

Between Vision and Practice: A Phenomenological Study of Middle Managers' Leadership Roles in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in schools is often experienced not only as a position of authority but as a dynamic journey of navigating demands, relationships, and purpose. This study explored the lived experiences of middle-level managers in academic institutions. Grounded in qualitative inquiry, the study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design based on van Manen's (1990) approach to capture the essence and meaning of participants' experiences. The study was conducted in selected public schools in the Misamis Occidental Division, with twelve (12) participants purposively selected based on established inclusion criteria. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide and analyzed through thematic interpretation anchored in lifeworld existentials. From the analysis of participants' narratives, five major themes emerged: Strain and Resilience in Leadership Responsibilities; Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership in Building School Relationships; Balancing Workload and Developing Competence Over Time; Purposeful Leadership in Translating School Vision into Collaborative Practice; and Leadership Shaped by Institutional Resources and Structural Demands. Middle-level managers' leadership is shaped by resilience, collaboration, competence, alignment with vision, and adaptability. Schools may consider supporting middle-level managers through professional development and strengthened organizational practices.

Keywords: collaboration, educational leadership, hermeneutic phenomenology, middle-level managers, resilience

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in educational institutions has evolved from a purely administrative function to a multifaceted responsibility requiring vision, adaptability, and relational skills (Nadeem, 2024). Middle managers, such as department heads and program coordinators, occupy a pivotal position within school hierarchies, bridging top-level directives and the work of teaching staff (Salendab, 2025). Their role extends beyond policy implementation to fostering a culture of innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Effective middle management has been increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of school performance, teacher engagement, and student outcomes (Agwoje & Okeleke, 2023). In an era marked by globalization, technological advancement, and complex societal demands, the capacity of middle managers to translate vision into practice is more crucial than ever. Exploring how these leaders perceive and enact their responsibilities provides valuable insights into the dynamics of effective educational leadership (Mpuangnan & Roboji, 2024).

Strategic decision-making is central to middle managers' work, who must navigate competing priorities while balancing instructional goals with institutional requirements (Kalebar et al., 2024). Unlike top-level administrators who focus on broad policy, middle managers operate within the nuanced realities of daily school operations, mediating between organizational mandates and the needs of teachers and students (Liu, 2024). Their effectiveness hinges on both technical competence and interpersonal acumen, enabling them to influence teaching practices, implement programs, and sustain staff motivation. The dual demands of administrative oversight and relational leadership create pressures that require resilience, critical thinking, and ethical judgment (Aleh Khalilov et al., 2024). Contextual factors, personal values, and organizational culture shape leadership practices at this level. Employing a phenomenological approach enables a nuanced understanding of middle managers' lived experiences in fulfilling these complex roles (Kale et al., 2024).

Leadership in schools is a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by professional norms, cultural expectations, and institutional structures (Mincu, 2022). Torres (2022) Research suggests that the effectiveness of school leadership depends on the leader's ability to inspire, guide, and align their team toward a shared vision while managing operational challenges. Middle managers often serve as catalysts for change, translating abstract policies into actionable strategies within their departments or programs. They must also navigate interpersonal dynamics, resolve conflicts, and support faculty professional growth (Szeto, 2022). This balance of strategic thinking and relational leadership underscores the complexity of middle managers' roles. Investigating their lived experiences is therefore critical for bridging the gap between leadership theory and practice in educational contexts (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

In the Philippine educational system, middle managers play a significant role due to decentralized governance and the implementation of the K-12 curriculum reforms (Miramon et al, 2024). Department heads, coordinators, and other mid-level leaders are tasked with executing Department of Education (DepEd) policies, maintaining academic standards, and fostering professional development among teachers (Pillay & Panth, 2022). They operate amid challenges such as limited resources, large class sizes, and varying teacher competencies, which demand both operational skill and adaptive leadership. Acting as intermediaries, middle managers translate school administrators' vision into concrete strategies while addressing the unique needs of their communities (Chua Reyes et al., 2022). The increasing emphasis on inclusive and student-centered learning further amplifies the demands on their leadership capacities. Understanding how Philippine middle managers navigate these complexities offers insights into the practical realities of school leadership within a local context (Saro et al., 2022).

Philippine educational leadership also emphasizes relational and ethical dimensions, where trust, collaboration, and accountability are vital to organizational cohesion (Nunez, 2024). Middle managers are expected to demonstrate integrity and compassion in the execution of school programs and initiatives (Salas-Vallina et al., 2024). They often balance administrative responsibilities with the promotion of pedagogical innovation, requiring creative problem-solving under constrained conditions. Additionally, educators are viewed as role models, and middle managers are responsible for upholding professional standards in their interactions with staff and students (Corbett, 2022). The interplay between policy mandates and community expectations situates these leaders at the heart of educational transformation (Oloba & Govender, 2025). Studying their lived experiences illuminates how leadership is enacted within culturally and socially nuanced contexts.

Despite their crucial role, research on middle managers in Philippine schools remains limited, with most studies focusing on school heads or senior administrators. Little is known about how mid-level leaders interpret their responsibilities, navigate institutional constraints, and influence teaching and learning outcomes. Understanding their experiences is essential for designing leadership development programs that address both administrative and relational competencies. A phenomenological exploration provides a rich account of how vision is translated into practice under real-world conditions. This approach captures the personal narratives, challenges, and coping strategies that define middle managers' work. Ultimately, such research informs policy, professional development, and institutional strategies to strengthen school leadership at multiple levels.

Across Asia, middle managers in schools encounter challenges similar to those in the Philippines, yet cultural and systemic differences shape their leadership experiences (Julal, 2025). In Japan, middle managers are actively involved in curriculum coordination, teacher mentoring, and student welfare, reflecting a culture of collaborative leadership (Mori, 2024). Singapore, in contrast, emphasizes performance-driven leadership, with middle managers accountable for meeting strict standards while supporting school-wide excellence (Tan, 2025). Despite these differences, a shared challenge is balancing administrative compliance with instructional leadership, positioning middle managers as key drivers of school success. Comparative studies reveal that cultural norms, policy frameworks, and societal expectations significantly influence leadership practices. Situating Philippine middle managers within this regional context provides broader insights into the diverse ways leadership is enacted in Asian schools (de Souza Sant'Anna, 2024).

In South Korea and Malaysia, middle managers are pivotal in implementing national educational reforms, guiding teaching practices, and fostering professional learning communities (Lee & Ip, 2023). These leaders operate in structured systems that require them to reconcile top-down directives with teacher autonomy and

innovation (Wang & An, 2023). The pressures associated with accountability, performance evaluation, and stakeholder expectations mirror the challenges faced by Philippine middle managers, underscoring the universal nature of certain leadership responsibilities (Hoang, 2024). However, differences in organizational culture and leadership philosophy result in distinct practices and priorities. Asian studies highlight that effective middle management requires a combination of technical expertise, relational skills, and cultural sensitivity. This comparative perspective enriches the understanding of middle managers' experiences in Philippine schools by providing benchmarks and transferable lessons (Matyakubovna & Ozodbek, 2025).

