

Five years at the helm: Experiences of school heads

Glen Rose L. Mejia^{*1}, Irene S. Sequito², Judith L. Vista³, John Lowell Perlas⁴, Doreen P. Villaruel⁵,
Shiela Marie F. Teodoro⁶, Terry Jane P. Niverca⁷

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7} Capiz State University Burias Campus, Philippines

*Corresponding Author email: grlmejia@capsu.edu.ph

Received: 12 February 2026

Revised: 10 April 2026

Accepted: 20 April 2026

Available Online: 21 April 2026

Volume 1 (2026), Issue 2, P-ISSN – 3116-3769; E-ISSN - 3116-3777

<https://doi.org/10.63498/injelps47>

Abstract

Aim: This study explored the leadership challenges experienced by school heads with five years of service in the Second District of Capiz and examined the coping mechanisms they employ as well as the lessons they can impart to future school leaders.

Methodology: A phenomenological design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of school heads. Data were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews with selected school heads who had at least five years of administrative service. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi phenomenological analysis to identify common challenges, coping strategies, and leadership insights.

Results: Findings revealed that school heads commonly encountered challenges related to time management, communication, limited resources, policy and change adaptation, and stakeholder coordination. To address these challenges, participants reported coping strategies such as prioritizing tasks, maintaining clear and transparent communication, innovating despite limited resources, proactively responding to policy reforms, and strengthening collaborative relationships with stakeholders. The experiences of the participants also generated valuable leadership lessons emphasizing self-awareness, collaborative and inclusive leadership, effective communication, and adaptability.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that school leadership involves complex responsibilities that require resilience, reflective practice, and adaptive strategies. The experiences of school heads highlight the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and flexibility in managing school operations and sustaining positive organizational climates. These insights provide practical guidance for aspiring school leaders and contribute to the ongoing development of effective educational leadership practices.

Keywords: *lived experiences, school heads, educational leadership, leadership challenges*

Introduction

Globally, school leadership has become increasingly complex, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused significant learning losses and disruptions in education systems worldwide. Studies show that school heads must now address learning gaps, integrate technology, and support student well-being while maintaining school performance (Gajderowicz et al., 2025). These demands highlight the critical role of leadership in improving educational outcomes.

In the Philippines, school heads are expected to go beyond administrative tasks and function as instructional leaders who directly influence teaching quality and student achievement. Recent research emphasizes that effective leadership through supervision, goal-setting, and teacher support positively impacts learning outcomes (Ulitt, J. 2025). However, school leaders continue to face challenges such as heavy workload, policy implementation gaps, and limited resources.

At the local level, studies reveal that school heads experience difficulties in adapting to rapid educational reforms, managing multiple responsibilities, and addressing contextual challenges within their

schools. Additionally, during the new normal, school administrators encountered major challenges in implementing new learning modalities and ensuring continuity of education (Ahmar et al., 2023).

Overall, these studies underscore that school leadership has become more demanding and multifaceted, making it essential to explore the lived experiences of school heads, particularly over an extended period such as five years.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Global Literature on Lived Experiences of School Heads with Five Years un Service

Research on school leadership highlights rich narrative accounts of school heads' lived experiences, revealing how their professional journeys are shaped by challenges, adaptive practices, and contextual demands. Lumanas, Sarillana, Nazareno, and Cagape's phenomenological study (2024) explored the lived experiences of school heads in selected public schools in Davao City, with an average of five years in administrative service, and found that educational leaders centered their experiences around fostering supportive environments and implementing mental health initiatives, indicating that principals actively cultivate culture and well-being as part of their everyday leadership roles. Likewise, Enriquez, Balatbat, De Leon, Reyes, Lacsina, and Abrazado (2025) documented school heads' intrinsic motivations, leadership qualities, and lived challenges across diverse contexts, pointing to adaptability, collaboration, and vision as core elements driving principals' sense-making and professional identity in education leadership. Macula's (2025) qualitative inquiry of public elementary school heads in the Davao Oriental region revealed that lived experiences encompass managing teacher motivation, innovation, and staff well-being while coping with complex leadership demands through resilience, emotional regulation, and community collaboration. Additional phenomenological research by Englis and Ligan (2025) documented school principals' lived responses to declining student retention, noting that leaders emphasize stakeholder engagement, community involvement, and collaborative leadership as they interpret and act on multifaceted educational problems. Duray (2025) similarly highlighted how school heads navigate educational change and reforms, describing lived experiences of adapting to teacher resistance, resource limitations, and technological demands while employing mentorship and stakeholder engagement to balance instructional leadership with emotional and organizational support.

