

Lived Experiences of School Heads: Motivations, Challenges, and Qualities of Leadership

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Abstract— This study explored the experiences, motivations, challenges, and leadership qualities of school heads in educational administration. Through in-depth interviews and a detailed questionnaire completed by 5 school leaders from diverse settings, it reveals intrinsic and extrinsic motivations like passion for education, commitment to student success, and aspirations for school improvement. Findings indicate that school heads are driven by the desire to create meaningful change and enhance student outcomes. Key leadership qualities identified include dedication, integrity, communication, problem-solving, adaptability, collaboration, and team empowerment. Effective leadership also involves a clear vision, the ability to inspire others toward common goals, continuous self-improvement, and innovation in educational environments.

Keywords— motivations, work ethics, leadership styles, challenges, school supervision, school administration, educational leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

School leadership is a key driver to the growth and development of a school. In the wide range of responsibilities taken by school leaders, they are often confronted with complex challenges and problems faced both internally and externally of the school. These challenges may be in the form of training, development, and managing of teaching and non-teaching staff, discipline and academic achievement of students, revisions and development of curricula, lack or poor management of the school's budget and physical resources, the safety and security of the school, and disputes and miscommunication between the school's stakeholders, parents, immediate community, and higher school officials.

Understanding these challenges is the first step in the development of effective support of school leadership and its community while also providing a unique perspective of how school leadership involves itself to the success of the school and its vision and mission. Existing research highlights persistent issues such as teacher motivation and behaviour, student discipline and achievement, stakeholder relationships, financial and resource management, curriculum implementation, and leadership capacity. Despite differences in regional and cultural settings, these challenges consistently affect school leaders' ability to deliver quality education. Furthermore, the effectiveness of school leadership is influenced by factors such as leadership styles, years of experience, work ethics, and the ability to engage stakeholders and manage resources efficiently. However, there remains a need to further explore how these factors interact and to identify the essential leadership qualities required to successfully navigate these challenges.

Recent study conducted by Verano et al. (2024); Shapaka (2024); Panibon (2023); Pelletero (2024); and Arif et al. (2023) reveal a wide range of challenges faced by school leaders across diverse contexts. The researchers reviewed the following papers to support the ideas gathered. The following are studies conducted to investigate, describe, and uncover the challenges and lived experiences faced by school heads.

Through the review of literature, the researchers noticed key similarities among the papers reviewed. Shapaka (2024); Panibon (2023); Pelletero (2024); and Arif et al. (2023) mentioned teachers and teacher motivation as major challenges faced by school heads. This is further supported by Lazaro et al. (2024). However, there is also research that links teacher motivation and efficiency with leadership style such as that conducted by Shapaka (2024). Findings from Shapaka (2024); Duraku and Hoxha (2021); Yalçinkaya (2021); and Badrun et al. (2022) concluded that there is a significant relationship between leadership styles and teacher motivation while that of Arif et al. (2023) along with the findings of Hoque and Raya (2023) concluded that the leadership styles of school heads have a significant relationship with the behavior of teachers.

Arif et al. (2023) also mentioned the challenges of student discipline as challenges faced by school heads while Panibon (2023) mentioned student achievement as another challenge faced by school heads. This is further supported by Amaefule (2020) who concluded that different leadership styles also influence student discipline. In addition to this, Kaleem et al. (2021) concluded that a transformational leadership style had a significant positive effect on the climate of the school and the academic achievement of students.

Verano et al. (2024); Panibon (2023); Pelletero (2024); and Arif et al. (2023) have mentioned that relationship with stakeholders is also a challenge faced by school heads. Arif et al. (2023) specifically highlighted the decline of parental respect, and in turn parental involvement, as a major challenge faced by school heads. This is also supported by the findings of Barth and Tsemach (2025) who suggest that different leadership styles have different effects on the attitude of teachers to parental involvement. There is also research that investigates the active role of school leaders towards parental involvement such as that of Yulianti et al. (2022) who concluded that school heads do not directly impact parental involvement but may contribute to parental involvement in academics, volunteering, and school decision making through teacher invitation.

