

Collaborative Governance: Educational Innovation within the Philippine Department of Education

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ARE-PEE M. CASTALONE, M.ED.

Christine Duncan's Heritage Academy, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA
rodelcastalone@gmail.com

LEDA BALUYOT

Detroit Edison Public School Academy, New Paradigm for Education, Michigan
ledatanciobaluyot@gmail.com

JENNIFER G. AGUAS

Mission Achievement and Success Charter School, MAS Charter, New Mexico
pheyaguas1491@gmail.com

ERLEN C. PRONTON

Mesa Alta Junior High School, Bloomfield Schools District, New Mexico
epronton@bsin.k12.nm.us | prontoneren@gmail.com

RACQUEL S. AGUAS

CDHA, APS Charter, New Mexico
racquel.aguas005@gmail.com

Abstract:

Amid global shifts toward decentralized and network-based educational governance, governance networks have increasingly been recognized as vital mechanisms for driving educational reform and innovation. This study examines how collaborative governance within the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) facilitates social and educational innovation in the context of ongoing curriculum and leadership reforms. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study explores the lived experiences and interactive dynamics among school leaders, local government units (LGUs), and community stakeholders engaged in school-community partnerships. Using purposive sampling, ten (10) participants comprising school heads and community leaders from a high-performing Schools were selected based on their sustained involvement in collaborative and innovative educational initiatives. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' narratives. The analysis yielded three interrelated themes: Synergistic Resource Mobilization, highlighting how schools and communities pool limited resources to create shared learning opportunities; Co-Created Pedagogical Adaptations, illustrating how community knowledge and expertise are integrated into localized and culturally responsive curricula; and Relational Leadership, emphasizing the role of school heads as facilitators and metagovernors within governance networks. The findings reveal that while collaborative governance enables innovation in resource-constrained settings, its sustainability is contingent upon effective metagovernance defined as a balance between autonomy and accountability. Rigid bureaucratic controls, power asymmetries, and leadership turnover remain significant constraints. The study concludes that strengthening relational leadership and institutionalizing collaborative governance mechanisms are essential for transforming isolated innovations into sustainable system-wide educational reforms within DepEd.

Keywords: Governance networks, educational innovation, DepEd Philippines, collaborative leadership, social innovation.

Introduction:

The landscape of public education in the Philippines is undergoing a significant paradigm shift. With the introduction of the MATATAG Agenda, the Department of Education (DepEd) has signaled a process of systemic “recalibration” that extends beyond curriculum reform to include the reconfiguration of leadership, governance, and decision-making structures.

This shift mirrors global movements away from rigid, hierarchical models of public administration toward more interactive and network-based forms of governance, as observed in comparative educational reforms worldwide (Torfing & Diaz-Gibson, 2016; Bangoy et al., 2025). Within this evolving context, schools are increasingly positioned not merely as implementing units but as active agents of change within their communities.

Central to this transformation is the distinction between educational management and educational leadership. While management emphasizes compliance, control, and procedural efficiency, leadership focuses on influence, shared responsibility, and moral purpose (Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2019).

The MATATAG Agenda implicitly calls for this shift in orientation, requiring school leaders to move beyond administrative functions toward relational and collaborative roles. As Daniëls, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) argue, contemporary educational leadership must foster environments where collective learning, trust, and innovation can flourish conditions that are essential in complex and resource-constrained systems such as Philippine public education.

In the Philippine context, collaborative governance is most visibly institutionalized through initiatives such as Brigada Eskwela and School-Based Management (SBM). These frameworks encourage partnerships among school leaders, parents, local government units (LGUs), and community stakeholders. However, while such structures formally exist, their capacity to generate meaningful innovation remains uneven. Innovation, as understood in this paper, goes beyond technological adoption and refers instead to social innovation new ways of organizing, teaching, and mobilizing community resources to address persistent challenges such as low literacy levels and student attrition. Recent studies on Filipino school heads highlight that the effectiveness of these collaborations largely depends on leadership dispositions and relational competencies rather than policy design alone (Almagro, Bacang, & Calumpang, 2025).