Local Studies in the Philippine Context

Local qualitative research on school leadership in the Philippines consistently illustrates that school heads' lived experiences are shaped by contextual challenges, adaptive strategies, and evolving professional identities. Macula's (2024) phenomenological study of public elementary school heads in Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental, highlighted how leaders navigate motivating staff, fostering well-being, and prioritizing instructional outcomes while employing emotional resilience, delegation, and community collaboration as coping mechanisms in response to leadership demands. Bantillo's (2025) narrative inquiry of school heads in disadvantaged areas of Masbate revealed that principals act as both administrative managers and instructional leaders, confronting financial, resource, and human resource challenges, yet demonstrating resilience and collaborative leadership to sustain school improvement. Duray's (2025) phenomenological account documented how public school heads in Davao City negotiate educational reforms, teacher resistance, funding constraints, and technological adaptation, responding through mentorship initiatives, community engagement, and strategic advocacy to sustain their leadership roles. In a similar vein, studies such as Gato and Escote's (2025) inquiry into the lived experiences of school heads in fostering teacher teamwork found that leaders with at least five years of experience faced resistance, emotional discomfort, and time challenges but used open communication, collaborative goal-setting, and trust-building to strengthen teacher relationships and school culture. Additionally, Englis and Ligan's (2025) research highlighted how school heads interpret declining student retention within broader socio-educational challenges, emphasizing leadership strategies that involve stakeholder engagement, community collaboration, and emotional resilience. Collectively, these studies show that the lived experiences of Philippine school heads — particularly those in early to mid stages of leadership service — involve complex negotiations of instructional leadership, stakeholder relations, contextual constraints, and adaptive strategies that shape both their professional practices and personal growth within school communities.

Synthesis

Local Philippine studies examining the lived experiences of school heads with approximately five years in service reveal a multidimensional portrait of leadership that is deeply contextual, relational, and adaptive. Across various qualitative inquiries, school heads describe their leadership journeys as encompassing not only instructional and administrative responsibilities, but also emotional, social, and community-oriented roles that shape their professional identities over time.

Studies also emphasize the adaptive and relational dimensions of lived leadership experiences. Duray (2025) illustrated how school heads in Davao City respond to educational reform pressures, teacher resistance, and emerging technological demands by engaging in mentorship, community outreach, and participatory decision-making processes. Such adaptive responses demonstrate that effective leadership involves continuous learning, responsiveness to contextual demands, and the cultivation of trust with stakeholders. Gato and Escote's (2025) inquiry into building teacher teamwork further reinforces this view, showing that principals with around five years of service work intentionally to strengthen collegial relationships through open communication, collaborative goal-setting, and trust-building — practices that both shape and are shaped by their lived leadership experiences.

Collectively, the Philippine literature affirms that lived leadership is not a static or singular experience; rather, it is shaped by ongoing negotiation between external structural demands (e.g., policy reforms, resource constraints) and internal relational processes (e.g., trust building, emotional resilience, collaborative engagement). School heads with approximately five years of service portray leadership as both challenging and transformative — requiring continuous adaptation, reflective practice, and strategic engagement with multiple stakeholders.

While these studies provide rich contextualized insights, they also reveal a need for more systematic exploration of longitudinal leadership trajectories, particularly beyond contextual snapshots, to understand how principals' lived experiences evolve as their tenure extends further. Nonetheless, the existing body of research clearly indicates that the lived experiences of school heads in the Philippines are shaped by a blend of contextual challenges, adaptive strategies, relational practices, and reflective growth that collectively contribute to their professional development and leadership effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on several leadership and experiential learning theories that explain how school heads develop, adapt, and make meaning of their leadership roles over time.

First, the Transformational Leadership Theory by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985) provides a strong foundation for understanding how school heads influence their schools. This theory posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate their followers by fostering a shared vision, encouraging innovation, and building strong relationships. In the context of this study, school heads' experiences over five years reflect how they gradually develop transformational practices such as motivating teachers, promoting collaboration, and improving school culture.

Second, the study is guided by Experiential Learning Theory developed by David Kolb (1984), which emphasizes that learning occurs through experience, reflection, and adaptation. School heads continuously learn from their daily leadership challenges—such as managing resources, addressing teacher concerns, and engaging stakeholders. Their five-year journey illustrates a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application, shaping their leadership competence and decision-making skills.

Third, the Distributed Leadership Theory, associated with James Spillane (2006), explains how leadership is shared among members of the organization rather than centered on a single individual. This theory supports the idea that school heads build collaborative environments by empowering teachers and stakeholders to take part in decision-making processes. Over time, their experiences highlight the importance of teamwork, shared responsibility, and collective leadership in achieving school goals.

