

Leadership and Challenges: A Phenomenological Exploration of Teacher-Principals in the Philippines



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ABSTRACT. This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of school principals who also serve as teachers in Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines. Thirty school heads, selected based on experience, marital status, and willingness to participate, provided insights through a Pre-Survey form and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis (Colaizzi's method) revealed challenges in teaching strategies, behavior management, technology integration, and parental communication, while strategic management skills included prioritization, planning, and stress management. Findings have implications for policy development, professional development programs, and curriculum design, benefiting scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. The study highlights the unique experiences of teacher-principals, contributing to scholarly dialogue on educational leadership. Recommendations emphasize ongoing strategic management training, self-assessment, and collaborative input. By exploring innovative teaching strategies

and sharing insights, teacher-principals can enhance collective educational knowledge. This study offers valuable perspectives on educational leadership, guiding policies and practices for a more effective and responsive educational system.

1.0. Introduction

The experience of teacher-principals is a multifaceted and often demanding phenomenon observed globally. Educators balancing the demands of teaching and administrative leadership face unique challenges, including time constraints, role conflict, and a potential lack of specialized knowledge in leadership domains (Tran et al., 2023; Bush & Middlewood, 2013). Despite these challenges, many teacher-principals draw strength from their classroom experience, citing advantages in building relationships and understanding the core complexities of education (Pounder, 2006). However, the scarcity of targeted support structures and professional development opportunities can exacerbate the difficulties for these dual-role leaders (Bush & Middlewood, 2013). Recognizing the global scope of this phenomenon underscores the need for context-specific research and interventions to support teacher-principals effectively as they navigate the complexities of their vital leadership roles.

Across the ASEAN region, the experiences of teacher-principals are marked by both resilience and

complexity. These educators navigate a demanding landscape where classroom instruction intertwines with administrative leadership. Challenges such as time management, balancing diverse responsibilities, and needing specialized leadership knowledge are commonly reported across Southeast Asian contexts (Bush & Middlewood, 2013; Tran et al., 2023). Many teacher-principals draw strength from their teaching backgrounds, leveraging it to build relationships and maintain a grounded understanding of educational challenges (Petalla, 2022). However, research highlights a need for targeted professional development in the region, specifically designed to support their multifaceted responsibilities (Petalla, 2022; Tran et al., 2023). This underscores the need for ASEAN-focused research, initiatives, and policy reforms to empower and support these educators, recognizing their pivotal role in shaping educational systems throughout Southeast Asia.

In the Philippines, teacher-principals navigate a complex landscape shaped by Department of Education (DepEd) policies like Memorandum Circular No. 4, s. 2016, which emphasizes instructional leadership and strategic management (Department of Education, 2016). This dual role requires a unique blend of instructional expertise

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and administrative competence (Casinillo & Suarez, 2022). While effective leadership is crucial for student success (González-Falcón et al., 2020), teacher-principals face constant demands, juggling tasks like curriculum alignment, school improvement initiatives, and fostering positive relationships with parents and the community (Casinillo & Suarez, 2022). Research suggests they are the linchpins of their schools, requiring strong leadership and adaptability to navigate the multifaceted complexities of their roles (Casinillo & Suarez, 2022; Juharyanto et al., 2020).

In Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines, teacher-principals face unique challenges as they balance classroom responsibilities with complex administrative duties. Limited resources, geographical constraints, and the legacy of natural disasters often exacerbate common burdens like time management and role conflict (Casinillo & Suarez, 2022). Despite these challenges, many teacher-principals within these provinces find strength in their deep-rooted connection to their communities, leveraging this bond to foster collaboration and build resilience (Petalla, 2022). Nevertheless, research highlights the need for specialized professional development programs tailored to the local context of Leyte and Southern Leyte. Such programs would empower teacher-principals with strategies for navigating their specific challenges, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes within their schools and communities.

