

Failing the Exam, but Sustaining the Leadership: Perceptions of School Heads on Their Journey of Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Failing professional exams reduces motivation. Using a qualitative descriptive design, I explored school heads' perceptions of regaining motivation to continue leading after failing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads. I conducted interviews and focus group discussions with 15 purposively selected school heads and analyzed the data using thematic analysis. I found out that school heads sustain leadership by exercising autonomy, building competence through resilience, and maintaining strong relationships with others; they remain accountable and committed to serving their school communities with integrity despite challenges; and validation from others strengthens their confidence, enabling them to continue leading with resilience and purpose. Educational policies may be reviewed to strengthen leadership resilience through autonomy, competence, collaboration, accountability, and support systems. Future research may test autonomy and competence as mediators and develop a validated instrument using EFA.

Keywords: Failing the exam, sustaining the leadership, perceptions of school heads, journey of resilience

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and its Scope

Losing motivation after failing a professional qualifying examination has been recognised as a significant concern in educational leadership globally. In the field of school administration, I learned that high-stakes certification assessments serve as benchmarks for leadership readiness. However, they also create critical moments of professional vulnerability when outcomes are unsuccessful. Across educational systems, school leaders who do not meet examination standards often experience a disruption in professional identity and engagement, raising concerns about sustained leadership motivation and commitment. Recent literature emphasises that motivation among educational leaders is not static but can be challenged by professional setbacks, particularly those associated with formal evaluation systems (Nguyen and Walker, 2023; Roberts et al, 2024).

In various countries, studies have increasingly documented reduced motivation after unsuccessful leadership certification or qualification processes. I learned that in the United States, studies have shown that school leadership licensure examinations affect the professional engagement of aspiring principals. (Grissom et al. 2023). In the United Kingdom, leadership assessment frameworks similarly place pressure on candidates, shaping their professional motivation and identity (Bush and Glover, 2024). Studies in Australia and Canada also indicate that unsuccessful certification among school leaders is associated with high attrition rates, which present challenges for maintaining professional drive and leadership engagement (Slater et al. 2023; Pollock and Wang, 2024).

In the Philippine context, the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is a key requirement for advancement in the Department of Education's principalship and leadership. I learned that there are examination takers who failed the leadership qualifications, yet they continue to perform their duties. Emerging

Philippine studies highlight that school leaders navigate complex motivational experiences within policy-driven evaluation systems such as the NQESH (Santos and Reyes, 2023; Dela Cruz et al. 2024).

Losing motivation after failing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) have several important consequences in educational leadership. It may weaken leadership performance, as self-efficacy is strongly linked to effectiveness in planning, implementing, and evaluating school practices (Elra et al. 2024). These consequences highlight the importance of examining motivation among school heads who continue to serve despite unsuccessful qualification outcomes. The loss of motivation after failing a professional qualifying examination is the reason I have conducted this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting strong, motivated school leadership, which is essential for quality learning. It also contributes to the national goals of Philippine education by strengthening leadership capacity and commitment among school heads. Moreover, it aligns with the vision and mission of Holy Cross of Davao College by developing resilient, value-driven, and competent educational leaders. The findings may help improve support systems and policies for school heads who continue to serve despite professional setbacks.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I explored school heads' perceptions of regaining motivation to continue leading after failing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions.

Research Questions

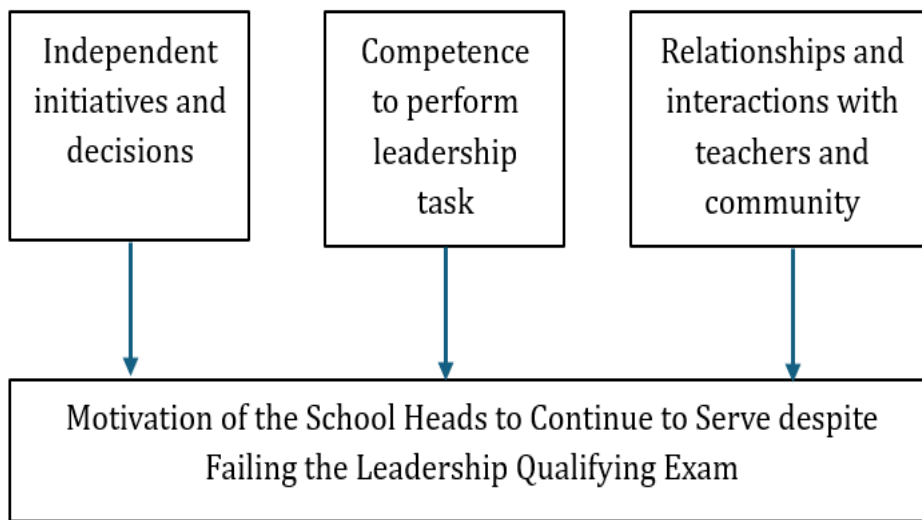
1. What are the independent initiatives and decisions of school heads despite not qualifying in the National Examination for School Heads?
2. What are the competencies of school heads that made them confident and effective in performing leadership roles after failing the qualifying examination?
3. What relationships and interactions do the school leaders have with teachers and the school community as they continue to serve despite the examination outcome?
4. What motivates school heads to carry out responsibilities despite failing the NQESH?

