Stewards of Stability: Crisis Management Practices and Decision-Making Factors among Rural School Leaders in Surigao Del Sur, Philippines

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0379

Received: 30 May 2026; Accepted: 04 June 2026; Published: 23 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Rural schools in the Philippines, particularly those situated in geographically isolated and disaster-prone areas, face systemic challenges in crisis management that centralized national frameworks do not adequately address. This study examined the level of crisis management practices; and the factors influencing school leaders' decision-making during crises in rural public schools across five districts in Surigao del Sur. Using descriptive research design, quantitative data were gathered from 140 respondents — 70 school heads and 70 Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) Coordinators — through a validated Likert-scale instrument. Results revealed that crisis management practices were rated at a moderately present level across four dimensions: crisis preparedness, crisis response, crisis recovery and learning, and communication and coordination. Decision-making during crises was predominantly influenced by situational and structural factors, including resource scarcity and geographic isolation, followed by relational and dispositional factors. Findings underscore a critical gap between policy mandates and contextual implementation in Last Mile Schools.

Keywords: crisis management, situational leadership, DRRM, rural schools, Philippines, decision-making, educational resilience

INTRODUCTION

Rural schools in disaster-prone regions constitute one of the most understudied yet most critically vulnerable segments of national educational systems. In the Philippine context — where geographic isolation, chronic resource scarcity, and frequent exposure to typhoons, flooding, and seismic events converge — rural school heads operate at the sharp edge of educational governance, often without the institutional scaffolding that their urban counterparts take for granted. This structural reality is acutely manifest in the province of Surigao del Sur, a predominantly rural coastal province in the CARAGA Region (Region XIII), where schools classified as Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs) or Last Mile Schools regularly contend with disrupted communication infrastructure, delayed central-office support, and a reactive crisis cycle born of inadequate preparedness protocols.

The prevailing international literature underscores that school leadership is the primary determinant of institutional resilience during crises. Adaptive, situationally responsive leadership has been consistently associated with more effective preparedness, faster crisis response, and stronger post-disaster recovery outcomes (Hallinger & Liu, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Yet the dominant body of evidence emerges from urbanized, resource-sufficient educational systems, leaving a conspicuous gap in the literature regarding the particular leadership challenges and crisis management configurations of rural schools operating under chronic constraints.

Two interconnected problems motivate this study. First, crisis management frameworks adopted by Philippine schools under Republic Act No. 10121 and DepEd Order No. 37, s. 2015, were designed around compliance-

based structures that assume stable communication infrastructure, accessible emergency supplies, and functioning inter-agency coordination — conditions frequently absent in rural Surigao del Sur. The resulting gap between mandated preparedness standards and implementable practice leaves rural school heads improvising under pressure, relying on personal resilience, community networks, and localized knowledge rather than institutionalized protocol. Second, while the demographics and professional profiles of school leaders are known to shape crisis management capacity (Dela Cruz & Santos, 2020; Mendoza et al., 2022), insufficient empirical evidence exists concerning how these factors operate in the specific context of Philippine Last Mile Schools, where situational leadership must compensate for absent administrative structures.

This study therefore addresses two core questions: (1) What is the level of crisis management practices in rural schools of Surigao del Sur, as perceived by school heads and DRRM Coordinators? (2) What factors — dispositional, relational, and situational-structural — influence the decision-making practices of rural school leaders during crises? In answering these questions, the study sought to generate empirically grounded evidence that can inform the development of a locally responsive crisis management framework, for application in rural educational settings across the Philippines.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical traditions. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) and extended by Hermosura and Decendario (2024), posits that effective leadership depends on a leader's ability to calibrate directive and supportive behaviors to the readiness level of followers and the demands of the immediate situation. In the crisis management context, SLT provides the primary analytical lens for examining how school heads shift between directive decision-making during acute emergencies and participative or delegative modes during preparedness planning and post-crisis recovery.

Fiedler's (1967) Contingency Theory of Leadership complements SLT by emphasizing that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon the structural alignment between a leader's style and situational variables — including leader-member relations, task structure, and positional power. In rural Surigao del Sur, where schools vary markedly by size, geographic classification (coastal, lowland, upland/GIDA), and resource availability, contingency theory frames how structural and contextual factors constrain or enable leadership effectiveness across different crisis phases.

