

Challenges Encountered by Public Elementary School Principals in the Division of Malaybalay City

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry explored the challenges encountered by public elementary school principals in the Division of Malaybalay City during School Year 2025-2026. Using a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, the study gathered data through in-depth interviews with ten public elementary school principals who were selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed following phenomenological procedures to identify significant statements, meanings, and emergent themes, while trustworthiness was supported through bracketing, member checking, and an audit trail. Findings revealed four major challenge areas: learner-related challenges, resource and facility constraints, stakeholder and community concerns, and teacher and organizational challenges. Learner-related challenges included reading difficulties, absenteeism, and behavioral concerns. Resource and facility constraints involved limited funds, insufficient classrooms, and lack of instructional materials. Stakeholder concerns were reflected in inconsistent parental and community support, while teacher and organizational challenges involved teacher-related concerns, administrative workload, and overlapping school demands. The study concludes that the work of public elementary school principals is shaped by interconnected challenges that require instructional focus, resourcefulness, communication, and resilience. The findings may guide school leaders, supervisors, and policy makers in strengthening support systems for public elementary school administration.

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INTRODUCTION

Public elementary school principals occupy a demanding position in the basic education system. They are expected to supervise instruction, manage school resources, implement programs, support teachers, address learner concerns, coordinate with stakeholders, and ensure that school operations remain functional. In the Philippine setting, these responsibilities are anchored on legal and policy mandates that define the school principal as an instructional leader and school manager. Republic Act No. 9155 emphasizes school-based management and the role of school heads in improving learning outcomes, while Republic Act No. 10533 reinforces the responsibility of schools to deliver learner-centered and quality basic education [1], [2]. In addition, DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020 defines professional standards for school heads, including instructional leadership, people management, and school governance [3].

In actual school practice, however, the work of principals is often affected by persistent and overlapping concerns. These include learners who struggle in reading, pupils who are frequently absent, limited school funds, shortage of instructional materials, facility concerns, weak stakeholder participation, teacher-related concerns, and heavy administrative workload. These challenges are not isolated events. They are part of the everyday reality of managing public elementary schools, especially in communities where school resources, family support, and learner needs vary widely.

The Division of Malaybalay City provides a relevant context for examining these experiences because public elementary schools operate in varied school and community conditions. Principals are expected to sustain teaching and learning while responding to the requirements of school improvement planning, instructional supervision, learner assessment, program implementation, and stakeholder coordination. These realities show that understanding principal leadership requires attention not only to leadership outcomes but also to the actual challenges experienced by school leaders in their daily administration.

This study was guided by the idea that adversity is a regular part of school leadership. Adversity Quotient Theory explains how individuals respond to difficulties through control, ownership, reach, and endurance [4], while phenomenology allows the researcher to understand the meanings of these experiences from the participants themselves [5]. Existing studies emphasize that school leadership involves managing complex responsibilities and responding to changing school conditions [6], [7]. However, there remains a need to document the lived realities of public elementary school principals at the local level. Thus, this article focuses on the challenges encountered by public elementary school principals in the Division of Malaybalay City.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design, specifically transcendental phenomenology. This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the lived experiences of public elementary school principals as they encountered challenges in school administration. Following Moustakas, the study focused on describing the essence of the participants' experiences by identifying significant statements, meanings, and themes from their narratives [5].

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in the Division of Malaybalay City, Bukidnon. The participants were ten public elementary school principals who were currently assigned in the division and had at least five years of experience in the principalship role. They were selected through purposive sampling because they could provide rich and relevant accounts of administrative challenges in public elementary schools. The group included principals with different ranks and leadership experiences, which helped capture varied perspectives on school administration.

Research Instrument and Data Gathering Procedure

The primary research tool was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide validated by experts. The guide was reviewed for clarity, relevance to the research question, appropriateness to the participants, and alignment with the focus of the study. The interview questions focused on the challenges encountered by principals in their leadership roles, particularly in relation to learners, teachers, resources, stakeholders, and school operations. The researcher secured ethical clearance and permission from the appropriate offices before conducting the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using the transcendental phenomenological procedure of Moustakas [5]. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy. The researcher read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the accounts of the participants and to identify statements that directly described the challenges encountered by public elementary school principals in the Division of Malaybalay City.

Epoche or bracketing was observed throughout the analysis. The researcher kept reflective notes and consciously set aside personal assumptions about school leadership so that the interpretation would remain grounded in the participants' actual narratives. The researcher then conducted horizontalization by treating each relevant

statement with equal value during the initial stage of analysis. Repetitive, overlapping, or unrelated statements were reduced, while meaningful statements connected to the research question were retained.