Theoretical Lens

This study was grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (1985), which explains that motivation is not just a single concept but exists on a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic. At the centre of SDT are three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which, when met, help individuals stay motivated, function well, and experience a sense of well-being. In this study, although the school heads did not pass the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), they remained motivated and committed to serve. This experience was explained using Self-Determination Theory.

The study showed that school heads stay motivated because their basic needs, as explained by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, are still being met. They show autonomy by choosing to continue leading and making decisions based on what they believe is right, even after facing challenges. Their sense of competence shows in their efforts to improve their skills and help their schools move forward. Their actions show that their leadership is not based on exam results alone. Meanwhile, school leaders, teachers, and the school community build meaningful connections that nurture their sense of purpose and belonging.

Paradigm



Assumptions

I assumed that school heads perceive they can continue to lead and manage schools independently, have the competence to do the job, and relate well with faculty and the community. They drew their motivation to do their task and serve the school community from these three elements. However, beyond this, I assumed that there may be conditions that drive the sources of their motivational strengths.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I presented my research design, the study locale, the sample and sampling technique, the data-gathering technique, the data analysis technique, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

In this study, I used descriptive qualitative research methods. It is an approach that provides a clear and straightforward description of a phenomenon, closely reflecting participants' experiences with minimal interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000; Kim et al. 2017). I applied it because I intended to understand participants' perceptions, experiences, or events in their natural settings, particularly when little is known about the topic or when a practical, rich description is needed (Colora and Evans, 2016; Kim et al. 2017).

This approach has limited theoretical depth and is sometimes criticised for limited generalizability due to small, context-specific samples (Colora and Evans, 2016; Doyle et al. 2019). However, it is a challenge because it pushes me to replicate the study to explore the claims that emerged. Despite these limitations, it remains useful for generating meaningful insights grounded in real-world experiences.

Locale of the Study

This study took place in the Division of Koronadal City, the capital of the Province of South Cotabato, located in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN) in the southern Philippines. The Division presents a dynamic school setting where school heads face both opportunities and challenges in their leadership roles, particularly amid evolving policies and accountability standards such as the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The participants of this study were 15 school heads currently serving in public schools. They are of varying genders and between 30 and 60 years old. They have at least 2 years of service, have not passed the NQESH, but continue to perform their leadership roles.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are intentionally selected based on their relevant experiences or characteristics related to the study (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024). I use this method when the researcher needs participants with direct knowledge of the phenomenon, especially in qualitative studies that aim for an in-depth understanding rather than generalisation. This technique ensures that the data collected is meaningful and relevant. Its advantages include obtaining rich and focused information, saving time by selecting only qualified participants, and allowing flexibility in choosing individuals who can best contribute to the study.

Data Gathering Technique

In this study, I employed an in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions as methods of data collection. In-depth interviews are a qualitative technique that involves one-on-one, open-ended conversations to explore participants' experiences, meanings, and perspectives in detail. At the same time, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a qualitative data collection method that involves guided group conversations to explore participants' shared experiences, opinions, and perspectives on a specific topic. These allow flexibility for probing and follow-up questions, enabling the researcher to gather rich, comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This method allowed me to obtain deep, detailed information, capture participants' authentic voices, clarify their responses through probing, and build rapport that encouraged honest, reflective answers.

Data Analysis Technique

In this study, I gathered data through semi-structured interviews. I then analysed the data using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). I began the analysis by reading the transcribed interviews several times to become familiar with the participants' responses. As I went through the data, I kept seeing the same ideas and statements, so I used them as my starting codes. I then grouped the codes into broader themes that reflected shared patterns among participants. I reviewed and refined these themes to ensure they aligned with the research questions and accurately represented the participants' responses. Through this process, I was able to see patterns and better understand their lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

The four elements of trustworthiness in qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings reflect the participants' experiences and realities. It uses authentic data and maintains consistency between participants' responses and the researcher's interpretation. In this study, I demonstrate the applicability of the findings to other contexts through detailed, rich descriptions. I provide detailed descriptions and clear documentation to help readers decide whether the findings are relevant to similar settings. I ensured consistency and stability of the research process over time. I designed the study so that other researchers can replicate it and obtain similar results. I also presented clear documentation of procedures, consistent data collection, and an audit trail to track the research process. Finally, I ensured that the findings reflect the participants' perspectives rather than my personal biases. In other words, I ensured objectivity and provided sufficient explanation to ensure that interpretations are grounded in the data. (Amankwaa, 2023; Forero et al., 2023).

RESULTS

In this chapter, I unfold a quiet story of strength woven from the perceptions of school heads who continue to lead, even in the shadow of an unmet expectation. Their voices echo not of defeat, but of persistence.

Autonomy in the Storm

In the realm of autonomy, the participants shared that they continued to lead even when they felt unsure after not passing the exam. The themes on autonomy and independence show that they were still making decisions, managing school programs, and guiding their teachers. They felt disappointed, but they did not let it stop them. Instead, they continued to take responsibility for their schools and stayed committed to their work despite the exam results.