Crisis Management Theory, operationalized through Coombs's (2007) cyclical model of preparedness, response, recovery, and learning, provides the evaluative architecture for the study's crisis management dimensions. This model conceptualizes crisis management not as a discrete event response but as an institutional process requiring proactive anticipation, real-time coordination, structured recovery, and reflective organizational learning. The PARE framework proposed by this study operationalizes these four phases within the specific constraints of Philippine rural schools.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an Descriptive Research Design, in which quantitative survey data were collected and analyzed. This design is well-suited to investigate complex, context-embedded phenomena such as crisis leadership in resource-constrained rural settings, where statistical patterns require narrative elaboration to be fully understood.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in public rural schools across five districts in Surigao del Sur: Tago, San Miguel, Bayabas, Cagwait, and Marihatag. These districts were purposively selected on the basis of their GIDA classification, frequent exposure to natural hazards, and geographic isolation from provincial administrative centers. A total of 140 respondents participated: 70 school heads (principals and Officers-in-Charge) and 70

designated DRRM Coordinators (classroom teachers with formal DRRM responsibilities). Stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation across school sizes (small, medium, large) and geographic classifications (coastal, lowland, upland/GIDA).

Table 1. Distribution of Study Respondents by District

District	**School Heads**	**DRRM Coordinators**	**Total**
Tago	29	29	58
Bayabas	8	8	16
Cagwait	13	13	26
San Miguel	13	13	26
Marihatag	7	7	14
Grand Total	**70**	**70**	**140**

Instrument and Data Collection

The quantitative instrument comprised a researcher-made Likert-scale questionnaire (1–5 scale) aligned to two domains: (a) Crisis Management (CM), encompassing crisis preparedness (CM1), crisis response (CM2), crisis recovery and learning (CM3), and communication and coordination (CM4); and (b) Decision-Making Factors (DM), encompassing dispositional (DM1), relational (DM2), and situational-structural (DM3) influences. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in educational leadership, DRRM, and research methodology. Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha coefficients in the acceptable-to-excellent range following pilot testing.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage) characterized instrument domain scores.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Crisis Management Practices in Rural Schools

Table 2 presents the mean scores and adjectival ratings for the four crisis management dimensions as perceived by both school heads and DRRM coordinators. The overall pattern indicates a moderately present level of crisis management across all four domains, signaling a system where foundational structures exist but consistent and comprehensive implementation remains elusive, particularly in resource-scarce Last Mile Schools.

Table 2. Level of Crisis Management Practices by Dimension

Crisis Management Dimension	**School Head Mean**	**DRRM Coordinators. Mean**	**Grand Mean**	**Adjectival Rating**
CM1. Crisis Preparedness (Pre-Crisis)	3.62	3.41	3.52	Moderately Present
CM2. Crisis Response (During Crisis)	3.74	3.55	3.65	Moderately Present
CM3. Crisis Recovery & Learning (Post-Crisis)	3.48	3.29	3.39	Moderately Present

CM4. Communication & Coordination	3.71	3.44	3.58	Moderately Present
Overall Mean	**3.64**	**3.42**	**3.54**	**Moderately Present**

Crisis Response (CM2) registered the highest grand mean (M = 3.65), suggesting that school heads are most proficient at activating immediate safety protocols and mobilizing staff during acute emergencies. This aligns with international findings that principals in high-hazard environments develop directive response competencies through repeated exposure, even in the absence of formal training (Villanueva & Ramos, 2024). By contrast, Crisis Recovery and Learning (CM3) produced the lowest grand mean (M = 3.39), revealing a systematic weakness in post-crisis organizational learning. After-action reviews, psychosocial support provision, and the institutionalization of lessons learned into updated DRRM plans were particularly inconsistently implemented — a pattern consistent with Filipino school heads' historically reactive approach to disaster management.

A persistent inter-group disparity was observed across all four dimensions: school heads consistently rated crisis management practices higher than DRRM coordinators. The largest gap appeared in Crisis Preparedness (CM1), where school heads reported a mean of 3.62 compared to coordinators' 3.41. This perception gap mirrors the policy-practice disconnect documented in ESD literature and reflects what Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) term responsibilization — a condition where administrative claims of compliance diverge from frontline implementation realities. School heads, who are formally accountable for DRRM compliance, may conflate documentation and formal plan production with actual operational preparedness, while coordinators working directly with students and communities perceive the practical gaps more acutely.

