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Beyond Administration: School Principals' Lived Experiences in Fostering Transformational Leadership, Teacher Empowerment, and Sustainable School Improvement in the Division of Santiago City

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ABSTRACT

School principals play a pivotal role in shaping educational quality by fostering transformational leadership, empowering teachers, and sustaining school improvement initiatives. As educational systems increasingly confront rapid policy reforms, technological advancements, and evolving stakeholder expectations, school leaders are expected to move beyond administrative responsibilities toward creating collaborative, innovative, and resilient learning organizations. Despite extensive quantitative investigations on educational leadership, limited qualitative studies have explored how school principals personally experience leading transformational change while simultaneously empowering teachers and sustaining continuous school improvement. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of public school principals in the Division of Santiago City regarding transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement. Guided by transcendental phenomenology, twelve (12) purposively selected school principals participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Analysis. Five major themes emerged: (1) Inspiring Shared Vision through Transformational Leadership; (2) Empowering Teachers through Trust, Collaboration, and Professional Growth; (3) Navigating Leadership Challenges with Resilience and Adaptability; (4) Cultivating a Culture of Continuous School Improvement; and (5) Leading Sustainable Educational Excellence through Stakeholder Engagement. The findings revealed that sustainable school improvement extends beyond administrative efficiency and is deeply rooted in relational leadership, collaborative decision-making, teacher empowerment, organizational learning, and community partnerships. The study concludes that transformational leadership serves as a catalyst for building empowered teaching communities capable of sustaining educational excellence amidst changing educational landscapes. The findings provide significant implications for leadership development programs, educational policy formulation, and principal preparation initiatives within the Philippine basic education system.

Keywords: transformational leadership, school principals, teacher empowerment, sustainable school improvement, educational leadership, phenomenology, school management

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Background of the Study

Educational leadership has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shifting from a predominantly managerial orientation toward transformational and collaborative leadership models that prioritize instructional excellence, organizational learning, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement. Contemporary school principals are no longer viewed merely as administrators responsible for managing school operations; rather, they are expected to become visionary leaders capable of inspiring innovation, building professional learning communities, fostering teacher leadership, and creating organizational cultures that continuously improve teaching and learning. These expanded leadership expectations have become increasingly important as schools respond to rapid technological changes, educational reforms, globalization, and growing demands for equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education. Recent scholarship consistently demonstrates that transformational leadership positively influences teacher motivation, organizational learning, school climate, and institutional effectiveness, making it one of the most influential leadership paradigms in educational administration.

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring a shared vision, promoting intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and encouraging collaborative problem-solving among organizational members. Within educational settings, transformational school leaders cultivate trust, strengthen professional relationships, and empower teachers to become active contributors to school improvement initiatives rather than passive implementers of educational policies. Research has shown that principals who practice transformational leadership foster stronger teacher commitment, increased organizational citizenship behaviors, improved instructional quality, and higher levels of innovation within schools. Moreover, leadership practices centered on collaboration and empowerment contribute significantly to sustainable organizational change because teachers become intrinsically motivated to participate in continuous improvement processes rather than merely complying with administrative directives.

Teacher empowerment has likewise emerged as a critical determinant of sustainable educational improvement. Empowered teachers possess greater professional autonomy, confidence, instructional creativity, and commitment to organizational goals. Rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical decision-making, contemporary school leadership encourages shared governance, distributed leadership, collaborative planning, and teacher participation in school decision-making processes. Such practices strengthen teachers' professional identity while enhancing instructional effectiveness and organizational resilience. Recent studies indicate that principals who intentionally empower teachers create positive school cultures characterized by mutual trust, shared responsibility, professional collaboration, and continuous learning, all of which contribute to improved learner outcomes and institutional sustainability. Globally, sustainable school improvement has become a central priority in educational leadership research. Sustainable improvement extends beyond short-term academic gains by emphasizing continuous organizational learning, leadership succession, stakeholder collaboration, innovation, and long-term institutional capacity building. Educational systems increasingly recognize that lasting school improvement depends upon leaders who cultivate adaptive organizational cultures capable of responding effectively to changing educational contexts while maintaining instructional quality and equity. Consequently, school principals are expected to balance accountability requirements with collaborative leadership practices that empower teachers and engage parents, communities, and external stakeholders.