School Heads Authority: Still managing the institutions despite the absence of credentials

When they talked about their experiences, you could feel the disappointment of not passing the exam. But they did not stop. They still showed up, led their schools, made decisions, and guided their teachers because they knew people were depending on them. For them, leadership was not just about the exam result. It was about doing their job and taking care of their school. Even with the challenges, they kept going and continued to serve as school heads. One of my participants said:

"Ang authority bi sa aton ang designation order. That legal basis gives us the authority... to implement duties and responsibilities" (P14, Page 1, Lines 69-71).

I could see that even if they felt disappointed after not passing the exam, they still chose to stay. They continued to lead their schools, make decisions, and guide their teachers because they knew their work did not end there. For them, being a leader meant doing what was necessary. Despite everything they went through, they kept going and continued to serve as school heads. One of my participants shared:

Another participant stated that:

"I consult with teachers and other stakeholders and consider their input. I also turn to experienced school heads for guidance" (P4, Page 1, Lines 20-22).

While he was speaking, I noticed that he turned to his fellow teachers and school heads for support. He shared that having people to talk to and guide him helped him continue in his role, knowing he was not alone. Participant 2 mentioned:

"I chose not to let my pain stop me from doing my job. I exercise my authority by reminding myself that my position comes with responsibility" (P1, Page 1, Lines 5-6).

As I listened to him, I could tell that his responsibilities were heavy. It was not just something he said, but it showed in how he spoke. You could sense that he was having a hard time carrying all of it.

"Knowing that higher authorities give me the task to run a school, because they still believe in my capacity... moving forward is necessary" (P6, Page 1, Lines 35-36).

I could see hope and joy on his face, especially when she said that those in higher positions still believe in her, even though she did not pass. He said:

" I ensure that I carry out decisions within my scope with accountability."

(P5, Page 1, Lines 25-26).

As he spoke, I noticed his sincerity, especially when he talked about the accountability behind his decisions. His gestures showed confidence, suggesting that he was certain about the responsibilities he carries as a school head.

Sustaining Independence and Self-Direction: Making decisions in carrying out school programs

As the school heads shared their experiences, it became evident that they remained determined to continue their roles despite the examination results. They continued to lead their schools by making decisions and implementing programs for their teachers and learners. The result did not prevent them from carrying out their responsibilities; instead, they continued to work with focus and commitment in managing their schools. One of my participants said:

"maskin wala kita nakapasa, may ara kita bible nga gina sunod ta gid. So ang bible naton amo na ang aton nga AIP, ang aton nga SIP..." (P8, Page 1, Lines 37-38)

When he mentioned the word "Bible," I noticed a change in his expression, showing how important his faith is to him. His eyes softened as he shared that even if they did not pass the exam, they still had guiding principles to follow, such as the AIP and SIP. Participant 2 shared:

"For the good of the teachers, learners and for the improvement of the school is still my priority in performing my leadership and duties." (P2, Page 1, Lines 6-7)

As he talked about his duties, it was clear he still wanted to do what he believed was right. Even if he did not pass the exam, he stayed committed to the school. One participant stated that:

"I focus on what I can control--delivering consistent leadership through planning, monitoring, and follow-through." (P5, Page 1, Lines 17-18)

As he spoke, I saw his sincerity and how much he valued his work. His pauses showed he was thinking carefully, and that his responsibilities mattered to him. Participant 1 emphasized:

"I consciously remind myself that one exam does not define my entire capability as a leader." (P1, Page 1, Lines 3-4)

As he talked, I saw some regret, especially when he mentioned the exam. It was clear it affected him, but he believed one result did not define him as a leader. Even though he was disappointed, he remained confident in his role and stayed committed to serving his school and community.

Quite a Strength of Competence

In terms of competence, the participants showed confidence that developed through their experiences and continued reflection. The themes Strategies for Maintaining Confidence and Self-Effectiveness and Steps for Continuous Improvement and Demonstration of Competence highlight how they continue to learn, adjust, and improve in their roles. Their responses suggest that their competence is not based on a single result but on their ongoing efforts to grow and perform their responsibilities effectively.

Strategies for Maintaining Confidence and Effectiveness: Resilient confidence amid leadership challenges

From their experiences, it was evident that the participants made efforts to remain strong despite the challenges they faced. Although they experienced moments of doubt, they managed these by reflecting on their experiences, seeking support from colleagues, and focusing on their responsibilities. These actions helped them maintain their confidence and continue performing their roles as school heads. One of my participants said that:

"I also invest time in continuous learning: attending and serving as a resource person in various trainings, reading policies, and seeking mentorship..." (P6, Page 1, Lines 19-21)

As she spoke, her gestures and responses suggested that she recognized the need for continuous learning and improvement. She admitted that there were still things she wanted to improve and was willing to learn more through training. She was humble but determined and remained committed to improving her skills despite the challenges. Participant 7 emphasized:

"However, my postgraduate education became a source of confidence... I applied the theories and best practices I learned..." (P7, Page 1, Lines 27-29)

She talked about what she learned and how she used it in her work. Her answers showed that she tried to apply these in how she leads. Her responses show she is still learning and doing her best for the school. Participant 7 shared:

"I maintain confidence by being reflective and open to growth... strengthen leadership competencies that they may not have fully demonstrated in the assessment." (P5, Page 1, Lines 13-15)

She pointed out the word "reflective" and said it helped her improve her work. She takes time to reflect on her actions and uses her experiences to improve. Her responses show she is trying to improve and grow as a school leader. Participant 3 expressed:

"Having a strong support system of family, real friends and colleagues had helped to maintain my confidence..." (P3, Page 1, Lines 8-9)

She said her family helped her handle her challenges. She was thankful for their support, and it helped her keep going in her role as a school head. Participant 8 expressed:

"Number 1 gid ang Ginoo...kag gin hatag pud sang deped ang trust nila sa imo...so kailangan I derederetso mo nlng na sya." (P8, Page 1, Lines 31-33)

She shared that her faith in God gave her strength. Her answer showed that this helped her stay hopeful and continue doing her responsibilities even when things were hard.

