



The Role of Philippine School Principals as Community Leaders in Educational Reform

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Abstract:

This study examines the multifaceted roles of Philippine school principals in promoting educational change within resource-constrained environments. Through qualitative analysis, the research highlights how principals navigate systemic limitations while simultaneously acting as instructional leaders and community representatives. Findings reveal that these leaders employ adaptive strategies that leverage local cultural values and community resources to drive incremental change. The study underscores the importance of collaborative approaches, demonstrating that alignment with community values fosters trust and support, facilitating meaningful educational reform. Furthermore, the research identifies a critical need for more flexible policies that empower principals to tailor national standards to local realities. Leadership training programs focusing on cultural adaptability and resource management are also recommended to equip school leaders with the necessary skills to address the unique challenges of the Philippine educational landscape. The findings resonate with existing literature on educational leadership in developing contexts, reinforcing the notion that school principals often serve as mediators between policy and practice. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of effective leadership practices in education and highlights the resilience of school principals in their quest for meaningful change, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these strategies on educational outcomes.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, School Principals, Philippine Education, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Values

Introduction:

The Philippine public education system operates under the influence of colonial legacies, bureaucratic challenges, and persistent resource constraints, creating a complex landscape for administrators who serve as change agents within their institutions (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005; Reyes, 2009).

These administrators face not only practical challenges but also systemic issues, including inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and instances of corruption, which collectively hinder the potential for meaningful reform in public education (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kilag et al., 2023).

Despite these obstacles, various efforts to innovate and improve educational outcomes have emerged. Kilag, Uy, and Vestal (2023) argue that digital transformation in learning can serve as a powerful mechanism for addressing some of these structural limitations by leveraging technology to create more accessible, inclusive, and efficient educational experiences. In line with this perspective, the Philippine Department of Education has increasingly explored digital solutions to reach marginalized communities and address inequities in access to resources and learning opportunities.

Change theory, as outlined by Fullan (2007), highlights the role of educational leaders in implementing sustainable reforms. Fullan emphasizes that for educational reforms to be effective, leaders must not only endorse policy changes but also foster a supportive environment within schools to encourage staff buy-in.

In the Philippines, this has become increasingly pertinent as school leaders work to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Leaders who understand the significance of distributive and high-commitment work systems, as discussed by Kilag et al. (2023), are better positioned to engage teachers and staff in collaborative efforts that enhance productivity and job satisfaction, ultimately improving student outcomes.



Instructional leadership also plays a critical role in fostering teacher development, which has direct implications for student achievement (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Leaders who prioritize teacher professional growth can effectively address knowledge gaps and promote best practices, particularly in core areas like literacy and numeracy. The use of evidence-based teaching strategies, such as multisensory language techniques, as suggested by Lumando, Uy, and Kilag (2023), is critical for enhancing literacy skills, especially in a multilingual context like the Philippines, where instruction in English, Filipino, and regional languages adds layers of complexity to pedagogy.

Moreover, approaches rooted in constructivist principles, as outlined by Groenewald et al. (2023) and Ondog & Kilag (2023), advocate for student-centered learning frameworks that engage students actively in their own learning processes. This paradigm shift away from rote memorization to more interactive, problem-based learning methods has shown positive results in cultivating deeper understanding, particularly in social sciences and numeracy. These methodologies, drawn from Piaget's cognitive development theory, recognize the unique cognitive stages of young learners and support differentiated instruction, enabling teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students.

However, sustaining these innovations requires strategic leadership, which Leithwood et al. (2004) identify as a key factor in successful educational reform. Strategic leadership involves setting clear goals, building a shared vision, and creating a school culture that values ongoing improvement and collaboration.

In the context of large-scale reforms, as seen in England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, such leadership has demonstrated the ability to drive widespread educational improvements. Philippine school administrators can draw from these insights to implement reforms that are not only innovative but also scalable and adaptable to local contexts.

