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Leading Where Resources Are Limited: Lived Experiences and Adaptive Practices of Public Elementary School Principals in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

School leadership in rural communities is shaped by conditions that extend beyond conventional administrative and instructional responsibilities. Public elementary school principals may encounter limited financial and instructional resources, infrastructure constraints, staffing concerns, competing administrative demands, and challenges in mobilizing community support while remaining responsible for sustaining teaching and learning. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and adaptive leadership practices of public elementary school principals working in resource-constrained rural communities. Specifically, it examines the challenges principals encounter, the strategies they employ to address resource limitations, the role of stakeholder collaboration in sustaining school operations, and the meanings they construct from their leadership experiences. Participants will be purposively selected public elementary school principals with direct experience leading rural schools. Data will be generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. The study is anchored in Adaptive Leadership Theory and contextualized within the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads. Recent Philippine research indicates that rural school leaders respond to resource scarcity through flexibility, community engagement, collaborative decision-making, resource mobilization, and context-sensitive problem-solving. The study is expected to contribute to the growing literature on context-responsive educational leadership by foregrounding principals' voices and examining how leadership is enacted when formal resources are insufficient. Findings may inform leadership development, resource-allocation policies, school-community partnerships, and institutional support for principals serving rural public schools.

Keywords: adaptive leadership; rural education; school principals; resource-constrained schools; school leadership; phenomenology; public elementary schools; Philippines

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Introduction

School principals occupy a critical position in the functioning and improvement of educational institutions. Their responsibilities extend beyond administrative management to instructional leadership, human-resource development, stakeholder engagement, resource management, strategic planning, and the creation of conditions conducive to teaching and learning. In the Philippine context, these multidimensional responsibilities are formally reflected in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), adopted nationally through Department of Education Order No. 24, s. 2020.

However, the exercise of school leadership does not occur under uniform conditions. The realities confronting principals in well-resourced schools may differ considerably from those experienced by school leaders in rural communities. Geographic location, transportation, connectivity, availability of instructional materials, staffing patterns, financial resources, community socioeconomic circumstances, and access to professional development can shape both the problems principals encounter and the leadership strategies available to them.

In resource-constrained schools, leadership may therefore become an exercise in continuously negotiating the gap between what schools are expected to accomplish and what available resources allow them to accomplish.

Recent Philippine research supports this concern. Almagro et al. (2025), in a phenomenological investigation involving elementary school heads in Negros Oriental, found that school governance in resource-constrained environments involved multifaceted difficulties associated with limited physical resources and other contextual conditions. Similarly, research involving school heads in geographically isolated areas of the southern Philippines indicates that resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and cultural diversity can require leaders to move beyond routine administrative management toward adaptability, collaboration, and context-responsive decision-making.

Resource limitations can also influence instructional leadership. A recent qualitative investigation of elementary school principals in geographically isolated communities in Tawi-Tawi identified inadequate instructional resources, infrastructure problems, unstable connectivity, staffing concerns, and administrative burden among the challenges confronting school leaders. Principals responded through community engagement, localized resources, mentoring, peer support, and flexible leadership practices.

These findings suggest that scarcity does not merely constitute a logistical problem. It can fundamentally shape how leadership is understood and enacted.

A principal managing a rural elementary school may need to function simultaneously as instructional leader, resource mobilizer, problem-solver, community liaison, staff mentor, and crisis manager. Formal leadership policies provide expectations regarding what principals should accomplish, but the everyday realities of rural schools may require school leaders to continually reinterpret these expectations according to local conditions.

This makes principals' lived experiences an important area of inquiry.

Quantitative indicators can determine levels of leadership competence, resource availability, or school performance. However, such measures cannot fully explain what it means to lead a school when resources are persistently limited, how principals make difficult decisions, how they negotiate competing priorities, and how these experiences influence their understanding of educational leadership.



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The present study consequently employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and adaptive practices of public elementary school principals in rural communities.

Review of Related Literature

Rural School Leadership

Rural school leadership must be understood as context-dependent. Rurality can influence school size, accessibility, staffing, infrastructure, community relationships, resource availability, and the professional responsibilities assumed by school leaders.

