



# Turbulence: School Leadership Responses to Poverty and Crises in Philippine Education

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## Abstract:

This study explores how school leaders in the Philippine education system respond to poverty, disasters, and chronic crises in the context of reform initiatives like the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA). Through qualitative analysis of narratives from school leaders, it examines the challenges they face and their responses to these challenges. Two main leadership responses are identified: custodian leadership, focusing on maintaining the status quo amidst structural challenges, and crisis leadership, dealing with chronic crises like annual flooding. The study reveals a disconnect between national reform policies and local realities, leading to cynicism among school leaders. Despite efforts to promote equity, challenges such as resource shortages and policy inadequacies persist. The findings emphasize the importance of context-specific solutions and meaningful engagement of school leaders in policy development. Addressing these issues is crucial for building a more resilient and equitable education system in the Philippines.

*Keywords:* School leadership, Philippine education system, Poverty, Disasters, Chronic crises

## Introduction

The Philippine education system faces profound challenges stemming from persistent poverty, recurring disasters, and a culture of crises. Despite numerous reform efforts, these challenges often persist or worsen. Reyes (2016b) describes the system as beleaguered by rising dropout rates, teacher shortages, and a lack of resources, compounded by a dysfunctional bureaucracy and systemic corruption (Reyes, 2010). Moreover, the nation's susceptibility to natural disasters and economic dearth further exacerbates the situation (Asian Development Bank, 2016; Bersales, 2016).

The Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) represents a significant reform initiative aimed at addressing these issues. Central to BESRA is the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001 (RA 9155), also known as the Principal Empowerment Act, which promotes School-Based Management (SBM) to achieve equity goals (Department of Education, 2006; Capuno & Kraft, 2011). However, the effectiveness of these reforms remains questionable in the face of complex systemic challenges.



This study explores the experiences of school leaders within this context of poverty, disasters, and crises. Drawing on emerging debates on leadership for social justice (Shields, 2004; Teoharis, 2007), the study adopts a distributed perspective on school leadership (Spillane, 2005) to understand how school leaders navigate reform initiatives amid structural constraints and cultural realities.

Using narratives of school leaders, this research aims to shed light on the challenges encountered and responses elicited by school leaders within the Philippine education system. Through a critical examination of SBM and its purported promise of equity, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on education reform and leadership in the Philippines.

### **Literature Review:**

The literature surrounding education reform, school leadership, poverty, disasters, and crises in the Philippine context provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by the education system and the responses of school leaders. This literature review explores key themes and findings from relevant studies.

Education reform in the Philippines has been a continuous effort to address persistent challenges. The Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) stands out as a comprehensive reform program aimed at improving the quality, equity, and efficiency of basic education (Department of Education, 2006). Central to BESRA is the implementation of School-Based Management (SBM), which decentralizes decision-making to empower school leaders (Capuno & Kraft, 2011). Persistent poverty remains a significant barrier to educational attainment in the Philippines (Bersales, 2016). Economic dearth affects resource allocation in education, leading to shortages of classrooms, teachers, and educational materials (Vera, 2017). Despite economic growth, poverty rates remain high, impacting access to education (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

The Philippines is prone to natural disasters due to its geographic location, leading to disruptions in education (Bankoff, 2003). Flooding, typhoons, and other calamities frequently affect schools, exacerbating the challenges faced by educators (Padawang, 2014).

SBM under BESRA aims to address inequality by empowering schools to manage their resources efficiently (Department of Education, 2006). However, the effectiveness of SBM in achieving equity goals is debated. Some studies suggest positive outcomes (Kimura, 2008), while others highlight persistent challenges (Capuno, 2009).

School leaders play a crucial role in implementing reforms and addressing challenges. Distributed leadership perspectives emphasize the importance of leadership beyond individuals, focusing on collaborative decision-making (Spillane, 2005). However, the reality for school leaders in the Philippines is complex, given the context of poverty and disasters.

In impoverished areas, school leaders often adopt custodian leadership roles, focusing on maintaining the status quo and preserving limited resources (Reyes, 2018). They navigate challenges such as land ownership issues and cultural barriers to education (Reyes, 2016a). In disaster-prone areas, school leaders face recurring crises that demand immediate responses (Smith & Riley, 2012). Crisis leadership involves dealing with emergencies and managing the consequences without long-term planning (Boin & Hart, 2003).

Despite the intentions of reform initiatives like SBM, their impact may not always align with the realities on the ground. School leaders, such as those in flood-prone areas, may find themselves isolated and unable to effectively address systemic challenges (Poblador, 2010).

