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Leadership in Action: Teachers' Lived Experiences of School Leaders' Leadership Styles and Their Influence on Professional Skills Development in the City Division of Santiago

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ABSTRACT

School leadership plays a vital role in promoting teachers' professional growth, instructional effectiveness, and organizational commitment. As educational institutions continue to respond to evolving curriculum reforms, technological advancements, and increasing accountability demands, school leaders are expected to adopt leadership styles that foster collaboration, innovation, and continuous professional learning. Although numerous quantitative studies have examined the relationship between leadership styles and teacher performance, limited qualitative research has explored how teachers personally experience school leaders' leadership practices and how these experiences shape their professional skills development. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago. Guided by transcendental phenomenology, twelve (12) purposively selected public school teachers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Analysis. Five major themes emerged: (1) Experiencing Visionary and Transformational Leadership; (2) Strengthening Professional Competence through Supportive Leadership; (3) Building Confidence through Mentoring and Instructional Guidance; (4) Overcoming Professional Challenges through Collaborative Leadership; and (5) Fostering Continuous Professional Growth through Empowerment and Organizational Learning. The findings revealed that school leaders significantly influence teachers' professional development by cultivating supportive work environments, encouraging collaboration, providing instructional mentoring, and empowering teachers to become reflective practitioners. The study concludes that effective leadership extends beyond administrative management and serves as a catalyst for continuous professional skills development and sustainable educational improvement. The findings provide valuable implications for leadership development, teacher professional development programs, and educational policy formulation within the Philippine basic education system.

Keywords: leadership styles, school leadership, teachers' lived experiences, professional skills development, transformational leadership, phenomenology, educational leadership

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Introduction

Educational leadership has become one of the most influential factors affecting teacher effectiveness, instructional quality, and overall school performance. In contemporary educational settings, school leaders are expected not only to manage administrative operations but also to inspire teachers, facilitate professional learning, promote instructional excellence, and cultivate organizational cultures that encourage innovation and collaboration. As schools respond to rapid educational reforms, technological developments, and increasing expectations for quality education, leadership practices have shifted from traditional managerial approaches toward transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership models that prioritize people development and continuous organizational improvement. Recent international research consistently identifies school leadership as the second most influential school-related factor affecting student achievement after classroom instruction, primarily because effective leaders create conditions that enable teachers to improve their professional competencies and instructional practices (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Leadership styles determine how school leaders communicate organizational goals, motivate teachers, facilitate decision-making, resolve conflicts, and encourage professional growth. Transformational leaders inspire teachers by articulating a compelling vision, recognizing individual strengths, promoting innovation, and fostering trust-based professional relationships. Instructional leaders, meanwhile, emphasize curriculum implementation, classroom supervision, mentoring, and instructional improvement. Distributed leadership encourages shared governance by allowing teachers to actively participate in leadership processes and collaborative decision-making. Regardless of the leadership approach, effective school leadership creates an environment where teachers continuously develop professionally while contributing meaningfully to school improvement (Hallinger, 2022).

Professional skills development has likewise become a strategic priority in education because teachers are expected to continuously update their pedagogical knowledge, instructional strategies, technological competencies, assessment practices, classroom management skills, and collaborative capabilities. Continuous professional development enables teachers to respond effectively to curriculum reforms, learner diversity, digital transformation, and emerging educational challenges. Research indicates that supportive school leadership significantly enhances teachers' motivation to participate in professional learning activities, instructional innovation, reflective practice, and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers who receive consistent mentoring, coaching, recognition, and professional support from school leaders demonstrate greater instructional confidence, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (OECD, 2021).

Globally, educational systems increasingly recognize that teacher professional development cannot be sustained solely through formal training programs. Instead, professional learning is strengthened through supportive leadership, mentoring, coaching, collaborative professional learning communities, and workplace-based learning experiences. UNESCO (2023) emphasized that school leaders play a crucial role in fostering lifelong professional learning by creating environments where teachers continuously acquire new competencies, exchange best practices, and engage in reflective instructional improvement. Consequently, leadership styles significantly influence not only organizational performance but also



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teachers' capacity to adapt to changing educational demands.

