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## A Phenomenological Study of School Heads' Lived Experiences Between Teaching-Learning and School Administration

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### ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study delved into the lived experiences of school heads in the Department of Education, Region IX, Philippines, as they navigated the dual imperatives of instructional leadership and school administration. Framed by the MATATAG Agenda and the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), this research addressed a gap in understanding the personal, emotional, and meaning-making aspects of educational leadership in the Philippine context, using a hermeneutic-phenomenological research design. Through in-depth interviews with 7 school heads from DepEd Region IX, the study uncovered the essence of their leadership as a dynamic, often tense, process of orchestrating harmony. Three constitutive themes emerged: (1) The Duality of Role and Identity: A Constant Tug-of-War; (2) The Moral Compass: Navigating Pressures Through Foundational Values; and (3) The Hermeneutics of Policy: Translating Abstract Directives into Lived Reality. The findings revealed that effective leadership transcended mere compliance with standards; it was an interpretive, value-laden practice that created coherence and fostered growth in the face of systemic challenges. Recommendations were offered for refining policy, developing leadership development programs, and conducting future research.

### INTRODUCTION

It is universally understandable that educational leadership is necessary for school improvement and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020). This leadership is institutionalized in policy frameworks such as the Philippine Professional Standards of the role of school head, which define the core competencies, and the MATATAG Agenda, which provides the strategic direction of the Department of Education (DepEd). These frames provide an idealized representation of the school head as an instructional leader, who oversees the teaching-learning process directly or indirectly, and as an administrative manager, who oversees the smooth running of the school. School heads are tasked with creating a welcoming, healthy, and inclusive learning environment for their students and teachers (Arshad et al., 2025).

Despite this, there is a big difference between these prescriptions about policy and what happens

on the ground to school heads. Though much is said of what school leaders should do, whether to create a vision, develop curriculum, coach teachers, manage resources and community relations, there is little in the way of deep interpretive insight as to the experience of such a twofold task. Very little is known of the inner sense that they generate, of the emotional burdens they carry, or of the subtleties of negotiating the underlying paradoxes of pedagogy and paperwork, in the light of the institutional and socio-cultural pressures of Philippine educational life.

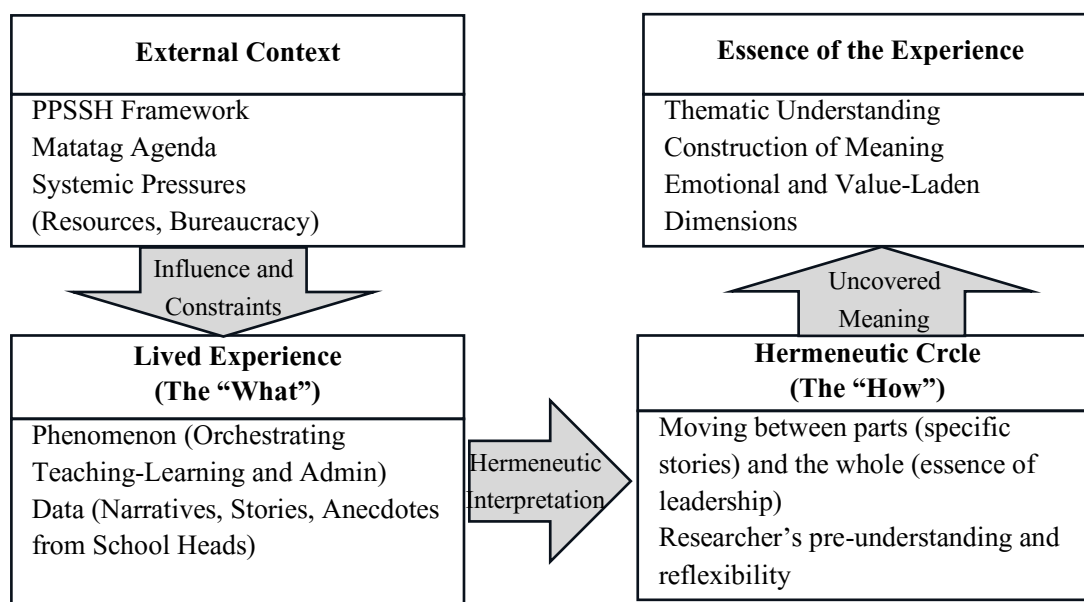
This research is anchored on transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), which considers leadership a process carried to the social and situational context of the school, and on distributed leadership, which considers leadership a process extended to the social and situational context of the school. Moreover, sensemaking may be defined as a crucial concept that gives us a prism

through which school heads process pragmatic ambiguous policies, manage crises, and make sense of their day-to-day problems.