Steps for Continuous Improvement and Demonstration Competence: Unyielding pursuit of leadership growth

Even with the challenges, they still tried to improve. They did not let the exam result stop them. They focused on learning, improving their skills, and doing their work well. Their responses demonstrate their leadership ability through their actions and their continuous efforts to improve. One of the participants said:

"I enrolled in short-term courses like Strategic Thinking and Innovation through SEAMEO INNOTECH, and I regularly participate in capacity-building programs..." (P7, Page 2, Lines 24-27)

She shared that she chose to join SEAMEO programs to improve her skills. Her answer showed that she saw this as a chance to grow and learn more. Her responses reflected a strong commitment to self-development and continuous improvement in her leadership practice. Another one said:

"I focus on practical and intentional steps that strengthen both my knowledge... Staying updated with DepEd orders and educational trends..." (P6, Page 2, Lines 13-18)

She highlighted the importance of keeping up with DepEd orders and staying informed about current trends in education. She saw this as part of her responsibility as a school leader, so she could do her job well. Her actions reflected her commitment to keep learning and improving how she serves her learners. Participant 6 expressed:

"I began to realize that it is vital to collaborate and empower the school team, recognize the teachers' strengths, and involve them in decision-making." (P6, Page 2, Lines 19-21)

She stressed the importance of involving teachers in making decisions. She valued working together and saw leadership as a shared responsibility. She believes that including teachers increases their engagement and commitment to the school's direction.

Relatedness in Leadership

When it came to working with others, the participants talked about how important their connections were with fellow school heads, teachers, and the school community. They relied on them for support, guidance, and encouragement. These connections also fostered a sense of belonging, which strengthened their resolve to continue in their roles.

Support Systems and Resources for Leadership Capacity: Strength through shared relationships

Support from colleagues, supervisors, and the school community helped participants continue in their roles. During hard times, this support gave them help and direction. Because of this, it was easier for them to continue leading their schools. One of my participants said:

"Support system with my colleagues who did not pass the NQESH. Motivation and encouragement from the 'na KAYA natin to'..." (P2, Page 3, Lines 6-7)

She said it was important for her to have people at work she could rely on. Being with colleagues who understood her made things easier during hard times. Their support and simple encouragement helped her continue in her role. Another one expressed:

"Actually... may teacher man ko nga isa... nga nag hambal nga sige lang mam Anne ah, Nakita man nmon kung ano ang gina himo mo diri sa school nga beyond gid sang imo capacity..." (P8, Page 3, Lines 31-34)

The teachers noticed her dedication through what she did every day. They could see her effort and how seriously she took her responsibilities. Because of this, they valued her work and appreciated her as a school head. Participant 8 expressed:

"Actually ang akon gid ya nga partner ang nag motivate sa akon right after nga nabal an ko nga wala ako kapasar..." (P8, Page 3, Lines 30-31)

She said that her partner is one of the main reasons she keeps going in her work. Having someone who supports and encourages her gives her strength, especially when things get hard, and helps her stay focused on her responsibilities.

Influence of Peer Relationships on Motivation: Sustained motivation through connection and support

They said that being with other school heads and co-workers helped them keep going. When they felt unsure, they talked to others who understood what they were going through. The support and simple words of encouragement helped them feel stronger and more confident. This made it easier for them to continue doing their work even when it was hard. One of my participants said:

"Hearing their own struggles and failures made me realise that I am not alone. Their encouragement reminds me that leadership is a journey, not a single exam." (P1, Page 4, Lines 2-3)

She talked openly about her struggles and failures. You could hear how heavy those experiences were for her. She spoke openly and courageously about the challenges in her journey. You could feel the pain in her words, but you could also see how she became stronger because of them. For her, those failures were not the end. They helped her learn and keep going. Even in difficult moments, she chooses to stand up and move forward. Participant 10 expressed:

"I feel valued, kag ahhhh naga remind sa akon nga ang service to our schools is bigger than any examination." (P10, Page 4, Lines 29-30)

She feels valued, and she reflects this in how she carries herself. There is quiet confidence in her. When she feels seen, appreciated, and trusted, she gains a stronger sense of purpose. She knows that her efforts matter and that people listen to her. This support makes her feel encouraged and helps her keep going with confidence. Another one stated:

"I never felt discriminated against because I did not pass the exam... my peers were eager to share tips... and were always willing to lend a helping hand." (P7, Page 4, Lnes 20-22)

She felt that she was treated fairly and not looked down on. You could see the relief in her face, as if a heavy feeling lifted. She felt accepted and respected for who she is. No one judged her or made her feel less. Because of this, she felt at ease and more confident, knowing that she belongs and is valued. Participant 12 expressed:

“Ang akon relasyon sa mga upod ta nga school heads nagahatag sang inspirasyon... nabatyagan ko nga importante ang akon kontribusyon...” (P12, Page 4, Lines 33-35)

She said that other school heads helped her a lot. When things were hard, they gave her support and encouraged her. Because of them, she felt more confident and not alone in her role. This support helped her continue leading even when it was difficult.