In geographically isolated Philippine communities, these contextual realities may substantially affect leadership practice. Recent research on adaptive instructional leadership in Tawi-Tawi found that principals operated amid resource scarcity, weak infrastructure, geographic isolation, staffing difficulties, and cultural considerations. Yet school leaders employed adaptive strategies to sustain instructional operations, including localized curriculum responses, mentoring, peer support, community collaboration, and flexible leadership.

Aranguez et al. (2026) similarly explored rural school heads' experiences in Davao del Norte and Davao de Oro. Their phenomenological study highlighted difficulties associated with scarce resources, remote locations, and limited exposure to emerging practices. Community engagement, innovative problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making emerged as important responses to these realities.

These findings demonstrate that rural leadership should not simply be treated as conventional school leadership occurring in a different geographical location. Context alters the nature of leadership itself.

Resource Constraints and School Management

Resource management represents one of the most significant responsibilities of school leaders. Principals must allocate available resources while balancing instructional requirements, operational expenses, infrastructure needs, personnel concerns, and emerging school priorities.

When resources are inadequate, these decisions become considerably more complex.

Recent Philippine phenomenological research involving eight school heads specifically examined experiences of managing limited resources. The findings revealed difficulties involving budgeting and planning, competing priorities, unexpected needs, insufficient funds, and the emotional and professional pressures associated with sustaining school operations.

Likewise, Adalid et al. (2026) identified limited budgets, competing priorities, stakeholder pressures, and insufficient time for long-term planning as important challenges affecting resource-allocation decisions among school heads. School leaders reported responding through regular budget reviews, participatory decision-making, strategic planning, and data-informed approaches.

Resource scarcity therefore does not involve finances alone. It requires leaders to establish priorities and determine which school needs require immediate intervention.



Resource Mobilization and Stakeholder Engagement

When institutional resources are insufficient, external relationships can become an important source of support.

Baguio and Buenavidez (2026), in a phenomenological study involving 13 public elementary school heads in Oroquieta City, found that resource mobilization involved experiences of financial and resource scarcity, contextual barriers, stakeholder engagement, strategic resource management, external dependence, and governance-related factors.

The finding emphasizes that principals are not merely resource allocators. In constrained settings, they may also become resource mobilizers.

Stakeholder relationships can therefore represent a form of leadership capital. Parents, local government units, community organizations, alumni, private partners, teachers, and other stakeholders may contribute resources, expertise, labor, or institutional support.

However, effective stakeholder engagement requires trust, transparency, communication, and shared responsibility. Rural principals must therefore exercise relational leadership alongside administrative competence.

Adaptive Leadership in Resource-Constrained Schools

Adaptive leadership provides a particularly appropriate conceptual perspective for understanding leadership under conditions of uncertainty and scarcity.

Adaptive problems differ from purely technical problems because they cannot always be solved through existing procedures or formal authority alone. They require learning, collaboration, adjustment, experimentation, and the mobilization of people to address difficult conditions.

Recent Philippine research demonstrates the relevance of adaptive leadership in resource-constrained education. Rosel et al. (2025) found that adaptive approaches incorporating transformational and servant-leadership characteristics contributed to collaboration, crisis management, and teacher retention in resource-limited schools.

Similarly, the 2026 study of geographically isolated schools in southern Philippines found that adaptive leadership manifested through resourcefulness, community engagement, flexible problem-solving, moral stewardship, and collaborative decision-making.

These findings suggest that successful rural leadership may depend less on rigid adherence to predetermined solutions and more on the principal's capacity to interpret emerging conditions and mobilize collective responses.

Decision-Making Under Constraint

Decision-making becomes particularly significant when principals cannot address every need simultaneously.

Asuque (2025), studying 15 school heads in the rural and resource-constrained Cataingan East District in



Masbate, identified contextual challenges, personal and professional experience, leadership strategies, and stakeholder engagement as important dimensions of principals' decision-making journeys.

In such environments, leadership decisions may involve difficult trade-offs. Principals may need to determine whether available resources should prioritize instructional materials, infrastructure, technology, professional development, learner support, or urgent operational requirements.

