

The Influence of Principal Leadership on School Improvement in a Philippine Public Secondary School: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of a school principal's leadership on school improvement in a public secondary school in Camarines Sur, Philippines. Employing a qualitative design, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the school principal and four teachers, and analyzed the data using a thematic analysis approach. The principal demonstrated a hands-on leadership style by fostering collaboration, mentoring staff, promoting instructional effectiveness, and strengthening school-community relationships. Teachers described the principal as proactive, approachable, and committed to shared goals. The school faced persistent challenges, including limited financial resources, insufficient instructional materials, high staff workload, and inconsistent stakeholder participation. To address these, the principal implemented strategies such as participatory planning, open communication channels, professional development initiatives, and inclusive decision-making processes. These actions enhanced teamwork and adaptability within the school. The study highlights the importance of strategic, collaborative, and responsive leadership in overcoming barriers and sustaining school progress within the context of Philippine public education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is recognized as one of the most critical factors influencing the growth and success of educational institutions. In schools, the principal serves as the instructional leader, responsible for guiding improvements in teaching, learning, and overall school performance. According to Leithwood et al. [1], effective leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to student learning. The principal's leadership can either drive or delay school progress, depending on how leadership priorities are enacted [2].

School improvement, in this study, refers to a set of intentional and sustained efforts aimed at enhancing student learning outcomes, improving teaching quality, fostering a supportive school culture, and ensuring that school resources and environments are conducive to the learning process [3]. It encompasses changes in instructional practices, curriculum enhancements, a collaborative culture, and stakeholder engagement.

Different leadership styles influence these areas in various ways. Harris [4] emphasizes that leadership promoting collaboration, continuous professional development, and innovation is key to achieving meaningful school improvement. The principal's role goes beyond administrative functions to include instructional mentoring and culture-building [5], [6]. Transformational leadership, in particular, encourages teacher growth and collaboration, leading to a positive school climate [7], [8].

Instructional leadership also plays a critical role. Lai and Lien [9] assert that when principals focus on curriculum alignment, teaching quality, and assessment systems, they have a significant influence on both instructional effectiveness and student achievement. As Reyes [10] notes, instructional leaders do not merely implement policy—they actively shape classroom instruction and school routines.

Equally important is distributed leadership. Galdames-Calderón [11] highlights that schools practicing collective learning and shared decision-making often experience greater success in improvement efforts. Principals who empower teachers and delegate leadership roles foster ownership and commitment, resulting in more sustainable reforms [12]. Furthermore, principals serve as liaisons between schools and external stakeholders. Strong partnerships with parents, local authorities, and community groups increase access to resources and enhance support for school initiatives [13].

In the Philippine context, the principal's leadership is shaped by national mandates and community expectations. DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020 outlines the role of principals as instructional leaders and champions of school-based management [14]. According to De Castro and Jimenez [15], many Filipino principals now focus on teacher empowerment, participatory leadership, and stakeholder collaboration to improve learning outcomes. However, limitations such as inadequate resources, administrative workload, and uneven leadership training can hinder their effectiveness [16].

Existing literature on principal leadership in the Philippines tends to be quantitative and policy-focused, leaving a gap in qualitative insights. This study, conducted in 2023, focuses on understanding how a school principal in a selected public secondary school in the province of Camarines Sur, Philippines, influences school improvement. It explores the principal's role in driving improvement efforts, the challenges encountered in implementing effective leadership strategies, and the actions taken to address these challenges and enhance the school's overall progress. Through this focused inquiry, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into leadership practices that can contribute to sustainable school development in the Philippine context.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the influence of a school principal's leadership on school improvement. It focused on gathering in-depth insights from one public secondary school in Camarines Sur through interviews and document analysis. The design allowed for a deeper understanding of leadership practices and their impact within the school context. This approach is important because it enables researchers to thoroughly explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and contexts, providing rich and detailed insights that quantitative data alone cannot capture [17].