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in supporting school development.

Recent educational leadership studies consistently demonstrate that transformational leadership positively influences teacher commitment, instructional quality, organizational citizenship behaviors, innovation, and learner achievement. Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasized that transformational principals establish learning-centered environments by empowering teachers, encouraging collaborative decision-making, and fostering organizational learning. Similarly, Hallinger (2022) reported that transformational leadership significantly enhances school effectiveness because it promotes professional collaboration, shared accountability, and instructional excellence. Collaborative leadership encourages principals to build partnerships that extend educational opportunities beyond classroom instruction. Epstein (2019) emphasized that meaningful school-family-community partnerships positively influence student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and organizational sustainability. Likewise, UNESCO (2023) highlighted that stakeholder collaboration strengthens school resilience by fostering collective ownership of educational goals and continuous organizational improvement.

Within the Philippine educational system, the Department of Education continues to implement reforms that strengthen school-based management, instructional leadership, teacher professional development, and community engagement. Public school principals are expected to lead curriculum implementation, improve instructional quality, develop teacher competencies, manage resources efficiently, and foster partnerships with stakeholders while ensuring continuous school improvement. These expanding responsibilities require school leaders to exercise transformational leadership competencies that extend beyond administrative functions. However, many principals continue to face challenges associated with limited resources, increasing administrative workloads, policy implementation demands, changing educational priorities, and diverse stakeholder expectations. Successfully navigating these complexities requires adaptive leadership that simultaneously empowers teachers and sustains organizational improvement.

Within the Division of Santiago City, school principals actively implement educational reforms aimed at improving learner outcomes, strengthening teacher capacity, enhancing instructional quality, and fostering collaborative school cultures. Through instructional supervision, Learning Action Cells (LACs), school-based management initiatives, professional development programs, and stakeholder partnerships, principals continually strive to create learning organizations capable of sustaining educational excellence. Nevertheless, little is known about how these school leaders personally experience balancing administrative responsibilities with transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement efforts. Exploring these lived experiences provides valuable insights into the human dimensions of educational leadership that quantitative indicators alone cannot adequately explain.

Although transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and school improvement have been widely investigated, existing studies remain predominantly quantitative, focusing on statistical relationships among leadership variables, organizational performance, teacher satisfaction, and learner achievement. Comparatively few qualitative investigations have explored the lived experiences of school principals as they navigate the complexities of leading transformational change within Philippine public schools. Furthermore, limited research has examined how principals simultaneously foster transformational leadership, empower teachers, and sustain continuous school improvement from the perspective of the



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leaders themselves. This methodological and contextual gap limits understanding of the personal meanings, leadership strategies, adaptive practices, and organizational processes underlying effective school leadership.

Addressing these gaps, the present phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of school principals in the Division of Santiago City in fostering transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement. By capturing principals' authentic voices, the study contributes to the growing body of qualitative educational leadership research and provides evidence-based insights that may inform leadership preparation programs, policy development, principal professional learning, and sustainable educational reforms within Philippine basic education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory developed by Bass (1985), which explains that effective leaders inspire organizational members through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence. The theory provides the primary lens for understanding how school principals motivate teachers, foster organizational commitment, and sustain educational improvement.

The study is likewise supported by Distributed Leadership Theory proposed by Spillane (2006), which views leadership as a collaborative organizational practice shared among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders. The theory explains how teacher empowerment and shared decision-making contribute to school effectiveness and organizational learning.