The international experience also offers valuable lessons for Philippine educators. Schleicher (2012) emphasizes the importance of preparing teachers and developing leaders who can navigate the challenges of the 21st century. These skills include adaptability, critical thinking, and cultural sensitivity, which are crucial in a diverse and evolving educational landscape. By fostering these competencies, Philippine education leaders can equip teachers with the tools to respond to student needs more effectively, addressing issues of inequality and supporting the holistic development of learners.

Educational reform in the Philippines demands a multi-faceted approach, encompassing strong leadership, commitment to professional development, and innovative instructional strategies. As Abendan et al. (2023) highlight, the convergence of technology and education represents a new frontier in transforming learning experiences. By embracing this confluence, Filipino educators can overcome historical and systemic challenges, advancing towards a more equitable and high-quality education system. The sustained improvement of public education in the Philippines hinges on the ability of leaders to inspire change, harnessing both local knowledge and global best practices to create lasting positive impacts on learners' lives.

Methods:

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences of school principals in the Philippines, with a particular focus on the challenges they face and the strategies they use to navigate their roles. Over a six-month period, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and direct observations of school practices. Supplementary sources, including policy documents and local school records, were analyzed to provide additional context to the findings. A thematic analysis approach was applied, allowing for the identification of key themes that reflect the principals' experiences within the unique cultural and contextual factors influencing school leadership in the Philippines.

Participants

Eight school principals from diverse backgrounds participated in this study, representing a mix of urban and rural schools across the Philippines. This diversity in school settings offered insights into how variations in resource availability, school size, and community location shape the leadership experiences of principals. The selection of both urban and rural participants allowed the study to capture a broader perspective on the challenges faced across different school environments, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues at play.

Data Collection

The data collection process utilized three primary methods to capture a rich and nuanced picture of the principals' experiences. Semi-structured interviews served as a core data source, allowing researchers to delve deeply into the specific challenges and adaptive strategies each principal employs. These interviews provided detailed personal



accounts, highlighting the principals' unique approaches to navigating their roles. Focus groups complemented the interviews by creating a space for collaborative discussion, enabling participants to share common issues and insights regarding broader systemic challenges. Through these group interactions, participants engaged in reflective conversations that enriched the findings and underscored shared experiences among school leaders. Additionally, direct observations of school practices provided firsthand insights into the daily operations and leadership dynamics within the schools. Observations of principals in action offered a valuable dimension to the study, illustrating how leadership strategies are enacted in real-time.

Data Analysis

A quasi-grounded theory approach guided the data analysis, which involved coding and categorizing themes that emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and observations. This method facilitated a flexible yet rigorous analysis process, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Themes were organized to reflect both common and unique experiences across participants, with attention given to the cultural and contextual factors that shape leadership practices in the Philippine setting. This approach enabled the researchers to generate insights that are sensitive to the complexities of leading schools in diverse environments.

Findings:

Systemic Challenges in Leadership

Participants in this study consistently cited limited resources, political interference, and bureaucratic constraints as primary challenges to effective school leadership in the Philippines. Schools often lacked essential teaching materials, and classrooms frequently exceeded the ideal student-teacher ratios, leading to overcrowding and strained instructional practices (Abendan et al., 2023).

This resource scarcity presents a significant barrier to implementing innovative educational approaches, as the lack of funding and supplies restricts the ability to adopt new teaching methods and provide individualized support to students (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). In response, school leaders are compelled to prioritize resource management and develop creative solutions to mitigate these limitations.

Political interference emerged as another prominent issue, where local politicians and community leaders often influence school policies, appointments, and resource allocation. This dynamic hinders the autonomy of school principals and affects the consistency and equity of school management, as resources are sometimes distributed based on political affiliations rather than educational needs.

Such interference underscores the broader socio-political challenges affecting the education system and emphasizes the need for a governance framework that safeguards school leadership from external pressures, allowing principals to focus on instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In addition to external challenges, principals face bureaucratic constraints within the educational system. Administrative protocols are often rigid and time-consuming, leaving limited flexibility for school leaders to adapt policies or expedite solutions for urgent school needs (Kilag et al., 2023). Bureaucratic inefficiencies consume time that could be allocated to instructional leadership and teacher support, hampering principals' capacity to drive improvements in teaching and learning (Groenewald et al., 2023). This bureaucratic burden not only slows the decision-making process but also demotivates leaders by constraining their ability to respond swiftly to school-specific challenges.