The literature highlights the complexity of education reform in the Philippines, where poverty, disasters, and systemic issues intersect. School leaders play a critical role in navigating these challenges, but their responses may vary based on context. Understanding the limitations of reform initiatives is crucial for developing effective strategies to address the multifaceted challenges in the Philippine education system.

### **Methodology:**

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the responses of school leaders to poverty, disasters, and cultures of crises within the Philippine education system, focusing on the impact of reform initiatives. The methodology involved a comprehensive literature review to synthesize existing research findings and insights related to the study's objectives.

Relevant scholarly articles, books, reports, and official documents related to education reform, school leadership, poverty, disasters, and crises in the Philippines were collected. Google Scholar and academic databases were systematically searched using keywords such as "Philippine education system," "school leadership," "poverty," "disasters," "education reform," and "School-Based Management (SBM)." Studies focusing on the challenges faced by the Philippine education system, responses of school leaders, impacts of reform initiatives like BESRA and SBM,



and contextual factors such as poverty and disasters were included. Studies not relevant to the research focus or not peer-reviewed were excluded.

Literature was analyzed thematically to identify key themes, findings, and insights related to school leadership responses in the Philippine context. Relevant sections of literature were coded according to themes such as poverty, disasters, SBM, leadership responses, and challenges faced by school leaders. Data from the literature were synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues, challenges, and responses of school leaders in the Philippine education system.

## **Findings and Discussion:**

### **Custodian Leadership in the Face of Structural Challenges**

School leaders in impoverished regions often exhibit custodian leadership strategies characterized by the preservation of the status quo and organizational reproduction. Despite the introduction of reform initiatives like School-Based Management (SBM) under the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), these leaders face significant structural challenges hindering their ability to enact meaningful change within their schools. In impoverished regions of the Philippines, school leaders face multifaceted challenges that impede educational reform efforts. Land ownership issues and seasonal child labor practices are among the structural challenges that affect schools' ability to implement reforms effectively.

Land ownership issues pose a significant challenge for many schools in the Philippines. According to Rutten, et al. (2019), large tracts of land, particularly in agricultural provinces like Negros Island, are owned by hacienderos, leading to uncertain land tenure for schools. This situation creates vulnerability and dependency for schools situated on these lands, limiting their autonomy and ability to make substantial changes.

Child labor, particularly in seasonal agricultural work, is another pervasive issue affecting school attendance and educational outcomes. The phenomenon known as "tiempo negro" involves children helping their families with farm work during busy seasons, leading to absenteeism and dropout rates (De Boer, 2014). Despite efforts to address child labor, it remains prevalent, especially in regions where agricultural livelihoods dominate.

The structural challenges faced by school leaders in impoverished regions significantly influence their leadership responses (Abella, et al., 2024). Leaders often find themselves constrained by these challenges, resorting to custodian leadership to maintain the status quo rather than implementing transformative changes.

### **Impact of Chronic Crises on Leadership Response**

School leaders faced significant challenges due to chronic crises such as annual flooding, which severely disrupted educational activities and exacerbated dropout rates. Despite reform initiatives like the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) promoting decentralization and local decision-making, leaders experienced isolation and felt abandoned by national and local authorities in addressing these persistent challenges.

Annual flooding poses a chronic crisis for many schools in flood-prone areas of the Philippines, disrupting regular educational activities and jeopardizing students' safety. This issue is particularly pronounced in low-lying coastal areas are located.

Flooding leads to the closure of schools and damages school infrastructure, affecting the continuity of education. According to Padawangi (2014), flooding in areas occurs repeatedly during the monsoon season, causing significant disruptions to teaching and learning processes.

Persistent crises such as flooding exacerbate dropout rates as students and teachers are often unable to attend school regularly. The prolonged closure of schools due to flooding prolongs the educational calendar and increases the likelihood of students discontinuing their education (Padawangi, 2014).

School leaders grapple with these chronic crises while feeling isolated and abandoned by higher authorities. Despite decentralization efforts promoted by BESRA, local leaders often lack the support and resources needed to effectively manage crises.

Leader's experience reflects the challenges faced by many school leaders in flood-prone areas. They often find themselves alone in dealing with crises, without adequate support from national or local authorities (Santos, 2017). This isolation hampers their ability to address the root causes of the crises effectively. The disconnect between national policies like BESRA and local realities exacerbates the challenges faced by school leaders dealing with chronic crises (Kilag, et al., 2024). While decentralization aims to empower local decision-making, leaders find themselves at a disadvantage due to inadequate support and resources.