The importance of strong school leadership is undeniable within our evolving educational landscape (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). To meet these modern challenges, leadership preparation programs must reform, shifting away from a historical focus on administrative tasks and toward developing the leadership and instructional skills needed for the 21st century (Pont, 2020; Klein & Schwanenber, 2020; Kadir et al., 2021). While research explores the general challenges of school leadership (Reid, 2020; Atasoy, 2020), a crucial gap persists: We lack an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of teacher-principals. This gap hinders the development of tailored support and policies for this unique group. By exploring their daily lives and strategies, we can gain insights to empower these dual-role educators, ultimately benefiting students and communities.

This phenomenological inquiry specifically focuses on teacher-principals in a local setting, addressing the complexities of their experiences. Observing them navigate diverse responsibilities within the school, family, and personal spheres will provide rich insights. While challenges are evident (Gallos & Bolman, 2021), the strategic management techniques employed by these teacher-principals remain unclear. This research aims to fill this gap by

exploring their lived experiences, their challenges, and the strategies they utilize to manage their multifaceted roles. By documenting these experiences, this study will contribute valuable knowledge to the existing literature on educational leadership.

2.0. Methodology

Research Design. This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach exceptionally well-suited for delving into the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology offers a unique path to understanding the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by those living it (Neubauer et al., 2019). In this inquiry into the lived experiences of school principals as teachers in Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines, a descriptive phenomenological approach is particularly apt. This allows for a rich and detailed exploration, clarifying the intricate dynamics these principals navigate within their dual roles.

Research Participants, Sampling Technique, and Setting. This study included 30 school heads from Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines, chosen through purposeful sampling. The specific criteria were at least three years as a school head, married or separated, and demonstrated willingness to participate actively. The study focused on public government schools, including those in the following districts: Matalom North, Matalom, Hilongos, Bato, Inopacan, Malitbog, Macrohon, and Padre Burgos. These schools play a crucial role in serving students and promoting the school's best interests.

Research Instrument. This study used semi-structured interviews to capture the essence of lived experiences as described by teacher-principals. This approach aligns well with the goals of phenomenological inquiry. A pre-designed interview guide focused the interviews on lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies, while open-ended questions encouraged rich narratives. The conversational format promoted participant-driven dialogue, ensuring their perspectives were central. To strengthen rigor, the interview guide was reviewed by experts for clarity and alignment with the research objectives. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring the full range of experiences was captured. Technological tools (e.g., audio recorders) were used, with participant consent, to enrich data collection.

Data Collection Procedure. This descriptive phenomenological study employed a meticulous data collection process built on trust and open communication with participants.

The research began by seeking permission

from the Schools Division Superintendents - the gatekeepers to access the target population (Creswell, 2014). Following approval, a Pre-Survey Form was distributed at designated meetings to identify potential participants who met the study's specific criteria. Upon identifying qualified individuals, informed consent was obtained, ensuring participants understood the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidential treatment of their data.

The researcher actively engaged in "bracketing" throughout the process (Moustakas, 1994). This involved setting aside personal assumptions and biases to ensure the participants' lived experiences formed the core of the inquiry. Semi-structured interviews, guided by a pre-designed framework but allowing for flexibility, were chosen for data collection. Open-ended questions facilitated rich and detailed responses about the lived experience of being a school principal-teacher. Interviews were purposefully scheduled on weekdays and weekends, and locations varied between schools and participants' homes based on availability and comfort level. This flexibility aimed to minimize disruption and encourage open dialogue.

Guided by the interview protocol, interviews continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new significant themes emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Throughout the interviews, probing techniques were employed strategically to elicit deeper insights and clarify any ambiguities. Importantly, participants were encouraged to express themselves in the most comfortable language, fostering a genuine and unfiltered sharing of their experiences.

Following each interview, a debriefing session was conducted to allow participants to ask questions and provide any additional information they felt was relevant. This ensured a collaborative and respectful data collection process. Data collection culminated with the debriefing session. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' words and nuanced expressions.