Financial challenges are also faced by school heads, similar to that mentioned by Panibon (2023), and Pelletero (2024). Other research suggests that financial management is a significant problem faced by school heads. Similar to the research conducted by Amos et al. (2021) concluded that financial challenges faced by school heads are due to shortage of school funds as well as poor monitoring, evaluation, and auditing of school finances, Sabwami et al. (2020) concluded that different leadership styles had a significant positive effect on the financial management.

Resource management was also mentioned by Verano et al. (2024); Shapaka (2024); and Pelletero (2024) while Panibon (2023) mentioned resource management as it intertwines with fiscal matters. Understanding the relationship of education management with the management of financial and non-financial resources is critical, as the management of financial and non-financial resources is an indicator of the fulfilment of educational goals as stated by Odigwe and Owan (2022). Given this, it may also be noted that challenges in non-financial resources may also stem from challenges with financial availability similar to the findings of Asuquo and Ogar-Ikwen (2021).

Providing safety and security to the school is also a concern of school heads. Asuquo and Ogar-Ikwen (2021) lightly mentioned security as a challenge in the management of physical resources of a school. Similar to how the management of financial and non-financial resources is an indicator of the fulfilment of educational goals, Gbesoevi et al. (2022) proposed that the effective planning of the safety and security of a school fosters an effective management of a school. Kratcoski (2023) mentioned the growing need for safety protocols for schools, especially those where crime rates are high. With that said, Wysokińska-Senkus (2020) identified a gap in the knowledge of students and their knowledge of safety and security within the school.

School heads also face the challenge of adopting, developing, and implementing school curricula. Arif et al. (2023) mentioned the challenge of an overloaded curriculum as a challenge faced by school heads while Pelletero (2024) mentioned its implementation. This is further discussed by Pak et al. (2020) who identified challenges regarding school curricula. Misunderstanding of educational standards found in the curriculum, miscommunication, lack of time for professional development, and the misalignment of equity when faced with a decision regarding curriculum implementation were also mentioned by the researchers.

In the Philippines, research such as that of Verano et al. (2024); Panibon (2023); Pelletero (2024); and Hungo et al. (2023) highlighted the need for continued research in the challenges faced by school leaders as well as the specialized and continued training of school leaders using the data-driven research. This coincides with the findings of Estacio and Estacio (2022) who concluded that effective school leaders demonstrate the ability to manage and communicate well with school personnel, align school resources effectively, and engage with stakeholders within and outside of the school.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of school heads in terms of their motivations and challenges encountered as school leaders, to uncover what motivates them to seek an administrative position and how they view and enact their work ethic and leadership style. It also examined the significant challenges school heads encounter in their work related to their dealings and responsibilities to teachers, students, parents, support staff, the curriculum, school budget and resources, safety and security, the community, and higher school authorities. Finally, the research explored the responses that were taken to ameliorate challenges, considers improvements school leaders would want to apply in their schools for the next five years, and what traits are believed to be most important for leaders to experience success in education.

III. METHOD

This study used a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by school heads. This approach was appropriate for capturing participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and insights. The population included school heads from selected schools, with five purposively sampled participants meeting criteria relevant to the research objectives. This method ensured selection of participants likely to provide rich, relevant data.

Data were collected via a semi-structured interview guide, offering a flexible yet focused framework for interviews. This allowed probing deeper into responses and exploring emerging themes while maintaining consistency.

Interviews were conducted in quiet, convenient settings and recorded with consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving systematic review and coding of transcripts to identify patterns and themes related to school heads' challenges. This method categorized data into meaningful themes addressing the research questions and objectives.

Ethical standards were upheld throughout. Informed consent, detailing study purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights, was obtained before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis was used to extract key themes and patterns from the narratives of the participants.

Table 1: Motivational Factors for Pursuing a Leadership Role in Education

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Desire to Create Positive Change	4
Sense of Purpose or Calling	3
Commitment to Student Success and Well-being	3
Leadership as a Form of Service (explicit or implied)	2
Faith-Based Motivation (Christ-centered leadership)	1
Motivated by Past Leadership Experiences (positive/negative)	1
Lifelong Aspiration / Childhood Dream	1

The responses show that the primary motivation for pursuing educational leadership is a strong desire to create meaningful, lasting change, expressed by four of five respondents. This drive is linked to a sense of purpose or calling, whether from childhood aspirations, personal passion for education, or spiritual beliefs. Several emphasized commitment to student success and well-being, aiming to positively influence young learners' holistic development. One respondent's motivation stemmed from past leadership experiences, especially negative ones, inspiring a commitment to lead with fairness and integrity. Another expressed a faith-based motivation, viewing leadership as a Christ-centered mission to serve and instill Christian values. Despite individual differences, all responses share a belief in education's transformative power and a dedication to serve, inspire, and lead with purpose.