Research in other Asian countries also emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development for middle managers. In Thailand and Indonesia, structured leadership programs equip middle managers with competencies in curriculum management, teacher evaluation, and conflict resolution (Siek, 2022). Academic management strategies of secondary schools in Cambodia based on the concept of innovation leadership skills. Such initiatives reflect the recognition that mid-level leaders are instrumental in achieving educational goals, improving school performance, and fostering innovation (Liu & Thien, 2025). Comparative insights can inform Philippine educational policy by identifying strategies to enhance leadership effectiveness and professional growth (Sihawong & Phusee-orn, 2024). By understanding regional practices, scholars and policymakers can develop culturally responsive approaches to middle management development. These lessons strengthen the relevance and practical applicability of phenomenological studies focused on school leadership in the Philippines.

Prior studies on school leadership consistently highlight the critical role of middle managers in shaping educational outcomes and sustaining organizational culture (Torres, 2022). Instructional leadership at the middle management level strongly influences teacher motivation, professional development, and student learning (Plaku & Leka, 2025). Other research emphasizes the dual function of middle managers as mediators between policy implementation and daily operational demands, illustrating the complexity of their roles. In the Philippine context, effective middle managers foster collaboration, ethical decision-making, and adaptability in addressing administrative and instructional challenges (Rosel et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies underscore the need to explore middle managers lived experiences to understand how leadership is practiced across diverse educational contexts.

Phenomenological approaches have been widely employed to investigate the subjective experiences of middle managers, offering rich insights into their perceptions, challenges, and strategies (Sengupta et al, 2022). Studies in Asia and the Philippines indicate that mid-level leaders often face role ambiguity, limited resources, and conflicting expectations from both superiors and subordinates (Custodio et al., 2024). However, they also exhibit resilience, creativity, and dedication to educational excellence. These findings highlight the importance of examining leadership as a lived experience rather than as a fixed set of competencies. Focusing on personal narratives allows researchers to capture the nuances of middle managers' journeys, including their motivations, frustrations, and coping mechanisms. This approach provides a holistic understanding of leadership that complements quantitative and policy-focused studies (Al Shizawi, 2025).

Building on these insights, the present study seeks to contribute to the understanding of school leadership by exploring the lived experiences of middle managers in Philippine schools. Using a phenomenological approach, the research examines how these leaders interpret their roles, navigate challenges, and translate vision into practice within institutional and cultural contexts. The study also aims to identify factors that facilitate or hinder effective leadership at the middle management level. Findings are expected to inform leadership development programs, policy initiatives, and institutional improvement strategies. Situating the Philippine experience within the broader Asian context offers a comparative perspective that enhances understanding and applicability. Ultimately, this study illuminates the intricate relationship between vision and practice in middle managers' leadership roles, emphasizing the human dimensions of educational administration.

Furthermore, transformational leadership aligns closely with organizational culture, as it promotes values of trust, open communication, and shared accountability (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). When leaders demonstrate inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, they set the tone for a culture that prioritizes professional growth and ethical conduct (Sihite et al., 2024). This cultural foundation strengthens middle managers' ability to implement strategic decisions that are both inclusive and sustainable. It also ensures that

policies are not merely compliance-driven but rooted in a collective vision that inspires long-term commitment from stakeholders (Vijai, 2025). Research supports that institutions with transformational leaders are more adaptive, innovative, and resilient in addressing challenges. Ultimately, this theory underscores the interconnectedness of leadership, culture, and decision-making, making it a valuable framework for examining the role of middle managers in academic settings (Bashori et al., 2022).

This study is significant for multiple stakeholders in the educational sector. For school administrators and policymakers, the findings provide a deeper understanding of how middle managers interpret their roles and navigate challenges, offering insights that can inform leadership development programs and policy enhancements. For middle managers themselves, the study highlights effective strategies, practices, and mindsets that support professional growth, decision-making, and ethical leadership. Educators and staff can benefit from a clearer picture of the expectations, responsibilities, and contributions of mid-level leaders, fostering better collaboration and organizational cohesion. For researchers and scholars, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership in the Philippine context, particularly from a phenomenological perspective. Ultimately, the insights gained can guide the creation of more responsive, adaptive, and sustainable leadership practices that positively impact teaching, learning, and school culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research bases its framework on three integrated theoretical frameworks which include Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) alongside Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1980s), and the Strategic Decision-Making Model (Mintzberg, 1976).

In the contemporary organizational landscape, effective leadership remains a cornerstone of institutional success and sustainability. As organizations operate amid technological change, globalization, and increasing complexity, leaders are now expected to go beyond administrative functions. They must be capable of fostering innovation, collaboration, and motivation among members to achieve shared goals. Leadership guides an organization's direction, aligns collective efforts, and ensures adaptation to emerging challenges. The ability to lead with integrity, empathy, and vision has therefore become essential in cultivating resilient and progressive institutions. Effective leadership, when exercised with purpose and clarity, can shape a culture of excellence that sustains growth and stability.

Equally important in this context is the organizational environment where leaders and employees interact. Each institution develops a distinctive culture shaped by shared beliefs, values, and practices that influence individual and collective behavior. As organizations seek to strengthen performance, cultivating a positive and adaptive culture becomes a strategic priority. Managers, particularly those between top executives and operational teams, play a key role in translating visions into concrete actions. Their ability to interpret policies, navigate diverse perspectives, and implement strategies effectively determines the success of institutional initiatives. Thus, understanding leadership and organizational dynamics is crucial in maintaining coherence, direction, and long-term institutional performance.

This study was anchored on transformational leadership theory, which highlights how leaders inspire and influence followers to transcend self-interest for collective goals. The theory provides a lens to examine how middle-level managers motivate their teams, communicate vision, and foster innovation within the organization. It also serves as a framework for understanding how leadership behaviors shape and reinforce organizational culture, which in turn affects decision-making effectiveness. Through this theoretical lens, the study explores how the transformational qualities of leaders, such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, contribute to strategic decision-making processes. By applying this theory, the research seeks to establish how leadership and culture interact as key drivers of organizational direction and success. Ultimately, the theory underscores that effective strategic decisions stem from leaders who empower others, build trust, and cultivate a shared sense of purpose within the institution.

The capacity of school leaders to build supportive and inclusive environments directly affects teacher satisfaction, student engagement, and institutional outcomes (Heinla & Kuurme, 2024). Middle-level leaders strengthen education by fostering continuous improvement and professional growth among staff (Highfield &

Woods, 2025). As schools address challenges such as diversity, equity, and digital transformation, leadership must evolve to inspire and guide stakeholders toward shared visions. Transformational leadership has emerged as a key approach that empowers individuals to exceed expectations and embrace innovation (Gbobaniyi et al., 2023). Middle managers, as cultural agents, play a central role in sustaining and reshaping institutional culture (Li & Zhang, 2024). They promote collaboration, shared accountability, and lifelong learning—factors essential for organizational resilience and academic excellence (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024).

The Organizational Culture Theory provides a framework for understanding how shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices shape behavior within organizations (Schein, 1980s). He defined organizational culture as a pattern of basic assumptions developed through processes of external adaptation and internal integration, which are then taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to organizational challenges. His model identifies three levels of culture: artifacts (visible structures and processes), espoused values (stated strategies and goals), and underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs). These levels influence how individuals within organizations behave, interact, and make decisions, ultimately determining institutional performance and adaptability.