Thus, decision-making under scarcity represents not merely an administrative process but a form of contextual leadership judgment.

School Improvement and Contextual Adaptation

Resource constraints also influence strategic school improvement.

Pugado et al. (2025), examining school heads' experiences in crafting and implementing School Improvement Plans in Philippine hinterland communities, identified budget constraints, participation difficulties, and limited access to formal training. Nevertheless, stakeholder engagement, collaborative efforts, and adaptation to local circumstances contributed to principals' ability to navigate these challenges.

This suggests that effective planning in rural schools cannot be separated from context. School improvement strategies must account for what schools realistically possess, what communities can contribute, and what solutions are locally feasible.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study is primarily anchored in Adaptive Leadership Theory, associated with Heifetz and colleagues. Adaptive Leadership Theory distinguishes between challenges that can be addressed through existing technical expertise and those requiring stakeholders to learn, adjust, reconsider established practices, and collectively develop new responses.

This perspective is particularly applicable to rural school leadership because resource limitations cannot always be solved by principals through formal authority. A principal cannot independently create additional government funding, eliminate geographic isolation, or immediately resolve staffing shortages. Instead, the leader may need to mobilize stakeholders, reorganize available resources, establish partnerships, adjust priorities, and develop locally appropriate solutions.

The framework is complemented by the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads, which formalizes expectations for school leadership within the Philippine basic education system. The PPSSH was nationally adopted through DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020 and reflects the Department of Education's effort to define professional expectations for school leaders in response to changing educational demands. Conceptually, the study views adaptive rural leadership as emerging from the interaction of:

Contextual Challenges → Leadership Interpretation → Adaptive Response → Stakeholder Mobilization → Sustaining School Operations and Learning

The framework does not assume that every principal experiences the same constraints or uses the same strategies. Rather, these dimensions provide sensitizing concepts for exploring participants' lived



experiences.

5. Objectives of the Study

The study generally aims to explore the lived experiences and adaptive leadership practices of public elementary school principals in resource-constrained rural communities.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Explore principals' lived experiences of leading resource-constrained rural schools.
2. Identify the leadership challenges they encounter in sustaining school operations and teaching and learning.
3. Examine the adaptive strategies principals employ in responding to resource limitations.
4. Explore the role of teachers, parents, communities, and other stakeholders in addressing school needs.
5. Understand the meanings and professional insights principals derive from leading under resource constraints.

Methodology

The study will employ a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the shared meanings that public elementary school principals construct from their lived experiences of leading rural schools under conditions of limited resources. Phenomenology is considered appropriate because the inquiry focuses on participants' firsthand experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and adaptive practices rather than predetermined measures of leadership effectiveness. The study will be conducted among selected public elementary schools in the San Mateo North District, representing varying school sizes and community contexts, with the characterization of schools as resource-constrained established through contextual evidence and participants' actual accounts. Participants will consist of purposively selected public elementary school principals or school heads who have current or recent leadership experience in rural schools, direct responsibilities for school administration and instructional leadership, experience in managing resource-related concerns, sufficient professional experience to provide information-rich narratives, and willingness to participate voluntarily. The number of participants will be determined by the richness and adequacy of the information generated rather than by statistical representativeness. Data will be gathered primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions that encourage participants to describe their experiences of leading schools with limited resources, situations in which resource constraints created leadership challenges, strategies employed to address such challenges, approaches to prioritizing competing school needs, experiences of obtaining support from teachers, parents, community members, and other stakeholders, and professional insights gained from rural school leadership. Follow-up probes such as "Can you tell me more?", "What happened next?", "How did you