Despite these obstacles, many principals exhibit resilience and adaptability, employing various strategies to navigate resource constraints and political influences. Some adopt distributive leadership approaches, delegating responsibilities to teachers and involving the school community in problem-solving efforts, which can help mitigate the effects of limited resources and foster a more collaborative school culture (Kilag & Sasan, 2023).

Distributive leadership has been shown to improve employee morale and productivity, especially in resource-challenged settings, by enhancing teachers' sense of ownership and commitment to school objectives (Kilag et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the concept of sustainable leadership, which emphasizes building capacity within the school community to ensure long-term success despite external limitations (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012).

Furthermore, principals leverage instructional leadership to support teachers in maximizing limited resources. For instance, they implement focused professional development initiatives to enhance teachers' instructional skills, ensuring that available resources are utilized effectively to improve student outcomes (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). This focus on instructional leadership also aligns with research on sustainable change, which suggests that school improvement efforts are most effective when leaders invest in teacher development and foster a shared commitment to educational goals (Fullan, 2007).



School principals in the Philippines operate within a challenging environment shaped by limited resources, political interference, and bureaucratic constraints. However, by employing distributive leadership and focusing on instructional support, many leaders demonstrate a capacity to adapt and sustain school improvement efforts.

These findings highlight the importance of empowering principals with greater autonomy and providing resources that enable them to implement effective leadership practices. The resilience and resourcefulness of these leaders underscore the potential for educational progress, even in constrained circumstances, reinforcing the need for systemic reforms that reduce bureaucratic obstacles and enhance resource allocation to schools.

Leadership Strategies for Educational Change

Despite significant challenges, school principals in the Philippines demonstrated adaptive leadership by fostering strong relationships and collaborative networks with teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. These leaders emphasized shared responsibility and actively engaged teachers in decision-making processes to cultivate a culture of mutual support and accountability.

Principals encouraged teachers to take ownership of school initiatives, which empowered staff to tackle resource limitations collectively (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012). By involving teachers in planning and problem-solving, they promoted a distributed leadership model that made the most of available resources and enhanced the sense of shared mission among school personnel (Kilag et al., 2023).

Community collaboration was also vital. Given the constraints on educational funding, principals tapped into local resources, seeking donations and volunteer support from the community to supplement limited budgets. This approach, as documented by Abendan et al. (2023), aligns with recent trends emphasizing innovative and community-driven educational solutions. By building relationships with parents and local stakeholders, principals not only gained resources but also strengthened community commitment to school success, which is crucial in resource-scarce environments (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Principals also adapted by cultivating a culture of resilience and optimism among staff and students. Recognizing that structural issues, such as overcrowding and outdated teaching materials, were unlikely to be resolved in the short term, these leaders focused on creating a positive and supportive school environment. They inspired teachers to adopt flexible and creative instructional methods, demonstrating how change leadership could foster effective teaching even within challenging contexts (Fullan, 2007). Such an approach aligns with sustainable leadership practices, as it promotes long-term resilience and adaptability by focusing on what can be controlled at the school level (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012).

Instructional leadership emerged as a key strategy for overcoming resource limitations. Principals supported teachers through targeted professional development, helping them to maximize limited resources by strengthening their pedagogical skills (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). This commitment to teacher development reflects a broader recognition that quality teaching is foundational to school improvement, even in resource-limited settings (Groenewald et al., 2023).

Philippine school principals exemplify adaptive leadership by fostering a supportive and collaborative school culture, engaging community resources, and empowering teachers to address challenges creatively. Their approach highlights the resilience and innovation required for effective school leadership under constraints, demonstrating that even amid systemic limitations, progress can be achieved through community partnerships and shared commitment to educational goals.