Lastly, the study draws on Resilience Theory, which explains how individuals adapt and thrive despite challenges and adversities. School heads often face pressures such as limited resources, policy changes, and stakeholder demands. Their lived experiences demonstrate resilience through coping strategies, emotional strength, and persistence, enabling them to sustain leadership effectiveness over time.

These theories collectively explain that the experiences of school heads are shaped by their ability to inspire others (Transformational Leadership), learn from experience (Experiential Learning), collaborate with stakeholders (Distributed Leadership), and adapt to challenges (Resilience Theory). Over a five-year

period, these theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive understanding of how school heads grow professionally, navigate challenges, and sustain effective leadership in their schools.

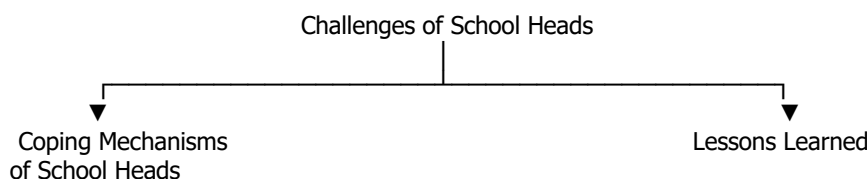
Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the central phenomenon of the leadership challenges experienced by school heads with five years in service in the Second District of Capiz. The framework emphasizes how these school heads navigate their challenges and how they cope with the challenges encountered. At the core of the framework are the challenges encountered by school heads, particularly time management, communication challenges, resource constraints, policy and change adaptation, and stakeholders' coordination. These challenges affect their articulation, confidence, and overall academic engagement. Surrounding this central issue are two key dimensions of exploration:

1. Coping Mechanisms of school heads – strategies employed by school heads prioritizing tasks, maintaining clear and transparent communication, innovating with limited resources, proactively responding to policy reforms, and building collaborative relationships to improve teamwork.
2. Lessons Learned – inclusive leadership lessons learned by the school heads that may be imparted to future school heads, which may be considered helpful in addressing their challenges, such as self-awareness for effective leadership, collaborative and inclusive leadership, effective communication, and adaptability and flexibility.

The interaction of these dimensions provides insight into how school heads construct their learning experiences, balance their challenges with resilience, and impart the lessons learned.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



The conceptual framework illustrates how the challenges encountered by school heads are central to the study and how these challenges lead to two key outcomes: coping mechanisms and lessons learned.

At the core of the framework are the challenges of school heads, which may include administrative workload, instructional leadership demands, personnel management, resource limitations, policy implementation, and stakeholder expectations. These challenges represent the realities faced by school heads in the performance of their roles and responsibilities.

Statement of the Problem

School leadership plays a critical role in improving school effectiveness, enhancing teacher performance, and supporting positive student outcomes. School heads are responsible for managing instructional programs, coordinating stakeholders, implementing educational policies, and maintaining the overall functioning of schools. These responsibilities require strong leadership skills, adaptability, and the ability to respond effectively to diverse organizational challenges.

School heads who have served for several years accumulate valuable experiences that shape their leadership practices, decision-making strategies, and professional growth. Through these experiences, they encounter various administrative, organizational, and interpersonal challenges that influence how they manage school operations and lead their educational communities. Understanding these experiences is important for identifying practical leadership strategies and insights that may benefit future school leaders. Despite the growing body of research on educational leadership, limited studies have focused specifically on the lived experiences of school heads with approximately five years of leadership service, particularly in the local context of the Philippines. The experiences, coping strategies, and leadership lessons developed by school heads during this period remain underexplored. Examining these experiences may provide valuable insights into how school leaders manage challenges, develop resilience, and sustain effective leadership practices within their schools.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of school heads with five years of service in the Second District of Capiz, with particular focus on the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the leadership lessons they can share with future school leaders.

General Objective

To explore the lived experiences of school heads with five years of service in the Second District of Capiz.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the challenges encountered by school heads with five years of service in the Second District of Capiz.
2. To identify the coping mechanisms adopted by school heads to address these challenges.
3. To determine the leadership lessons that school heads may impart to future school leaders.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What challenges are encountered by school heads with five years of service in the Second District of Capiz?
2. What coping mechanisms do school heads adopt to address these challenges?
3. What leadership lessons can school heads impart to future school leaders?

METHODS

Research Design

The study utilized a phenomenological design. This design is appropriate because the study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of school heads who have served in their leadership roles for five years in service in the Department of Education (DepEd). Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of participants' experiences, allowing the researcher to gain deeper insights into their challenges, leadership practices, and personal reflections. As emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2021), phenomenological research is suitable for studies that seek to describe the common meaning of lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon.