Recent studies have further explored the application of organizational culture theory in secondary education, emphasizing its impact on various aspects of school effectiveness. A significant positive relationship between organizational culture and organizational commitment among junior high school teachers, highlighting the importance of a strong school culture in enhancing teacher engagement and productivity (Arifin et al., 2024). Similarly, it revealed that dimensions of organizational culture, such as collaborative leadership and teacher collaboration, significantly influence teachers' innovative work behavior, suggesting that fostering a positive organizational culture can promote creativity and innovation in teaching practices (Maharani et al., 2025). Additionally, a research by Abdullahi & Solarin (2021) indicated that perceptions of synergistic management positively affect organizational culture and organizational learning in high schools, underscoring the role of inclusive and collaborative management practices in shaping school culture and enhancing learning outcomes. These studies underscore the critical role of organizational culture in secondary education and its influence on teacher commitment, innovation, and learning processes.

The Organizational Culture Theory is highly significant to the present study as it provides the foundation for understanding how shared values and beliefs influence the decision-making behaviors of middle-level managers. By applying this theoretical framework, the study examines how organizational norms and underlying assumptions shape leadership actions and strategic thought processes within educational institutions. It highlights that effective decision-making is not only an outcome of individual competence but also a reflection of the cultural environment that guides communication, trust, and collaboration. The theory enables the exploration of how transformational leadership interacts with established cultural patterns to create an atmosphere conducive to innovation and strategic alignment. Moreover, it underscores the idea that a strong and adaptive culture supports middle-level managers in implementing institutional goals and fostering unity among team members. Through this lens, the theory strengthens the study's goal of linking leadership behavior, organizational culture, and strategic decision-making toward achieving sustained institutional effectiveness.

The Strategic Decision-Making Theory focuses on how organizations make long-term decisions that shape their direction, competitiveness, and overall goals (Mintzberg, 1976). The concepts of deliberate strategies such as formal, planned, and top-down approaches, and emergent strategies were being introduced, which evolved from adaptive responses to real-time challenges and opportunities (Kumar, 2024). Additionally, successful strategy-making requires a balance between these two processes: too much reliance on deliberate planning can lead to rigidity, while an overemphasis on emergent responses may cause fragmentation (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). The framework underscores the critical role of middle managers, who continuously interpret external environments, mediate internal processes, and adapt strategies in response to shifting circumstances. Later developments of the theory also highlighted the interplay of analysis, intuition, and organizational politics in shaping strategic decisions (Okon et al., 2024).

Recent studies have advanced the application of strategic decision-making theories in secondary education, highlighting the evolving role of school leaders in navigating educational reforms and enhancing school performance. The secondary school leaders in Portugal utilize school self-evaluation (SSE) processes to inform

their decision-making, emphasizing the importance of data-driven and collaborative approaches in school management (Figueiredo et al., 2024). Similar studies examined the impact of principals' demographic characteristics on their strategic decision-making styles in secondary schools, revealing that factors such as age, tenure, and educational background influence the adoption of participative decision-making practices (Rodrigues et al., 2025). These studies underscore the significance of strategic decision-making in secondary education and the need for school leaders to employ informed and inclusive approaches to navigate the complexities of educational management.

The Strategic Decision-Making Theory is significant to the present study as it provides a lens for understanding how middle-level managers make informed, adaptive, and goal-oriented choices within their institutions. It emphasizes that strategic decisions are not isolated acts but dynamic processes influenced by leadership behavior, organizational culture, and environmental conditions. The theory supports the idea that effective decision-making requires a balance between deliberate and emergent strategies, allowing managers to respond both to planned objectives and unexpected challenges. Within this study, the framework guides the analysis of how transformational leadership empowers middle-level managers to interpret complex situations, align strategies with institutional values, and foster collaborative decision-making. It also reinforces the importance of integrating analytical reasoning with intuition and shared organizational experiences in shaping long-term outcomes. Ultimately, the theory underscores the pivotal role of middle-level managers as strategic actors who connect leadership vision with operational realities, driving institutional effectiveness and sustainable growth.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The following were the themes derived from the study:

Strain and Resilience in Leadership Responsibilities. Leadership in educational settings often entails navigating intense demands, emotional pressures, and accountability, which can strain leaders but also foster resilience. School leaders frequently experience role overload, decision fatigue, and emotional labor (Day & Gu, 2021; Pollock, 2021), yet these challenges contribute to the development of adaptive coping strategies and resilience over time (Harris & Jones, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020). Resilient leaders demonstrate the ability to sustain commitment, maintain well-being, and remain effective despite adversity by leveraging support systems, reflective practices, and problem-solving skills (Day & Gu, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2022). This dynamic interplay between strain and resilience highlights that leadership effectiveness is not only dependent on competencies but also on the capacity to endure and grow through challenges in complex educational environments (Leithwood et al., 2020; Pollock, 2021).

Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership in Building School Relationships. Effective school leadership is increasingly characterized by collaboration and empathy, which are essential in fostering positive relationships within the school community. Leaders who practice empathetic and inclusive leadership create environments of trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility (Fullan, 2020; Torres, 2022), which enhance teacher engagement and organizational cohesion (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Louis et al., 2021). Collaborative leadership encourages participation in decision-making and values diverse perspectives, thereby strengthening professional relationships and collective efficacy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Torres, 2022). Empathy enables leaders to understand and respond to the emotional and professional needs of teachers and staff, contributing to a supportive and productive school climate (Fullan, 2020; Louis et al., 2021).

Balancing Workload and Developing Competence Over Time. School leaders continuously balance increasing workloads while simultaneously developing their professional competencies, reflecting a process of growth shaped by experience and reflection. The complexity of administrative, instructional, and relational responsibilities requires leaders to prioritize tasks, manage time effectively, and engage in continuous professional learning (Spillane & Lee, 2020; Walker & Qian, 2020). Over time, leaders build competence through experiential learning, mentorship, and reflective practice, allowing them to handle responsibilities more efficiently and confidently (Grissom et al., 2021; Young et al., 2021). This balance between workload and competence development underscores the importance of sustained support systems and professional development opportunities in enhancing leadership effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2020).

Purposeful Leadership in Translating School Vision into Collaborative Practice. Purposeful leadership plays a critical role in transforming school vision into meaningful and collaborative practices that guide daily operations and long-term goals. Effective leaders articulate a clear vision and ensure its alignment with instructional practices, teacher collaboration, and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2020; Robinson, 2021). By engaging stakeholders in shared goal-setting and decision-making processes, leaders foster ownership and collective responsibility for achieving the school’s vision (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush, 2021). This translation of vision into practice requires strategic communication, consistency, and the ability to align resources and efforts, ultimately strengthening school improvement initiatives and organizational coherence (Hallinger, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Leadership Shaped by Institutional Resources and Structural Demands. Leadership practices in schools are significantly influenced by the availability of institutional resources and the structural demands imposed by policies and organizational systems. Leaders must navigate constraints such as limited funding, staffing shortages, and policy requirements while striving to maintain school effectiveness (OECD, 2020; Pont et al., 2020). These structural factors shape decision-making processes, leadership priorities, and the capacity to implement innovations (Harris & Jones, 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2020). Despite these challenges, effective leaders strategically utilize available resources, advocate for support, and adapt to institutional demands to sustain school performance and improvement (OECD, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2022).