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respond?”, and *“What did that experience mean to you as a school leader?”* will be used to obtain deeper and more reflective narratives. Prior to data collection, appropriate institutional and ethical approvals will be secured, followed by permission from relevant education authorities and participating schools. Participants will be informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, confidentiality safeguards, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Interviews will be conducted at mutually convenient times in settings that ensure privacy and, with participants’ informed consent, will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and a reflexive journal will also be maintained to document contextual observations, methodological decisions, and researcher reflections throughout the inquiry. The interview data will undergo phenomenologically informed thematic analysis, involving repeated reading and familiarization with the transcripts, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of related meanings, development and refinement of themes, and synthesis of the essential structure of the principals’ lived experiences. Themes will be grounded in participants’ narratives rather than imposed before analysis. To establish the trustworthiness of the study, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability will be systematically addressed. Credibility will be enhanced through in-depth interviewing, appropriate probing, careful comparison of interpretations with original transcripts, and participant clarification when necessary; dependability will be strengthened through an audit trail documenting the research process and analytical decisions; confirmability will be supported through reflexive journaling and the use of participants’ verbatim accounts to substantiate interpretations; and transferability will be facilitated through rich descriptions of the participants, school settings, rural context, and conditions surrounding their leadership experiences. Regarding ethical considerations, informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms or participant codes such as P1, P2, and P3 will be used to protect their identities. Identifying information concerning principals, teachers, learners, schools, and other stakeholders will be treated confidentially, particularly because interviews may involve sensitive discussions concerning financial constraints, personnel issues, administrative difficulties, infrastructure deficiencies, and stakeholder relationships. Data will be handled securely and used solely for legitimate research purposes, and findings will be presented in a manner that accurately represents participants’ experiences while minimizing the possibility of identifying or adversely evaluating individual schools or personnel.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis may be organized around four interconnected themes that illuminate how public elementary school principals experience leadership in rural communities where resources are limited: (1) Leading Through Scarcity: Making Difficult Choices with Limited Resources; (2) Finding Ways Forward: Resourcefulness and Adaptive Problem-Solving; (3) Leadership Beyond the School Gate: Mobilizing Community and Stakeholder Support; and (4) Becoming a Leader Through Adversity: Resilience, Reflection, and Professional Growth.

Theme 1: Leading Through Scarcity Making Difficult Choices with Limited Resources

The first theme captures the difficult decisions principals may face when available resources cannot simultaneously address all identified school needs. Participants may experience resource scarcity not



simply as a shortage of funds but as an everyday leadership dilemma involving the prioritization of instructional materials, facilities, technology, personnel needs, and learner support.

Participant 1:

“There are many things that the school needs, but our resources cannot cover everything. As a principal, I have to decide which need is more urgent and which one can wait.”

Participant 2:

“Sometimes teachers request materials that they really need for instruction, but there are also repairs that must be done. You have to look at which concern will affect the learners the most.”

Participant 3:

“The challenge is not only that the budget is limited. Unexpected needs also arise. You may already have a plan for the funds, but suddenly there is something more urgent that needs attention.”

Participant 4:

“It is difficult because every request has a reason. You cannot simply say that one is important and another is not. You have to explain why certain needs must be prioritized.”

These narratives portray resource scarcity as a decision-making and prioritization challenge. Principals are not simply managing inadequate resources; they are continually deciding how scarce resources can produce the greatest educational benefit. This requires them to distinguish urgent needs from important but deferrable concerns while considering how each decision may influence learners, teachers, and school operations.

The experiences are consistent with Anino et al. (2025), whose phenomenological investigation of school heads identified budgeting and planning difficulties, competing priorities, unexpected needs, and insufficient funds as significant dimensions of resource management. Resource scarcity therefore places school heads in situations where choices must be made among several legitimate needs.

Similarly, Adalid et al. (2026) found that school heads encountered limited budgets, competing priorities, stakeholder pressures, and constraints on long-term planning. Their findings suggest that resource allocation requires more than financial competence; it involves strategic judgment and the capacity to balance immediate needs with longer-term school objectives.

Asuque (2025) likewise demonstrated that the decision-making journeys of rural school heads are shaped by contextual challenges, professional experiences, leadership strategies, and stakeholder involvement. Such evidence reinforces the interpretation that leadership under scarcity is inherently contextual. What constitutes the most urgent priority in one school may not necessarily represent the same priority in another.

Theme 1 therefore reveals that rural school leadership frequently involves leading through difficult trade-offs. The principal's role shifts from simply implementing predetermined plans toward continually interpreting needs, establishing priorities, and making defensible decisions under constraint.