This study aims to explain, define, and comprehend the nature of the lived experiences of school heads in DepEd Region IX as they juggle their functions in instructional leadership and school administration. The following questions inform this research: (1) In what ways do school heads narrate their personal experience of living with the twin responsibility of coordinating the teaching-learning process and their role as school administrators? (2)

What do school heads make of their role, and with what personal meanings, values, and beliefs as they move through systemic pressures and policy requirements? (3) How do the ideals of abstract policy (e.g., PPSSH and MATATAG) as school heads manifest them in the flurry of their daily leadership activities, and their emotional problems related to it?

The conceptual framework for this study visualizes the hermeneutic process of interpreting the school head's lived experience, situated within and influenced by systemic and policy contexts.



This framework visually conceptualizes the dynamic process of uncovering the essence of school heads' lived experiences. The External Context (MATATAG Agenda, PPSSH Framework, Systemic Pressures) is positioned as the overarching reality that influences and constrains the phenomena being studied. It flows into the core of the research: The Hermeneutic Circle of Inquiry.

This circle is the engine of the study, depicting the continuous, non-linear process of interpretation. It involves the constant movement between the Lived Experience (the raw "texts" or narratives provided by the school heads) and their Hermeneutic Interpretation. This interpretation is not neutral; it is actively shaped by the researcher's engagement with the data, the pre-understanding of leadership concepts, and ongoing reflexivity. One cannot be understood without the other, hence the bidirectional arrow.

Through this rigorous, cyclical process of the Hermeneutic Circle, meaning is uncovered. This

leads to the study's outcome: the Essence of the Experience. This is not a simple finding but a rich, thematic construction of meaning that captures the emotional and value-laden dimensions of what it means to be a school head orchestrating administration amidst a quality teaching-learning process.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to describe the universal essence of a phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenology, informed by the philosophies of Heidegger (1962), acknowledges the inseparability of interpretation or hermeneutics from experience. It focuses on understanding the meaning of human experience as it is lived and interpreted through the researcher's dialogue with the participants' narratives (van Manen, 2016). This

design is most appropriate for uncovering the deep, interpreted realities and personal meanings that school heads attribute to their complex leadership experiences.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted within the Department of Education, Region IX, Philippines, encompassing eight schools divisions. Purposive, criterion-based sampling was used to identify information-rich participants. The criteria included: (1) being a sitting school head (Principal or Head Teacher) in an elementary or secondary school within Region IX; (2) having at least three years of experience in the position to ensure rich, lived experiences to draw upon; and (3) representing a variety of school contexts (e.g., urban, rural, large, and small). From an initial pool of 32 nominees, 8 school heads (4 from elementary, 4 from secondary) were randomly selected, ensuring representation from all eight divisions (Moustakas, 1994), with 7 actual participants. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, where subsequent interviews no longer yielded new thematic insights. Pseudonyms (e.g., SH1, SH2) are used to protect participant anonymity.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to elicit rich, narrative descriptions of their experiences. Questions included: "Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt torn between your duties as an instructional leader and your administrative tasks?" and "What values guide you when making difficult decisions that affect both teachers and students?" Interviews were conducted in a hybrid of English and Filipino (Tagalog and local dialects), depending on participant comfort, to ensure depth and nuance. Each interview, lasting 60-90 minutes, was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive field notes were documented immediately after each interview to capture non-verbal cues and initial interpretive thoughts.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the hermeneutic circle, an iterative process of moving between the whole transcript and its parts to uncover meanings (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). The process involved:

1. Naive Reading. Reading and re-reading transcripts holistically to gain a sense of the entire narrative.
2. Thematic Analysis. Identifying significant statements and meaning units (horizontalization) that pertained to the research questions.
3. Clustering and Thematizing. Grouping these meaning units into emergent sub-themes and then synthesizing them into robust, essential themes that capture the phenomenon's essence.
4. Exhaustive Description. Weaving the themes into a coherent narrative of the participants' lived experience.