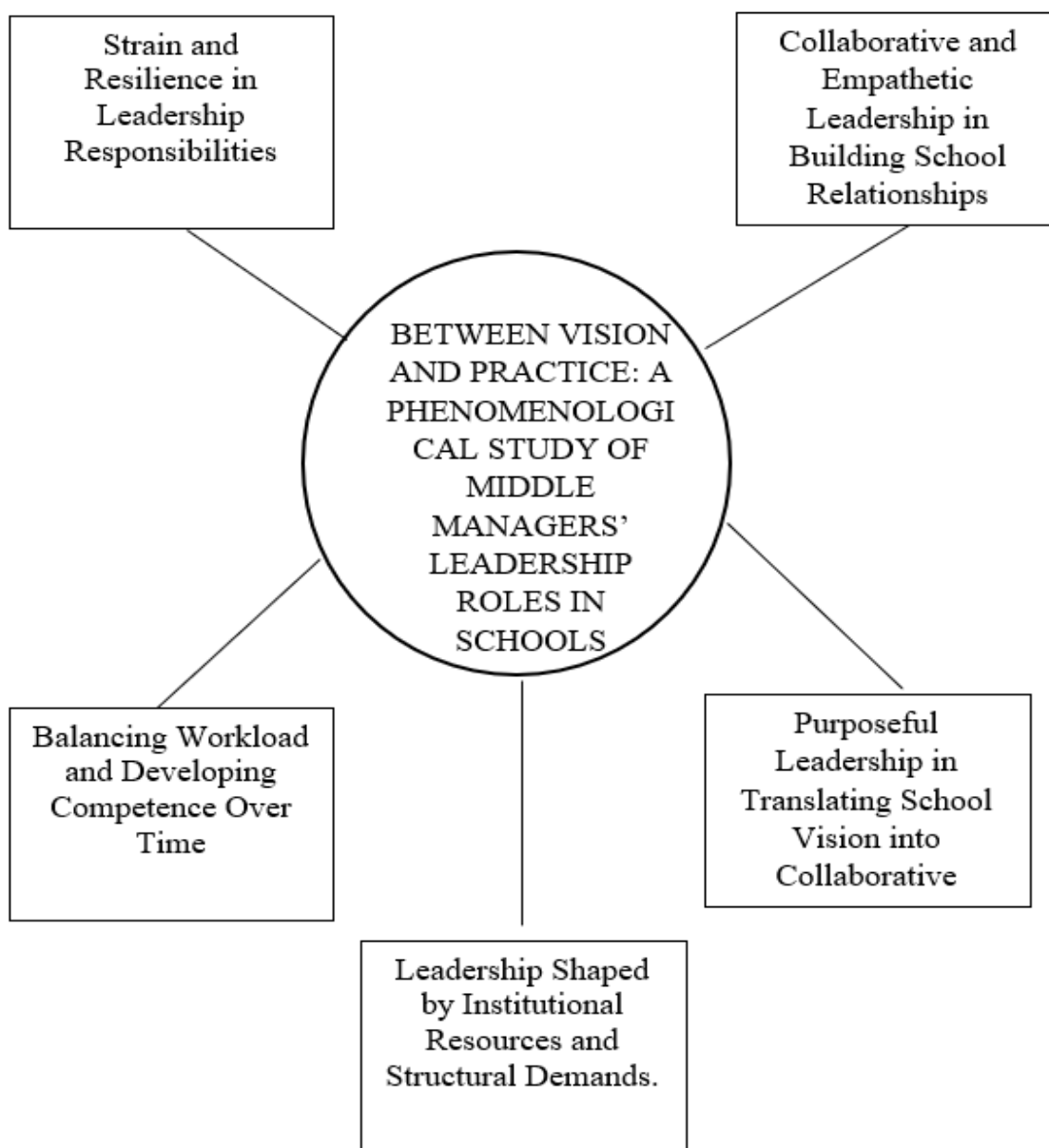


Figure 2. Schematic Diagram

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the lived experiences of middle level managers' leadership roles in schools. Specifically, answered the following questions using van Manen's Lifeworld Dimensions.

1. How do middle-level managers physically and emotionally experience the demands, pressures, and responsibilities of their leadership roles in schools?
2. How do middle-level managers describe their experiences in building and sustaining relationships with teachers, students, administrators, and the school community?
3. How do middle-level managers experience and interpret time in balancing immediate administrative tasks with long-term educational goals and reforms?
4. How do middle-level managers' leadership practices reflect their conscious intentions and commitments toward aligning school vision with everyday realities?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

This study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by van Manen (1990), sought to uncover the meaning of human experience by reflecting on how individuals lived through and made sense of a phenomenon in their daily lives. Instead of focusing on abstract theories or numerical data, this approach emphasized rich narratives, thick descriptions, and interpretive reflection that illuminated the essence of lived experience. Through dialogic interviews and interpretive analysis, the design provided a pathway to capture the depth of human realities, particularly as they were embodied, relational, and situated in time. This enabled the revelation of the nuanced ways participants experienced leadership within academic institutions.

Setting

This study was conducted in the Misamis Occidental Division, focusing on public school teachers under the Department of Education (DepEd). It explored how middle-level managers, such as school and department heads, bridge the gap between institutional vision and classroom practice through their leadership. Misamis Occidental, with its diverse educational and socio-economic environment, provides a meaningful context for understanding how leadership is experienced and enacted within schools. Data were gathered from selected public schools in the municipalities of Aloran and Panaon, where teachers' lived experiences illuminated the realities of leadership in everyday educational practice.

Participants

The study involved 12 participants who met the inclusion criteria and possessed firsthand experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to deliberately select individuals with the knowledge, experience, or characteristics necessary to provide rich, relevant data for the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, which occurred when additional interviews yielded no new themes or insights, thereby ensuring the depth and comprehensiveness of the qualitative data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The inclusion criteria for the participants were as follows: (1) full-time teachers in public schools, (2) at least one year in service holding a permanent position and under the direct supervision of the curriculum chair or department head, and (3) those who were willing to provide informed consent and participate in in-depth interviews. Establishing these criteria ensured that the selected participants could provide meaningful and relevant insights while maintaining ethical standards and safeguarding the quality and integrity of the data collected.

INSTRUMENTS

The primary instrument for this study was a researcher-designed interview guide, carefully crafted to explore participants lived experiences. Following van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological orientation, the guide was structured around the lifeworld existentials—lived body (embodiment), lived relation (relationality), and lived time (temporality)—to ensure that questions probed the essential dimensions of human experience. Open-ended questions allowed participants to narrate their stories freely, offering thick, detailed descriptions that captured meaning as it was lived.