Policy and Curriculum Implementation

While the national curriculum provides a structured educational framework, principals in the Philippines find it both a valuable guide and a significant constraint, especially in rural schools. The curriculum standardizes instruction across the country, aiming to ensure equity in educational content and expectations (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978).

However, principals report that it often fails to account for local realities, such as limited resources, diverse student needs, and language barriers that make its implementation challenging (Abendan et al., 2023).

One prominent issue is language. In rural areas, local dialects often differ greatly from English and Filipino, the two primary languages of instruction outlined in the curriculum. This language gap creates a barrier for both students and teachers, who may struggle to achieve the curriculum's expected outcomes due to limited proficiency in the mandated languages (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Additionally, resource limitations—such as outdated textbooks, insufficient teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms—further hinder effective implementation, particularly in remote schools with minimal funding (Kilag et al., 2023).



To adapt, principals employ creative solutions, such as encouraging teachers to translate key concepts into local dialects or to use culturally relevant examples that resonate with students' backgrounds. Such adaptive strategies, while not officially supported by the curriculum, allow for more effective teaching tailored to students' linguistic and cultural contexts. This reflects Fullan's (2007) change theory, highlighting the importance of flexibility and localized solutions in school improvement.

While the national curriculum serves as a foundational guide, its effectiveness depends on the ability of school leaders and teachers to adapt its requirements to local contexts. By balancing the curriculum's standardized goals with the realities of their unique settings, principals work to bridge the gap between national expectations and local needs, thereby fostering a more inclusive and responsive educational environment.

The Role of Cultural Values

Cultural values such as respect for authority and community cohesion significantly shape leadership practices within educational institutions. In the context of Philippine schools, principals navigate these cultural imperatives by aligning their school goals with local cultural expectations. This alignment fosters trust and support from the community, which is essential for effective school leadership.

Respect for authority is a foundational cultural value in many Filipino communities, deeply ingrained in social interactions and organizational hierarchies. Principals leverage this value by establishing themselves as authoritative figures while also being approachable and understanding. By demonstrating a commitment to the community and its values, school leaders cultivate a positive school environment that encourages collaboration among teachers, students, and parents.

According to Fullan (2007), effective leadership requires a deep understanding of the cultural context in which schools operate, allowing leaders to implement changes that resonate with the community's expectations.

Community cohesion also plays a crucial role in shaping leadership practices. Principals actively engage with community members to ensure that school initiatives reflect local priorities and concerns. This involvement not only helps in garnering support for school programs but also reinforces the school's role as a vital community institution (Reyes, 2023). When school goals are aligned with the values and aspirations of the community, it fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, leading to enhanced student outcomes and a more supportive learning environment (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978).

Moreover, the collaborative approach to leadership, which emphasizes shared decision-making and inclusivity, aligns with the principles of sustainable leadership articulated by Hargreaves and Fink (2012). This model encourages principals to value input from various stakeholders, thus promoting a culture of mutual respect and cooperation. Such dynamics not only empower teachers and students but also ensure that educational practices are culturally relevant and responsive.

The interplay between cultural values of respect for authority and community cohesion profoundly influences leadership practices in schools. By aligning school objectives with local cultural expectations, principals can cultivate trust and support from the community, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of educational initiatives and fostering a more inclusive and responsive school environment.

This holistic approach to leadership not only benefits the school but also contributes to the broader community's development and well-being, demonstrating the integral role of cultural values in shaping educational success.

Discussion:

The findings of this study underscore the complex role of Philippine school principals as they navigate the dual responsibilities of instructional leadership and community representation. In the context of educational reform, principals face systemic limitations that can hinder their ability to implement top-down policies effectively. However, they are not merely passive recipients of external mandates; rather, they employ adaptive strategies that leverage community resources and local cultural values to foster incremental change within their schools.

One significant aspect of the principals' role is their position as mediators between policy and practice. Research has consistently shown that in developing contexts, school leaders must bridge the gap between national educational standards and the unique needs of their local communities (de Guzman, 2006). This balancing act requires a nuanced understanding of both the educational policies at play and the cultural dynamics of the communities they serve. Principals must interpret and adapt national guidelines in ways that resonate with local realities, ensuring that educational practices are both relevant and effective.