### **Reliability and Verification**

Credibility was ensured through member checking, where thematic summaries were shared with participants for validation. Analyst triangulation involved a peer debriefing with an experienced qualitative researcher to challenge interpretations. Dependability was achieved through a clear audit trail of methodological decisions. Thick, descriptive findings support transferability. Confirmability was maintained through bracketing via a reflexive journal, where the researcher's assumptions, values, and biases regarding educational leadership were continuously documented and set aside to minimize their influence on the analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This research aimed to understand how school heads manage their lives as they balance the roles of instructional leadership and school administration. The results of the in-depth interviews, as analyzed, have found three fundamental themes, which represent the nature of this phenomenon: (1) The Duality of Role and Identity: A Constant Tug-of-War; (2) The Moral Compass: Navigating Pressures Through Foundational Values; and (3) The Hermeneutics of Policy: Translating Abstract Directives into Lived Reality.

### **The Duality of Role and Identity: A Constant Tug-of-War**

This theme is directly related to the first research question, which explores the experience of school heads living with twin responsibilities. The statistics indicate that their professional life is essentially characterized by an all-encompassing and even anxious conflict between their role as a

teaching leader and the requirements of their administrative role. School heads are considered persons in authority who manage the school and are considered the pillars of the educational system (Pagunsan & Moyani, 2023).

#### 1. The Instructional Pull vs. The Administrative Gravity

School heads have always had a strong desire to be directly engaged in the teaching and learning process, which they often refer to as their primary passion. Nonetheless, they are constantly distracted by management matters. SH2 puts it momentarily: “In some cases, I was torn; on the one hand, I wanted to be in the classroom teaching, and on the other hand, I had the administrative work that a school head has to do. This torn emotion is not just about task management, but also about a professional identity conflict”. SH1 represents it as an in-house query of effectiveness: “It was merely a thought to be effective in the classroom or as a school head”.

Administrative work, especially reports and compliance, is often explained as a factor that physically and emotionally separates them from their educational mission. SH3 writes directly that, “Administrative tasks consume both time and energy that I could use instead of teaching and working with students”. SH4 offers the same comment, saying that, “Such assignments rob her of the time to spend with teachers and students”.

SH2, SH3, and SH4 express this metaphor literally as a burden, whereas SH7 speaks about it as: “A weighty responsibility that is overwhelming in some circumstances”.

#### 2. Smoothing and Shifting: The Fragmented School Day

The reality of experiencing this duality is the everyday life of fragmentation and abrupt transitions. A typical day is never linear. SH1 stated that, “In the morning, daily round to school and homeroom classes one at a time. Conduct visit classes. Signing of documents for operations, procurement, and other concerns”. SH5 emphasized the “frequent interruption of searching for the ASAP reports, which requires they have to switch gears.” SH4 characterizes this as requiring the switch between administrative, student, and employee meetings within a short period. This constant change results in a condition wherein, according to SH7, “frequent changes are the norm,

and the only way to handle this situation is by prioritizing tasks, being organized, and being flexible.” SH3 has admitted that, “The emotional load of such a juggling game has taken its toll on him, and he has stated that he has experienced considerable stress and responsibility. On the physical side, I felt tired and unrestful”.

#### 3. Resolution and Reconciliation: Adopting the Higher Position

The school officers narrate how to defeat this duality. It is not about destroying one role to achieve the other, but it is about redefining themselves. SH1 had a decisive move to believe he was an education leader and concluded that, “I would be an education leader; in this way, I will be able to change things in many different ways. This is a transition from being an immediate implementer (teacher) to a multiplier of influence (leader)”.

The delegation and collaboration proved to be a practical balance in SH2, which was guided by the realization that “My primary role was to support the students and teachers”. SH5 emphasizes these reconciliations and views administration not as a burden, but as part of a leader's role, where delegation plays a crucial role. To them, the desire to educate is not lost; instead, it is lifted. According to SH1, “It is just that my ability to educate has increased now.”

#### **The Unyielding Tension: Beyond Juggling**

The first theme confirms the well-documented tension between instructional leadership and managerial duties (Grissom et al., 2021). However, our hermeneutic analysis adds a deeper, more poignant layer: this is not merely a time-management issue but an existential tug-of-war for the identity of the school head. Their yearning for the classroom reflects a deep commitment to the core mission of education—student learning—which aligns with the core principle of educational leadership (Brauckmann et al., 2020). The administrative burden, often perceived as an alienating force, pulls them away from this core identity. This finding suggests that support systems need to address not just the workload but also the identity conflict that arises from it.