Interactions With Teachers and Staff: Sense of belonging and trust

They said that working with their teachers and staff helped them keep going. In their daily work, they helped each other and worked as a team. The support they received made their tasks easier to handle. They felt trusted and supported by those around them, which helped them stay committed to their roles even during difficult times. One of my participants said:

"When they show trust, cooperation, and respect, it reassures me that my leadership is valued. Their support helps heal my self-doubt..." (P1, Page 5, Lines 2-3)

She said that trust, teamwork, and respect are important to her. These guide how she deals with teachers and staff. Because of this, they work well together and support each other. Participant 5 expressed:

"We collaborate, share ideas, and support each other - it's like a big family. Their encouragement and respect boost my sense of belonging..." (P3, Page 5, Lines 6-8)

During the interview, she said that working together and sharing ideas with others was important to her. She listened to her co-workers and was willing to learn from them. For her, learning came from working as a team and helping each other. Another one stated:

"I have not experienced any negative response from teachers... regarding my exam result. I was treated with the same respect as when I first took the role..." (P7, Page 5, Lines 18-20)

As I listened to her during the interview, I felt that her supervisors and colleagues treated her fairly. I noticed it in the way she spoke calm and sincere. It seemed like she was in a place where people were respected and valued. I also saw a deep confidence in her, like she felt accepted and not judged. It showed how respect shaped the way she saw herself and others. Participant 2 expressed:

"Wala sang may nag bag-o in terms of belongingness and support from the community." (P2, Page 5, Line 5)

I felt that her sense of belonging had not changed. I noticed it in the way she spoke, calm and steady. It seemed that she still felt accepted and valued. Even after everything she had been through, she still felt connected and part of the group.

Driven by Accountability

Accountability guided them and reminded them of their purpose. Even when they faced problems, they stayed responsible and did their work. They kept going because they knew their learners and teachers depended on them.

School Heads Expectations: Guided by deep commitment to serve

In their stories, you can see a strong sense of responsibility. Even after not passing the NQESH, they did not leave their roles. They stayed and continued their work, thinking of their schools, teachers, learners, and the community. The result did not stop them from leading. They were still committed to serving. Even if they felt disappointed, they chose to stay strong and continue doing their duties. Participant 1 shared:

"Sometimes, I feel heavy. There are moments when this creates added pressure..." (P5, Page 1, Lines 16-17)

I felt that others had questioned her ability. I saw it in her face and in the way she spoke. There was a short pause, like she was remembering moments when she doubted herself. But I also saw strength in her. Even with those doubts, she wanted to show that she is capable and can do more than what others think. Participant 6 noted:

"I use it as motivation to prove that genuine leadership comes from commitment, collaboration, and the courage to keep learning." (P6, Page 1, Lines 24-26)

During the interview, she said that leadership comes from being committed, working with others, and not giving up even when things are hard. Her answers showed that she stayed strong and had a clear purpose in her role. For her, leadership was not just about position, but about what you do and how you work with people. Another one expressed:

"While the pain and embarrassment are real, they have taught me to manage my team with empathy, honesty, and understanding." (P1, Page 1, Lines 6-7)

As she spoke, she paused, as if it was hard for her to share the experience. She seemed embarrassed, but she still chose to talk about it. Her actions showed that she was willing to face her challenges and continue in her role.

The Power of Validation

On the other hand, validation comes from simple words of support, trust, and recognition from others. It reminds them that their efforts matter, that they are still capable leaders, and that people continue to notice and value what they do.

Perceptions of Supervisor and Colleague Support: Validation strengthens confidence and sustains leadership commitment

Participants shared that recognition and trust from supervisors and colleagues helped build their confidence. Simple words of encouragement made them feel valued and supported in their work. Because of this, they chose to keep serving and stayed committed as school leaders, even when things were difficult. Participant 1 expressed:

"The expectations feel heavy, especially knowing that people may silently question my competence." (P1, Page 1, Lines 1-2)

I could see and feel that others had questioned her ability, and it showed in how she spoke. There was a slight pause and careful choice of words, as if she was remembering those moments of doubt. But underneath it, I also felt her quiet strength and her will to rise above what others said about her. It was not just about proving others wrong, but about rebuilding her confidence and reminding herself of what she can truly do. Participant 11 emphasized:

"Nakikita ko ang suporta ng aking mga supervisor at ksamahan bilang... nakatuon sa aking mga nagawa kaysa sa resulta ng pagsusulit." (P11, Page 6, Lines 38-39)

Her supervisors' support meant a lot to her, and it showed in the warmth and confidence in her voice. There was a sense of relief and gratitude, as if their guidance and trust gave her strength during hard times. Because of this support, she slowly regained her confidence and found the courage to keep going, knowing she was not alone and that someone believed in her ability to lead. Participant 7 expressed:

"I am deeply grateful for the support I received from the division office from the Schools Division Superintendent down to the education supervisors... they motivated me to retake the exam." (P7, Page 6, Lines 23-26)

The support she received from her supervisors, especially from the Schools Division Superintendent, was clear in the way she spoke. Her voice showed reassurance and growing confidence. There was warmth in her words, as if their trust, guidance, and encouragement gave her strength during her most difficult moments. Because of this, she was able to stand stronger, believe in herself again, and continue her journey with courage, knowing that others guided and valued her, and that she was not alone. Participant 8 noted:

"mga encouragement nila nga sige lang ah..take ka lang gihapon...indi madulaan sang paglaom..." (P8, Page 6, Lines 29-30)

Her supervisors did not let her lose hope. It showed in how she spoke, with a quiet strength shaped by their steady encouragement and reassurance. Their words lifted her during times of doubt and reminded her to keep going. Because of this support, she found the strength to move forward and hold on to hope, even in difficult times. Participant 9 mentioned:

"grabeh nga support eh...after nila nabal an nga wala ako nakapasa, may nag chat dayon sa akon nga, sge lng friend ah.....may sunod pa..." (P9, Page 6, Lines 32-34)

The support of her friends showed in the way she spoke. Her voice was soft, but it carried strength because she knew others were there for her. There was warmth and comfort in her words, as if their encouragement gave her a safe space to be herself without fear. Their presence helped lift her during hard times, gave her courage to keep going, and reminded her that she was not alone.

"maayo ning mga upod naton kay kmi kami mismo nag cheer up sang amon mga self..." (P9, Page 6, Lines 35-36)

The support from her colleagues meant a lot to her, and it showed in the way she spoke. Her voice was comfort and quiet strength. There was warmth in her words, as if their encouragement and shared experiences helped her during hard times. Being with them reminded her that she was part of a team that understands, supports, and stands with her every step of the way.

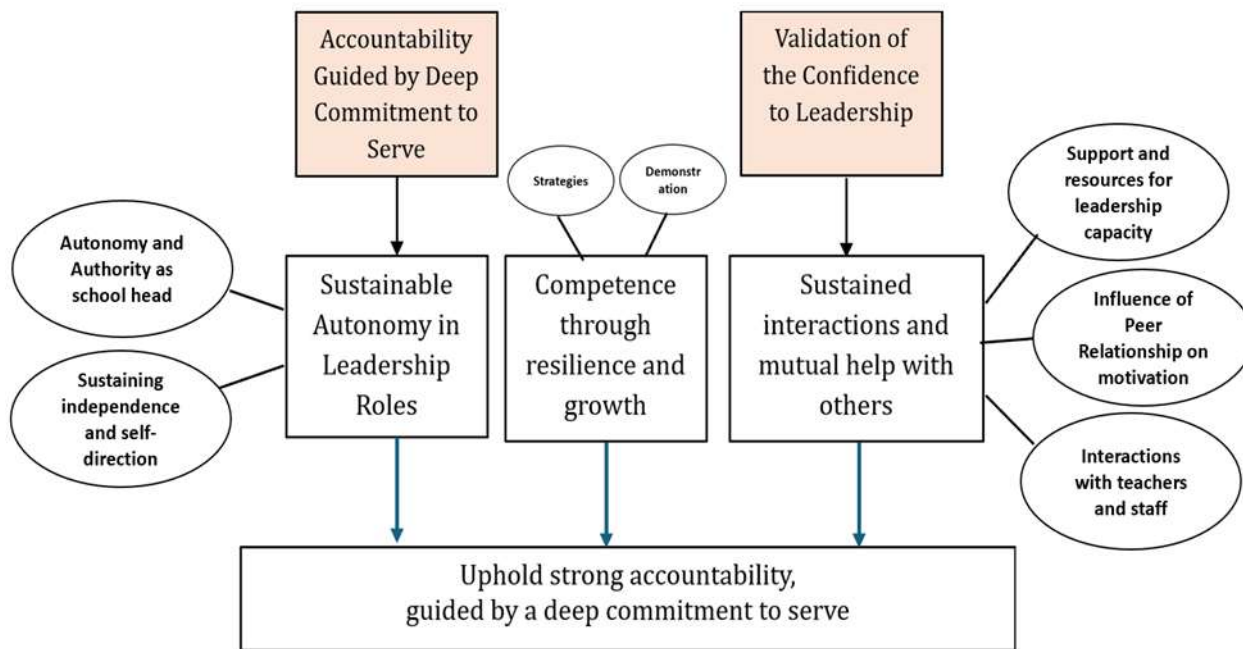
Summary of Findings

1. School heads continue to make decisions in their roles and lead independently, even when they face challenges. Their ability to decide for themselves helps them manage the school well and make good choices for their community. This independence keeps them motivated and helps them lead with purpose and commitment.
2. School heads show their ability by facing challenges and working to improve their skills. They learn from their mistakes and use them as chances to grow. This support helps them become more confident and effective as leaders.
3. School heads keep strong relationships by talking and working with their colleagues and stakeholders. They share ideas and support each other. These connections create a supportive work environment that keeps them motivated and improves their leadership.
4. School heads show accountability by performing their duties well. They are guided by their commitment to serve learners, teachers, and the community. Even when they face challenges, they remain responsible and do what is right. This strong sense of purpose helps them lead with honesty and dedication.
5. Support from supervisors, colleagues, and the community helps school heads feel more confident and valued as leaders. When they receive recognition, encouragement, and trust, they feel supported in their

work. This support motivates them to keep leading even when challenges arise. It also strengthens their commitment and inspires them to serve with more dedication and purpose.