Theme 2: Finding Ways Forward Resourcefulness and Adaptive Problem-Solving

The second theme represents principals' efforts to find workable alternatives when conventional solutions are unavailable. Rather than allowing limited resources to completely prevent school activities,



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participants may describe modifying plans, maximizing existing resources, sharing materials, reorganizing responsibilities, and developing locally feasible solutions.

Participant 2:

“If we cannot obtain exactly what we need, we ask ourselves what we already have and how we can use it. Sometimes the solution is not perfect, but we find a way to continue.”

Participant 3:

“As a school head, you cannot always wait for additional resources. There are situations where you have to think of an alternative because the teachers and learners need an immediate solution.”

Participant 5:

“We maximize whatever is available. Sometimes we reuse materials, share resources among teachers, or adjust an activity according to what the school can provide.”

Participant 6:

“I learned that one solution will not work for every problem. Sometimes you need to change your original plan because the situation of the school is different.”

These narratives illustrate adaptive problem-solving as an important dimension of rural school leadership. Principals may operate within conditions that cannot immediately be altered through formal procedures or additional funding. Consequently, they attempt to maximize what is available while developing alternative ways of accomplishing school objectives.

This interpretation aligns strongly with Adaptive Leadership Theory. Adaptive leadership becomes particularly relevant when challenges cannot be addressed exclusively through existing technical procedures and instead require experimentation, learning, collaboration, and adjustment.

Recent Philippine evidence supports this interpretation. Dugasan et al. (2026), examining leadership in geographically isolated and disadvantaged Philippine schools, identified adaptive management characterized by resourcefulness, collaborative decision-making, community engagement, and context-sensitive responses. Their findings demonstrate that principals working under difficult conditions may need to exercise leadership beyond routine administrative procedures.

Jemsy et al. (2026) similarly found that principals in geographically isolated schools encountered inadequate instructional resources, infrastructure limitations, connectivity concerns, staffing difficulties, and administrative burdens. Principals responded through strategies such as localized resource utilization, mentoring, peer support, community collaboration, and flexible leadership practices.

Rosel et al. (2025) further emphasized the value of adaptive approaches in resource-constrained Philippine schools, particularly in facilitating collaboration, responding to crises, and maintaining organizational functioning.

The findings suggest, however, that resourcefulness should not be interpreted as a substitute for adequate resources. Principals' ability to improvise demonstrates professional agency, but persistent dependence on improvisation may also indicate structural inequities requiring institutional intervention.

Theme 2 consequently represents rural principals as adaptive problem-solvers who continually negotiate between ideal solutions and practically achievable responses.

Theme 3: Leadership Beyond the School Gate Mobilizing Community and Stakeholder Support



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The third theme highlights the relational dimension of rural school leadership. When formal school resources are insufficient, principals may increasingly depend on relationships with teachers, parents, local government units, community organizations, alumni, private partners, and other stakeholders.

Participant 1:

“The school cannot solve every problem by itself. When there is a need that we cannot address, we communicate with the parents and other stakeholders and explain the situation.”

Participant 3:

“There were projects that would not have been possible without the support of the community. Some contributed materials, others volunteered their time or labor.”

Participant 4:

“I learned that you should not approach stakeholders only when you need something. You have to build a relationship with them and make them feel that they are really part of the school.”

Participant 6:

“Transparency is important. When stakeholders know where their support goes and they see the results, they become more willing to participate again.”

The participants' narratives expand the meaning of school leadership beyond the physical boundaries of the school. Principals may function not only as instructional and administrative leaders but also as relationship builders, negotiators, networkers, and community mobilizers.

This interpretation is strongly supported by Baguio and Buenavidez (2026), whose phenomenological investigation of public elementary school heads identified financial and resource scarcity, stakeholder engagement, strategic resource management, external dependence, and governance factors as central dimensions of resource mobilization. Their findings demonstrate that addressing school resource needs often requires principals to establish relationships extending beyond formal institutional structures.

Pugado et al. (2025) similarly found that stakeholder engagement and collaborative efforts helped school heads in hinterland communities navigate challenges associated with school improvement planning. This suggests that community participation can contribute not only material resources but also local knowledge, legitimacy, collective ownership, and problem-solving capacity.