### **The Moral Compass: Navigating Pressures Through Foundational Values**

The theme will respond to the second research question and provide insights into the personal meanings, values, and beliefs that shape the responses of school heads regarding systemic pressures. The policy does not influence the way they make decisions when faced with extreme pressures, but rather a set of personal values that have served as a moral guide. The necessity to develop integrity among school principals over the disciplinary lines is a shared problem that needs efforts and innovative strategies to equip ethical leaders to cross the challenges of the modern educational environment and influence positive transformation (Bujang et al., 2025).

#### **1. The Triad of Core Values: Integrity, Service, and Student-Centeredness**

The participants always mentioned a list of values that they believed were their core, which motivates their actions. Most of what they talked about was Integrity, Compassion, Empathy, and a Commitment to Student Success. Integrity was the most important value, especially in procurement and resource management. The SH1 and SH5 claimed integrity as one of their central beliefs. SH5 expounded that, "Integrity and honesty play a big role, especially in the aspects of MOOE liquidation. As a leader, we need to be transparent at all times, and we need to lead with humility and empathy at times, and value teamwork and shared responsibility".

Compassion and Empathy guide their relationships with teachers and students. SH7 has empathy as one of its core values, which is evident in the statement: "Advocating for a bullied learner despite pushback". The last criterion is Student-Centeredness. SH4 considered its core value to be student-centeredness, and SH5 considered its core value to be putting the best interests of learners at the heart of all the decisions. SH7 reiterated the fact that, in difficult situations, "In the face of all these pressures, my fundamental values and beliefs revolve around prioritizing the well-being and success of my students and staff".

#### **2. The Cultural Foundation: *Bayanihan* and *Kapwa***

These values are deeply rooted in the ideas of Filipino culture, which gives them a rich contextual meaning in their leadership. SH2, SH3, and SH4

specifically mentioned the concept of *bayanihan* (communal unity). SH3 stated that, "The Filipino idea of *bayanihan* or communal unity is centered on my work. It emphasizes collaboration, teamwork, and a shared commitment to achieving common goals". SH4 also related their values to *Kapwa* (shared identity) and *Bayanihan*, "Family and culture, particularly the Filipino values of *Kapwa* and *Bayanihan*, deeply influence my approach to service as a school head". This culture-based change their purpose of work into a service, or *bayanihan* in action. SH1 internalized this "I was instilled to be a man for others. I provide service for others before my own".

#### **3. Inner Strength: Resilience Based on Purpose**

The activation of the value system of school heads under pressure is a testament to their inner strength. It is not being stoic but instead being driven by a tough existence and a sense of purpose. SH1 gave it the definition that "It says to be resilient. There may be loud noises outside and inside the school, but if you are grounded with your values, nothing can hinder you from accomplishing your goals". SH5 referred to it as, "Inner strength to me as a school head is the resilience and moral courage to stay composed under pressure and make ethical decisions. It is the capacity to lead with empathy, faith, and purpose, inspiring the school community to overcome challenges together".

Teams of personal support can be used to refill this strength. The following: "Family, friends, constant support system" (SH1), self-care practices (SH2), and spending time with family (SH3, SH6). SH7 is also being restored by recalling their mission, which helps them remain consistently attached to their core purpose; thus, they are more powerful.

### **Values: The Foundational Bedrock of Leadership Praxis**

The second theme powerfully demonstrates that in the absence of perfect resources or ideal conditions, leadership is fundamentally sustained by personal and cultural values. The prominence of *serbisyo* (service) and *lakas ng loob* (resilience) underscores the critical role of culturally embedded values in Filipino educational leadership. This finding resonates with the concept of transformative leadership in which transformational leaders give importance to ethics and values and align individual aspirations and motivations to the organization's

vision (Quiros, 2020). It suggests that effective leadership development must move beyond skill acquisition to foster and reflect upon the value systems that guide difficult decisions and sustain leaders through adversity.