Analyzing how collaboration leads to innovation also requires attention to policy interpretation and enactment at the school level. Policy documents such as SBM manuals and MATATAG guidelines do not operate in a vacuum; they are mediated through the values, experiences, and judgments of school leaders. Cardno (2018) emphasizes that policy document analysis is both a leadership tool and a qualitative method that reveals how formal rules interact with lived practice. In the Philippine setting, this interaction often results in adaptive, localized responses shaped by contextual realities, reinforcing the importance of flexible governance arrangements.

This paper seeks to contribute to the growing field of socio-educational governance by examining how collaborative practices within Philippine public schools stimulate educational innovation. Moving beyond a purely administrative view of DepEd, the study adopts a relational lens that conceptualizes schools not as isolated institutions but as nodes within broader governance networks. By foregrounding leadership, collaboration, and community engagement, the paper aligns Philippine educational reform with contemporary international scholarship while grounding its analysis in local practice and lived experience.

Literature Review:

This study is grounded in Governance Network Theory, which emphasizes interdependence, collaboration, and negotiated decision-making among multiple actors in the public sector. Unlike traditional public administration models that rely heavily on hierarchy, legal mandates, and centralized authority, governance networks operate through shared responsibility and mutual reliance.

In education systems facing increasing complexity, governance networks offer a framework for understanding how schools, local governments, and communities collectively respond to policy demands and resource constraints. In the Philippine context, Local School Boards (LSBs) serve as a formalized governance network, bringing together the mayor, the schools division superintendent, and representatives from teachers and parents to co-manage educational resources and priorities.

The relevance of governance networks is further underscored by ongoing reforms in Philippine public sector management. Parinasan et al. (2024) argue that 21st-century governance requires adaptive, innovative, and collaborative competencies, particularly in bureaucracies traditionally shaped by rigid administrative procedures.

Their review of public sector management education in the Philippines highlights the growing need for leaders who can navigate cross-sector partnerships and policy complexity. Governance networks thus function not only as structural arrangements but also as learning spaces where public leaders develop the capacity to respond creatively to emerging educational challenges.

Building on this framework, Torfing's (2012) concept of collaborative innovation provides a critical lens for examining how governance networks generate new solutions. Collaborative innovation occurs when diverse actors such as teachers, parents, local officials, and civil society partners share their "fragmented knowledge" and combine different perspectives to address public problems. This process is especially relevant in education systems where no single actor possesses sufficient resources or expertise to implement sustainable reforms. In Philippine public schools, collaboration often compensates for systemic limitations, allowing stakeholders to co-create contextually appropriate innovations.

Several scholars have emphasized the role of design thinking and experimentation in collaborative governance. Millan (2019) demonstrates how design thinking can support public service innovation by encouraging iterative problem-solving, empathy, and stakeholder engagement.

Applied to education, this approach enables school leaders and communities to prototype localized solutions rather than relying solely on centrally designed interventions. Such practices align with governance network theory by reinforcing the idea that innovation emerges from interaction rather than command-and-control mechanisms.

Leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining governance networks and enabling innovation. Studies on educational leadership in Southeast Asia reveal a growing emphasis on relational, adaptive, and distributed leadership practices (Kilag et al.). Similarly, Philip et al. (2025) highlight how outstanding school principals act as digital and collaborative leaders, leveraging networks to navigate change in evolving educational landscapes. These findings suggest that effective governance networks depend not only on formal structures but also on leaders' ability to cultivate trust, manage relationships, and guide collective action.

Beyond formal leadership roles, teacher leadership and collaboration are also essential components of governance networks. Ainin, Tampus, and Eliseo (2025) demonstrate that teacher-led collaboration significantly contributes to curriculum innovation, particularly when teachers are empowered to participate in decision-making processes.

Their case study underscores how governance networks extend into the classroom, where educators act as co-innovators rather than passive implementers of policy. This aligns with the broader shift toward participatory governance in education.

Finally, philosophical and contextual analyses of Philippine education emphasize that governance and innovation are deeply shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors. Cimene et al. note that navigating the Philippine educational landscape requires sensitivity to local realities, values, and constraints.