Data Analysis. This study employed a rigorous data analysis process inspired by Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method to systematically organize, extract meaning, and capture the essence of the lived experiences shared by the school principals. After transcription and coding, the researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts, practicing "bracketing" to minimize bias and prioritize the authentic voices of the participants. Significant statements about teacher-principals' strategic leadership experiences were extracted and meticulously documented. These were transformed into tentative meanings, ensuring consistency with their source. Through iterative analysis, these meanings were organized into categories and clusters,

forming a thematic structure with internal convergence and external divergence. This structure served as the foundation for a comprehensive description of teacher-principals' strategic management practices, with each theme carefully defined. To capture the essence of the phenomenon, the description was refined, removing redundancies to reveal the fundamental structure. Finally, member checking validated the findings, ensuring they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and enhancing the study's overall credibility.

Data Trustworthiness. This study emphasized trustworthiness, a hallmark of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strategies were employed to safeguard credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking ensured that the findings resonated with participants' experiences. A thick description of the phenomenon and context aids readers in judging transferability to similar settings. A comprehensive audit trail detailing methods and analysis fosters dependability. Furthermore, expert review of the analysis minimized researcher bias and strengthened the study's confirmability.

Ethical Considerations. This phenomenological study emphasized ethical practices to protect participants' well-being and ensure respect. A detailed informed consent process formed the foundation of this commitment. Participants received a transparent explanation of the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data handling protocols. To further prioritize participant autonomy, they were empowered to choose the recording format (audio, video, or none) they felt most comfortable with during interviews. This respectful approach fostered a trustful research environment vital for participants to share their lived experiences openly.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Experiences as a Teacher

The participants believe working as teachers has the greatest impact on their work as school heads. They agree that their years as classroom teachers give them the confidence to face the day-to-day demands of the job. Besides, their teaching experience with different learner populations and with different grade levels from K-6 gives them confidence that they could be effective educators in diverse environments (Yildirim & Kiliç, 2021; Lwi, 2019). Participant F believes that her background experiences have shaped who she is as a school leader. She highlights that:

The more ka ma exposed sa
lain-lain nga taw, the more pud

ka ma aware sa similarities ug differences among them. (The more you are exposed to different people, the more aware you are of their similarities and differences.) (Participant F, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Being exposed to other people's culture, values, and traditions may enhance school heads' appreciation and understanding of diversity (Lindsey et al., 2018; Casinillo et al., 2021). The more open and exposed they are to cultural differences, the more prepared they will be to understand and, ideally, appreciate the cultural diversity that surrounds them. Participants also stressed that their experience as teachers gave them authority and more credibility as instructional leaders. Participant G, for example, says that her teachers are more willing to listen to her suggestions and recommendations because they know that she is an effective teacher. Her reputation as a successful teacher gives her more reliability as an instructional leader. Participant G also notes that her teaching background makes her more sensitive to what teachers feel and go through daily because she knows what it is like and what it means to be in the teacher's shoes.

Participant E highlights the pivotal role of her teaching background in shaping and refining the instructional approach at her school. Drawing on her firsthand experience as an educator, she adeptly tailored the instructional strategy to align with the unique requirements of her diverse learner population. The students under Participant E's guidance not only benefited from the adapted approach but also underwent transformative educational experiences that, in her words, "*helped a lot and made a big difference.*" (Participant E, personal communication, October 8, 2021). This underscores the significant impact of personalized teaching methodologies in fostering positive outcomes for students and emphasizes the indispensable connection between a teacher's expertise and the enhanced learning experiences of their students.

Ang ahung panabot ug sa ahung kaagi as teacher, nakahatag nahu ug pagsabot nga ahung gikinahanglan para mapasayun ang pagtudlo ug ang pagkat-un sa mga bata. (My knowledge and my experience as a teacher provided me with the understanding, I needed to facilitate teaching and learning for my students.) (Participant E, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

These school heads believe they are at a disadvantage because they do not have the background knowledge to guide and back up their decisions (Shamir-Inbal, 2021). Participant O shares her experiences in the classroom and that in the plethora of her responsibilities in school, classroom instruction and management are also the additional roles she needs to perform effectively. Similarly, the participants agreed that teaching and administrative duties are integral to their jobs and responsibilities at school. In reference to this, participant N comments:

Ang ahung role sa school dili ra administrative functions, hasta instructional. Ahu pud nang responsibilidad kay nag-teach man ko ug subjects. (My responsibilities in school are not only administrative but also instructional in nature because I teach subjects in school.) (Participant N, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Participants F and A1 support the statement of participant N as she reflects on her experiences as a teacher in school. She says:

Maaju gani ka Ma'am kay subjects ra imong gitudluan, ag aho jud kay class adviser ko. Tanan nga subjects ahung gi-handle. (Good for you, Ma'am. You are focusing on teaching. I am a class adviser teaching all subjects.) (Participant N, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Part of the responsibility of the school principal is to determine the need of the school in which the school makes all means to address the gap (Collins & Halverson, 2018). The participants agreed that in their experiences as multitasking school heads with multiple responsibilities, instances of leaving their learners in school are more often evident.

Kanunay nahu mabijaan ahung mga bata labi na ug magsubmit ko ug report sa District. (I always left my learners in school, especially when I submitted a report to the district.) (Participant Q, personal, communication, October 8, 2021)

Hasta ng urgent staff meeting Ma'am, mao jud nay kanunay mahitabo nga mabijaan ng mga bata sa klasi. (The urgent staff meeting Ma'am is the reason why learners are left in school.) (Participant A, personal, communication, October 8, 2021)

Part na na sa atong responsibilidad ug pagpanarbahu sa gobierno. (That is part of our responsibilities and part of our job in government) (Participant K, personal, communication, October 8, 2021).

Those roles, as they stressed in their experiences, are the submission of the school reports and attending the staff meetings. In reference to this, participant C shares her experiences:

Sa ahung experiences, malouy ko maghunahuna sa ahug mga bata nga kanunay nahu mabijaan sa klasi. Ang ahung buhaton nalang jud, ahung e-fuse ang ahung mga students sa lain nga klasi para di sila mabijaan sa klasi. (In my experiences, it's so sad to think that my learners are often left in class. What I did was to fuse my students with another class so that they would not be behind with the lessons.) (Participant C, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Participants revealed that time management plays an important role in their nature of work, especially in classroom instruction and management. They both agreed that time management greatly affects their role as teachers, especially since they play a dual role in the school. *Participant L describes themselves as "kasing" (top) (Participant L, personal, communication, October 8, 2021)*, who often moves around and work around in multitasking roles. Participants unveil that dashing and rushing to classroom instruction frequently happens. School heads often make their instructional activities and delivery to speed it up to cope with the set learning skills to be taught. This statement is illustrated by participant H, who comments:

"Sa ahu pud nga part, based sa ahung experiences, kanunay ko magdalidali ig klasi kay ug di, mabijaan nahu ang uban nga skills. Usa pa, ang ahung mga school reports naghuwat sa office." (On my part, based on my experiences, I often get in a hurry in teaching the lessons so that the other learning skills will not be left behind. One more thing, my school reports are waiting in the office.) (Participant H, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Across the surveyed participants, a shared pattern emerges regarding their experiences as educators. Notably, the role of classroom instruction, a pivotal responsibility, often tends to be overshadowed and lacks the necessary focus. Despite a shared recognition

among participants of the paramount significance of classroom instruction, their experiences in both teaching and leadership roles underscore a prevailing tendency to accord higher significance to administrative duties, especially during instances of administrative-related demands (Comstock & Margolis, 2020; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020).

Teacher-principals assert that their extensive teaching backgrounds shape their leadership effectiveness, fostering confidence, adaptability to diverse learners, and cultural sensitivity (Jhaveri & Li, 2024; Petalla & Madrigal, 2017). This experience enhances instructional leadership credibility, but participants acknowledge a lack of specific leadership knowledge. Balancing classroom instruction with administrative duties poses a significant time management challenge, often resulting in classroom responsibilities taking a backseat. This highlights a complex balancing act within their dual roles and a need to improve leadership practices. The emphasis on reflection and drawing from experience underscores the importance of ongoing professional development to integrate leadership expertise and practical teaching insights (Jhaveri & Li, 2024; Oluwatoyin, 2023; Petalla & Madrigal, 2017).