### **Impact of Chronic Crises on Leadership Response**



In the Philippine education system, school leaders face daunting challenges, especially in regions prone to chronic crises. Leaders exemplify the struggle of school leaders dealing with issues like annual flooding. Despite efforts like the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) advocating decentralization, leaders often feel isolated and abandoned by higher authorities when addressing these persistent challenges.

Annual flooding poses a chronic crisis for many schools in flood-prone areas of the Philippines, disrupting regular educational activities and posing risks to students' safety. Flooding leads to school closures and damages infrastructure, severely affecting teaching and learning processes. According to Padawangi (2014), flooding in areas occurs repeatedly during the monsoon season, causing significant disruptions to educational activities.

Persistent crises such as flooding exacerbate dropout rates as students and teachers struggle to attend school regularly. Prolonged school closures due to flooding can extend the academic calendar, increasing the likelihood of students dropping out (Padawangi, 2014). School leaders grapple with chronic crises while feeling isolated and unsupported by higher authorities. Despite decentralization efforts promoted by BESRA, local leaders often lack the necessary support and resources to effectively manage crises.

Leader's experience reflects the challenges faced by many school leaders in flood-prone areas. They find themselves alone in dealing with crises, without adequate support from national or local authorities (Santos, 2017). This isolation hampers their ability to address the root causes of crises effectively. The implementation of reforms like BESRA encounters challenges in areas affected by chronic crises (Uy et al., 2023). While decentralization aims to empower local decision-making, leaders face obstacles such as limited resources and inadequate infrastructure.

### **Policy Dumping and Cynicism Among School Leaders**

In the Philippine education system, school leaders face significant challenges arising from reform initiatives amidst entrenched poverty, disasters, and crises. These challenges often lead to cynical beliefs and behaviors among school leaders, who perceive reform efforts as disconnected from their local contexts, a phenomenon known as "policy dumping." This section explores how such policy dumping contributes to cynicism among school leaders and undermines their confidence in the efficacy of reform initiatives. Policy dumping refers to the imposition of national policies on local contexts without adequate consideration of the unique challenges and needs of those contexts (Thanh, et al., 2024). In the Philippine education system, this often occurs when reform initiatives are implemented without addressing the specific realities of schools facing poverty, disasters, and crises.

As a result of feeling disconnected from reform initiatives, school leaders may develop cynical beliefs and behaviors. They may doubt the intentions behind reforms and question their effectiveness in addressing local challenges (para la Justicia Social, 2014).

School leaders feel unsupported when national policies fail to consider their local realities. This lack of support contributes to feelings of cynicism and disillusionment among school leaders, who struggle to implement reforms effectively (Thanh, et al., 2024).

Cynicism among school leaders undermines their confidence in the efficacy of reform initiatives. They may become resistant to change or adopt a passive approach to policy implementation, believing that reforms will not address the root causes of their challenges (Shields, 2004).

Policy dumping in the Philippine education system contributes to cynicism among school leaders, undermining their confidence in reform initiatives. Addressing this issue requires a more inclusive approach that considers local contexts and actively involves school leaders in policy development and implementation.

### **Conclusion:**

The study sheds light on the complex challenges faced by school leaders in the Philippine education system amidst poverty, disasters, and chronic crises. Through the narratives of school leaders like Mrs. Andanza and Mr. Altercado, it becomes evident that reform initiatives often fall short in addressing the profound structural and contextual issues within schools.

School leaders experience a disconnect between national reform policies and the realities of their local contexts. This disconnect leads to cynicism among school leaders, who perceive reform efforts as inadequate and sometimes irrelevant to addressing their most pressing challenges.

In impoverished regions and flood-prone areas school leaders often resort to custodian leadership, focusing on preserving the status quo and managing crises rather than implementing meaningful change. This highlights the limitations of reform initiatives like SBM under BESRA in effectively addressing local challenges.



The study underscores how chronic crises, such as poverty and natural disasters, exacerbate educational inequities and contribute to high dropout rates and low student retention. Despite efforts to promote equity through reform, persistent challenges hinder progress toward achieving education for all.

Addressing the issues faced by school leaders requires more than just policy reforms; it demands context-specific solutions that consider the unique challenges of each school community. Policy dumping, or the imposition of national policies without regard for local contexts, only perpetuates cynicism and undermines leadership efficacy.

The study highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive and contextually relevant approach to education reform in the Philippines. By acknowledging the realities faced by school leaders and providing them with the necessary support, policymakers can work towards a more equitable and resilient education system.

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