### **The Hermeneutics of Policy: Translating Abstract Directives into Lived Reality**

This theme is related to the third research question. It sheds light on how school heads interpret and implement abstract policies, such as the MATATAG Agenda or PPSSH, in their everyday activities. It is not an active process of translation, negotiation, and emotional labor but a passive implementation. The school principal's function as head of administration, together with the administrative staff's performance, is carried out in line with operational requirements for school administration and positively affects how smoothly teaching and learning activities are carried out (Apriani, 2023).

#### **1. The Original Reading: Between Overwhelm and Hope**

The reactions of the school heads were moderately positive, but also mixed, with some feeling fear when they first heard about the new policy. "When I first read the MATATAG Agenda, I felt overwhelmed but also excited about the potential for position change" (SH3). "When I first heard the MATATAG agenda, I felt overwhelmed but excited about" (SH4). SH7 was wary, "I felt cautious, needing to understand its implications".

These emotions frequently occurred. Positive feelings accompanied them. School heads were often hopeful. The hope was about the prospect of positive change. This is seen in statement SH1. Excitement was present as well. It centered around the possibility of positive change as indicated by SH3; this excited anticipation was common. There was a sense of duty, too. Individuals felt responsible for the successful execution of policy, as stated by SH2. Responses are interesting and mirror the policy's burdens, or so they say. Policies present new challenges and offer an essential opportunity for improvement.

#### **2. The Act of Translation: The Directive to Context**

The hermeneutic process of translating policy to their teachers is an essential aspect of their lived lives. This does not mean translation, but making the policy pertinent and significant. SH2 replied

that, "My approach involves first thoroughly understanding the policy myself, then communication is the key point to the teachers in a clear, concise, and relatable manner". The strategy of SH5: "I need to present the direction in simple, practical terms so that teachers see the policy as clear and not overwhelming". The way SH7: "To clarify the policy's intent, linking it to its own school goals, and raising concerns publicly. This is necessary as it will promote a deeper understanding of the material among teachers".

#### **3. Emotional Labor of Mediation: The Bridge**

The most heartrending revelation is the role of the school head as a negotiator or intermediary between the pressures of the seniors and teachers on the one hand and the realities of the situation on the other. This middle place is emotionally distressing. SH7 referred to it as, "It is a constant balancing act, requiring diplomacy, guided by DepEd Orders as a torch in decision-making".

SH5 referred to it as, "Being in the middle place as a school head means balancing the expectations of my superior with the realities of my teachers. It is challenging, but it allows me to serve as a bridge and mediator, always ensuring that decisions remain focused on the learners' best interest". SH2 reported that, "Being in that middle place is like walking a tightrope. I need to balance the expectations and directives from above with the realities and challenges faced by teachers and the school".

Their lived experience within this domain relates directly to specific mediating behaviors. First, Pitching Upwards occurred frequently. The mediators defended their teachers. Clear and compelling reasons were presented. These were for the defense (SH2). Also, mediators used available evidence. The evidence supported educator demands (SH7). Next, there was Managing Downwards. Some directives are, by nature, strict, rigid, or even quite awful. When directives such as these were being issued, the mediator's behavior shifted. They took control of their emotions—remaining calm and listening to the staff as well. Clarity on the rationale proved essential, and they worked diligently to achieve it (SH7). The aim was to ensure that feelings would remain in the background, never in the lead (SH1). Finally, they employed certain Metaphors to express self-understanding more effectively. For instance, they

employed figurative language, which may even seem like poetry. To accurately portray their mediatory responsibility. Think about the image of the Bridge (SH2, SH6). Imagine that they are in essence a Lighthouse (SH5). Most graphic, most vivid? Perhaps the view of a “chaperone of Solutions” (SH1). Navigating, rough and hazardous, like awful storms of fighting interests.

**Policy as a Lived, Emotional Reality**

The third theme offers a significant contribution to the literature. The translation of policy is revealed not as a technical-rational activity but as a form of emotional labor. School leaders' emotional labor can be viewed as a tool for effective control, a means to build relationships, or a site for reflection and action towards more just and self-determined leadership (Huang & Yin, 2024). School heads' sensemaking skills significantly impact teacher commitment and school climate, with a positive learning climate mediating this relationship (Dis & Demirkasımoglu, 2024)

and mediators who must manage their own emotions and the emotions of their staff during change. This challenges top-down, compliance-oriented policy implementation models. It advocates for a more participatory approach where school heads are involved as co-creators in the policy process, thereby reducing the interpretive gap and emotional burden of mediation.