2.2. Participant Selection

The participants of this study were four teachers who had been teaching in the school for more than three years, along with the school principal, who had been assigned to the school for the past three years. These participants were selected for their familiarity with the school's leadership dynamics and improvement efforts. Their experiences provided valuable insights into how the principal's leadership influenced various aspects of school improvement.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

Before initiating the study, the researchers obtained formal approval from the school principal, who willingly agreed to participate in the study. Upon approval, interviews were scheduled with the principal and four selected teachers during their vacant periods, with each session lasting approximately 20 minutes. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, where participants were provided with prepared questions and asked to write their responses. This method enabled the researchers to gather detailed insights into the principal's leadership practices and their perceived impact on school improvement.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data collected through structured interviews, guided by pre-identified thematic categories, were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Since the interview questions were already organized according to key themes related to leadership and school improvement, the researchers reviewed the participants' responses within each theme to identify consistent patterns and viewpoints. These responses were then interpreted to draw meaningful insights into how the principal's leadership practices influenced the school's overall progress.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to all participants, and their voluntary participation was emphasized. They were informed that their responses would be used for academic purposes and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality and respect for participants' rights were maintained throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Role of the School Principal in Driving School Improvement Initiatives

When asked about the role of the school principal in driving school improvement initiatives, all respondents acknowledged the principal's central leadership function. However, each shared unique perspectives that highlight varying aspects of how this role is perceived and experienced in the context of their school setting.

One teacher emphasized that the principal plays an active and visible role in leading the school's improvement efforts. Teacher A shared, *"The principal has a big responsibility in planning and leading all school improvements. The principal is visible when there are programs, and clear directions guide us. The principal also serves as a figurehead who inspires us and keeps us aligned with the school's goals."*

Teacher B emphasized the principal's gatekeeping and facilitative role in the planning process. Their insights suggest a structured leadership approach and close supervision during planning and implementation. Teacher B stated, *"The principal plays the key role in giving direction, especially during planning. All initiatives pass through the principal's office before approval. The principal is always present in leadership team discussions and participates in the finalization of school targets."*

Teacher C expressed appreciation for the principal's hands-on involvement, particularly in academic and developmental areas. Their response reflects a relationship based on guidance and instructional leadership. Teacher C explained, *"The principal is hands-on, especially in academic matters and school development. The principal supports our efforts by giving guidance and providing a sense of direction. We follow the principal's plans and instructions in implementing school improvements."*

Teacher D highlighted the principal's unifying and participatory role. Their response illustrates how leadership can also be exercised by fostering collaboration and inclusivity among staff. Teacher D described, *"The principal is supportive and actively joins in most of the school programs. The principal consolidates the staff's ideas and gives us focus. Even though we are many, the principal ensures we are united in our objectives."*

The principal provided a broader perspective, reinforcing the intentional and strategic nature of their leadership. Their response focuses on collaboration, planning, and alignment with key areas of school improvement. The principal affirmed, *"I believe I play a crucial role in leading and guiding the direction of school improvement. I make sure that I am actively involved in identifying our school's priority areas, such as curriculum development, teacher training, community engagement, and enhancing learning outcomes for our learners. I lead the formulation of plans but also collaborate with my teaching and non-teaching staff, stakeholders, learners, and the community to ensure a shared direction."*

3.2. Key Problems and Challenges in Implementing Effective Leadership Strategies for School Improvement

When asked about the challenges encountered in implementing school improvement efforts, respondents shared a range of practical and recurring issues. While financial constraints emerged as a common theme, each teacher highlighted specific day-to-day

realities—such as workload, participation, and resource limitations—that shape the pace and success of initiatives in their school.

Teacher A noted, *“I believe our principal is effective, but there are challenges that can affect how leadership efforts move forward. Our biggest challenge is the lack of sufficient funds for projects, especially for facilities. Sometimes, there are good plans, but implementing them takes time due to delays in support. The principal always tries to find ways, but the budget is always a limitation.”*

Teacher B raised concerns not just about resources, but about teacher buy-in. Their response reflected that internal staff dynamics, such as willingness to adapt and share the load, also affect the success of improvement initiatives. Teacher B mentioned, *“Another problem is that not all teachers are equally participative. Some staff still resist changes, especially if they add to their workload. Nevertheless, overall, the principal still manages to encourage collaboration.”*

Teacher C highlighted how the workload and time pressures experienced by teachers present an ongoing challenge for the principal in sustaining improvement efforts. Despite these constraints, the principal remains supportive and adaptable to the situation. Teacher C shared, *“I think one of the big challenges for our principal is really the workload we all face. We have numerous tasks, and sometimes it is challenging to keep up with the improvement plans. The principal understands this and really tries to adjust, delegates tasks when needed, and listens to us when we bring it up.”*

Teacher D pointed out that the lack of equipment remains a challenge for the principal, especially considering the teaching and learning needs in today’s 21st-century context. Despite these limitations, the principal continues to seek ways to provide necessary resources for both teachers and learners. Teacher D shared, *“We are now in a 21st-century where teaching and learning have greater needs, but there are still equipment and resources we lack. I see that our principal really tries to find ways to provide what we need for our teaching and for the learners.”*