Transformational leadership has become one of the most widely studied leadership models in educational research. According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders inspire organizational members by articulating a shared vision, encouraging intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and serving as role models. Within educational settings, transformational school leaders motivate teachers to exceed organizational expectations while promoting innovation, collaboration, and professional commitment. Leithwood et al. (2020) reported that transformational leadership positively influences teacher motivation, school climate, instructional quality, and organizational effectiveness. Likewise, Hallinger (2022) emphasized that transformational leadership enables schools to build professional learning communities that sustain long-term educational improvement.

Spillane (2006) explained that distributed leadership recognizes leadership as a collective organizational practice rather than the exclusive responsibility of school administrators. Through shared leadership, teachers become instructional leaders, mentors, curriculum developers, and active contributors to organizational change. Harris and Jones (2020) similarly concluded that collaborative leadership strengthens teacher efficacy, professional identity, organizational trust, and school effectiveness. Schools that empower teachers are more likely to sustain innovation, improve instructional quality, and build resilient learning organizations.

According to Fullan (2020), sustainable educational improvement depends on leaders who cultivate cultures of continuous learning, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving. Professional learning communities (PLCs), Learning Action Cells (LACs), lesson study groups, and mentoring programs provide opportunities for teachers to exchange knowledge and strengthen instructional competence. UNESCO (2023) emphasized that schools characterized by collaborative organizational learning demonstrate greater resilience, innovation, and instructional effectiveness than institutions relying solely on hierarchical management structures.

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education has strengthened educational leadership through the implementation of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), both of which emphasize instructional leadership, teacher mentoring, collaborative governance, and continuous professional development. School leaders are expected to facilitate Learning Action Cells (LACs), instructional coaching, classroom observations, school-based training, and mentoring programs that enhance teachers' professional competencies. These leadership responsibilities require principals and school heads to create supportive organizational cultures where teachers are empowered to innovate, collaborate, and continuously improve their instructional practices.

Within the City Division of Santiago, school leaders actively implement professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening instructional competence, curriculum implementation, technology integration, and learner-centered pedagogy. Through instructional supervision, school-based in-service training, Learning Action Cells, mentoring programs, and collaborative planning, school leaders contribute significantly to teachers' professional growth. However, teachers' lived experiences regarding these leadership practices remain insufficiently explored. Understanding how teachers personally perceive school leaders' leadership styles provides deeper insights into the relational and organizational processes



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that facilitate professional skills development beyond what quantitative measures can reveal.

Although previous studies have extensively examined leadership effectiveness, organizational commitment, teacher satisfaction, and instructional performance, most investigations have employed quantitative methodologies focusing on statistical relationships among leadership variables. Comparatively few phenomenological studies have explored how teachers experience different leadership styles and how these experiences influence the development of their professional knowledge, instructional competence, leadership capacity, and professional identity. Furthermore, limited qualitative research has examined this phenomenon within the Philippine public school context, particularly in the City Division of Santiago. This methodological and contextual gap limits understanding of the lived realities that shape teachers' professional development under varying leadership approaches.

Addressing these research gaps, the present phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago. By capturing teachers' authentic narratives, the study contributes to the growing body of qualitative educational leadership literature and provides evidence-based insights that may inform leadership preparation programs, school leadership development, teacher professional learning initiatives, and educational policy within the Philippine basic education system.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago.

Specific Objectives

Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. **Describe** the lived experiences of teachers concerning the leadership styles demonstrated by their school leaders.
2. **Examine** how school leaders' leadership styles influence teachers' professional skills development, including instructional competence, classroom management, communication, collaboration, and professional confidence.
3. **Identify** the leadership practices that contribute to teachers' professional growth, instructional effectiveness, and continuous learning.
4. **Explore** the challenges encountered by teachers in relation to their school leaders' leadership styles and how these experiences affect their professional development.
5. **Determine** the meanings teachers attribute to effective school leadership in fostering professional skills development and educational excellence.