Teaching Strategies

One of the challenges that teachers face is choosing the appropriate teaching strategies. Teaching strategies are essential for enhancing student learning. Participant B says:

Daghan ug klase and strategy na gamiton sa maestra pero kinahanglan ang kana jud na makahatag ug pagtulon-an ang imporante. (Teachers use different kinds and strategies in teaching, but they need to select the ones that can deliver learning effectively.) (Participant B, personal, communication, October 8, 2021).

Daghan naman bag-o nga mga stratehiya na atong gamiton pero kinahanglan magpili jud ta sa maayo nga stratehiya para makahatag ta ug pagtalun-on sa mga estudyante. (There are many new strategies that we can use, but we have to choose the best strategy to provide learning for our students.) (Participant C, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Actually, ang pinaka best nga buhaton ang mogamit ug lain-lain nga strategy, depende ug unsay effective nga gamiton para sa nagkalainlain nga bata sa classroom. (Actually, the best thing to do is to utilize various

strategies, depending on what proves effective for different children in the classroom) (Participant J, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Note that the teaching strategy of the teacher is the method used to deliver information in the classroom, online, or in some other medium. It reflects understanding different learning styles (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). It implies that teachers should be keenly aware of various teaching methodologies and their impact on students' learning achievements. The study of Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) and Petalla and Doromal (2021) also underscored that in any given classroom, students exhibit diverse interests, abilities, skills, and existing knowledge.

Educators face a significant challenge: choosing appropriate teaching strategies. This decision directly impacts student learning outcomes. Effective selection and implementation are crucial for creating a rich learning environment (Bean & Melzer, 2021). Research suggests active learning, collaboration, and technology integration as effective approaches (Bean & Melzer, 2021). Choosing the best strategy aligns with evidence-based teaching, urging educators to base decisions on proven effectiveness (Claire et al., 2024; Malagsic et al., 2021). Additionally, utilizing varied strategies for diverse learners aligns with differentiated instruction, acknowledging individual needs within the classroom (Ojong, 2023).

Dealing with Misbehaviors

Dealing with student misbehavior is another challenge in teaching. It hinders their learning because they are not attentive to their studies but engaged in activities that violate the established norms and standards. Participant C says:

Dli jud lalim na naa jud badlangun nga bata ug kinahanglan jud nimo badlungon kay naa jud na epekto sa iyang magkalampos. (It is really hard to have misbehaving learners and they need to be corrected because it can affect their development.) (Participant C, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Nagkailain-lain nang among mga studyante, lain-lain sad na sila ug kina-iyang naay lisud ug batasan. (We have different students and so they have different behaviors with inappropriate behaviors too.) (Participant I, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Lain-lain nga bata, lain-lain sad na ug kina-iyang. Therefore, kining ilang mga batasan mao ni ang sagad nga lisud e deal sa mga teachers sama namo. (Different children also have different personalities. Therefore, dealing with their behaviors, which vary widely, can often be challenging for teachers like us.) (Participant K, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Student misbehavior disrupts learning by diverting students' attention and harming the classroom environment (Porter & Serra, 2020; Kontor Owusu et al., 2021). Teachers must master classroom management to ensure the best educational experience possible. Effective classroom management requires positive reinforcement, clear expectations, and consistent consequences (Jobirovna, 2023; Malagsic et al., 2021; Petalla & Madrigal, 2017).

Addressing misbehavior transcends mere disruption; it is essential for creating a focused learning environment (Burden, 2020). Educators must understand the roots of misbehavior to employ strategies addressing diverse student needs. Preventative measures like positive relationships, a supportive classroom culture, and proactive interventions are crucial for long-term success (Collier et al., 2018).

