1 said, "Trust is the most important thing... I am really transparent in all financial and project decisions." SH5 noted, "Our communication is clear... because they see our sincerity and transparency." SH2 mentioned posting financial reports publicly, while SH3 shared, "We inform the PTA about the status of projects, even if not finished." SH4 emphasized direct communication to avoid misunderstandings, and SH6 highlighted regular meetings to keep everyone updated. SH7 stated, "No secrets... we explain plans to the community," and SH10 added that even small projects get regular updates to show transparency. These examples reflect a consistent effort by school heads to build credibility and trust through open, honest communication.

Supporting studies reinforce these themes. Bryk and Schneider's (2002) concept of relational trust highlights the vital role of transparency, sincerity, and consistent communication in fostering strong school-community partnerships. They argue that such trust facilitates collaboration, community support, and engagement, all essential for sustained educational improvement. This framework validates the participants' emphasis

on transparent leadership as foundational to long-term school success.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Terms of School Operations and Management

Effective management of daily operations in last-mile schools is accomplished despite prevalent challenges

Theme 1: Strategic Resource Allocation and Budgeting

Participants emphasized careful planning and transparent budgeting to manage limited resources effectively. SH1 said, "We are very strict with the budget matrix... I personally do not handle money so there are no issues of corruption." SH2 added, "We are flexible with the budget but still compliant with guidelines... especially when expenses are for emergencies." SH3 noted, "We make sure that the budget is aligned with the SIP priorities so that the direction of spending is clear." SH6 stated, "We monitor expenses per project so they do not exceed the approved allocation." SH7 emphasized the need for foresight given limited funds, while SH8 explained that teachers are informed about the budget breakdown to understand limitations. These practices reflect strategic, transparent financial management supporting school priorities.

Supporting studies align with these findings. Coffin & Cooper (2017) emphasize that transparent and strategic budgeting enhances efficiency and accountability, which are critical for schools with limited resources. Their resource management framework highlights that clearly articulated financial protocols help prevent financial issues and ensure resources are used effectively, validating the participants' approach to careful budgeting and fiscal discipline.

Theme 2: Participatory management through effective delegation

School heads emphasized the importance of participatory management through effective delegation to ensure smooth school operations and shared responsibility. For example, SH3 said, "I delegate some tasks to my TIC and teachers so that only one person isn't burdened," highlighting workload distribution. SH7 stressed collaborative financial management: "I always talk and consult with my teachers and stakeholders... it's easier to

create solutions when many are involved.” Others mentioned consulting committees before decisions (SH4), training TICs to handle concerns (SH5), and involving officers in monitoring budgets (SH6, SH8), all showing a culture of teamwork and shared accountability.

Supporting studies reinforce these practices as effective for promoting distributed leadership and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers, parents, and PSDS observed better time management, open communication, and efficient delegation, leading to smoother operations and greater staff ownership. This aligns with Spillane’s (2006) concept of distributed leadership, which argues that shared responsibilities and collaboration increase staff engagement, build organizational capacity, and improve problem-solving, thus enhancing overall school management effectiveness.

Practices Employed by School Heads in Terms of Personal & Professional Effectiveness

Maintaining personal well-being and enhancing professional effectiveness are crucial despite the demanding nature of managing last-mile schools.

Theme 1: Balancing Professional Responsibilities with Personal Life

Participants recognized the need to balance professional duties with personal life by practicing deliberate time management and setting clear boundaries. SH1 said, “Work and family should really be balanced... my personal life should not be sacrificed.” SH8 added, “When it's work, it's really work, but when it's family time, I really focus on them so that I don't lose my motivation for work.” Others noted scheduling to avoid overlap (SH2), not bringing work home on weekends (SH3), pacing oneself (SH4), setting message cut-off times (SH5), weekly planning (SH6), and family support motivating balance (SH7).

Supporting studies confirm that effective time management and clear boundaries enhance school heads’ effectiveness and prevent burnout. Teachers and parents observed school heads’ flexibility and approachability despite busy roles, while supervisors affirmed their balanced professionalism. This aligns with Greenhaus and Allen’s (2011) work-life balance theory, which emphasizes that harmony between professional and personal life improves individual

effectiveness, reduces stress, and supports sustained success and well-being.