The principal acknowledged that resource and budget constraints are the most persistent hurdles. However, the principal also expressed confidence in the staff’s teamwork and cooperation, which helps in navigating these limitations. The principal explained, *“My main challenge is the inadequacy of budget and resources. Even with the cooperation of my teachers, there are times when we are delayed due to these limitations. Despite this, I still find it manageable because the staff collaborates with me and helps with the implementation.”*

3.3. Actions the Principal Can Take to Address Identified Problems and Enhance School Improvement Efforts

When asked what actions the school principal can take to address existing problems better and strengthen school improvement initiatives, the respondents shared proactive and realistic recommendations. Each one focused on different areas such as communication, collaboration, professional development, and shared decision-making—all seen as vital levers to support progress in the school context.

Teacher A recommended practical and relationship-based strategies, emphasizing that sustained collaboration and transparent communication are key foundations for moving the school forward, along with providing relevant training opportunities. Teacher A suggested, *“Open communication is important so that all staff know what to expect. Providing additional training will help us be more effective in new programs, enabling us to support our principal better. If we continue collaborating and find ways to get more support, our school can improve even more.”*

Teacher B highlighted the need for stronger institutional structures and clearer systems. Their response reflects a call for more consistent alignment among staff through better feedback, clearer policies, and enhanced professional opportunities. Teacher B emphasized, *“We need clearer policies and better feedback mechanisms. Regular meetings help align us with the school's goals. It would also help if teachers were given more growth opportunities.”*

Teacher C focused on improving implementation through closer collaboration and community partnerships. Their response suggests that guided support, consistent teamwork, and strong community ties can accelerate school improvement efforts. Teacher C suggested, *“Stronger collaboration among teachers would really help us implement things properly. We also need to strengthen our connection with the community, as they can provide valuable support to the school. Improvement will be faster if communication and cooperation are always present.”*

Teacher D focused on shared leadership and evidence-based planning. They emphasized the importance of engaging teachers in decision-making and using data more effectively, while also leveraging external partnerships for additional resources. Teacher D proposed, *“It is important that we feel involved in decision-making. If we can use data in planning and evaluating, that would guide us better. Strengthening the ties with external partners also helps provide added support.”*

The principal provided a comprehensive outlook, emphasizing the importance of transparency, teacher support, strong external collaborations, and a clear focus on learners. Their response reflected a strategic commitment to long-term, sustainable improvement through active involvement with teachers, local government, and stakeholders. The principal reflected, *“I prioritize increasing transparency, supporting teachers' professional development, and focusing on students. Strengthening partnerships with the community and stakeholders is also crucial for sustainable improvement. This includes collaborating with our local government unit, the barangays, the parent-teacher association, and other stakeholders to make our improvement goals a reality. I am very confident that by implementing these strategies, we will see progress in our school's performance and environment.”*

3.4. Discussions

The responses highlighted the principal's central role in driving school improvement initiatives. Across all perspectives, the principal was seen as an active leader who provides direction, fosters collaboration, and ensures alignment with the school's goals. This finding is supported by Kilag et al. [18], who found that effective school principals in the Philippines

actively guide their institutions by articulating a clear vision, fostering collaboration, and aligning strategies with school goals through hands-on leadership and community engagement.

Teachers emphasized the principal's visibility and involvement in programs, planning, and academic development. The principal's leadership was described as hands-on, supportive, and participatory, striking a balance between instructional guidance and strategic oversight. This finding is corroborated by Rodulfa [19], who highlights that principals who actively guide instruction and mentor teachers play essential roles in fostering both pedagogical and strategic school improvement efforts. Teachers also recognized the importance of the principal's role in unifying staff efforts and promoting an inclusive, collaborative environment. This observation is also reinforced by Simbre et al. [20], whose study found that principals exhibiting inclusive and collaborative leadership styles significantly enhance staff cohesion and foster a positive, unified school climate.

From the principal's own perspective, leadership was focused on guiding improvement through active engagement in planning, curriculum development, teacher support, and community partnerships. This aligns with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes vision building, teacher empowerment, and a collaborative culture. This is supported by Li et al. [21], who noted that effective principals drive school improvement by actively participating in planning, shaping the curriculum, supporting teachers, and building strong community ties.