Technology Use

The use of technology is another challenge faced by the teachers. This varies from teacher to teacher, school to school. In some schools, the challenge is learning how to use the technologies available. Participant T says:

Naay uban nga maglisud na ug cope gamit and technology for instruction, reluctant na ang uban to use for instruction." (There were some who hardly coped with instructions regarding the use of technology. They were reluctant to use it.) (Participant T, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

In others, it may be learning how to teach using minimal technologies. Whatever the situation, Participant A asks:

Unsa man atong gamiton nga stratehiya para epektibo ang akong pagtudlo? (What strategy can we use to make our instruction effective?) (Participant A, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Kinahanglan jud sa mga bata karun na matudlo-an sa makabag-o nga stratehiya arun daghan sila makat-unan. Dili jud nah sajum kay mag-agi jud ka ug kalisud para hinay hinay makat-un ra jud sila. (The children need to learn using the new strategies in teaching so that they will learn more. It is not easy because they will go through difficulties until they gradually learn) (Participant D, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Modern technology plays a crucial role in education, enhancing student learning and equipping them for the future (Heavin et al., 2018; Jorilla & Bual, 2020). However, integrating technology brings unique challenges for educators (Alkhalwaldeh & Khasawneh, 2023; Petalla, 2022). These challenges vary based on the teacher's proficiency and the availability of resources. Targeted support and resources are crucial for teachers to effectively utilize available technology.

Additionally, some educators face resistance to technology adoption due to a lack of training or concerns about its impact (Lassoued et al., 2020; Petalla, 2022). To address this, professional development programs, mentorship, and a supportive institutional culture promoting technology integration are essential (Miller, 2023; Petalla, 2022).

Parental Communication Challenge

Promoting parental involvement in the activities of the students is another challenge for these school heads. This aims to ensure that the students are inspired and motivated by their parent's presence and support. As Participant H says:

Kinahanglan jud na ang mga ginikanan moapil jud sa mga aktibidad sa mga bata, kay imporante jud kana para mapalambo ang ilang kaug-maon. (It is indeed important for the parents to participate in school activities because it is important for the development of their children's future.) (Participant H, personal, communication, October 8, 2021).

Ug makakita ang ilang mga bata nga naa kanunay ilang ginikanan nagga-supporta, ma-motivate and mga bata to study well. (If their children observed that their parents support their school activities, they get motivated to study well.) (Participant J, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Mao lagi nga maglisug ug implement ang mga school sa school programs ug project tungud na

kay wan a communicate ug maaju sa mga ginikanan.(That is why schools often struggle to implement school programs and projects because there is a lack of effective communication with the parents.) (Participant T, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Research consistently demonstrates that parental engagement improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism, and bolsters parents' confidence in their children's education (Smith et al., 2021). Students with involved parents exhibit higher grades, test scores, and improved social skills and behavior (Smith et al, 2021; O'Toole et al., 2019).

School administrators face the challenge of encouraging parental engagement and creating meaningful, sustainable partnerships that inspire and motivate students. Key to fostering this partnership is creating a welcoming school environment that values diverse families (Pescasio, 2023). This aligns with social cognitive theory, emphasizing the power of observational learning and social modeling (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

Strategic Management as Teachers

The participants agree that despite the various aspects of problems and challenges, they strongly believe that humans, considered the highest form of animals or rational animals, can shape and adapt to any working circumstances and situations. They also concur that their experiences of multiple roles as teachers, heads of schools, and family members contribute to the development of such values. Participant H refers to this.

Tanang tawo naay abilidad nga mo adapt sa ijang environment. Bisan unsa kalisud, maningkamot man jud ta nga makaadjust ug makasurvive. (All human beings have the ability to adapt to his/her working environment. No matter how tough it is, we exert our efforts to be able to adjust and to survive.) (Participant H, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Furthermore, Participant A supports the previous statement by emphasizing the gift of human beings that enables them to cope with any challenges that they encounter in their experiences.

Mao nay gift nga innate na natong mga tawo to survive and adjust to our environment. (That is an innate gift that we have as human beings, the ability to survive and to adjust to our environment) (Participant A, personal, communication, October 8, 2021).

As educators, kabalo man me ug kanus-a molugar. Importante gayud nga katigo mo adjust sa working environment ug naa man nah kanato to cope from the working environment. (As educators, we know when to adapt. It is crucial for us to adjust to the working environment quickly and have the resilience to cope with it) (Participant Z, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Strategic management involves behaviors that protect individuals from the psychological harm of challenging situations (Viac & Fraser, 2020; Hora & Millar, 2023). This protection operates by modifying problematic conditions, managing perceptions of experiences, and controlling emotional responses (Tran & Lumley, 2019).