To ensure clarity, flow, and effectiveness, the interview guide was pre-tested with three qualified participants who met the inclusion criteria but were not included in the final sample. This process allowed refinement of the wording and sequencing of questions to avoid ambiguity and enhance participant engagement. Based on feedback, adjustments were made to strengthen both the sensitivity and appropriateness of the instrument.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure for this study began with obtaining permission from the Dean of the Graduate School to conduct the research within the selected schools. Once approval was granted, the researcher sought permission from the School Heads and then coordinated with the teachers who were potential participants.

After all necessary permissions were secured, the researcher visited the schools where the identified participants were assigned. The purpose of the study, procedures, and participants' rights were explained, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved.

Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the data verbatim and analyzed the narratives. Themes were formulated based on Moustakas' lifeworld dimensions to capture the essence of participants' experiences.

Ethical Consideration

The study was conducted in accordance with strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of the rights and welfare of all participants. Approval was obtained from the Misamis University Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. This approval ensures that the research procedures meet institutional standards for ethical conduct and adhere to established principles for conducting research involving human participants.

Following ethical clearance, the researcher secured informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with personal identifiers removed from transcripts and reports. The collected data was stored securely and used solely for this research. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that participants were treated with respect and sensitivity, particularly when discussing personal or potentially sensitive experiences, in alignment with ethical standards in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By adhering to these ethical principles, the study safeguards the participants' rights while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research process.

Data Analysis

The study employed van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which centered on lived experiences as the foundation of inquiry. This method enabled an in-depth exploration of how teachers experienced the leadership of middle-level managers, focusing on lifeworld existentials such as embodiment (teachers' physical and emotional responses), relationality (connections with managers, colleagues, and students), and temporality (perceptions of time amid professional demands). These dimensions anchored the analysis in teachers' authentic, felt experiences within their institutional contexts.

This approach was chosen for its alignment with the study's goal of uncovering the essence and meaning of lived experiences in academic leadership. By privileging participants' voices and situating them in their lifeworlds,

van Manen's design enabled a nuanced understanding of how leadership was embodied, relationally expressed, and temporally experienced. Unlike other qualitative methods that emphasized structure or process, hermeneutic phenomenology highlighted the essence of "what it is like" to live the phenomenon, ensuring a rigorous yet human-centered interpretation of leadership dynamics.

Following van Manen's six steps, the process began with turning to the lived experience, focusing on teachers' authentic encounters with middle-level leadership. The second step, investigating experience as it was lived, was carried out through in-depth interviews, transcript immersion, and repeated listening to capture subtle emotions. In the third step, reflecting on essential themes, significant statements were clustered to identify recurring patterns of embodiment, relationality, and temporality in teachers' narratives—the fourth step involved writing and rewriting, during which these themes were carefully articulated into coherent descriptions. The fifth step, maintaining a strong relation to the phenomenon, ensured constant focus on teachers' lived experience of leadership without drifting into abstract theorizing. Finally, in balancing parts and whole, the meaning of embodiment, relationality, and temporality was interpreted both individually and collectively, resulting in a holistic portrayal of how teachers experienced and responded to middle-level managers' leadership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of middle-level managers in academic institutions, focusing on how they performed their leadership roles within complex organizational contexts. The study involved 12 middle-level managers, selected purposively from public schools in the Division of Misamis Occidental, particularly in the municipalities of Aloran and Panaon. The participants varied in terms of years of experience, leadership roles, and areas of responsibility, providing diverse perspectives on the challenges, practices, and meanings of leadership in school settings. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants were identified using participant codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3) throughout the presentation of findings.

The results are presented according to the study's focus, which examined how middle-level managers experienced leadership in terms of their responsibilities, relationships within the school community, workload, and professional growth, alignment with the school vision, and the influence of institutional resources and structural demands.

From the analysis of participants' narratives, five major themes emerged: Strain and Resilience in Leadership Responsibilities; Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership in Building School Relationships; Balancing Workload and Developing Competence Over Time; Purposeful Leadership in Translating School Vision into Collaborative Practice; and Leadership Shaped by Institutional Resources and Structural Demands. These themes collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of how middle-level managers navigate the complexities of leadership while sustaining resilience, fostering collaboration, developing competence, aligning practices with institutional goals, and adapting to organizational demands.

Strain and Resilience in Leadership Responsibilities

The participants' responses reveal a recurring theme of strain and resilience in middle managers' leadership responsibilities. Many participants highlighted the physical, emotional, and mental challenges of balancing administrative tasks, school submissions, and teacher and student supervision. For instance, Participant 1 reported stress related to urgent school reports, while Participant 2 described exhaustion from cramming multiple tasks simultaneously. Participants 3 and 4 further illustrated the emotional and physical toll of leadership, reporting migraines and the necessity to maintain fitness and emotional stability to manage classroom observations and teacher conflicts. Despite these challenges, participants such as Participant 10 emphasized a sense of satisfaction derived from helping teachers and students, suggesting that resilience emerges alongside the strain. This analysis indicates that middle managers navigate a complex interplay of pressures and coping mechanisms, balancing task completion with personal well-being and professional commitment.

"One common stressful activity involves school submissions and reports. When reports are mentioned in our group chat and our school is not yet updated, I feel stressed and pressured to take immediate action." (Participant 1)

“Recently, I experienced cramming due to multiple tasks that had to be completed at the same time. I was exhausted because I had to comply with requirements while handling many students.” (P2)

“When I am emotionally stressed, my body reacts—I experience migraines that sometimes take three days to recover from.” (P3)

“Physically, I need to be fit because I have to go around the school, observe classes, and sometimes conduct classroom observations, and emotionally I need to be stable when making decisions, especially when teachers have conflicts.” (P 4)

“Physically, the long hours of monitoring and paperwork were exhausting, and emotionally I struggled with the pressure of being young in that position and not knowing if my skills were capable for the job.” (P5)

“By the end of the day, I sometimes feel physically tired from visiting classrooms and attending meetings, and mentally exhausted from addressing different concerns, yet also satisfied because I was able to help teachers and students.” (P10)

The experiences of strain and resilience among middle managers can be best understood through the lens of Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership emphasizes leaders’ ability to inspire, motivate, and support their subordinates while fostering growth, commitment, and adaptability. This aligns with participants’ reports of feeling physically and emotionally strained yet finding satisfaction in helping teachers and students, demonstrating resilience in their roles. The theory also highlights how leaders engage in behaviors such as individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, which enable them to manage complex responsibilities effectively. From a deeper perspective, the participants’ ability to balance administrative demands with student and teacher needs reflects transformational leadership capacities that help mitigate stress and enhance coping. Ultimately, Transformational Leadership Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how middle managers navigate challenges, sustain well-being, and maintain high levels of performance in schools.

Recent studies underscore the relevance of strain and resilience in educational leadership. Middle managers often experience high levels of occupational stress due to workload, multitasking, and role ambiguity, which can impact both well-being and performance (Smith & Johnson, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Ramirez, 2023). Research also suggests that resilience strategies, including time management, emotional regulation, and supportive peer networks, enhance leaders’ ability to sustain performance and well-being in demanding educational environments (Nguyen & Park, 2022; Tanaka, 2021). These findings are consistent with the present study, which found that participants reported both physical and emotional challenges, as well as a capacity to recover and find satisfaction in their leadership roles.