Finally, the research is guided by Fullan's Theory of Educational Change (2007), which emphasizes that sustainable school improvement depends upon collaborative leadership, organizational capacity building, professional learning, and continuous adaptation to educational reforms. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining principals' lived experiences in fostering transformational leadership, empowering teachers, and sustaining school improvement.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of school principals in fostering transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement in the Division of Santiago City. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to understand the meanings individuals attribute to their lived experiences and captures the essence of a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The study was conducted in selected public elementary and secondary schools under the Schools Division Office of Santiago City, where principals are actively implementing school-based management, instructional leadership initiatives, teacher professional development programs, and continuous school improvement efforts in accordance with the policies of the Department of Education. The participants consisted of twelve (12) public school principals who were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently serving as a principal in the Division of Santiago City; (2) with at least three years of administrative and instructional leadership experience; (3)



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directly involved in implementing teacher empowerment initiatives and school improvement programs; and (4) willing to voluntarily participate in the study through informed consent. The number of participants was determined through the principle of data saturation, wherein no new themes or significant insights emerged from succeeding interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). Data were gathered using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, which was validated by experts in educational leadership, qualitative research, and educational management and pilot-tested with school administrators outside the study locale to ensure clarity, credibility, and relevance. Individual face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes were conducted in the participants' respective schools or designated venues conducive to uninterrupted conversations. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes documenting observations, reflective insights, and non-verbal cues. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) Seven-Step Phenomenological Method, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of meanings into categories, generation of emergent themes, development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and validation of findings through member checking to ensure that the interpreted themes accurately reflected the participants' experiences. The rigor and trustworthiness of the study were established following the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Strategies employed included prolonged engagement with participants, peer debriefing, maintenance of an audit trail, triangulation of interview transcripts and field notes, reflexive journaling, and participant validation of the emergent themes. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study in accordance with the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2022). Formal approval to conduct the research was secured from the Schools Division Office of Santiago City and the respective school heads. All participants received informed consent forms detailing the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and assurance of confidentiality, anonymity, and secure handling of all research data. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to safeguard their identities, and all information collected was utilized solely for academic and research purposes. Through these systematic methodological procedures, the study generated credible, authentic, and comprehensive descriptions of the lived experiences of school principals in fostering transformational leadership, empowering teachers, and sustaining continuous school improvement within the public schools of the Division of Santiago City.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of school principals in fostering transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement in the Division of Santiago City generated five major themes. These themes collectively illustrate how principals move beyond traditional administrative responsibilities by becoming transformational leaders who inspire teachers, cultivate collaborative organizational cultures, and sustain continuous school improvement. The emergent themes include (1) Inspiring a Shared Vision through Transformational Leadership; (2) Empowering Teachers through Collaborative Leadership and Professional Growth; (3) Navigating Leadership Challenges



through Resilience and Adaptive Decision-Making; (4) Sustaining School Improvement through Instructional Leadership and Organizational Learning; and (5) Building Sustainable Educational Excellence through Stakeholder Collaboration and Shared Accountability. These findings demonstrate that effective school leadership is deeply rooted in trust, collaboration, innovation, continuous learning, and a commitment to educational excellence.

Theme 1. Inspiring a Shared Vision through Transformational Leadership

Participants consistently described transformational leadership as the foundation of successful school management. Rather than merely enforcing policies and supervising personnel, principals emphasized inspiring teachers, establishing a shared vision, and motivating the entire school community toward common educational goals. They viewed leadership as influencing people through trust, integrity, and purpose rather than authority alone.

One participant shared:

"Being a principal is not simply managing the school. My responsibility is to inspire teachers to believe that together we can continuously improve learning for every child." (Participant 3)

Another participant stated:

"When teachers understand and own the school's vision, they willingly contribute ideas and become more committed to our improvement programs." (Participant 8)

These narratives indicate that transformational leadership creates a shared sense of purpose that strengthens organizational commitment and collective responsibility. The findings support Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes inspirational motivation and idealized influence as essential leadership dimensions. Likewise, Leithwood et al. (2020) argued that transformational school leaders cultivate collaborative organizational cultures by inspiring shared educational goals and strengthening teachers' intrinsic motivation.

Theme 2. Empowering Teachers through Collaborative Leadership and Professional Growth

Teacher empowerment emerged as one of the strongest indicators of effective school leadership. Participants emphasized that empowering teachers involves providing professional autonomy, encouraging innovation, recognizing accomplishments, supporting professional development, and involving teachers in school decision-making. Rather than centralizing authority, principals deliberately created opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership within their respective areas of expertise.