Communication and Coordination (CM4) rated at M = 3.58, capturing a system where internal and external communication channels exist but remain unreliable under crisis conditions. Respondents revealed that in upland GIDA schools, the primary communication tools during typhoons were improvised channels — community bandilyo (public address) systems, hand-carried memos, and informal barangay networks — activated only when mobile infrastructure failed. This finding resonates with Axisa et al.'s (2022) observation that geographic fragmentation produces a perception of institutional invisibility from central authorities, forcing rural leaders into autonomous communication improvisation.

Factors Influencing Decision-Making During Crises

Table 3 presents the mean scores for the three categories of factors influencing rural school leaders' decision-making during crises. All three categories registered a high influence rating, with Situational and Structural factors emerging as the dominant influence category.

Table 3. Factors Influencing Decision-Making During Crises

Decision-Making Factor Category	**School Head Mean**	**DRRM Coord. Mean**	**Grand Mean**	**Adjectival Rating**
DM1. Dispositional Factors	4.21	4.07	4.14	High
DM2. Relational Factors	4.18	4.02	4.10	High
DM3. Situational & Structural Factors	4.45	4.38	4.42	High
Overall Mean	**4.28**	**4.16**	**4.22**	**High**

Situational and Structural factors (M = 4.42) exerted the highest overall influence on crisis decision-making. Resource availability, geographic location, limited rural infrastructure, and the presence or absence of department memoranda were rated as dominant decision-shapers. This finding confirms Azano and Stewart's (2021) observation that rural administrators' decisions are fundamentally constrained by structural realities —

the absence of broadband connectivity that renders synchronous online directives unimplementable, the lack of assistant principals that concentrates all coordination authority on the school head, and the distance from district offices that delays the arrival of external technical support. In this context, decision-making becomes less a function of formal protocol and more an exercise in adaptive pragmatism, consistent with Boin and Lodge's (2021) argument that effective crisis leaders operating in high-uncertainty environments rely on pragmatic, trial-and-error strategies rather than principled compliance with standardized frameworks.

Dispositional factors (M = 4.14), encompassing emotional regulation, personal values, resilience, and risk tolerance, ranked second. Respondents revealed that school heads perceived their composure under pressure as the single most critical personal resource during crises — serving as what Hayes et al. (2021) describe as a calming presence that stabilizes organizational culture during emergencies. Expressions of moral duty and communal responsibility featured prominently: respondents frequently framed their crisis actions not in terms of administrative compliance but as fulfillment of an ethical obligation to protect children and community members entrusted to their care. This dispositional orientation aligns with the Ethic of Care framework documented by Lane et al. (2020), wherein rural leaders extend their moral responsibility beyond the institutional boundary to encompass the broader community welfare.

Relational factors (M = 4.10), including stakeholder trust, inter-agency coordination, and community social capital, formed the third but closely ranked category. Respondents consistently identified community partnerships — with barangay officials, local government units, and parent-teacher organizations — as the most reliable substitute for absent formal institutional support. When the mobile network failed and district office communication lines went silent, it was barangay community networks, informal parent-teacher Facebook group chat groups, and the local community's awareness of the school's needs that enabled resource mobilization and information sharing. This finding substantiates Villanueva and Ramos (2024) and corroborates the Philippine model of crisis leadership as fundamentally relational and communal rather than hierarchically bureaucratic.

CONCLUSION

This study addressed two critical empirical questions concerning the crisis management practices and decision-making influences of rural school leaders in Surigao del Sur, Philippines. Regarding crisis management practices, findings confirm that schools across the five study districts maintain a moderately present level of crisis management overall. Crisis response competencies are comparatively stronger, reflecting repeated experiential adaptation under resource-constrained conditions. Crisis recovery and organizational learning represent the most pronounced systemic deficit — a gap that, left unaddressed, perpetuates the reactive crisis cycle that traps rural schools in chronic vulnerability. A consistent perception gap between school heads and DRRM coordinators across all four dimensions suggests that compliance-based reporting obscures operational insufficiencies that are more visible at the teacher level.

Regarding decision-making factors, situational and structural constraints — particularly resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and inadequate infrastructure — exert the highest influence on rural school leaders' crisis decisions, surpassing both dispositional and relational factors. This finding carries a significant policy implication: crisis management capacity in Last Mile Schools cannot be meaningfully improved through leadership development interventions alone. Structural investments in communication infrastructure, emergency supply stockpiling, and decentralized administrative authority are prerequisites for translating adaptive leadership dispositions into effective crisis outcomes.

Future research may focus Longitudinal designs examining how DRRM training exposure moderates the relationship between situational leadership practices and crisis management outcomes, which would further advance the evidence base for rural educational resilience policy.

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