The retained significant statements were coded and transformed into meaning units. Similar meaning units were clustered to form subthemes, and related subthemes were organized into the major challenge themes. This process led to the four emergent themes presented in the study: learner-related challenges, resource and facility constraints, stakeholder and community concerns, and teacher and organizational challenges. The final themes were reviewed against the transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' descriptions and remained aligned with the purpose of the study.

To strengthen credibility and trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review the accuracy of their transcribed responses or summarized statements and clarify points when necessary. Bracketing was also observed by keeping reflective notes and setting aside personal assumptions during interpretation so that the analysis would remain focused on the participants' actual narratives. An audit trail was maintained through organized interview transcripts, coding notes, theme matrices, and reflective notes, which documented how significant statements were reduced into meaning units, subthemes, and major themes. These validation techniques helped ensure that the findings were credible, organized, and grounded in the participants' lived experiences rather than in the researcher's personal assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interviews revealed four major themes that describe the challenges encountered by public elementary school principals in the Division of Malaybalay City. These themes are learner-related challenges, resource and facility constraints, stakeholder and community concerns, and teacher and organizational challenges.

Table 1. Emergent Challenge Themes Encountered by Public Elementary School Principals

Major Theme	Subthemes	Description
Learner-Related Challenges	Reading difficulties, absenteeism, behavioral issues	Principals dealt with learner concerns that directly affected classroom participation, academic performance, and continuity of learning.
Resource and Facility Constraints	Financial constraints, lack of facilities and materials	Schools experienced limitations in funds, instructional materials, learning spaces, and physical resources needed for effective instruction.
Stakeholder and Community Concerns	Parental involvement, limited external support	Principals encountered inconsistent support from parents, barangay officials, and other stakeholders during program implementation.
Teacher and Organizational Challenges	Teacher-related concerns, organizational workload and management demands	Principals managed differences in teacher capacity, work attitudes, monitoring needs, reports, programs, and overlapping administrative tasks.

Learner-Related Challenges

Learner-related challenges emerged as one of the most consistent concerns encountered by principals. These concerns included reading difficulties, absenteeism, and behavioral issues. Participants described that many learners still struggled with word recognition, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. In some cases, learners

were able to read words but could not understand what they read, which affected their performance across learning areas. As one participant noted, reading problems were among the biggest challenges because poor reading skills affected all subject areas and overall academic achievement.

The principals also explained that reading concerns became more visible through the use of assessment tools such as Phil-IRI and CRLA. Assessment data helped identify learners at the emerging, frustration, or non-reader levels. However, the presence of many slow readers and non-readers placed pressure on principals and teachers to design remediation, monitor progress, and ensure that learners were supported. This challenge shows that literacy difficulties are not only classroom-level concerns but also leadership concerns because they influence school priorities, programs, and resource allocation.

Absenteeism was another learner-related challenge. Principals shared that irregular attendance disrupted learning continuity and made intervention efforts less effective. Learners who were frequently absent often missed lessons, assessments, and remediation activities, making it difficult for teachers to help them catch up. In actual school settings, this required principals to coordinate with teachers, parents, and sometimes barangay officials through attendance monitoring and home visitation.

Behavioral issues also added to the complexity of school management. Participants described cases of low engagement, lack of seriousness in school tasks, peer conflict, bullying, and risky behavior among learners. These issues required principals to ensure student safety, support classroom management, and strengthen guidance mechanisms. Studies on school climate and learner behavior confirm that student engagement, peer relationships, and safety concerns influence academic and socio-emotional outcomes [8], [9].

Resource and Facility Constraints

The second theme involved resource and facility constraints. Principals reported that limited funds, insufficient instructional materials, lack of classrooms, limited ICT resources, and school maintenance needs made their work more difficult. These constraints affected both administrative planning and the delivery of instruction. In schools with limited textbooks and reading materials, teachers had to improvise lessons and develop materials based on available competencies, which required additional time and effort.

Financial constraints were especially evident when schools needed to respond to urgent concerns not included in the prepared budget. Principals had to balance the use of available funds for teachers' needs, learning materials, maintenance, and school programs. Because school budgets are often planned ahead of time, immediate needs such as repairs, additional materials, or emergency facility concerns could not always be addressed quickly. This made prioritization a constant part of school leadership.

Facility and material shortages also shaped school operations. Lack of classrooms, insufficient learning spaces, limited computers, and inadequate reading materials affected the quality and continuity of teaching and learning. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that school funding, infrastructure, and learning materials influence school functioning and learner outcomes [10], [11], [12]. In this study, resource limitations required principals to become practical decision-makers who continuously assessed which needs should be addressed first.