- School heads remain motivated and persist in their leadership roles by maintaining a clear purpose, demonstrating flexibility, and sustaining commitment despite challenges. Their strength comes from making their own decisions, learning from challenges, and receiving support from others. All these help build their confidence, give them support, and keep them dedicated to their role as leaders.

Modified Paradigm



DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I discussed the findings of my study. Likewise, I established the implications for practice and future direction of my study.

Sustained autonomy in leadership roles

I found out that school heads continue to exercise decision-making authority in their roles, leading with independence despite challenges or setbacks, and their ability to act autonomously allows them to remain in control of school operations and make meaningful decisions for their communities. This sustained autonomy strengthens their motivation and enables them to lead with purpose and commitment, as Ryan and Deci (1985) explain: autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation, as individuals are more engaged and committed when they have control over their actions and decisions. Similarly, my findings align with Wilson and Knighton (2021), who reported that leaders who are trusted by their organisation and given decision-making authority are more likely to sustain effective leadership.

However, the current finding disagrees with the study of Noll et al. (2020), stating that autonomy is "not a motivator unless accompanied by sufficient competence. He suggests that autonomy, by itself, may not sustain motivation or leadership effectiveness and can even lead to reduced outcomes when other psychological needs are unmet. Noll's study did not report the number of participants, while my study clearly identified all participants.

Demonstrated competence through resilience and growth

I found out that school heads demonstrate competence by overcoming challenges and continuously improving their skills over time. They learn from setbacks and use these experiences as opportunities for professional growth. Their resilience strengthens their confidence and enhances their effectiveness as leaders. Salvo-Garrido et al. (2025) support this finding, who found that resilience develops through continuous adaptation to challenges, enabling educators to improve their competence and effectively manage difficult situations. Similarly, Hostallero and Cabal (2024) found that leadership competencies are strengthened through resilience, as school leaders who overcome challenges become more effective in their roles. These studies affirm that learning from setbacks and sustained resilience enhances professional growth and competence.

In contrast, the current finding contradicts the study by Kunter et al. (2013), which found that competence alone does not always lead to improved performance, as factors such as stress, burnout, and a lack of support can limit the effective use of one's skills. These findings imply that while school heads may develop competence by overcoming challenges, their effectiveness as leaders may still be limited when they do not adequately address external and emotional factors.

While it is true that the study of Kunter et al. (2013) involved a larger number of participants, its primary focus was on confirming relationships between variables within a structured framework. My present study employed a qualitative approach that allowed a deeper exploration of the phenomenon, despite having only 15 participants. It captured rich, lived experiences of school heads, providing a more comprehensive and contextualised understanding of how school heads develop, experience, and sustain competence in real-life leadership situations.

Sustained interactions and mutual help with others

I found out that school heads sustain strong relationships through continuous interaction with colleagues and stakeholders, engaging in collaboration, sharing ideas, and offering mutual support. These meaningful connections create a supportive professional environment that strengthens their motivation and helps them lead more effectively. Debnath (2025) supports this finding, who found that continuous collaboration and interaction among educators foster trust, mutual support, and professional growth, thereby enhancing motivation and effectiveness. Similarly, Phebeni (2025) affirmed that collaborative leadership promotes shared decision-making, trust, and inclusivity, creating a supportive environment that strengthens commitment and leadership effectiveness.

On the contrary, Moldovan (2020) found that relationships and collaboration in schools can also lead to conflict and tension, which may hinder effective interaction and weaken leadership effectiveness.

While Kunter et al. (2013) included a larger number of participants, the study mainly examined relationships between variables within a structured framework. In contrast, this study worked with only 15 participants but used a qualitative approach, which allowed a closer look at their actual experiences. Through their stories and reflections, I better understood how competence is developed and sustained in real leadership situations. Although the number of participants was small, the data provided a more detailed and context-based view of how school heads experience and develop their competence over time.

Emerging Themes

Uphold strong accountability, guided by a deep commitment to serve

The findings showed that school heads maintain a strong sense of accountability by continuously carrying out their duties and responsibilities. They guide their actions with a commitment to serve learners, teachers, and the community. Even when they face challenges and setbacks, they still try to remain responsible and act with integrity in their leadership. It is this sense of purpose that keeps them going and allows them to lead with dedication. This finding aligns with Garcia and Ching (2024), who emphasised that school heads who practice ethical leadership demonstrate accountability, responsibility, and integrity in governance. They further explained that leaders who uphold ethical standards help build transparency and trust, showing their genuine commitment

to their roles. Similarly, Siva Vikaraman et al. (2021) affirmed that effective school leaders demonstrate ethical integrity, adhere to professional standards, and practice social responsibility, all of which strengthen their accountability even in challenging situations.