Table 2: Participants' Descriptions of Their Work Ethics

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Dedication and Commitment to Excellence	4
Teamwork and Collaboration	3
Open Communication and Accountability	3

Integrity and Professionalism	3
Adaptability and Flexibility	1
Core Values / Inspirational Framework	1

The responses reveal that dedication and commitment to excellence are shared by nearly all respondents, with strong emphasis on fostering teamwork and collaboration. Integrity and professionalism, especially leading by example, are common themes. Many highlight the importance of open communication and accountability in leadership. One respondent emphasizes a core values-based framework rooted in the university's principles, while another highlights adaptability and flexibility in meeting varying needs and tasks. These shared elements show a strong alignment in work ethic, focusing on both people and quality leadership outcomes.

Table 3: Participants' Descriptions of Their Leadership Style

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Collaboration and Team Empowerment	3
Support and Guidance	3
Adaptive Leadership	2
Empathy and Understanding	1
Authoritative and Democratic Approach	1
Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Approach	1
Transformative and Servant Leadership	1

The responses highlight collaboration and team empowerment as central to most respondents' leadership styles, focusing on creating an inclusive environment where all ideas and contributions are valued. Several emphasize support and guidance to empower growth while promoting autonomy. Empathy and understanding are key traits for one respondent, recognizing unique strengths and challenges in leadership. One response combines authoritative and democratic approaches, while another stresses data-driven, evidence-based leadership grounded in science and measurable results. Transformative leadership is cited by one, aiming to inspire excellence and innovation; another highlights a servant leadership approach. Adaptive leadership is valued by some, showing flexibility in responding to evolving needs and challenges. These responses reveal diverse leadership styles, united by themes of collaboration, support, and adaptability.

Table 4. Challenges Encountered in Managing/Dealing with Various Stakeholders

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
a. Teachers	
Resistance to change	4
Performance issues	4
Communication and collaboration challenges	4
b. Students	
Discipline and engagement	4

Mental health and emotional challenges	4
Diverse learning needs	3
c. Parents	
Parental involvement	4
Financial concerns	4
d. School Staff	
Collaboration and communication	4
Workload management	4
e. Curriculum	
Adaptability and flexibility	4
Implementation challenges	3
f. School Budget	
Limited resources	4
Funding for non-academic activities.	4
g. Resources	
Limited facilities and outdated technology	4
h. Safety and Security	
Ensuring physical and emotional security	4
Inadequate security personnel.	4
i. Community	
Building relationships with the community	4
j. Higher School Authorities	
Balancing expectations	4

Based on response analysis, school leaders face a wide range of challenges managing key stakeholders and school operations. Teacher issues include resistance to change, inconsistent performance, and lack of commitment, often addressed through professional development and open communication. Student challenges focus on behavioral problems, low motivation, diverse learning needs, and increasing concerns about mental health and emotional well-being. With parents, school heads face differing expectations, encouraging involvement, and addressing financial or academic concerns. Among staff, fostering collaboration, maintaining morale, and resolving conflicts are common challenges. Curriculum difficulties involve adapting to frequent changes, integrating innovations, and ensuring responsiveness to learners' needs. Budget constraints limit funding for essential and non-academic programs, requiring careful prioritization and alternative funding searches. Limited resources such as outdated technology, inadequate facilities, and poor infrastructure exacerbate financial issues. Safety and security remain pressing concerns, with enforcement, emergency preparedness, and student welfare requiring ongoing attention. Community involvement poses challenges as schools seek partnerships and shared accountability. Relations with higher authorities add complexity due to inconsistent communication, bureaucratic demands, and differing policy

interpretations. These issues demonstrate the multifaceted and dynamic nature of school leadership, emphasizing the need for adaptability, strong communication, and collaborative problem-solving.