In this context, resource scarcity often necessitates creative improvisation or *diskarte*, making collaborative governance not merely an option but a practical necessity. Taken together, the literature supports the view that governance networks provide a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how collaboration drives educational innovation in the Philippine Department of Education.

Methodology:

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of individuals navigating collaborative governance within the Department of Education (DepEd).

Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to understand how participants perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences within bureaucratic and collaborative contexts. Rather than focusing solely on measurable outcomes, this approach emphasizes the processes through which school–community partnerships are formed, sustained, and translated into educational innovation.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those involved possessed direct and substantive experience in school–community collaboration. The selection criteria included school heads from public schools classified as Level 3 (Advanced) under the School-Based Management (SBM) framework, as well as community leaders such as Parent–Teacher Association officers and local government unit representatives who had maintained active partnerships with public schools for at least three years.

Additionally, participants were required to have a demonstrated history of involvement in innovative initiatives, including but not limited to localized reading programs and community-funded technology projects. In total, ten (10) participants from a selected Schools took part in the study and were engaged through semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, allowing for systematic identification of patterns across participants’ narratives. The process began with familiarization, wherein interview transcripts were carefully transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of the data.

This was followed by an initial coding phase, during which recurring ideas and expressions such as references to resource sharing, local support mechanisms, and bureaucratic constraints were identified. These codes were then clustered into broader conceptual themes that captured key aspects of collaborative governance and innovation. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure their coherence and alignment with the study’s research questions on governance networks and educational innovation.

Findings and Discussion:

Theme 1: Synergistic Resource Mobilization

The first theme reveals that educational innovation in Philippine public schools is largely driven by resource-based collaboration. Participants consistently emphasized that the regular budget allocation from the Department of Education (DepEd) is insufficient to meet the demands of contemporary teaching and learning, particularly in relation to digital infrastructure, learning spaces, and enrichment programs. As a result, schools are compelled to seek external partnerships to bridge persistent resource gaps. This finding aligns with broader accounts of the “unseen burden” carried by school leaders, who are expected to deliver reform outcomes despite structural and fiscal constraints (Ainin et al., 2024).

Participants described how resource scarcity often becomes the catalyst for collaboration rather than an obstacle to innovation. Instead of viewing limited funding as a barrier, school leaders and community partners engage in collective problem-solving, pooling financial, material, and human resources. This adaptive response reflects the lived experiences of Filipino school principals who navigate policy expectations while responding pragmatically to local realities, particularly during periods of disruption and uncertainty (Espolong, 2024). Innovation, therefore, emerges not from abundance but from strategic interdependence among stakeholders.

A prominent example of this collaborative innovation is the establishment of Community Learning Hubs, wherein local government units (LGUs) provide internet connectivity and physical facilities, while schools contribute teaching personnel and instructional oversight. These hubs serve as shared learning spaces that extend educational access beyond the traditional classroom. Such initiatives reflect the growing demand for digitally enabled learning environments, especially in light of the Philippines’ efforts to align its education system with the requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Eslit, 2023). Beyond addressing immediate resource needs, synergistic resource mobilization also signals a shift in governance relationships.

Participants noted a transition from informal, personality-based arrangements often characterized as clientelism, where school heads rely on personal appeals to local officials toward more structured and goal-oriented partnerships. In these

arrangements, LGU contributions are aligned with the school's School Improvement Plan (SIP) and the broader local development agenda, creating a shared framework for accountability and sustainability.

This transformation reflects an emerging culture of partnership that reframes local governments not as benefactors but as co-producers of educational outcomes. By embedding educational initiatives within LGU development plans, schools are able to secure more consistent support while maintaining institutional legitimacy. Such governance arrangements resonate with studies on smart public institutions, which emphasize the importance of collaborative, multi-stakeholder ecosystems in sustaining innovation and service delivery (Sulasula, 2023).

Furthermore, synergistic resource mobilization redistributes leadership responsibilities within the governance network. School heads act as conveners and negotiators, while community actors contribute context-specific expertise and resources.