**Implications for the PPSSH and MATATAG Agenda**

This study provides a ground-level perspective on these frameworks. The PPSSH domains, while comprehensive, are experienced not as separate checklists but as deeply intertwined and often competing demands. The MATATAG Agenda's goal of building resilient institutions is embodied in the daily resilience (*lakas ng loob*) of its school heads. Therefore, the success of these policies hinges on recognizing and supporting the human, emotional, and interpretive work required to bring them to life.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Select Illustrative Codes

Theme	Select Meaning Units (Codes)	Participant Quote (Paraphrased for Brevity)
1. The Duality of Role and Identity: A Constant Tug-of-War	The Instructional Pull vs. The Administrative Gravity; Smoothing and Shifting: The Fragmented School Day; Resolution and Reconciliation: Adopting the Higher Position	SH2: “I felt torn between my desire to be in the classroom and the administrative tasks”. SH3: “Administrative functions take time and energy away from my primary focus on instruction”. SH1: “I chose to be an education leader; this way, I can implement change in a variety of ways”.
2. The Moral Compass: Navigating Pressures Through Foundational Values	The Triad of Core Values: Integrity, Service, and Student-Centeredness; The Cultural Foundation: “ <i>Bayanihan</i> ” and “ <i>Kapwa</i> ”; Inner Strength: Resilience Based on Purpose	SH5: “Integrity and Honesty build trust. I place the best interest of learners at the heart of every decision”. SH4: “Filipino values of 'Kapwa and Bayanihan' guide me to serve with compassion and put the community first”. SH1: “Inner strength means to be resilient. If you are grounded with your values, nothing can hinder you”.
3. The Hermeneutics of Policy: Translating Abstract Directives into Lived Reality	The Original Reading: Between Overwhelm and Hope; The Act of Translation: The Directive to Context; Emotional Labor of Mediation: The Bridge	SH3 & SH4: “When I first read the MATATAG Agenda, I felt overwhelmed but also excited about the potential for change”. SH2: “I see myself as a bridge, connecting the administration's vision with the practical realities of my teachers”. SH5: “The challenge is to let teachers see the 'why' behind the change, not just the compliance”.

## CONCLUSION

This hermeneutic phenomenological study has illuminated the essence of school leadership in DepEd Region IX as a complex, interpretive practice of orchestrating harmony between the ideal of instructional leadership and the reality of administrative management. It is a practice deeply infused with personal values, cultural norms, and emotional labor. The school head emerges not as a mere functionary of policy but as a critical sense-maker, a values-driven leader, and an emotional mediator whose work is central to translating national educational aspirations into meaningful practice. Their experience is one of constant negotiation, guided by a compass of service and resilience, striving to create coherence and purpose for their schools amidst systemic challenges.

Based on the profound insights gleaned from the lived experiences of the school heads, this study proposes a multifaceted set of recommendations aimed at nurturing the essence of leadership within the educational landscape. For DepEd policy and practice, it is recommended that support structures be reframed to move beyond generic training towards targeted interventions, such as providing administrative officers for school clusters to alleviate managerial burdens and establishing coaching programs focused on emotional regulation and sense-making. Consequently, promoting participatory policy design by involving practicing school heads in the drafting of memos and reporting systems is crucial to ensure their practicality and reduce administrative overhead. Furthermore, leadership development should be deeply grounded in the Filipino context; thus, integrating modules on reflective practice and values clarification—centering concepts like “*serbisyo*” and “*lakas ng loob*”—into the National Leadership Training is essential.

At the practitioner level, school heads are encouraged to engage in intentional orchestration by consciously scheduling and protecting non-negotiable instructional time in their calendars, thereby communicating its paramount importance to the entire school community. They should also embrace the principles of distributed leadership as more than a delegation tactic; by actively empowering teacher-leaders through the delegation of administrative tasks, they can foster a culture of collective responsibility and capacity-building. To

further this scholarly conversation, future research is strongly recommended to explore the transferability of these findings in other regional contexts. A complementary phenomenological study examining the lived experiences of teachers receiving this translated leadership would provide an invaluable dual perspective, while an action research project designed to co-create and pilot new models of administrative support directly with school heads could serve as a powerful praxis, addressing the identified tensions between leadership and management.

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