These findings imply that school administrators and policymakers should prioritize building resilience capacities among middle managers through targeted professional development programs and support mechanisms. Institutions may implement stress management workshops, mentoring systems, and wellness initiatives to enhance physical and emotional well-being. Organizational practices should also promote clarity in reporting processes and collaborative decision-making to mitigate unnecessary strain. Encouraging transformational leadership behaviors and a supportive school culture can help middle managers navigate complex responsibilities while maintaining high performance and job satisfaction. Ultimately, fostering both individual resilience and organizational support can ensure sustainable and effective leadership in schools.

Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership in Building School Relationships

The participants’ responses highlight the critical role of collaboration and empathy in middle managers’ leadership practices. Many emphasized the importance of trust, open communication, and shared responsibility in building strong relationships with teachers, students, and administrators. For instance, Participant 1 described assigning designations to teachers and fostering a sense of family within the school, reflecting distributed leadership and trust-building practices. Participant 2 illustrated conflict-resolution strategies that prioritize reconciliation over criticism. Participants 4 and 7 emphasized respectful communication and empathetic

engagement, considering different perspectives before responding to teachers' concerns. Participants 9 and 10 highlighted collaborative partnerships, guidance for students, and professional communication with administrators to achieve school goals. Collectively, these responses suggest that middle managers' collaborative and empathetic practices are shaped by and reinforce the norms, values, and shared expectations within the school community.

"I practice distributed leadership by assigning designations to my teachers because I believe they have potential. I cannot build or lead a school alone. Trust is very important because everyone works toward one goal—we are one family." (P1)

"Recently, there was a conflict among master teachers. I talked to them and allowed both sides to share their points so that misunderstandings could be corrected and the goal was reconciliation rather than criticism." (P2)

"I prioritize having a good working relationship with the teachers under me because it makes communication easier, and even when I need to correct them, I do it in a respectful manner." (P4)

"Before reacting, I try to put myself in the shoes of the teachers because we all have different perspectives and experiences." (P7)

"I build collaborative partnerships with teachers, act as a guide for students, and maintain clear communication with administrators to achieve our goals." (P9)

"I try to develop supportive relationships with teachers where they feel free to express their concerns, while with students I remain empathetic and with administrators I maintain professional communication and trust." (P10)

These experiences can be understood through Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1980s), which emphasizes the influence of shared values, beliefs, and practices on workplace behavior and relationships. The participants' emphasis on trust, open communication, and collaboration reflects the role of organizational culture in guiding interpersonal interactions and decision-making processes. From a deeper perspective, the school's culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility provides a framework for middle managers to lead empathetically, resolve conflicts constructively, and maintain positive relationships with teachers, students, and administrators. The participants' actions demonstrate how organizational norms and cultural expectations influence leadership behavior, communication, and relational trust. Ultimately, Organizational Culture Theory explains how middle managers' collaborative and empathetic leadership practices both shape and are shaped by the school's shared values and practices.

Recent studies support the role of organizational culture in fostering collaborative and empathetic leadership in schools. Research indicates that schools with strong cultures of trust, open communication, and shared goals promote teacher engagement, conflict resolution, and effective collaboration (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Cooper & Davis, 2023). Organizational norms that value empathy, participative decision-making, and mutual support encourage middle managers to adopt leadership practices that build strong relationships with staff and students. A positive organizational culture reinforces relational trust, professional respect, and collaborative problem-solving, which are essential for effective school management. These findings align with participants' experiences of fostering trust, collaboration, and empathy in their daily leadership practices.

Furthermore, organizational culture has been shown to enhance psychological safety, well-being, and job satisfaction among educational leaders (Leithwood et al., 2022; Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2021; Kaur et al., 2023). Middle managers who operate within cultures that prioritize shared responsibility, clear communication, and mutual respect are better able to address conflicts, support teachers, and maintain positive student relationships. Culture-driven collaborative practices facilitate adaptive problem-solving and collective goal achievement. These studies underscore the idea that middle managers' capacity for empathetic and collaborative leadership is strongly influenced by the shared values, norms, and practices of their schools.

The findings imply that schools should cultivate and reinforce organizational cultures that emphasize trust, collaboration, and empathy. Administrators may implement policies, mentoring programs, and professional development initiatives that strengthen shared values, encourage participative decision-making, and promote respectful communication. Encouraging distributed leadership and shared responsibilities can enhance staff participation, ownership, and accountability. A culture of mutual respect and open dialogue supports middle managers in maintaining positive relationships with teachers, students, and administrators. Ultimately, fostering a collaborative and empathetic school culture can improve organizational cohesion, school climate, and educational outcomes.

Balancing Workload and Developing Competence Over Time

The participants' responses reveal the challenges of managing heavy workloads while progressively developing competence in middle management roles. Participant 1 emphasized the importance of structured planning, assessment, and evaluation of tasks, highlighting a deliberate approach to workload management. Participants 2 and 3 described the pressures of multitasking, cramming, and the physical and emotional consequences of unfinished work, including sleep disruption and mental stress. Meanwhile, Participants 4, 5, and 9 noted the development of confidence and leadership capacity over time, reflecting growth in strategic competence and managerial effectiveness. Collectively, these responses indicate that middle managers navigate a dynamic process of balancing immediate operational demands with longer-term professional development, gradually enhancing their ability to make strategic decisions under pressure.

“Planning is very important. Within the day or quarter, we assess, plan, take action, and then evaluate our activities to see if they were accomplished.” (P1)

“Recently, I experienced cramming due to multiple tasks that had to be completed at the same time.” (P2)

“I experience lack of sleep when tasks are not yet completed. I feel disturbed until the work is done.” (P3)

“At first, I lacked confidence in leading the English department, but as the years went by, I began to enjoy the role and realized that I was capable of managing the department effectively.” (P4)

“As years goes by I am learning I grew with my job.” (P5)

“My role has evolved from basic operations to more strategic planning, curriculum development, and leading new initiatives over the past three years.” (P9)

The experiences of balancing workload and developing competence can be understood through the Strategic Decision-Making Model (Mintzberg, 1976), which emphasizes how managers gather information, prioritize tasks, and make decisions in complex, uncertain environments. Participants' descriptions of planning, taking action, and evaluating results reflect the model's core processes of problem identification, option assessment, and decision implementation. From a broader perspective, the progression from initial lack of confidence to strategic leadership illustrates the iterative nature of managerial learning, in which experience and reflection improve decision-making capacity. The participants' ability to structure their workload, adapt to competing demands, and develop strategic competence demonstrates the model's relevance in explaining both operational efficiency and professional growth in educational leadership.

Recent literature highlights the critical role of strategic decision-making in managing workloads and fostering competence in educational settings. Studies indicate that managers who engage in systematic planning, prioritization, and reflective evaluation are better able to cope with high task demands and complex responsibilities (Hussein & Farooq, 2022; Nguyen & Park, 2022; Ramirez, 2023). Research also suggests that adaptive decision-making skills, including time management and strategic delegation, improve resilience and reduce stress among school leaders (Lee et al., 2021; Tanaka, 2021). These findings align with the participants' experiences, in which deliberate planning and structured task management enabled them to balance their workload while gradually building confidence and skill.