Population and Sampling and Other Sources of Data

The study was conducted at Second District of Capiz. The target population consisted of ten (10) school heads who were in service for five years in the Department of Education (DepEd) at the time of the study.

Sampling Technique. Purposive sampling was employed to deliberately select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently employed as a school head in the DepEd. (2) have at least five (5) years of service as school heads., and (3) assigned to a public elementary and secondary school under DepEd. School heads assigned to private schools or non-DepEd institutions were excluded.

Participants. Ten (10) school heads met the criteria and were invited to participate.

Other Sources of Data. To contextualize the findings, institutional documents were also reviewed through Republic Act No. 9155 (*Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001*). This is the main law that defines DepEd's mandate, powers, and functions in basic education in the Philippines. It decentralizes education administration and empowers DepEd to oversee public basic education from the school to the national level. While, Republic Act No. 11713 (Teacher Education Council Act). This law institutionalizes the professional standards and development of school leaders (including principals and head teachers) across all levels in basic education.

Instruments

The primary instruments for data collection were researcher-developed interview guides used for in-depth interviews. The guides contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' leadership challenges, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned.

Validation. The instruments underwent expert validation by three professionals: one specialist in special education, one social science professor, and one qualitative research methodologist. They evaluated

the guides for content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. Feedback from the validators was incorporated to refine and improve the instruments prior to actual data collection.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the second semester of Academic Year 2025-2026. After securing institutional approval and informed consent, the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant in a private setting with school heads to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each session lasted 45–60 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

Treatment of Data

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involves a systematic, step-by-step approach to interpreting qualitative data. Specifically, the following steps were applied:

1. **Familiarization** – Researchers repeatedly read transcripts to immerse themselves in the data.
2. **Extraction of Significant Statements** – Key phrases directly related to participants' leadership challenges, coping mechanisms, and leadership lessons learned.
3. **Formulation of Meanings** – Significant statements were interpreted to generate underlying meanings.
4. **Organization into Themes** – Meanings were grouped into clusters of themes, such as leadership challenges, coping mechanisms, and leadership lessons learned.
5. **Exhaustive Description** – A comprehensive narrative was developed that captured the essence of participants' experiences.
6. **Member Checking** – Preliminary themes were shared with participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of interpretations.

This process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while also revealing broader patterns.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers strictly adhered to ethical protocols to protect participants' rights and ensure research integrity. Before data collection, formal approval was obtained from the Dean of the College. Each participant received an informed consent form explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Permission was secured before audio-recording interviews and discussions. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Data were stored securely in password-protected files, accessible only to the researchers, and were permanently deleted after the completion of the study.

The study also complied with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173) to ensure that participants' information was handled responsibly and ethically. This study adheres to the Ethical Guidelines for Education Research (BERA, 2018), acknowledging the ethical implications of the study.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the participants. The findings are organized into emergent themes, each accompanied by a corresponding interpretation and discussion of its implications. The thematic presentation follows the sequence outlined in the study's statement of the problem to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives.

1. Challenges Encountered by School Heads Five Years in Service

Themes

Time management
Communication Challenges
Resourcefulness Constraints
Policy and Change Adaptation

1.1 Time management

Time management emerged as a significant challenge in school management, as reflected in the participants' responses.

Participant 2: *"I struggled with managing limited time, often juggling administrative, instructional, and relational responsibilities simultaneously,"*

Participant 5: *"I had to develop strategies to prioritize tasks and create structured schedules to ensure that all aspects of school management were handled effectively."*

The participant highlighted the complexity of balancing multiple roles within a constrained timeframe. Their struggle underscores how competing demands can place considerable pressure on school leaders and affect overall efficiency. The participant illustrates the adoption of deliberate planning and prioritization as essential coping mechanisms. Together, the responses indicate that effective time management is not only a challenge but also a critical skill that requires intentional strategies to ensure the smooth functioning of school operations.

Ritchey, T. (2021) found that school administrators often struggle to balance administrative, instructional, and relational responsibilities, noting that competing demands frequently lead to work overload and reduced efficiency.

1.2 Communication Challenges

Communication challenges emerged as an important issue in school management, particularly in relation to coordination, progress, and stakeholder engagement. Participants indicated that gaps in communication and a lack of consistency initially affected the flow of work and alignment among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. These challenges required deliberate efforts to improve clarity, transparency, and regular interaction to support effective collaboration.