6. Develop a Leadership Excellence for Teachers' Professional Skills Development Framework (LET-ProSDP) based on the findings to strengthen leadership practices and promote sustainable teacher professional development in the City Division of Santiago.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago. A phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate because it seeks to understand the essence and meaning of participants' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon through their personal narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, the study utilized transcendental phenomenology, which emphasizes describing participants' experiences as they are consciously perceived while allowing the researcher to bracket personal assumptions and biases. The research was conducted in selected public elementary and secondary schools within the City Division of Santiago, where teachers regularly engage with school leaders in implementing instructional programs, professional development initiatives, and school improvement activities. The participants consisted of twelve (12) public school teachers selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently employed as a permanent teacher in the City Division of Santiago; (2) with at least three years of teaching experience under the supervision of the current or previous school leader; (3) actively participating in professional development programs such as Learning Action Cells (LACs), in-service training (INSET), mentoring, coaching, or instructional supervision; and (4) willing to voluntarily participate in the study by signing an informed consent form. The number of participants was determined using the principle of data saturation, wherein no additional significant insights or emerging themes were observed during the latter stages of data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). Data were gathered through a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, which underwent content validation by experts in educational leadership, qualitative research, and teacher professional development and was pilot-tested among teachers outside the study locale to establish clarity, relevance, and credibility. Individual face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes were conducted in quiet and comfortable venues within the participants' respective schools. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes documenting observations, participants' emotional expressions, and contextual information relevant to the study. The interview recordings 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, organization of meanings into clusters of themes, development of exhaustive descriptions, formulation of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and validation of the findings through member checking to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. To establish the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These were achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, peer debriefing, triangulation of interview transcripts and field notes, maintenance of an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and participant validation of the emergent themes. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study in accordance with



the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2022). Prior to data collection, approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Office of Santiago City and the respective school heads. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and secure storage of research data. All information gathered was used exclusively for academic and research purposes. Through these rigorous methodological procedures, the study generated credible, authentic, and comprehensive descriptions of teachers' lived experiences of school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago generated five major themes. These themes illustrate how school leaders' leadership practices shape teachers' instructional competence, professional confidence, collaborative engagement, and commitment to continuous learning. The emergent themes include (1) Experiencing Transformational Leadership that Inspires Professional Excellence; (2) Strengthening Professional Skills through Mentoring and Instructional Support; (3) Building Confidence through Empowerment and Shared Leadership; (4) Overcoming Professional Challenges through Collaborative Leadership; and (5) Sustaining Continuous Professional Growth through a Culture of Learning and Innovation. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that effective leadership extends beyond school management by creating supportive environments that enable teachers to continuously enhance their professional competencies and instructional practices.

Theme 1. Experiencing Transformational Leadership that Inspires Professional Excellence

Participants consistently described their school leaders as transformational leaders who inspired them through a clear vision, encouragement, recognition, and genuine concern for teachers' professional growth. Rather than merely assigning tasks, school leaders motivated teachers to pursue excellence by fostering trust, collaboration, and shared commitment toward improving learner outcomes.

One participant shared:

"Our principal always reminds us that leadership is about inspiring people. Because of her encouragement, I became more confident in trying new teaching strategies and improving my classroom practices." (Participant 2)

Another participant explained:

"Our school head believes in our abilities. Instead of focusing on our weaknesses, she motivates us to develop our strengths and become better educators." (Participant 9)

These narratives indicate that transformational leadership motivates teachers to pursue continuous professional growth while strengthening organizational commitment. The findings support Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence as essential leadership behaviors. Likewise, Leithwood et al. (2020) argued that transformational school leaders cultivate teacher commitment by



inspiring shared educational goals and promoting professional excellence.

Theme 2. Strengthening Professional Skills through Mentoring and Instructional Support

Teachers identified mentoring, coaching, classroom observation, and instructional guidance as significant leadership practices that enhanced their professional skills. Participants emphasized that constructive feedback from school leaders enabled them to improve lesson planning, classroom management, assessment strategies, and learner engagement.