This relational dynamic reduces overreliance on individual leaders and strengthens collective ownership of educational initiatives. As Ainin et al. (2024) suggest, collaborative resource mobilization not only alleviates administrative burdens but also enhances leaders' capacity to focus on instructional and developmental priorities.

This theme underscores that innovation within the Philippine education system is less about acquiring additional funding and more about reconfiguring relationships among schools, local governments, and communities. Synergistic resource mobilization demonstrates how collaborative governance transforms scarcity into opportunity, enabling schools to develop responsive and contextually grounded solutions. In doing so, it exemplifies how governance networks can generate sustainable educational innovation even within highly constrained bureaucratic environments.

Theme 2: Co-Created Pedagogical Adaptations

The second theme highlights how curriculum innovation emerges through collaboration between schools and community actors, resulting in pedagogical practices that are both contextually relevant and socially grounded.

The study found that when schools open their instructional spaces to community experts such as local farmers contributing to agricultural lessons or information technology professionals assisting in computer laboratories the curriculum becomes "alive" and meaningfully connected to learners' everyday experiences. These findings reinforce the idea that effective education reform requires governance mechanisms that extend beyond centralized policy design (Saguin & Ramesh, 2020).

Participants emphasized that such pedagogical adaptations are often driven by necessity rather than formal directives. In the absence of detailed operational guidelines, school leaders and teachers exercise professional judgment to respond to local needs. This mirrors Cahapay's (2022) observation that Philippine school principals frequently lead "without a guidebook," especially in periods of disruption, relying on improvisation, collaboration, and contextual knowledge. Co-created pedagogies thus emerge as practical responses to policy gaps and evolving community expectations. One prominent example identified in the study is the Localized Heritage Curriculum, where community elders are invited to share oral histories, cultural narratives, and indigenous knowledge, which are later integrated into Social Studies modules.

This approach not only enriches academic content but also affirms learners' cultural identities. By grounding instruction in local history and lived experience, schools foster a sense of belonging and relevance that standardized curricula often fail to achieve. Such practices align with broader efforts to cultivate culturally responsive and globally aware learners (Butac et al., 2025).

Teacher leadership plays a critical role in sustaining these pedagogical innovations. Teachers act as curriculum translators and co-designers, bridging formal learning competencies with community knowledge. However, as Poloyapoy et al. (2024) note, teacher leaders in Philippine public schools often face challenges related to workload, authority, and institutional support. Despite these constraints, participants in this study demonstrated that collaborative environments empower teachers to take ownership of curriculum adaptation and instructional innovation.

From a governance perspective, co-created pedagogical adaptations challenge the traditional “pedagogical monopoly” of the central office. While national standards remain important, collaboration allows schools to contextualize learning without abandoning accountability. This shift reflects a governance model where authority is distributed and negotiated, rather than imposed, enabling schools to function as sites of innovation rather than mere policy implementers (Saguin & Ramesh, 2020).

Moreover, these collaborative practices contribute to the development of learners who are both locally grounded and globally oriented. By integrating indigenous knowledge, community expertise, and contemporary skills, schools create hybrid pedagogies that prepare students for participation in a diverse and interconnected world.

Butac et al. (2025) emphasize that such intercultural pedagogical practices are essential in forging learners who can navigate both local identities and global citizenship. Theme 2 illustrates that pedagogical innovation in Philippine public schools is not solely a technical process but a relational and governance-driven practice. Co-created pedagogical adaptations demonstrate how collaborative governance enables schools to move beyond uniform instruction toward meaningful, identity-affirming learning experiences. In doing so, these practices affirm the school’s role as a cultural and social institution embedded within its community, reinforcing the transformative potential of collaborative educational governance.

Theme 3: Relational Leadership (The "Metagovernor")

A central finding of the study is the redefinition of the school head’s role from that of a hierarchical “boss” to a relational facilitator or metagovernor. Rather than exercising authority through command and control, effective school heads coordinate, enable, and balance the interests of multiple stakeholders within governance networks.

This leadership orientation aligns with Torfing’s concept of metagovernance, where leaders shape the conditions for collaboration without dominating the network. In the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd), this role is particularly significant given the complexity of bureaucratic procedures and the growing emphasis on collaborative innovation.