Participants identified several challenges influencing the implementation of school improvement efforts. Financial constraints, particularly the lack of sufficient budget for projects and resources, emerged as the most pressing concern. This was also observed by Ruvahofi et al. [22], who reported that inadequate budgets for materials, facilities, and staffing were the most frequent obstacle in school resource management. These challenges reflect long-standing structural issues rooted in national and regional funding disparities. Despite decentralized school-based management policies, many public schools in the Philippines continue to face inadequate support due to limited local government resources and bureaucratic delays in the distribution of national funding. As a result, school principals often operate within significant limitations, requiring them to be resourceful and adaptive.

Teachers also highlighted practical challenges, including workload pressures, limited equipment, and varying levels of staff participation. This was supported by Asman et al. [23], who reported that excessive workloads, inadequate equipment, and uneven staff participation create significant practical challenges for teachers. These day-to-day realities hinder the pace and sustainability of school improvement initiatives. In such contexts, the principal's ability to demonstrate transformational and distributed leadership becomes crucial. By empowering teachers, promoting collaboration, and encouraging shared ownership of school initiatives, principals can mitigate some of the limitations posed by external constraints.

Despite these challenges, both teachers and the principal acknowledged the importance of teamwork, adaptability, and collaboration in overcoming obstacles. This was supported by Donque and Valle [24], who emphasized that teamwork, adaptability, and collaboration are essential in achieving school success. The principal's leadership was

viewed as responsive and committed to finding ways to address these limitations while maintaining progress toward school improvement goals. This aligns with Em [25], who discussed that a 21st-century leader is well-educated, learns from the past, leads effectively in the present, and anticipates future challenges to prepare for and address unforeseen problems. Such qualities are especially vital in contexts with persistent resource constraints, where principals must not only respond to current needs but also plan strategically for long-term development.

In addition, the responses revealed several actionable approaches that the principal could adopt to advance school improvement efforts further. Suggestions centered on strengthening communication, fostering collaboration, deepening community engagement, and promoting shared leadership—hallmarks of both transformational and distributed leadership models. This was supported by Phillips et al. [26], who emphasized the importance of communication, collaboration, and shared leadership in school improvement.

Teachers emphasized the importance of transparency, ongoing professional development, and opportunities for increased involvement in planning and decision-making. This was supported by Talafian et al. [27], who noted that teachers consider openness, continuous learning, and active roles in school planning and decisions as essential to improvement. Additionally, there was an emphasis on clearer systems, effective feedback, and stronger alignment of goals among all stakeholders. The principal's viewpoint reflected a learner-focused and strategic leadership approach, committed to building sustained progress through partnerships with teachers, the community, and external collaborators. This was affirmed by Alanoglu [28], who highlighted the importance of learner-focused and strategic leadership through strong partnerships.

Overall, the findings of this study align with the principles of transformational and distributed leadership frameworks. Transformational leadership is evident in the principal's efforts to inspire and motivate staff, set a shared vision, and foster professional growth. Distributed leadership emerges in the emphasis on collaboration, shared decision-making, and empowering teachers as co-leaders in school improvement. These leadership approaches, when adapted effectively—even under resource limitations—can sustain meaningful progress and build resilient school communities.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reaffirm the principal's pivotal role in advancing school improvement efforts. Both teachers and the principal consistently emphasized leadership that is intentional, collaborative, and responsive to the school's evolving needs. While financial limitations, resource constraints, and staff workload present ongoing challenges, these are met with a shared commitment to adaptability and teamwork. The principal's leadership promotes professional growth, fosters open communication, and actively engages the wider school community to sustain progress toward improvement goals.

Addressing a gap in the existing literature, this study captured the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding their principal's leadership, an area often overlooked in policy-focused or quantitative research. Concentrating on a single public secondary school

in Camarines Sur provided valuable, context-specific insights into how leadership is practiced and perceived in real-world educational settings.

To further strengthen school improvement efforts, principals should continue to promote transparency, expand professional development opportunities, and deepen collaboration among staff. They should also establish stronger partnerships with external stakeholders, such as local government units and community organizations, to gain additional support and resources. Establishing clearer systems for feedback and shared decision-making will help align the goals and actions of all stakeholders, ensuring more sustainable progress.

Future research should explore similar themes across multiple schools, especially by comparing urban and rural contexts or examining the impact of different leadership styles, such as transformational and distributed leadership. Broader qualitative studies will deepen understanding of how principals across diverse settings can adapt their leadership to improve learning outcomes and overall school performance.

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