One teacher shared:

"After every classroom observation, our principal discusses both my strengths and the areas I can improve. Those conversations helped me become a more reflective teacher." (Participant 5)

Another participant stated:

"The coaching sessions gave me practical ideas that I immediately applied in my classroom. I realized that continuous mentoring helps us grow professionally." (Participant 11)

These findings demonstrate that instructional support strengthens teachers' instructional competence and professional confidence. The results support Instructional Leadership Theory, which recognizes principals as instructional leaders who guide teaching and learning through mentoring, supervision, and continuous professional development. Hallinger (2020) similarly emphasized that effective instructional leadership directly contributes to improved teacher performance and student learning by strengthening instructional practices.

Theme 3. Building Confidence through Empowerment and Shared Leadership

Participants emphasized that school leaders developed their confidence by empowering them to assume leadership responsibilities, participate in school decision-making, facilitate Learning Action Cells (LACs), conduct training sessions, and lead school programs. Teachers described empowerment as a process that increased their sense of ownership, accountability, and professional identity.

One participant remarked:

"When our principal assigned me to lead a school project, I realized that she trusted my abilities. That experience greatly improved my confidence as a teacher." (Participant 1)

Another participant explained:

"Our ideas are always welcomed during meetings. Knowing that our opinions matter motivates us to contribute more to the improvement of our school." (Participant 7)

These narratives suggest that shared leadership creates opportunities for teachers to develop leadership competencies while strengthening organizational commitment. The findings affirm Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, which explains that leadership is a collaborative organizational process shared among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders. Harris and Jones (2020) likewise concluded that teacher empowerment enhances innovation, professional identity, and organizational effectiveness.

Theme 4. Overcoming Professional Challenges through Collaborative Leadership

Teachers acknowledged that they encountered numerous professional challenges, including curriculum changes, increasing administrative workload, learner diversity, technological demands, and classroom



management concerns. However, participants consistently emphasized that supportive and collaborative school leaders helped them navigate these challenges through open communication, teamwork, mentoring, and shared problem-solving.

One participant shared:

"Whenever we experience difficulties in implementing new programs, our principal listens first before making decisions. We solve problems together as one team." (Participant 4)

Another participant stated:

"During challenging times, our school leader never leaves us alone. She works with us until we find practical solutions that benefit both teachers and learners." (Participant 10)

These findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership strengthens organizational resilience while promoting positive workplace relationships. The results support Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, which emphasizes that educational leaders sustain organizational improvement by fostering collaboration, adaptability, and collective problem-solving. Schools characterized by collaborative leadership are more capable of responding effectively to educational reforms and emerging challenges.

Theme 5. Sustaining Continuous Professional Growth through a Culture of Learning and Innovation

Participants consistently described their schools as environments that encouraged lifelong professional learning. School leaders promoted participation in Learning Action Cells (LACs), in-service training (INSET), graduate studies, research activities, seminars, workshops, peer mentoring, and collaborative instructional planning. Teachers viewed continuous learning as an essential responsibility supported by effective leadership.

One participant explained:

"Our principal encourages us to attend seminars and pursue graduate studies because learning should never stop for teachers." (Participant 6)

Another teacher shared:

"Professional growth has become part of our school culture. We continuously share teaching strategies and learn from one another." (Participant 12)

These narratives reveal that supportive leadership cultivates organizational cultures where continuous professional learning becomes a shared responsibility. The findings align with Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, which emphasizes that adults learn effectively through self-directed, collaborative, and experience-based learning opportunities. UNESCO (2023) likewise emphasized that schools promoting organizational learning and professional collaboration are more likely to sustain instructional innovation and educational quality.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that teachers' professional skills development is profoundly influenced by the leadership styles practiced by their school leaders. Participants consistently described leadership as a relational and developmental process characterized by inspiration, mentoring, empowerment, collaboration, and continuous professional learning rather than merely administrative supervision. Transformational leadership emerged as the foundation for cultivating teacher motivation, confidence,