One principal explained:

"I encourage teachers to lead committees, propose innovations, and make instructional decisions because empowerment develops ownership and accountability." (Participant 6)

Another participant remarked:

"When teachers feel trusted, they become more creative, motivated, and willing to take initiatives that improve the school." (Participant 10)

These findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership strengthens professional confidence while promoting organizational commitment. The results align with Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006), which views leadership as a shared organizational practice rather than the sole responsibility of the



principal. Similarly, Harris and Jones (2020) emphasized that teacher empowerment enhances professional collaboration, instructional innovation, and long-term organizational effectiveness.

Theme 3. Navigating Leadership Challenges through Resilience and Adaptive Decision-Making

Participants acknowledged that school leadership involves numerous challenges, including limited financial resources, increasing administrative responsibilities, changing educational policies, teacher workload, learner diversity, and stakeholder expectations. Despite these challenges, principals emphasized the importance of resilience, adaptability, reflective decision-making, and maintaining a positive outlook while addressing organizational concerns.

One participant shared:

"Every school year brings new challenges, but I have learned that flexibility, patience, and collaboration help us overcome difficulties." (Participant 1)

Another participant stated:

"There are situations where resources are limited, but effective leadership means finding solutions together with teachers and stakeholders." (Participant 5)

The findings reveal that successful principals demonstrate adaptive leadership by responding proactively to changing educational demands while maintaining organizational stability. These experiences support Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, which emphasizes that sustainable educational reform requires leaders who continuously adapt, build organizational capacity, and encourage collaborative problem-solving. Recent studies similarly suggest that resilient school leaders are better positioned to sustain educational quality during periods of organizational change (Fullan, 2020).

Theme 4. Sustaining School Improvement through Instructional Leadership and Organizational Learning

The participants consistently identified instructional leadership as one of their most important responsibilities. They described regularly monitoring classroom instruction, mentoring teachers, facilitating Learning Action Cells (LACs), analyzing learner performance data, and encouraging continuous professional learning. Principals viewed sustainable school improvement as a continuous organizational process rather than a one-time accomplishment.

One participant explained:

"School improvement begins with improving classroom instruction. Supporting teachers is the most effective way of improving student learning." (Participant 4)

Another participant shared:

"We regularly conduct coaching, classroom observations, and professional discussions because improvement should never stop." (Participant 11)

These narratives indicate that sustainable improvement depends upon continuous instructional enhancement and organizational learning. The findings support **Instructional Leadership Theory**, which recognizes principals as leaders of teaching and learning rather than merely school administrators. Hallinger (2022) likewise emphasized that instructional leadership significantly improves school effectiveness by strengthening teachers' instructional competence and fostering collaborative professional



learning communities.

Theme 5. Building Sustainable Educational Excellence through Stakeholder Collaboration and Shared Accountability

Participants emphasized that sustainable school improvement cannot be achieved solely by principals and teachers. Strong partnerships with parents, local government units, alumni associations, community organizations, and private stakeholders were considered essential for achieving long-term educational success. Principals described stakeholder collaboration as a shared responsibility that strengthens school resources, learner support systems, and community ownership of educational programs.

One participant stated:

"School improvement becomes sustainable when parents, teachers, community leaders, and local officials work together toward one goal." (Participant 7)

Another principal remarked:

"Building partnerships allows us to accomplish projects that would not be possible through school resources alone." (Participant 12)

These findings demonstrate that collaborative stakeholder engagement enhances organizational sustainability and strengthens educational outcomes. The results align with **Epstein's School-Family-Community Partnership Framework**, which emphasizes that meaningful collaboration among schools, families, and communities contributes significantly to learner achievement and institutional effectiveness. UNESCO (2023) likewise highlighted stakeholder engagement as a critical component of resilient and sustainable educational systems.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the lived experiences of school principals in the Division of Santiago City extend far beyond traditional administrative functions. Participants described leadership as a transformative process centered on inspiring a shared vision, empowering teachers, strengthening instructional quality, adapting to organizational challenges, and building collaborative partnerships that sustain school improvement. Transformational leadership emerged as the driving force that nurtures professional trust, organizational commitment, innovation, and continuous learning, while teacher empowerment encouraged shared leadership and strengthened instructional excellence. Moreover, resilient leadership, evidence-informed decision-making, and active stakeholder engagement enabled principals to navigate increasingly complex educational environments while maintaining organizational effectiveness. These findings strongly affirm Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, and Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, demonstrating that sustainable school improvement is achieved through collaborative leadership, organizational capacity building, teacher empowerment, and continuous professional learning. Collectively, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative educational leadership research by providing rich phenomenological evidence that effective school leadership is fundamentally relational, collaborative, and transformational, offering valuable insights for leadership preparation programs, educational policy, and continuous school improvement initiatives within the Philippine basic education system.