Participants described successful school heads as individuals who possess the capacity to navigate the “grey areas” of policy implementation. These leaders demonstrate practical wisdom in interpreting regulations while remaining aligned with institutional accountability. By strategically exercising discretion, they are able to initiate innovative partnerships and programs without violating formal rules. This finding resonates with phenomenological studies on school leadership during periods of crisis, which highlight leaders’ reliance on judgment, adaptability, and relational trust rather than rigid compliance (Uy, Sasan, & Kilag, 2023). Relational capital emerged as a key leadership resource in this metagovernance role. School heads cultivate trust with teachers, parents, local officials, and community partners, enabling smoother coordination and sustained collaboration.

Gading (2024) emphasizes that instructional leadership practices are most effective when grounded in supportive relationships, as trust enhances teacher performance and openness to innovation. In this study, relational leadership was found to facilitate both pedagogical and organizational change, reinforcing the importance of interpersonal influence over positional authority.

However, the exercise of relational leadership is constrained by the heavy bureaucratic demands placed on school heads. Participants consistently cited extensive reporting requirements, overlapping documentation, and audit-related pressures as major obstacles to sustained collaborative work.

This phenomenon, described by participants as “compliance fatigue,” diverts leaders’ time and energy away from relationship-building and innovation. Similar tensions have been observed in studies on educational institutions adapting to Education 4.0, where administrative burdens often slow down transformative initiatives (Alda, Boholano, & Dayagbil, 2020).

The challenge is further intensified in contexts involving technology integration and digital transformation. While innovation is encouraged at the policy level, school leaders are frequently required to comply with rigid procurement, reporting, and evaluation procedures. Cadiz et al. (2024) note that technology integration in Philippine education is

often shaped more by compliance structures than by pedagogical intent. As a result, school heads must mediate between innovation goals and bureaucratic expectations a task that demands high levels of relational and strategic competence.

Despite these constraints, participants demonstrated that metagovernance enables school leaders to buffer their schools from bureaucratic overload by delegating tasks, empowering teachers, and leveraging community partnerships. This distributed approach to leadership allows innovation to continue even when formal systems are slow to adapt. The ability to align instructional leadership with administrative supervision, as observed by Gading (2024), becomes critical in maintaining organizational coherence while pursuing change.

Theme 3 underscores that innovation in the Philippine education system is highly dependent on relational leadership embedded within governance networks. School heads who act as metagovernors are able to reconcile autonomy with accountability, collaboration with compliance, and innovation with regulation.

However, for this leadership model to be sustainable, systemic reforms are needed to reduce bureaucratic burdens and recognize relational work as a core leadership function. Without such reforms, the potential of collaborative governance to drive lasting educational innovation remains constrained.

Theme 4: Challenges to Collaborative Innovation

Despite the demonstrated benefits of collaborative governance, the study identified several persistent barriers that inhibit sustained innovation within Philippine public schools. These challenges reveal structural tensions between innovation-oriented practices and compliance-driven bureaucratic systems. While governance networks create opportunities for shared problem-solving, they also expose school leaders to risks that often discourage experimentation and long-term collaboration.

One of the most significant inhibitors is rigid accountability mechanisms, particularly the fear of adverse findings from the Commission on Audit (COA). Participants expressed concern that unconventional partnerships and flexible resource arrangements although educationally beneficial may later be questioned during audits. This climate of risk aversion discourages school heads from pursuing innovative collaborations, reinforcing conservative decision-making. Similar tensions have been observed in curriculum innovation efforts aimed at developing global competence, where accountability pressures often limit schools' capacity to respond creatively to emerging international and local challenges (Diano Jr. et al., 2023).

A second challenge involves power imbalances within governance networks, especially in relationships between schools and local government units (LGUs). While collaboration ideally operates on mutual trust and shared goals, participants noted instances where LGUs exert disproportionate influence over school priorities. In such cases, governance networks revert to hierarchical arrangements, undermining the autonomy of school leaders and teachers. This finding aligns with leadership studies emphasizing that the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives is strongly shaped by the leadership orientations of local chief executives, whose approaches can either enable or constrain participatory governance (Carvajal & Sanchez, 2024).