Participant 1: *"I faced communication gaps that initially slowed progress, which required me to implement regular check-ins and clearer documentation."*

Participant 7: *"I learned that consistent and transparent communication with teachers, parents, and stakeholders was essential to maintain alignment and trust."*

The responses illustrated how communication challenges influenced both operational progress and relationships within the school context. Participant 1 response shows that communication gaps can hinder progress, prompting the need for structured strategies such as regular check-ins and improved documentation. This reflects the importance of clarity and consistency in information sharing. Similarly, participant 7 underscores that transparent and consistent communication is essential for maintaining alignment and trust among diverse stakeholders. Collectively, the responses suggest that addressing communication challenges requires intentional communication practices that promote clarity, transparency, and sustained engagement to enhance school effectiveness.

Gallardo, Llanos, and Perez (2024) found that ineffective or inconsistent communication can disrupt collaboration and weaken trust within school communities, while transparent and regular information sharing strengthens relationships and organizational coherence.

1.3 Resourcefulness Constraints

Resource constraints were a recurring challenge that required school leaders to adapt their approaches to achieve institutional goals. Participants highlighted limitations in materials, staffing, and funding, which compelled them to think creatively and maximize the use of available resources. This theme reflects how constraints influenced innovation and efficiency in school management.

Participant 3: *"I had to navigate resource constraints, which pushed me to be more creative and efficient in using the tools available to me."*

Participant 10: "I often found myself innovating and finding alternative solutions to achieve school objectives despite limited materials, staff, or funding."

The responses indicated that resource constraints significantly shaped participants' leadership practices. Participant 3 demonstrates that limited resources encouraged creativity and efficiency, suggesting that constraints can stimulate adaptive problem-solving. Similarly, Participant 10 highlights the need for innovation and alternative solutions in the face of shortages in materials, staff, and funding. Together, these responses show that while resource limitations present challenges, they also foster resourcefulness, enabling school leaders to remain focused on achieving objectives through strategic and innovative use of available resources.

Makgoka M. (2022) found that school principals, particularly in resource-limited contexts, relied on creativity, strategic allocation, and collaboration to sustain school operations despite shortages in funding, materials, and staffing. Similarly, Kannayalal R. (2024) reported that novice principals frequently encountered limited resources, which compelled them to develop adaptive problem-solving skills and maximize available assets to meet institutional goals.

1.4 Policy and Change Adaptation

Adapting to changing policies and regulatory requirements emerged as a significant challenge in school leadership. Participants described the need to remain flexible, reassess plans, and respond proactively to policy reforms to ensure continuity in school operations and compliance with educational standards. This theme highlights how policy changes influenced leadership practices and decision-making.

Participant 4: "I found adjusting to changing policies and requirements challenging, requiring me to remain flexible and quickly reassess plans."

Participant 9: "I learned to anticipate and respond to policy reforms proactively, ensuring that my school continued to meet educational standards without disruption."

The responses illustrated the dynamic nature of policy and change adaptation in school management. Participant 4 emphasizes the difficulty of adjusting to frequent policy changes, which necessitated flexibility and rapid reassessment of plans. This suggests that policy shifts can create uncertainty and pressure for school leaders. In contrast, participant 9 highlights a more proactive approach, demonstrating the importance of anticipating policy reforms to maintain compliance and minimize disruption. Collectively, these responses indicate that effective adaptation to policy changes requires both flexibility and forward planning to sustain educational quality and institutional stability.

Uy, Sasan, and Kilag (2023) reported that principals who demonstrated proactive responses to policy shifts were more effective in minimizing disruptions and sustaining instructional quality during periods of change

1.5 Stakeholders Coordination

Coordinating multiple stakeholders emerged as a key challenge in school management, particularly in maintaining alignment, clarity, and effective collaboration. Participants highlighted difficulties related to role definition, expectations, and teamwork, emphasizing the importance of clear communication and relationship-building to support coordinated efforts.

Participant 6: "Coordinating multiple stakeholders was often difficult, and I had to possibly define roles and expectations clearly to maintain alignment."

Participant 8: "I realized that building collaborative relationships and clarifying responsibilities early prevented misunderstandings and improved teamwork."

The responses demonstrated that effective stakeholder coordination depends largely on clarity and collaboration. Participant 6 points to the difficulty of managing multiple stakeholders and the need to clearly define roles and expectations to maintain alignment. This suggests that ambiguity in responsibilities can hinder coordination and collective action. Similarly, participant 8 emphasizes that establishing collaborative relationships and clarifying responsibilities early helps prevent misunderstandings and enhances teamwork. Together, the responses indicate that proactive role clarification and relationship-building are essential strategies for improving stakeholder coordination and fostering a cohesive school management environment.