Theme 2: Engaging in Continuous Development

School heads in last-mile schools emphasized continuous learning as essential for effective leadership. SH7 said, “I'm pursuing a master's degree because I want to be an example to my teachers and students that continuous education is important.” SH3 noted that “participation in IPED training sessions helped us become more culturally responsive.” SH8 shared, “I join seminars and workshops to stay updated on new trends in education and leadership.” SH5 focused on studying strategies for managing multi-grade schools, while SH1 highlighted learning from “daily interactions with colleagues and stakeholders.” SH9 reflected that “years managing two schools have strengthened who I am personally and professionally.” These responses show commitment to lifelong learning through formal education, training, and practical experience.

Supporting studies link continuous development to resilience and sustained leadership effectiveness. School heads adopt resilience strategies and positive coping mechanisms to manage stress and maintain emotional stability. This aligns with Patterson and Kelleher’s (2005) resilience framework, emphasizing emotional intelligence, optimism, and social support as key to effective leadership. Their research suggests resilient leaders better manage challenges and sustain organizational success in complex contexts.

Challenges Faced by School Heads in Managing Last-Mile School

This section examines the distinct challenges school heads encounter in managing last-mile schools

Theme 1: Geographical Constraints

Participants identified geographic isolation as a major challenge, citing difficult terrain, hazardous travel, and costly fares. SH1 said, “One of the real challenges is the distance of the school... it's really risky especially because there are hardly any houses nearby.” SH10 shared, “I've had accidents and slipped several times,” highlighting dangerous roads. SH6 explained that teachers stay at school during the week due to travel risks and expense,

going home only on Fridays. SH3 described a “1-meter wide, very steep” road making travel physically demanding. SH5 noted the expensive fare of ₱300 and difficulty finding rides. SH2 emphasized delays in project delivery and reluctance of service providers due to isolation. These issues affect safety, logistics, teacher retention, and overall operations.

Teachers, parents, and supervisors confirmed that geographical constraints disrupt daily travel, supply delivery, and staff deployment. Parents worried about children’s risky commutes, especially in bad weather. Supervisors highlighted poor roads and lack of transportation as factors limiting school effectiveness. Geographic isolation reduces communication efficiency and compromises safety, significantly impacting school management. Gallego (2022) stressed that isolated schools remain under-resourced and underserved without targeted interventions, limiting educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners.

Theme 2: Resource Scarcity

Participants reported severe shortages of resources such as classrooms, instructional materials, and frequent logistical challenges including high transportation costs and poor infrastructure. For example, SH5 stated, “Kulang kaayo ang among classrooms... grabe kaayo ang among gasto sa daily transport,” and SH8 described how supplies “isakay pa ug kabayo,” highlighting extreme transport difficulties. Other participants noted expensive daily commutes, poverty, absenteeism due to farm work, lack of internet, power interruptions (SH6), and frequent teacher turnover (SH7), with only two teachers handling multigrade classes from Kinder to Grade 6 (SH10). These conditions create a heavy burden on school leaders, who struggle to maintain quality education amid limited infrastructure, manpower, and financial resources.

Supporting studies confirm these findings, emphasizing that resource scarcity forces school leaders to innovate constantly under severe constraints. PSDS highlighted frequent teacher turnover linked to stress from inadequate resources. Odden and Picus (2014) argue that such severe resource limitations require exceptional adaptability and innovative strategies from school administrators to sustain educational effectiveness. Together, these insights illustrate

how logistical and material shortages critically challenge instructional leadership and school operations in last-mile schools.

Theme 3: Socio-Economic and Cultural Challenges

Participants highlighted socio-economic and cultural challenges that heavily affect student attendance and educational outcomes. SH5 noted, “Many children are absent because of their family’s poverty, and they marry young here,” while SH9 mentioned, “Constant pull-out in the lower grades affect teaching quality, limited teachers affect learning; busy parents unable to support children.” SH6 explained children miss school to help on farms or care for siblings, and SH7 added that fishing or farming duties are common reasons for absenteeism, with families unable to prioritize schooling due to food insecurity. SH8 pointed out that many stop schooling after Grade 6 because of distance and poverty, often marrying early. These factors reflect how poverty, labor demands, and cultural norms intersect to hinder continuous schooling and educational success.