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instructional innovation, and organizational commitment, while instructional leadership strengthened professional competence through coaching, classroom supervision, and constructive feedback. Likewise, distributed leadership empowered teachers to participate actively in decision-making and school improvement initiatives, fostering stronger professional identity and shared accountability. Furthermore, collaborative leadership enabled teachers to overcome professional challenges through teamwork, open communication, and collective problem-solving, while a culture of continuous learning sustained long-term professional growth and instructional excellence. These findings strongly affirm Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, and Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, highlighting that effective school leadership serves as a catalyst for teachers' professional skills development by creating empowering, collaborative, and learning-centered school environments. The study contributes to the growing body of qualitative educational leadership literature by providing rich phenomenological evidence that school leaders significantly shape teachers' professional competencies through supportive leadership practices, ultimately contributing to sustainable school improvement and enhanced educational quality in the City Division of Santiago.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of teachers regarding school leaders' leadership styles and their influence on professional skills development in the City Division of Santiago. The findings revealed that effective school leadership extends beyond administrative supervision and serves as a powerful catalyst for teachers' professional growth, instructional competence, leadership capacity, and organizational commitment. Teachers consistently described transformational, instructional, and collaborative leadership practices as essential in creating supportive school environments that promote continuous learning, reflective practice, innovation, and shared accountability. School leaders who inspired a common vision, provided mentoring and constructive feedback, empowered teachers through participatory leadership, and cultivated collaborative professional relationships significantly enhanced teachers' confidence, instructional effectiveness, and willingness to embrace continuous improvement. Despite challenges such as increasing workload, curriculum reforms, technological demands, and diverse learner needs, teachers emphasized that supportive leadership enabled them to remain resilient, motivated, and committed to delivering quality education. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that professional skills development flourishes in schools where organizational learning, professional collaboration, and teacher empowerment are embedded within the leadership culture. Ultimately, the findings affirm that school leadership is not merely a managerial function but a transformative process that develops competent, reflective, and empowered educators capable of contributing to sustainable school improvement. These findings strongly support Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, and Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, emphasizing that effective leadership creates meaningful learning experiences that continuously strengthen teachers' professional competencies and organizational effectiveness.

Educational Implications

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The findings of this study offer important implications for educational leadership, teacher development, and school governance. First, school leaders should continue adopting transformational and instructional leadership practices that emphasize mentoring, collaboration, teacher empowerment, and shared decision-making as core strategies for improving instructional quality and organizational performance. Second, schools should institutionalize professional learning communities (PLCs), Learning Action Cells (LACs), coaching, mentoring, lesson study, and reflective practice as sustainable mechanisms for teachers' continuous professional skills development. Third, the Department of Education and the Schools Division Office should strengthen leadership development programs by equipping school leaders with competencies in transformational leadership, instructional supervision, emotional intelligence, coaching, mentoring, conflict management, and organizational change. Fourth, teacher professional development should be viewed as a continuous and collaborative process supported by school leadership rather than a series of isolated seminars or training activities. Finally, educational policymakers should formulate policies that promote teacher empowerment, distributed leadership, innovation, and workplace learning while providing school leaders with adequate resources and administrative support to effectively carry out their instructional leadership responsibilities. These initiatives will contribute to developing highly competent teachers capable of responding to evolving educational challenges and improving learner outcomes.

Recommendations

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

1. **School leaders** should continuously strengthen transformational, instructional, and collaborative leadership practices by fostering trust, open communication, teacher empowerment, mentoring, coaching, and shared decision-making to support teachers' professional growth.
2. **Teachers** should actively participate in professional learning opportunities such as Learning Action Cells (LACs), school-based in-service training (INSET), graduate education, action research, mentoring programs, and collaborative instructional planning to continuously enhance their professional competencies.
3. **The Schools Division Office and the Department of Education** should implement comprehensive leadership development programs that equip school leaders with advanced competencies in transformational leadership, instructional coaching, teacher mentoring, organizational learning, conflict resolution, strategic planning, and professional development management.
4. **Schools** should institutionalize professional learning communities (PLCs), peer coaching, mentoring systems, collaborative lesson planning, instructional innovation teams, and reflective practice sessions to promote continuous teacher learning and organizational improvement.



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5. Educational policymakers should formulate and strengthen policies that encourage teacher leadership, distributed governance, instructional innovation, continuous professional learning, and leadership succession while minimizing excessive administrative workload that may hinder school leaders from focusing on instructional leadership.
6. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in other school divisions, private educational institutions, higher education institutions, and different geographical contexts to validate the findings. Future studies may also employ mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term influence of leadership styles on teacher effectiveness, instructional innovation, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, learner achievement, and sustainable school improvement.

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