However, this finding is not fully consistent with Ordofa and Asgedom (2022), who argued that accountability in schools can depend on the context and may sometimes lead to unintended outcomes, such as pressure or compliance rather than true leadership effectiveness. They explained that accountability, when not properly understood, may not always result in positive leadership practices.

It is also worth noting that Ordofa and Asgedom (2022) based their conclusions on a systematic review of different studies and did not involve direct participants. In contrast, this study involved 15 school heads, which allowed a closer look at their actual experiences. Although the study included fewer participants, it provided a more detailed and personal understanding of how school heads experience and practice accountability in real leadership situations.

Validation strengthens school heads' confidence and commitment to leadership.

As I reviewed the participants' responses, I saw how important validation is in their leadership journey. When supervisors, colleagues, or even members of the community show trust and appreciation, it gives school heads a sense of reassurance. Some of them shared that even simple words of encouragement helped them regain confidence, especially during difficult moments. It reminded them that they are still capable and valued as leaders. Because of this, they continue to lead and serve, not just out of duty, but with a deeper sense of purpose.

This finding connects with the study of Avelino (2024), which highlights how trust and collaborative leadership help create a more supportive school environment. When people feel supported, they tend to experience less stress and become more positive in their work. I also found a similar idea in Tablate (2025), which showed that leadership grounded in encouragement, recognition, and positive relationships strongly influences teachers' intrinsic motivation. In my study, I found that when school heads receive this kind of support, it not only influences those around them but also strengthens their confidence and commitment as leaders.

However, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) argued that relying too much on external rewards or recognition may weaken intrinsic motivation. At first, this seemed to contradict what I found. But when I looked more closely at the participants' experiences, it became clear that validation was not something they depended on. Instead, it simply affirmed what they already believed about their role. It did not replace their internal motivation but rather supported it. In this sense, validation became a source of strength that helped sustain their confidence and commitment to leadership.

Autonomy, competence, and relationships sustain leadership resilience.

In my study, I found out that school heads sustain their motivation and leadership resilience by continuing to lead with purpose, adaptability, and commitment despite challenges and setbacks. This resilience develops through sustained autonomy in leadership roles, demonstrated competence through resilience and growth, and sustained interactions and mutual help with others, which together reinforce their confidence, support systems, and dedication to leadership. These results support the study by Guimarães et al. (2025), which found that when leadership environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they foster stronger intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. These findings suggest that leaders who experience these three conditions are more likely to remain motivated, adaptive, and committed in their roles.

Similarly, my findings align with those of Casumpo (2024), who argues that leader resilience significantly strengthens leadership competence and effectiveness, enabling school heads to adapt to challenges and sustain their performance. Resilient leaders demonstrate perseverance, adaptability, and continuous growth, which reinforces their confidence and long-term commitment to leadership roles.

On the other hand, my current findings differ from those of Cheng et al. (2023), who argue that resilience and leadership motivation are not always sustained by autonomy, competence, and social support alone, as contextual

factors can weaken their effects. For instance, research found that high job complexity and demanding environments can reduce intrinsic motivation, even when supportive leadership is present, indicating that motivation and resilience may decline under excessive demands.

Cheng et al. (2023) used a larger sample of 412 participants, providing broader, more generalisable findings. In contrast, the present study involved 15 school heads, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of lived experiences and a richer understanding of leadership resilience within a specific context.

Implication for Practice

School heads can take time to pause and reflect on their experiences, especially on how they continue to lead with independence even when things are not easy. Despite the challenges, they still find ways to make decisions and move forward. Over time, they grow in their competence not because everything goes smoothly, but because they learn from setbacks and keep going. They also build stronger relationships by working with others, sharing ideas, and supporting one another. At the same time, they carry a strong sense of accountability, rooted in their commitment to serve. The recognition they receive from supervisors, colleagues, and even the community may seem simple. Still, it matters, as it helps strengthen their confidence and keeps them grounded in their role as leaders.

For the Department of Education, this highlights the need to provide more meaningful support for school heads who have not yet passed the examination. This support can be provided through mentoring programs, peer support groups, and capacity-building activities that help them continue learning and improving. These efforts help school heads sustain their leadership by strengthening their skills, confidence, and connection with others.

At the same time, education leaders play a key role in ensuring that these forms of support reach the school level. By providing the needed resources such as funds, materials, and technical assistance, they help turn these programs into actual practice. Regular coaching sessions, learning action cells, and simple recognition mechanisms can make a difference. When school heads feel supported and given opportunities to grow, they are more likely to continue serving with integrity, purpose, and commitment.

Future Directions of My Study

Future research may examine sustained autonomy in leadership roles as a mediator between accountability guided by a commitment to serve and leadership resilience to explain how decision-making independence supports resilient leadership. It may also explore demonstrated competence through resilience and growth as a mediator between validation and leadership resilience, to better understand how personal growth influences the impact of social support.

A comparative design between successful and unsuccessful NQESH passers could also provide deeper insight into motivational differences. Methodologically, future studies should provide a more detailed explanation of thematic coding procedures, including strategies for ensuring credibility such as triangulation, member checking, or inter-rater agreement.

Additionally, I may conduct an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to develop and validate an instrument based on the study's themes. The study may assess data suitability using KMO and Bartlett's Test and apply Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation. The study may retain items with loadings of 0.40 or higher and assess reliability using Cronbach's alpha.

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