Supporting studies align with these findings, emphasizing that socio-economic and cultural barriers strongly limit student participation and educational progress. Teachers and parents confirmed the impact of poverty, child labor, and early marriage on attendance. Bourdieu’s Social Reproduction Theory (1977) explains how these factors perpetuate educational inequalities, highlighting the need for culturally responsive and socio-economically aware leadership to overcome systemic barriers in last-mile schools.

Coping Strategies Used by School Heads to Overcome Leadership Challenge

School heads employed various coping strategies to manage the unique challenges of leading last-mile schools effectively

Theme 1: Optimistic Resilience

Participants stressed the need for optimism and resilience in handling the difficulties of managing last-mile schools. SH1 said, “Think positive ra gyud...what the school is, is a reflection of the community,” showing emotional alignment with their environment. SH2 noted, “If there’s a will, there’s a way...laban lang gihapon,” reflecting persistence despite distance. SH4 stated, “Makaya ra gyud tanan kay ako ning pamugas,” tying

resilience to livelihood. SH5 added, “Positive vibes gyud ko... kita ra gyud ang magdaot sa atong kaugalingon,” pointing to emotional self-regulation. SH9 and SH10 highlighted endurance through physical hardship, while SH8 emphasized being “a resourceful leader,” capable of guiding the community and finding ways forward.

Teachers, parents, and supervisors confirmed that school heads maintain positivity despite limited resources, logistical challenges, and teacher turnover. Leaders are trained to stay optimistic, create solutions, and adapt under pressure. Fredrickson’s (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions supports this, stating that positive emotions expand adaptive coping and psychological resilience—key traits for leading in high-stress, low-resource settings.

Theme 2: Holistic Support System

Participants described relying on a holistic support system that addressed emotional, spiritual, familial, and professional needs. SH7 said, “I open up, I share it with colleagues .. then always prayer,” showing the value of communication and faith. SH9 emphasized, “I really go to church, I get strength from the Lord,” while SH3 noted, “I talk to my co-teachers; I don’t like to keep it to myself,” highlighting peer support. SH2 shared, “My family really, they are my strength especially when I get very burned-out,” pointing to familial support. SH1 added, “We just help each other here,” and SH5 stressed, “My engagement with the stakeholders already gives me joy and help,” showing the role of teamwork and community in sustaining well-being.

Supporting studies confirm that spiritual grounding, peer interaction, and community engagement help school leaders cope with stress from emergencies, low morale, and resource gaps. Cobb’s (1976) social support theory explains how strong networks and spiritual practices improve resilience and coping in high-pressure environments, particularly in remote and under-resourced school contexts.

Theme 3: Recreational Activities

Participants shared that engaging in recreational activities and relaxation helped them manage stress and stay mentally balanced. SH1 said, “We sometimes wander with the family... to relax,” while SH5 and SH2 emphasized bonding through outings and games like Scrabble. SH3 noted, “I eat

delicious food... then I rest and listen to music,” and SH9 added, “I just really sleep properly... the only way I can recharge.” SH10 shared, “I relax with the teachers... we chat and then have coffee,” showing the value of peer socialization. SH4 also highlighted, “I jog during the weekend... it helps to refresh the mind,” indicating physical activity as mental relief.

These coping methods help address stress from the many roles school heads juggle, such as leadership, counseling, and community engagement. Recreational breaks help maintain focus and prevent burnout. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress and coping supports this, noting that relaxation and leisure activities reduce stress and improve performance. Though based on a small sample in Misamis Occidental, the findings suggest recreation supports effective school leadership, with implications for broader leadership development strategies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that school heads in last-mile schools implement leadership practices grounded in collaboration, strategic reflection, and contextual responsiveness. Despite facing persistent challenges related to geographic isolation, limited resources, insufficient manpower, and socio-cultural barriers, they successfully sustained school operations and instructional leadership through inclusive decision-making, structured supervision, teacher mentoring, and community involvement. To cope with these challenges, school heads relied on personal resilience, social and spiritual support, and practical stress-relief strategies. These findings suggest the need for the Department of Education and other stakeholders to provide sustained leadership training, strengthen support systems for school heads in remote areas, and institutionalize mechanisms that promote well-being, shared leadership, and localized decision-making in last-mile schools.

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