The participants expressed a belief in their innate human capacity for resilience and adapting to diverse work challenges. They attributed this adaptability to their experiences in multiple roles – as teachers, school heads, and family members. This aligns with evolutionary psychology, which emphasizes the adaptive nature of human behavior for survival (Shackelford, 2020), and research on workplace adaptability, which highlights the ability to adjust cognitively and behaviorally to meet environmental demands (Woodruff, 2019).

Prioritization

Teachers cope with these challenges by prioritizing their duties and responsibilities. They focus on the most important and serious tasks first and leave the less important ones for later. As Participant B says:

Sa pag deal naho sa mga challenges, ako jud paningkamutan na ang pinakaimportante tagaan nako ug bili na para nahu pinaka serious. It is a matter of prioritizing the most important over those unimportant. (For me, in dealing with challenges, I prioritize the ones that are the most important and quite serious. It is a matter of how you prioritize the most important ones over those that are not.) (Participant B, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

In solving or overcoming challenges, I made some priorities for I do believe that it can solve one at a time in the process of promoting success and growth in school. (Participant G, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Huna-hunan kanaunay ug unsay urgent ug maayo unahon sa pagtrabahu ug comply. (Always consider what is urgent and prioritize that in your work and compliance.) (Participant V, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Prioritization – the ability to identify urgent and important tasks – is essential for teachers facing multiple challenges (Casinillo & Casinillo, 2021). By focusing on critical tasks first, teachers can manage their workload more effectively, reducing frustration and increasing overall efficiency.

This strategic prioritization demonstrates teacher resilience and organizational skills. It also aligns with strategic planning principles, which emphasize addressing issues systematically for a greater chance of success (Bondar et al., 2020).

Planning

Success is best measured by planning. Teachers plan ahead of time to prevent problems and to promote quality learning among the students. They avoid hasty decision-making by choosing the best strategies for effective teaching. As Participant H says,

Importante jud na planuhon daan para walay problema ug maka assure ka maayo ang pagtudlo. (Planning is important to avoid problems and to assure effective teaching.) (Participant B, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Tinuud nah, mag anticipate na daan sa bisan unsa nga sitwasyon. (Indeed, anticipate any situation in advance.) (Participant C, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

The response of Participant H shows the importance of planning. Planning is one of the most important principles of teaching. It provides a structure and context for teachers and students and a framework for reflection and evaluation. Planning also maximizes the learning that can be achieved by arranging appropriate student activities (Huck, 2020; Petalla & Madrigal, 2017).

Meticulous planning is essential for educators seeking success. By planning ahead, teachers can anticipate challenges, design effective lessons, and make informed decisions – ultimately improving student outcomes (Petalla & Madrigal, 2017). This emphasis on planning demonstrates educators' strategic mindset and commitment to creating successful learning environments.

Furthermore, effective educational leadership requires a blend of vision and planning. Visionary

leaders set direction, while planning provides the practical steps to achieve that vision (Durairaj et al., 2024; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). Integrating these elements is crucial for a thriving educational system.

Stress Management

Participants H and F report that they walked into their respective school settings to find a “laissez-faire” type of school environment that was not necessarily conducive to learning.

Siguro, ang environment was one of favoritism, and mistrust and somewhat laissez-faire. (I think the environment here was one of favoritism, mistrust, and somewhat laissez-faire.) (Participant F, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

This is what Participant H remembers from his first year as a school head at the school where he works. He also comments that after a couple of years, he can see positive changes in the school due to a more positive school climate.

Siguro, ang ahung team ug ako have a positive impact sa school. We changed the feeling and moved into a more positive school climate. Na-improve among attendance. Gamay na lamang ang discipline referrals. Ni gamay na pud and tardy students by 20%. Siguro we are trying to create a different attitude towards school. Nitaas ang among academic performance, attendance, discipline ug expectations both students and teachers.” (Besides, my team and I have had a positive impact on the school. We changed the feeling and moved into a more positive school climate. We improved our attendance. We decreased discipline referrals. We decreased the number of tardy students by twenty percent. I think we are trying to create a different attitude towards school.) We are raising our academic performance in terms of attendance, discipline, and expectations for both students and teachers.) (Participant H, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Cool-cool lang uy. Deal with all the challenges with ease. Isa-isa lang. Anyways, mahuman raman gihapon ang tanan bisan hinay basta kanunay. (Just stay cool. Deal with all the challenges with ease, one at a time. Anyway, everything will be completed, even if it is slow, as long as it is consistent.) (Participant Q, personal communication, October 10, 2021).