Sustainability emerged as another critical concern. Many innovative practices were described as personality-dependent, thriving under specific school heads or mayors but declining once leadership changes occur. This highlights the absence of institutionalized mechanisms that embed collaboration into formal governance structures. The fragility of such initiatives mirrors broader patterns observed during crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where educational innovations often depended on individual leadership capacity rather than systemic support (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

The study also revealed that collaborative work adds to the already heavy workload of school leaders, exacerbating what participants described as "innovation fatigue." Balancing instructional leadership, administrative compliance, and partnership management places school heads in a constant state of negotiation. Research on large-scale qualitative collaboration similarly emphasizes the difficulty of balancing autonomy and coordination, particularly when institutional systems are not designed to support collaborative work (Bates et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Department of Education must move beyond what participants described as “checklist governance.” If collaborative innovation is to be genuinely encouraged, policy frameworks must recognize uncertainty, experimentation, and relational work as legitimate components of educational leadership. Without systemic support, collaborative efforts will remain isolated and vulnerable to leadership turnover and bureaucratic pressure.

First, DepEd should formalize metagovernance training for school leaders. Leadership development programs should include competencies in negotiation, conflict resolution, partnership management, and collaborative decision-making not solely administrative compliance. Such training would better prepare school heads to navigate complex governance environments and sustain innovation across leadership transitions.

Second, the creation of flexible auditing mechanisms for innovation is crucial. Establishing “innovation sandboxes” would allow schools to pilot new partnership models with provisional safeguards and adaptive reporting requirements. This approach acknowledges that innovation involves risk and learning, particularly in times of disruption, as seen during the pandemic when alternative research and operational methods became necessary (Moises Jr., 2020).

Finally, the role of Local School Boards (LSBs) should be strengthened and reimagined. Rather than functioning primarily as fund-releasing bodies, LSBs should be empowered as local innovation councils that coordinate resources, align development plans, and institutionalize collaborative practices. By embedding collaboration into formal governance structures, DepEd can transform isolated innovations into sustainable, system-wide improvements.

Thus, addressing these challenges requires a recalibration of governance itself one that balances accountability with trust, autonomy with coordination, and compliance with creativity. Only through such reforms can collaborative governance fulfill its potential as a driver of sustained educational innovation in the Philippine context.

Conclusion:

This study affirms that a networked approach to governance is not merely a Western theoretical construct but a practical and contextually appropriate necessity within the Philippine Department of Education. In an education system characterized by resource constraints, policy complexity, and diverse local realities, collaborative governance enables schools to respond adaptively to persistent challenges.

The findings demonstrate that innovation whether manifested through localized reading initiatives, community learning hubs, or co-created curricula emerges from sustained interaction among schools, local governments, and community stakeholders rather than from centralized directives alone.

The study further highlights that collaborative governance reshapes how innovation is produced and sustained. When governance networks function effectively, they allow schools to mobilize resources, contextualize pedagogy, and distribute leadership responsibilities. However, these innovations often remain fragile and uneven, constrained by rigid accountability mechanisms, leadership turnover, and bureaucratic demands. Without deliberate efforts to institutionalize collaboration, innovative practices risk remaining isolated “pockets of excellence” rather than becoming integral components of the education system.

Central to the sustainability of collaborative innovation is the adoption of a flexible and relational model of leadership. School heads who act as facilitators and metagovernors rather than traditional administrators are better positioned to cultivate trust, manage partnerships, and navigate the grey areas of policy implementation. Such leadership recognizes that educational reform is not solely a technical or managerial task but a relational process that requires negotiation, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability among stakeholders.

The transformation of Philippine education does not rest in the authority of a single secretary, policymaker, or school principal. Instead, it lies in the strength and resilience of the web of relationships that connect schools to their communities. By embracing collaborative governance as both a leadership practice and a policy orientation, the Department of Education can move toward a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable educational system that is responsive to the needs and identities of Filipino learners.

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