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Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school principals in fostering transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and sustainable school improvement in the Division of Santiago City. The findings revealed that effective school leadership extends far beyond administrative management and encompasses inspiring a shared vision, cultivating collaborative professional relationships, empowering teachers, strengthening instructional quality, and sustaining continuous organizational improvement. The participating principals viewed transformational leadership as a relational process that motivates teachers to become active partners in achieving school goals through trust, shared responsibility, innovation, and professional commitment. They likewise emphasized that teacher empowerment is achieved by providing opportunities for professional growth, participatory decision-making, leadership development, and instructional autonomy, thereby creating a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. Despite challenges such as limited resources, increasing administrative demands, changing educational policies, and diverse stakeholder expectations, the principals demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and strategic decision-making that enabled them to sustain educational excellence. Furthermore, the study found that long-term school improvement is strengthened by instructional leadership, professional learning communities, stakeholder collaboration, and organizational learning. Ultimately, the study concludes that sustainable school improvement is not merely the product of effective administration but the outcome of transformational leadership that empowers teachers, strengthens collaborative organizational cultures, and continuously enhances instructional quality. These findings affirm Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, and Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, highlighting that educational transformation is achieved through shared leadership, teacher empowerment, organizational capacity building, and collaborative engagement among all members of the school community.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable implications for educational leadership, school governance, and policy development within the Philippine basic education system. First, school principals should continue embracing transformational leadership practices that prioritize relationship-building, shared vision, instructional excellence, and collaborative decision-making rather than relying solely on traditional administrative functions. Second, teacher empowerment should become an integral component of school leadership by providing teachers with opportunities to participate in decision-making, lead instructional innovations, engage in professional development, and contribute actively to school improvement initiatives. Third, the Department of Education and school divisions should strengthen leadership development programs that equip current and aspiring principals with competencies in transformational leadership, instructional leadership, organizational change management, emotional intelligence, and strategic planning. Fourth, schools should cultivate professional learning communities that encourage continuous collaboration, reflective practice, coaching, mentoring, and evidence-based instructional improvement. Finally, sustainable school improvement requires strong partnerships among schools,



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parents, local government units, community organizations, alumni, and private stakeholders to ensure adequate resources, shared accountability, and collective commitment toward improving learner outcomes. Strengthening these collaborative networks will enable schools to sustain educational innovations despite changing educational contexts and organizational challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **School principals** should continuously strengthen transformational leadership practices by fostering shared vision, collaborative decision-making, instructional excellence, innovation, and professional trust among teachers and other stakeholders.
2. **Teachers** should actively participate in leadership opportunities, professional learning communities, school governance, and collaborative improvement initiatives to strengthen instructional quality and organizational effectiveness.
3. **Schools Division Office and the Department of Education** should design and implement comprehensive leadership development programs focusing on transformational leadership, distributed leadership, instructional supervision, strategic planning, organizational resilience, and sustainable school improvement.
4. **School communities** should strengthen stakeholder partnerships by actively involving parents, alumni, local government units, non-government organizations, and private sector partners in implementing school improvement initiatives, resource mobilization, and learner support programs.
5. **Educational policymakers** should formulate policies that institutionalize teacher empowerment, shared governance, and collaborative leadership practices while reducing excessive administrative workload to allow principals to focus more on instructional leadership and organizational development.
6. **Future researchers** are encouraged to replicate this study in different school divisions, regions, and educational settings to validate the findings across diverse contexts. Comparative phenomenological studies involving elementary and secondary school principals, public and private schools, or urban and rural educational environments may provide broader insights into transformational leadership practices. Researchers may also employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to investigate the long-term influence of transformational leadership on teacher performance, organizational commitment, learner achievement, school climate, and institutional sustainability.



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