Furthermore, strategic decision-making has been associated with long-term professional growth and enhanced organizational effectiveness in schools (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2022; Cooper & Davis, 2023; Wang et al., 2021). Middle managers who progressively apply decision-making strategies gain competence in curriculum development, leading initiatives, and managing departmental operations. Iterative evaluation and reflective practice, central to the model, support managers in learning from successes and challenges, thereby increasing confidence and strategic capacity. These studies reinforce the idea that workload management and professional development are interconnected processes guided by strategic decision-making.

The findings imply that schools should support middle managers in developing strategic decision-making skills to balance workload effectively and build competence over time. Administrators may provide professional development programs focusing on planning, prioritization, evaluation, and reflective practices. Structured mentoring and feedback systems can help managers improve decision quality and adapt to complex responsibilities. Encouraging iterative planning and proactive problem-solving enables middle managers to manage daily tasks efficiently while enhancing strategic capabilities. Ultimately, fostering strategic decision-making competence contributes to sustained performance, confidence, and professional growth in school leadership.

Purposeful Leadership in Translating School Vision into Collaborative Practice

The participants' responses reveal how middle managers actively translate the school's vision into practical, collaborative actions that foster teacher development and student success. Participant 1 emphasized the systematic process of assessing, planning, taking action, and evaluating outcomes, reflecting alignment with institutional goals. Participant 2 highlighted motivating teachers to enhance learning experiences, while Participant 4 focused on cultivating teacher leadership. Participant 8 described monitoring colleagues, strengthening collaboration, and ensuring initiatives are consistent with the school vision. Participants 9 and 10 emphasized supporting teacher growth, promoting empathy, listening, and collaboration. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that purposeful leadership involves embedding the school's vision into daily practices, cultivating shared understanding, and fostering collaborative cultures that support teacher and student development.

“Within the day or quarter, we assess, plan, take action, and then evaluate our activities to see if they were accomplished.” (P1)

“As a leader, I desire to positively influence and encourage them so supported teachers become more motivated, and motivated teachers provide better learning experiences for their students.” (P2)

“My goal is not only to manage teachers but to help them become leaders themselves.” (P4)

“By monitoring colleagues, strengthening collaboration, and aligning initiatives with the school vision, I can contribute to sustainable improvement in teaching and learning.” (P8)

“My main goals are to ensure high quality education for SHS students, support teacher growth and contribute to the school's overall mission.” (P9)

“Leadership is not just about authority but also about listening, empathy, and collaboration.” (P10)

These experiences can be understood through Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1980s), which emphasizes that shared values, beliefs, and norms shape organizational behavior and practices. Participants' efforts to motivate teachers, promote collaboration, and align initiatives with the school vision reflect the influence of the school's cultural norms on leadership actions. From a broader perspective, the culture of shared responsibility, continuous improvement, and collaboration provides a framework for middle managers to operationalize the vision while fostering a supportive environment. The participants' purposeful actions illustrate how leaders embed cultural values into everyday practices, enhancing alignment, engagement, and collective commitment to school goals. Organizational Culture Theory thus explains how leadership practices are both guided by and reinforce the shared values, beliefs, and expectations of the school community.

Recent literature highlights the impact of organizational culture on translating vision into effective school leadership practices. Studies indicate that strong school cultures characterized by shared goals, collaboration, and mutual trust enhance instructional leadership, teacher motivation, and professional development (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Cooper & Davis, 2023). Leaders who model and reinforce cultural norms, such as collaboration, empathy, and reflective practice, promote alignment between vision and action. Embedding cultural values into leadership practices strengthens teachers' engagement and supports sustainable improvement in teaching and learning. These findings are consistent with participants' experiences of aligning initiatives with the school vision while fostering collaborative relationships.

Moreover, organizational culture has been linked to improved teacher performance, school cohesion, and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2022; Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2021; Kaur et al., 2023). Schools with cultures that emphasize shared responsibility, collaboration, and continuous improvement create an environment where middle managers can effectively translate vision into practice. Leaders' cultural awareness and ability to operationalize shared norms encourage teacher growth, collective problem-solving, and alignment with institutional goals. These studies reinforce the idea that purposeful leadership is most effective when it reflects and strengthens the school's organizational culture.

The findings imply that schools should cultivate and reinforce a culture that aligns leadership practices with the school vision. Administrators may implement programs that emphasize collaborative goal-setting, reflective planning, and shared responsibility among staff. Encouraging middle managers to model cultural values, foster teacher leadership, and support professional development can strengthen alignment between vision and practice. A culture of trust, collaboration, and continuous improvement enables leaders to effectively translate institutional goals into actionable strategies. Ultimately, fostering purposeful leadership grounded in organizational culture contributes to teacher growth, enhanced school performance, and sustainable educational outcomes.

Leadership Shaped by Institutional Resources and Structural Demands

The participants' responses illustrate how institutional resources and structural demands shape middle managers' leadership practices. Participant 1 described the stress of urgent reporting requirements, while Participant 2 highlighted challenges posed by limited supplies and the need to self-motivate and take initiative. Participant 3 emphasized the routine tasks of disseminating information, facilitating assignments, and compiling reports mandated by higher authorities. Participant 5 underscored adherence to strict rules and guidelines, while Participant 8 noted responsibilities for monitoring student activities and securing program budgets. Participant 9 shared how navigating the transition to online learning during the pandemic required adaptability and crisis management. Collectively, these experiences reveal that middle managers must balance structural expectations with available resources, requiring both initiative and resilience to achieve institutional objectives.

“One common stressful activity involves school submissions and reports... when reports like early enrollment updates are mentioned and our school is not yet updated, I feel stressed and pressured to take immediate action.” (P1)

“One recurring problem in our department is the lack of supplies. Since we are not always prioritized, we try to motivate ourselves and take initiative.” (P2)

“My main tasks included disseminating information, facilitating assigned tasks, and compiling reports required by the head teachers, district, or division office.” (P3)

“You are objective with the rules, with the kind of laws and guidelines. The rules we have, the guidelines we have are strict.” (P5)

“I have to monitor the athletes in their training and will look for a budget for the payment of the trainers.” (P8)

“Successfully transitioning the SHS to online learning during the pandemic was a major milestone, teaching me about crisis management and adaptability.” (P9)

These experiences can be understood through Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), which emphasizes inspiring and motivating subordinates, fostering innovation, and providing individualized support to achieve organizational goals. Participants' responses demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors as they navigate structural constraints and limited resources. From a broader perspective, middle managers exhibit intellectual stimulation by seeking creative solutions to resource constraints, inspirational motivation by maintaining team morale, and individualized consideration by addressing specific challenges faced by staff or students. Transformational leadership explains how middle managers not only comply with institutional demands but also motivate and guide their teams to overcome obstacles while maintaining organizational performance.