Partido et al. (2025) found that participatory and collaborative leadership practices enhance coordination by fostering trust, shared responsibility, and collective ownership among stakeholders

2. Coping Mechanism of the Challenges Encountered

Themes

Prioritizing tasks
Maintaining clear and transparent communication
Innovating with limited resources
Proactively responding to policy reforms
Building collaborative relationships to improve teamwork

2.1 Prioritizing tasks

Prioritizing tasks emerged as an important coping mechanism used by school leaders to manage competing demands and maintain effectiveness. Participants described deliberate approaches to organizing their workload, focusing on urgency and impact to ensure that key objectives were achieved within required timeframes.

Participant 2: "I prioritize tasks by assessing urgency and impact to ensure critical objectives are met on time."

Participant 5: "I organize my workload effectively to balance competing demands and deliver consistent results."

The responses indicated that task prioritization plays a central role in coping with the complex responsibilities of school management. Participant 2 highlights a strategic approach to prioritization by evaluating urgency and impact, which supports timely achievement of critical objectives. Similarly, participant 5 emphasizes effective workload organization as a means of balancing competing demands while maintaining consistent performance. Together, these responses suggest that prioritizing tasks enables school leaders to cope with pressure, allocate time efficiently, and sustain productivity in demanding environments.

Ritchey, T. (2021) found that effective principals intentionally prioritize tasks based on urgency and impact to manage workload pressures and sustain leadership effectiveness.

2.2 Maintaining clear and transparent communication

Maintaining clear and transparent communication emerged as a key coping mechanism for managing responsibilities and ensuring effective coordination within the school environment. Participants emphasized the importance of clarity, transparency, and timely information-sharing to support shared understanding, alignment, and accountability.

Participant 1: "I communicate clearly and transparently to ensure expectations and decisions are well understood."

Participant 7: "I share timely and accurate information to support alignment and accountability."

The responses highlighted the role of clear and transparent communication in supporting effective school management. Participant 1 emphasizes the importance of clarity and transparency in ensuring that expectations and decisions are understood by all parties. This approach helps reduce confusion and fosters trust. Similarly, participant 7 underscores the value of sharing timely and accurate information to promote alignment and accountability. Together, these responses suggest that maintaining clear and transparent communication serves as an effective coping mechanism that enhances collaboration, strengthens accountability, and supports the smooth functioning of school operations.

Gallardo, Llanos, and Perez (2024) similarly found that principals who practiced open and consistent communication were more successful in building trust, reducing misunderstandings, and improving collaborative work within schools.

2.3 Innovating with limited resources

Innovating with limited resources emerged as a critical coping mechanism for school leaders facing constraints in materials, staff, or funding. Participants emphasized the need to leverage creativity, available tools, and skills to achieve objectives and maintain operational effectiveness despite these limitations.

Participant 3: "I find creative solutions to achieve outcomes despite limited resources."

Participant 10: "I maximize available tools and skills to improve efficiency and effectiveness."

The responses highlighted how resource constraints can drive innovation and adaptive problem-solving. Participant 3 emphasizes the use of creativity to achieve desired outcomes even when resources are limited, suggesting that challenges can stimulate innovative thinking. Similarly, participant 10 illustrates the strategic use of available tools and skills to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Together, these responses indicate that innovating with limited resources enables school leaders to overcome constraints, maintain productivity, and ensure that school objectives are met despite operational challenges.

Makgoka, M. (2022) found that principals in resource-limited contexts often relied on creative problem-solving and strategic use of available materials to sustain school operations and achieve objectives. Kannayalal, R. (2024) also reported that limited funding, staffing, and materials encouraged school leaders to adopt adaptive strategies, including leveraging existing skills and tools to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

2.4 Proactively responding to policy reforms

Proactively responding to policy reforms emerged as a key coping mechanism for school leaders to navigate changing educational regulations. Participants highlighted the importance of staying informed, anticipating changes, and adjusting practices to ensure compliance while minimizing disruption to school operations.

Participant 4: "I stay informed about policy reforms and adjust my work practices accordingly."

Participant 9: "I proactively implement changes to ensure compliance and minimize disruption."

The responses illustrated that proactive engagement with policy reforms is essential for effective school management. Participant 4 emphasizes the importance of staying informed and adjusting work practices in response to evolving policies, which helps maintain alignment with regulatory requirements. Similarly, participant 9 highlights the implementation of changes ahead of time to ensure compliance and reduce operational disruptions. Together, these responses indicate that anticipating and responding proactively to policy reforms enables school leaders to maintain educational standards, uphold accountability, and ensure continuity in school operations.