Dugasan et al. (2026) likewise highlighted community engagement and collaborative decision-making as important elements of adaptive leadership in geographically isolated Philippine schools.

The participant response emphasizing transparency adds another significant dimension. Stakeholder mobilization should not be reduced to solicitation. Sustainable school-community partnerships require trust, accountability, reciprocity, and shared ownership. Principals who communicate school priorities transparently may strengthen stakeholders' confidence that their contributions serve legitimate educational purposes.

Theme 3 therefore conceptualizes rural school leadership as relational leadership. The school's capacity to respond to scarcity may depend partly on the principal's ability to transform individual stakeholders into a network of shared responsibility for children's education.

Theme 4: Becoming a Leader Through Adversity-Resilience, Reflection and Professional Growth



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The fourth theme captures how repeated encounters with resource constraints may influence principals' professional identities. Participants may describe difficult experiences as opportunities that strengthened their patience, creativity, decisiveness, empathy, resilience, and understanding of educational leadership.

Participant 2:

“When I first became a school head, I thought that having a good plan was enough. Later, I realized that leadership also means knowing how to adjust when the plan cannot be followed.”

Participant 3:

“The challenges taught me to become more patient. There are problems that cannot be solved immediately, but you cannot give up because the teachers and learners depend on your leadership.”

Participant 5:

“I became more confident in making decisions because of the experiences I went through. Every difficult situation taught me something about leadership.”

Participant 6:

“Being a principal in a rural school taught me that leadership is service. Sometimes you have to do things beyond what you originally thought was the role of a principal.”

The fourth theme reveals a developmental dimension of leadership. Participants may not simply respond to challenges; they may also be changed professionally by the process of confronting them.

The movement from believing that leadership is primarily about planning toward recognizing the importance of adaptation illustrates the development of contextual leadership competence. Experience may teach principals that leadership plans cannot always anticipate unexpected resource limitations, community concerns, personnel issues, or emerging learner needs.

This interpretation corresponds with Aranguez et al. (2026), whose phenomenological examination of rural school heads emphasized the importance of innovative problem-solving, collaborative decision-making, community engagement, and adaptation to difficult educational conditions. Such experiences suggest that leadership expertise may develop partly through repeated engagement with complex contextual challenges.

Almagro et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that school heads' lived experiences of governance involved navigating complex institutional and resource-related realities. Their findings reinforce the importance of understanding leadership not only through prescribed competencies but also through principals' experiences of interpreting and responding to actual school conditions.

The participants' narratives may also indicate a shift toward service-oriented leadership. Statements emphasizing responsibility toward teachers and learners suggest that principals may understand leadership increasingly in moral and relational terms rather than merely through administrative authority. Dugasan et al. (2026) identified moral stewardship, community engagement, collaborative decision-making, and adaptive management among important characteristics of leadership in geographically isolated schools. This supports the interpretation that challenging contexts can influence not only what principals do but also how they understand who they are as educational leaders.

Nevertheless, resilience should not be romanticized. The capacity of principals to persist despite resource constraints should not be interpreted as evidence that inadequate resources are acceptable. Leadership



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resilience represents a professional strength, whereas chronic under-resourcing remains an institutional concern requiring systemic responses.

Theme 4 therefore reveals leadership development as a process of reflection through experience. Difficult circumstances may encourage principals to reconsider assumptions, refine decision-making, strengthen relationships, develop adaptive capacity, and construct a deeper understanding of leadership as service.

Conclusion

Leading a rural public elementary school under resource constraints requires more than conventional administrative competence. Principals may need to continuously reconcile institutional expectations with local realities, balance competing priorities, mobilize community support, protect instructional quality, and devise workable responses to circumstances they cannot independently control.

Recent Philippine studies increasingly demonstrate that resource-constrained school leadership involves adaptability, resourcefulness, stakeholder engagement, contextual decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving.

By foregrounding principals' lived experiences, the proposed study can provide a deeper understanding of leadership where resources are limited. Its central contribution lies not merely in documenting scarcity but in explaining how educational leaders interpret constraints, exercise agency, mobilize relationships, and sustain their schools despite difficult conditions.

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