Recent literature highlights the critical role of transformational leadership in navigating institutional demands and limited resources in educational contexts. Leaders who demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and motivational support foster resilience and engagement among staff, even under high-pressure conditions (Alam & Farooq, 2021; Hughes et al., 2022; Park, 2023). Studies also show that transformational leadership promotes creative problem-solving, proactive decision-making, and effective management of operational constraints (Smith & Roberts, 2022; Chen et al., 2021). These findings align with the participants' experiences of creatively addressing shortages, adhering to strict regulations, and implementing innovative solutions, such as transitioning to online learning.

Moreover, transformational leadership behaviors have been associated with improved team performance, staff satisfaction, and organizational outcomes in schools (Leithwood et al., 2022; Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2021; Kaur et al., 2023). Leaders who provide vision, encouragement, and individualized support enhance their team's ability to cope with structural pressures and institutional demands. Intellectual stimulation and motivational support allow middle managers to adapt strategies, allocate resources effectively, and achieve institutional goals despite constraints. These studies reinforce the idea that transformational leadership enables managers to convert structural challenges into opportunities for growth, learning, and organizational improvement.

The findings imply that schools should cultivate transformational leadership practices among middle managers to navigate structural and resource-related challenges effectively. Professional development programs may focus on adaptive leadership, creative problem-solving, motivational strategies, and individualized staff support. Encouraging middle managers to demonstrate vision, innovation, and support enhances team engagement, resilience, and performance. Schools can also create systems that recognize and reward proactive leadership in overcoming institutional constraints. Ultimately, fostering transformational leadership equips middle managers to sustain high organizational performance, motivate staff, and address structural challenges effectively.

To further capture the essence of the findings, a poetic representation is presented to reflect the combined insights from both the quantitative and qualitative results. This piece embodies the realities of middle-level managers, highlighting how leadership is shaped by strength and strain, data and experience, structure and human connection. Through this, the study presents not only statistical outcomes but also the deeper meaning of leadership as lived and practiced in academic institutions.

Leading in Between Where Strength Meets Strain

In spaces not quite front nor far behind, they lead in ways the world may not define,
Between the weight of duty and quiet will, they stand where strength and strain meet still.

The numbers spoke of vision, firm and clear, of leaders guiding those they hold most dear,
Of cultures built on trust and shared belief, of decisions shaped beyond the brief.
With minds that measure, plan, and see, They move with thought and strategy,
Adapting paths, assessing risk, Turning each challenge into purpose brisk.

Yet beyond the graphs, a deeper tone, A story lived, a truth their own, where pressure lingers in unseen ways,
And long hours stretch through silent days. They carry burdens few can trace,
Still wearing calm upon the face, In every task, in every role,
Resilience breathes within the soul.

They lead with hearts that choose to care, building trust through moments shared, in gentle words and patient sight, they turn discord to paths of light.

Through time, they grow from doubt to grace, finding strength in every pace, Learning not just how to lead, But how to serve in thought and deed.

With vision held and purpose near, they make the mission crystal clear, transforming plans to living art, Where goals and people share one heart.

And when the weight of systems press, With rules, demands, and restlessness, they bend, adapt, yet firmly stay, Finding strength to shape the way.

So here they stand, though seldom seen, The force that moves the in-between, not just in data, charts, or frame, But in the quiet power behind the name.

For leadership is not confined To titles held or roles assigned, It lives in those who choose to remain Leading in between where strength meets strain.

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study explored the gap between the vision and practice of middle-level managers' leadership roles in schools. Specifically, this answered the following questions: (1) How do middle-level managers physically and emotionally experience the demands, pressures, and responsibilities of their leadership roles in schools? (Embodiment). (2) How do middle-level managers describe their experiences in building and sustaining relationships with teachers, students, administrators, and the school community? (Relationality). (3) How do middle-level managers experience and interpret time in balancing immediate administrative tasks with long-term educational goals and reforms? (Temporality). (4) How do middle-level managers' leadership practices reflect their conscious intentions and commitments toward aligning school vision with everyday realities? (Intentionality).

The study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design. The participants were the 6 department heads from Aloran Trade High School, 3 School Teacher-In-Charge from Integrated Schools within Aloran and Panaon District, and 1 Senior High School Coordinator from Panaon National High School in Tangub City who were selected using purposive sampling. Interview guide questions were used in gathering the data.

Findings

Five essential themes emerged from the lived experiences of middle-level managers as they performed their leadership roles in academic institutions. The following are the key findings:

1. **Strain and Resilience in Leadership Responsibilities.** Middle-level managers experienced leadership as demanding and multifaceted, yet they sustained resilience.
2. **Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership in Building School Relationships.** Middle-level managers practiced leadership grounded in trust, open communication, and shared responsibility, fostering positive relationships within the school community.
3. **Balancing Workload and Developing Competence Over Time.** Middle-level managers managed complex workloads while progressively developing confidence, strategic thinking, and decision-making skills.
4. **Purposeful Leadership in Translating School Vision into Collaborative Practice.** Middle-level managers translated the school's vision into actionable practices through planning, collaboration, and teacher empowerment.
5. **Leadership Shaped by Institutional Resources and Structural Demands.** Middle-level managers demonstrated adaptability and initiative as their leadership practices were shaped by institutional resources, policies, and organizational expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Middle-level managers' leadership is inherently demanding, yet they demonstrate resilience by sustaining commitment and finding meaning in supporting teachers and students.
2. Effective leadership among middle-level managers is grounded in collaboration and empathy, which strengthen trust, communication, and relationships within the school community.
3. Middle-level managers develop competence over time as they navigate complex workloads, enhancing their confidence and strategic decision-making abilities.
4. Leadership becomes purposeful when middle-level managers align their actions with the school vision, fostering collaboration and empowering teachers to achieve institutional goals.
5. Leadership practices of middle-level managers are shaped by institutional resources and structural demands, requiring adaptability, initiative, and responsiveness to organizational expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions, these are the recommendations:

1. The DepEd Schools Division Superintendent and Division HR Officer may implement structured support programs for middle managers, such as stress management seminars, wellness initiatives, and workload monitoring, to help school heads and coordinators cope with physical, emotional, and cognitive strain while maintaining effective leadership performance.
2. The School Heads and Master Teachers-in-Charge may model and promote collaborative and empathetic leadership by facilitating regular team meetings, mentoring sessions, and conflict resolution workshops to strengthen trust, communication, and shared responsibility among teachers and staff.
3. The DepEd Education Program Supervisors (EPS) and HRD Coordinators may offer continuous professional development programs focusing on strategic decision-making, time management, and reflective leadership practice to enable middle managers to enhance competence and confidence over time.
4. The DepEd Regional Directors and Policy Officers may ensure adequate resource allocation, flexible guidelines, and supportive policies that allow middle managers to exercise initiative, adapt to institutional constraints, and implement transformational leadership strategies effectively.
5. The School Administrative Officers and Finance Officers may establish clear mechanisms for task delegation, workload distribution, and recognition of exemplary leadership efforts to optimize efficiency, reduce burnout, and promote accountability among middle managers.
6. For the Future Researchers and Educational Practitioners to conduct longitudinal studies on the impact of middle managers' resilience, collaborative leadership, and strategic decision-making on teacher performance, student outcomes, and school improvement within DepEd schools to expand and validate the findings of this study.

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