Participants emphasized the positive impact of a supportive school climate on stress management. A positive climate promotes discipline, positive attitudes, and collaboration – all crucial for meeting expectations and enhancing overall well-being (Ho et al., 2022). Effective school leaders play a key role in fostering this climate, recognizing that a supportive environment benefits educators and students (Lawrence, 2020). Research supports this, showing that a positive school climate fostered by effective leadership can lead to academic improvement and reduced stress (Forfang & Paulsen, 2021; Shoaib et al., 2022).

Additionally, the importance of leaders’ emotional intelligence and coping strategies aligns with research like Ginsberg’s (2020). These skills are essential for leaders to mitigate their stress and create a less stressful environment for their team. This fosters a collaborative atmosphere where educators feel supported in tackling the inevitable challenges of their work.

Eidetic Insight

Teacher-principals recognize the profound impact of their classroom experience on their leadership success, citing benefits in confidence, adaptability, and cultural understanding. However, they acknowledge a gap in specific leadership knowledge, indicating a need for targeted professional development. Time management remains a formidable challenge in balancing classroom instruction with administrative duties, highlighting the need for efficient strategies and institutional support. Further, teacher-principals desire ongoing support and professional development in key areas like teaching strategies, student behavior management, technology integration, and fostering parental engagement. Despite challenges, they demonstrate resilience in their complex roles, and stress management is directly linked to a supportive school climate that promotes well-being.

4.0. Conclusion

This phenomenological inquiry underscores the multifaceted strengths and challenges faced by teacher-principals. Their extensive classroom experience undeniably shapes their leadership, fostering confidence, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. Educational institutions should actively recognize these valuable assets and build upon them. Simultaneously, the study reveals a need to address potential gaps in specific leadership knowledge. Targeted professional development, tailored to areas like administration, policy, and strategic planning, can empower these educators to excel in their multifaceted roles.

Furthermore, support systems are crucial to

navigating the complexities of the teacher-principal position. Institutions must proactively address time management challenges by implementing strategies such as streamlined processes, administrative support, and training in setting clear priorities. Comprehensive professional development should emphasize best practices in teaching strategies, student behavior management, technology integration, and fostering robust parental engagement. Most importantly, fostering a positive school climate where collaboration, resilience, and well-being are prioritized is essential for teacher-principals' stress management and long-term success.

By embracing the unique strengths of teacher-principals while recognizing their need for tailored support, educational institutions can empower these leaders to thrive and positively impact their schools and communities.

5.0. Limitations of the Findings

The possible limitations of the study's findings are the locale of the research study, which dealt only with Leyte and Southern Leyte, Philippines, and does not contemplate the broader sense of Philippine education and school leaders. Moreover, the current article's investigation centers around the educators' perspectives and encounters, which, while insightful, might not holistically capture the tangible outcomes and authentic influences that strategic management exerts on their professional undertakings.

6.0. Practical Value

As for the practical value of this current study, it documented and elucidated the lived experiences of school principals given their respective roles and functions as teachers, which is a great help in assessing some existing problems in the leadership and strategic management of educational institutions. Additionally, the findings may give valuable insights to the school leaders to improve their traits and attributes in doing their duties and responsibilities while handling classes at the same time.

7.0. Directions for Future Research

The study suggests that further research must be conducted that deals with school leaders' perspectives on their well-being and health, which is a potential weakness of the current findings. Moreover, investigating the job satisfaction and burnout of school principals may help assess their work assignments and management skills. Future research may also investigate the happiness and income, personal attributes, and competencies of school leaders as inputs to institutional leadership in the country, which can enhance the development of the educational system.

8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interest declared by the authors.

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