Table 5: Strategies in Handling Challenges in School Management and Supervision

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Collaboration and Communication	3
Professional Development and Capacity Building	2
Decision-Making and Leadership Autonomy	1
Strategic and Evidence-Based Planning	1
Empathy, Spiritual Grounding, and Emotional Intelligence	1
Policy and Standards Adherence	1
Student Discipline and Support	1

Based on thematic analysis, school heads address challenges in management and supervision through a multifaceted approach emphasizing collaboration, communication, and professional development. Most respondents stressed fostering a collaborative environment where open communication among teachers, staff, and stakeholders builds trust and involvement in decision-making. Professional development and mentoring are key strategies, particularly to help teachers adapt to curriculum changes and manage classroom issues. Strategic planning using tools like SWOT analysis, goal-setting, and outcome-based evaluation guides continuous improvement. Some respondents handle less critical decisions independently based on experience, while complex issues require support from superiors and colleagues. Emotional intelligence and spiritual grounding aid in navigating difficult situations, alongside adherence to DepEd policies to align actions with guidelines. Addressing student discipline and promoting well-being through clear expectations and structured support are essential for effective school management.

Table 6: Planned School Improvements for the Next Five Years

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Facilities & Infrastructure	5
Teacher Retention & Development	3
Student Support & Well-being	3
Academic Excellence & Innovation	4
Enrollment & Growth	2
Community Engagement	1

Over the next five years, school leaders envision improvements to enhance education quality and student experience. Top priorities include upgrading facilities and infrastructure, such as building a five-story structure, larger classrooms, and air-conditioned rooms to create a comfortable learning environment, especially in hotter months. They also aim to increase student enrollment and retain quality teachers by fostering a supportive workplace and investing in continuous professional development, including training in modern teaching strategies

and leadership. The responses highlight a growing focus on academic innovation and student-centered learning to improve performance through creativity, outcomes-based education, and continuous improvement. School heads are committed to supporting students holistically, emphasizing mental, emotional, and physical well-being as vital for academic success. Finally, some emphasize strengthening community ties to enhance resources and support, fostering a more engaged and collaborative school environment.

Table 7: Essential Qualities for Success in Educational Leadership

Themes/Categories	Number of Responses
Visionary Leadership	4
Communication Skills	4
Decision-Making and Problem-Solving	4
Adaptability and Innovation	4
Collaboration and Community	3
Integrity and Ethical Leadership	3
Commitment to Growth & Learning	3

Analysis of responses on essential qualities for success in educational leadership revealed key themes. Visionary leadership was predominant, noted by four of five respondents, highlighting the need for clear direction and inspiring others toward shared goals. Communication skills, decision-making, problem-solving, adaptability, and innovation were also emphasized by four respondents, reflecting the dynamic educational environment requiring informed decisions, effective communication, and flexibility. Collaboration and community engagement were identified as vital by three respondents, stressing teamwork with staff, students, parents, and the broader community. Integrity and ethical leadership, cited by three participants, were fundamental for setting positive examples and building trust. Commitment to growth and lifelong learning appeared in three responses, underscoring continuous self-improvement and innovation. Together, these themes depict an ideal educational leader as visionary, communicative, ethical, collaborative, and resilient amid change.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that dedication, professionalism, honesty, and flexibility are key qualities of effective educational leadership, fostering collaboration and addressing challenges like student misconduct, teacher underperformance, resource scarcity, and communication issues. School leaders prioritize cooperation and open communication to build inclusive, empowered work cultures. They apply diverse leadership styles—transformational, data-driven, democratic, and authoritative—guided by empathy, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. To overcome persistent challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change, they use strategic planning, strict adherence to educational policies, and focused professional development.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights that key leadership traits—dedication, integrity, adaptability, and professionalism—help school heads foster collaboration and tackle challenges like teacher performance, student behavior, resource

limits, and communication barriers. Emphasizing open communication and inclusive leadership, they use authoritative, democratic, data-driven, and transformational styles grounded in emotional intelligence. To address resistance to change and limited resources, they rely on strategic planning, professional development, and strong policy enforcement. Future goals include improving infrastructure, retaining skilled teachers, promoting innovative student-centered learning, and strengthening community ties. Future research should explore leadership differences by school type and region, assess leadership impact on student outcomes, and examine long-term leadership development for sustainable school improvement.

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