Stakeholder and Community Concerns

The third theme was stakeholder and community concerns. Principals experienced difficulty in securing consistent support from parents, barangay officials, and community partners. Although support was sometimes present, it was not always sustained or sufficient. Some participants explained that stakeholder engagement became more difficult when parents and community members were occupied with work, household responsibilities, or other priorities.

In program implementation, limited stakeholder support affected resource mobilization, volunteer assistance, facility improvement, and learner support activities. One participant explained that if stakeholders were not properly informed, school needs were not always understood or prioritized. Another noted that stakeholder

engagement was especially difficult in more urbanized communities, where parents and partners had limited availability. These experiences indicate that school leadership involves not only internal management but also continuous relationship-building with families and the community.

The literature supports this finding. Strong school-family-community partnerships help strengthen learner support, resource mobilization, and school improvement [13], [14]. However, stakeholder participation may vary because of socio-economic conditions, time availability, and competing household responsibilities [15]. Therefore, stakeholder concerns should not be interpreted merely as unwillingness to support the school. They may also reflect broader social and economic conditions that limit participation. For principals, this means that communication, repeated follow-up, and trust-building remain necessary leadership tasks.

Teacher and Organizational Challenges

The fourth theme involved teacher and organizational challenges. Participants reported concerns related to differences in teachers' skills, work attitudes, adaptability, and personal or professional needs. Some teachers required more guidance in unpacking competencies, preparing specific learning objectives, or adjusting instruction to learner needs. Others needed closer monitoring, mentoring, and feedback to improve their classroom practices. These findings show that principals must manage not only programs but also the professional growth and varied capacities of teachers.

Teacher-related challenges also involved managing personalities and expectations. A principal may need to work with teachers who differ in age, experience, rank, teaching style, and openness to change. For example, younger principals may need to lead senior or more experienced teachers, while at the same time maintaining respect and authority. This requires communication, emotional sensitivity, and clear leadership direction.

Organizational workload and management demand also emerged strongly. Principals described their responsibilities as overlapping and continuous. They supervised teachers and staff, implemented DepEd programs and policies, managed school resources, monitored learners, built partnerships, and complied with reports. One participant described being "bombarded" with programs, projects, and activities, making it difficult to decide what should come first. These experiences affirm that principals handle multiple interconnected responsibilities that require constant prioritization and adjustment.

Research on school leadership similarly shows that principals manage complex roles involving instructional leadership, resource management, supervision, and stakeholder engagement [6], [7]. When administrative demands increase, principals may have less time for direct instructional leadership, teacher coaching, and learner-focused support. Thus, teacher and organizational challenges reveal the need for stronger support systems, clearer task prioritization, and more realistic workload management for public elementary school principals.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that public elementary school principals in the Division of Malaybalay City encounter interconnected challenges that affect school administration, teaching and learning, and school-community relations. These challenges are not limited to one area of responsibility. Learner-related concerns, resource limitations, stakeholder issues, teacher-related concerns, and organizational workload interact with one another and shape the daily work of principals.

Learner-related challenges show that reading difficulties, absenteeism, and behavioral concerns require continuous monitoring and coordinated action. Resource and facility constraints reveal that principals must make difficult decisions in allocating limited funds and materials. Stakeholder concerns show that school improvement depends on sustained communication and community participation. Teacher and organizational challenges indicate that principals need to support teachers while also managing reports, programs, and administrative requirements. Overall, the findings show that principal leadership in public elementary schools requires resilience, practical decision-making, instructional focus, and strong collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, school principals may strengthen literacy-focused leadership by sustaining reading assessment, remediation, and progress monitoring systems. Programs such as Phil-IRI-based interventions, CRLA-guided grouping, and school-based reading remediation may be regularly reviewed to ensure that learners with reading difficulties receive appropriate support.

Schools may also strengthen attendance monitoring and behavioral support systems. Home visitation, parent conferences, guidance activities, and coordination with barangay officials may be used to address absenteeism, peer conflict, and learner behavior concerns in a more consistent and preventive manner.

The Department of Education and local stakeholders may provide stronger support for school resources and facilities. Needs-based funding, instructional materials, ICT support, and facility improvement programs may help reduce the burden on principals and teachers. School leaders may also be assisted in preparing realistic resource plans that prioritize urgent instructional needs.

Stakeholder engagement may be improved through clearer communication, regular consultation, and flexible participation mechanisms. Parents, barangay officials, alumni, and community partners may be engaged not only during school activities but also in planning, resource mobilization, and learner support programs.

Finally, support systems for principals may be strengthened through leadership coaching, technical assistance, mentoring, and workload management. District and division offices may provide clearer prioritization of reports, programs, and deadlines so that principals can devote more time to instructional leadership, teacher support, and learner improvement.

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