Uy, Sasan, and Kilag (2023) similarly found that principals who stay informed and implement reforms proactively sustain instructional quality and institutional stability, even during periods of frequent policy shifts.

2.5 Building collaborative relationships to improve teamwork

Building collaborative relationships emerged as a vital coping mechanism for school leaders to enhance teamwork and achieve shared objectives. Participants emphasized the importance of fostering trust, cooperation, and active collaboration among colleagues to improve overall school outcomes.

Participant 6: "I build strong working relationships that foster trust and cooperation within the team."

Participant 8: "I actively collaborate with colleagues to achieve shared goals and improve outcomes."

The responses highlighted the role of collaborative relationships in promoting effective teamwork. Participant 6 emphasizes the importance of building trust and cooperation within the team, which strengthens interpersonal bonds and facilitates smooth coordination. Similarly, participant 8 underscores active collaboration to achieve shared goals, demonstrating that joint efforts contribute to improved outcomes. Together, these responses suggest that fostering strong collaborative relationships is a key coping mechanism that enhances team cohesion, supports problem-solving, and ensures that school objectives are met efficiently.

Partido et al. (2025) found that participatory leadership practices that promote active collaboration and shared responsibility improve alignment, accountability, and the achievement of school goals.

3. Lessons Learned May Inform Future School Heads

Themes

Self-Awareness for Effective Leadership
Collaborative and Inclusive Leadership
Effective Communication
Adaptability and Flexibility

3.1 Self-Awareness for Effective Leadership

Self-awareness emerged as an essential lesson for effective school leadership. Participants reflected on how understanding their personal strengths and limitations, engaging in regular reflection, and responding thoughtfully to challenges shaped their leadership practices. These insights provide valuable guidance for future school heads aiming to lead with confidence, clarity, and intentionality.

Participant 5: "I have learned to understand my strengths and limitations, which helps me make

more informed and confident decisions as a school leader."

Participant 7: "I regularly reflect on my daily actions and decisions, using these reflections to improve my leadership practices over time."

Participant 3: "I recognize that self-awareness allows me to respond thoughtfully to challenges rather than reacting impulsively."

The responses underscored that self-awareness is foundational for effective leadership. Understanding one's strengths and limitations, as highlighted by the first response, enables leaders to make informed decisions and act with confidence, minimizing impulsive or reactionary behavior. The second response emphasizes the importance of continuous reflection, which allows leaders to evaluate their daily actions, identify areas for improvement, and refine leadership strategies over time. The third response demonstrates that self-awareness fosters thoughtful and measured responses to challenges, helping leaders maintain composure in complex situations. Collectively, these lessons suggest that cultivating self-awareness equips future school heads with the insight and reflective habits necessary to navigate challenges, make balanced decisions, and guide their teams effectively.

Ritchey, T. (2021) found that principals who understand their personal strengths and limitations make more informed decisions, respond thoughtfully to challenges, and lead with greater confidence.

3.2 Collaborative and Inclusive Leadership

Collaborative and inclusive leadership emerged as a critical lesson for effective school management. Participants reflected on the importance of involving teachers, students, and stakeholders in decision-making, valuing diverse perspectives, and sharing leadership responsibilities. These practices were seen to foster ownership, trust, and collective effectiveness, providing guidance for future school heads.

Participant 2: "I have learned that involving teachers, students, and stakeholders in decision-making fosters a stronger sense of ownership and commitment."

Participant 8: "I actively seek input from my team, valuing diverse perspectives to create a more inclusive school environment."

Participant 9: "I believe that empowering others and sharing leadership responsibilities strengthens trust and effectiveness across the school."

The responses highlighted that collaborative and inclusive practices are central to effective leadership. The first response emphasizes that involving teachers, students, and other stakeholders in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, which enhances motivation and accountability. The second response underscores the importance of seeking diverse perspectives, which contributes to

an inclusive environment and encourages innovative solutions. The third response demonstrates that empowering others and distributing leadership responsibilities strengthens trust and overall effectiveness within the school. Collectively, these lessons suggest that future school heads can enhance school performance and community engagement by promoting collaboration, inclusivity, and shared leadership.

Partido et al. (2025) found that seeking diverse perspectives and distributing leadership responsibilities fosters inclusivity, strengthens team cohesion, and promotes innovation. Gallardo, Llanos, and Perez (2024) also reported that empowering staff and engaging the wider school community builds trust and accountability, supporting more effective and responsive leadership.