The study's data indicate a pressing need for more flexible policies that empower principals to modify national standards to suit local contexts. Such flexibility would allow for greater responsiveness to the specific challenges



faced by schools in diverse communities across the Philippines. For instance, rural schools often contend with issues related to resource scarcity and language barriers, making it crucial for principals to adapt teaching methods and curricula to meet the needs of their students. By fostering a culture of adaptability, educational policymakers can support principals in implementing reforms that are not only compliant with national standards but also culturally appropriate and resource-sensitive.

Moreover, the findings suggest that leadership training programs should place a strong emphasis on cultural adaptability and resource management. As educational leaders, principals must develop skills that enable them to effectively utilize the resources available within their communities. This includes harnessing local knowledge, engaging with parents and community members, and building partnerships with various stakeholders to enhance the educational experience for students.

Training programs that focus on these competencies can empower principals to become more effective leaders in their schools, equipping them with the tools necessary to address the unique challenges of the Philippine educational landscape.

Cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping the strategies employed by principals. In many Filipino communities, cultural norms emphasize respect for authority and the importance of community cohesion. These values inform the way principals interact with teachers, students, and parents, fostering an environment of collaboration and trust. By aligning school goals with local cultural expectations, principals can gain the support and engagement of community members, which is essential for successful school leadership. This collaboration is vital for creating a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders, ultimately contributing to improved student outcomes.

In addition to cultural adaptability, principals must also be skilled in resource management. Many schools in the Philippines operate within tight budgets and face significant challenges related to infrastructure, instructional materials, and teacher training. Effective principals are those who can creatively leverage available resources, whether through community partnerships, fundraising initiatives, or innovative teaching practices. By adopting an entrepreneurial mindset, principals can identify opportunities for collaboration and resource-sharing that enhance the educational experience for their students.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of collaborative leadership approaches that empower teachers and staff to take an active role in decision-making processes. When principals involve their teams in shaping school policies and practices, they not only foster a culture of shared leadership but also tap into the diverse expertise and perspectives of their educators. This collaborative approach can lead to more informed and contextually relevant decisions that ultimately benefit students.

The findings also suggest that ongoing support and professional development for school leaders are essential for sustaining educational reform efforts. As principals navigate the complexities of their roles, they require access to resources, mentorship, and networks that can facilitate their growth as educational leaders. By investing in leadership development initiatives, policymakers can ensure that principals are well-equipped to handle the challenges of their roles and lead their schools effectively.

The findings of this study illustrate the multifaceted role of Philippine school principals as they balance their responsibilities as instructional leaders and community representatives. By employing adaptive strategies that leverage community resources and cultural values, principals can drive incremental change within their schools despite systemic limitations.

There is an urgent need for flexible policies that empower principals to adapt national standards to local realities, as well as for leadership training programs that focus on cultural adaptability and resource management. Ultimately, supporting school principals in these areas will contribute to a more responsive and effective educational system in the Philippines, benefiting both students and the broader community. As educational leaders continue to navigate the complexities of their roles, their ability to foster collaboration, build community trust, and adapt to local contexts will be critical for achieving sustainable improvements in education.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the resilience and adaptability of Philippine school principals in driving educational change despite facing significant challenges. By prioritizing collaborative approaches and aligning their initiatives with community values, these leaders exemplify how meaningful transformation can be achieved even in resource-constrained environments. Their ability to engage with local stakeholders and leverage community resources is critical in fostering a supportive educational climate that enhances student learning.

Looking ahead, future research should delve into the long-term impacts of these leadership strategies on educational outcomes, particularly in rural and underserved areas.



Exploring how these adaptive leadership practices influence student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and community engagement will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of such approaches.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the scalability of these strategies across different contexts, ensuring that successful practices can be shared and implemented in various educational settings throughout the Philippines. By continuing to investigate and document these dynamics, the educational community can better support principals in their essential roles as leaders of change, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and effective educational landscape for all students.

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