3.3 Effective Communication

Effective communication emerged as a key lesson for school leadership. Participants emphasized that clear, consistent, and transparent communication is essential for guiding staff, ensuring alignment with school goals, and fostering trust within the school community.

Participant 1: "I have learned that clear, consistent, and transparent communication is essential for guiding staff and maintaining alignment with school goals."

The response highlighted that effective communication is foundational for school leadership. Clear and consistent messaging ensures that staff understand expectations, roles, and objectives, reducing misunderstandings and promoting accountability. Transparent communication also strengthens trust and collaboration among team members, enabling smoother implementation of school initiatives. This lesson suggests that future school heads should prioritize developing strong communication skills to maintain alignment, guide their teams effectively, and foster a positive and collaborative school environment.

Gallardo, A.R., Llanos, M. T., and Perez, J. L. (2024) also found that transparent communication strengthens trust, collaboration, and relationships within the school community, enhancing overall organizational effectiveness

3.4 Adaptability and Flexibility

Adaptability and flexibility emerged as critical lessons for effective school leadership. Participants highlighted the importance of adjusting quickly to changing policies, reforms, and school needs, while maintaining effectiveness. These practices enable school leaders to navigate dynamic educational environments and respond proactively to unexpected challenges.

Participant 4: "I have learned to adjust quickly to changing policies, reforms, and school needs without compromising effectiveness."

Participant 6: "I approach unexpected challenges with a flexible mindset, seeking creative solutions rather than resisting change."

Participant 10: "I recognize that being adaptable allows me to lead my school successfully in dynamic and evolving educational environments."

Adaptability and flexibility emerged as crucial lessons for effective school leadership, enabling school heads to respond successfully to changing policies, reforms, and evolving school needs. Participants emphasized that the ability to adjust quickly without compromising effectiveness supports continuity and stability in school operations. Approaching unexpected challenges with a flexible and creative mindset allows leaders to view change as an opportunity for innovation rather than resistance. Overall, adaptability empowers school leaders to navigate dynamic educational environments proactively, strengthen resilience, and sustain effective leadership amid ongoing change.

Uy et al. (2023) reported that leaders who approach challenges with a flexible and creative mindset are better able to innovate, solve problems, and sustain instructional quality in dynamic educational environments.

The responses underscore that adaptability and flexibility are essential for managing the dynamic nature of school leadership. The first response emphasizes the ability to adjust quickly to policy changes and evolving school needs, maintaining effectiveness despite uncertainty. The second response highlights a flexible mindset, where unexpected challenges are met with creative problem-solving rather than

resistance. The third response demonstrates that adaptability enables school leaders to successfully navigate evolving educational contexts, ensuring continuity and quality in school operations. Together, these lessons suggest that future school heads must cultivate adaptability and flexibility to respond effectively to change, lead with resilience, and sustain school performance in dynamic environments.

Conclusions

The study reveals that school heads with five years of service face interconnected challenges in time management, communication, resource constraints, policy adaptation, and stakeholder coordination. To address these difficulties, they employ coping mechanisms such as prioritizing tasks, maintaining clear and transparent communication, innovating despite limited resources, proactively responding to policy reforms, and strengthening collaborative relationships. These experiences lead to important lessons that emphasize the value of self-awareness, collaborative and inclusive leadership, effective communication, and adaptability. Collectively, the findings suggest that overcoming leadership challenges not only strengthens managerial competence but also fosters reflective, flexible, and people-centered leadership.

Moreover, these lived experiences significantly contribute to teacher professional development, as school heads support, mentor, and empower teachers through collaborative practices, continuous feedback, and capacity-building initiatives. Their leadership also drives school organizational improvement by promoting a positive school culture, enhancing teamwork, and ensuring efficient management of resources and processes. In addition, their ability to interpret and implement reforms strengthens educational policy implementation, as they translate policies into actionable school practices while adapting to contextual realities.

These insights can guide future school heads in developing the resilience and leadership capacity needed to manage schools effectively and sustain positive educational outcomes in dynamic and demanding environments.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, educational institutions and education authorities may consider strengthening leadership preparedness through targeted training programs, mentorship initiatives, and institutional support systems to help future school heads develop essential management and decision-making competencies.

Professional development programs may emphasize skills in time management, task prioritization, effective communication, resource optimization, and adaptability to educational policy changes.

Future school heads may also benefit from cultivating transparent communication practices, fostering collaborative relationships with teachers and stakeholders, and creatively maximizing available resources to support school operations.

Leadership development initiatives may further encourage self-awareness, inclusive leadership practices, and adaptability so that school leaders can effectively navigate dynamic educational environments and sustain positive school outcomes.

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