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Leading Through Teachers' Eyes: Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Teachers on School Leadership Practices in Public Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

School leadership is experienced most directly by teachers through everyday interactions, administrative decisions, instructional support, professional development, communication, and workplace relationships. Understanding leadership from teachers' perspectives therefore provides important insights into how formal leadership practices are translated into everyday school experiences. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding school leadership practices in public elementary schools in Mayoyao District, Ifugao, Philippines. Specifically, it examines how teachers experience leadership in relation to instructional support, communication and decision-making, professional development, recognition and motivation, interpersonal relationships, and responses to contextual challenges. Participants are purposively selected public elementary school teachers with sustained experience working under school-level leadership. Data are generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The inquiry is sensitized by contemporary perspectives on instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership and by the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), while allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts. The study positions teachers not merely as recipients of leadership decisions but as knowledgeable organizational actors whose experiences reveal how leadership is enacted, negotiated, and interpreted within rural elementary-school contexts. Findings are expected to contribute to culturally and contextually responsive leadership development, teacher-leader relationships, professional support mechanisms, and school-improvement initiatives in geographically situated public-school communities.

Keywords: educational leadership, elementary teachers, lived experiences, phenomenology, rural education, school leadership, teacher perceptions, Ifugao

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1. Introduction

Leadership occupies a central position in the functioning and improvement of schools. Although learners are the ultimate beneficiaries of educational leadership, teachers are among those who encounter school leadership most consistently. They experience leadership through decisions concerning teaching assignments, curriculum implementation, professional development, classroom supervision, resource allocation, communication, recognition, workload distribution, conflict management, and relationships with families and communities.

For this reason, leadership cannot be fully understood solely from the perspectives of those occupying formal leadership positions. The experiences of teachers provide another important lens through which leadership can be examined.

School leaders influence organizational conditions within which teachers perform their work. Research has consistently associated school leadership with teacher motivation, professional collaboration, instructional practice, organizational climate, and student outcomes. Grissom et al. (2021) emphasized the substantial influence of principals on students and schools and highlighted the importance of people management, instructional leadership, and organizational leadership in effective principal practice.

Leadership, however, is not experienced by teachers as an abstract set of competencies. It is encountered through everyday interactions. A school leader may formally demonstrate competence in planning and administration, yet teachers may experience leadership through whether they are listened to, trusted, supported when difficulties arise, included in decisions, provided constructive feedback, or given opportunities to grow professionally.

Teachers' perceptions consequently provide an important source of evidence about how leadership practices function in everyday organizational life.

This issue is particularly important within the Philippine public-school context. The Department of Education institutionalized the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) through DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020. The standards organize school leadership around five domains: Leading Strategically; Managing School Operations and Resources; Focusing on Teaching and Learning; Developing Self and Others; and Building Connections. These domains emphasize that effective school leadership encompasses organizational management, instructional improvement, human-resource development, and relationships with stakeholders.

Leadership is nevertheless contextual. Practices effective in one school environment may be experienced differently in another because leadership is embedded within organizational culture, community expectations, available resources, personnel relationships, geography, and local circumstances.

This contextual dimension is especially relevant to public elementary schools in Mayoyao District, Ifugao. Schools situated within geographically distinct communities may encounter conditions involving transportation and accessibility, resource availability, community relationships, culturally situated expectations, multilevel responsibilities, and personnel limitations. Such conditions may shape not only how school heads exercise leadership but also how teachers understand and respond to it.

The voices of teachers are therefore essential.

Quantitative surveys can indicate whether teachers perceive leadership positively or negatively, but



numerical ratings cannot fully explain why teachers interpret particular practices as supportive, what experiences build or weaken trust, how leadership affects their professional lives, and what teachers believe effective leadership looks like within their particular school contexts.

A phenomenological approach provides an opportunity to examine these deeper meanings.

The present study therefore explores school leadership through teachers' eyes. It recognizes teachers as active participants in school organizations whose everyday experiences provide valuable insights into leadership practice.

Rather than attempting to rank school leaders or determine statistically which leadership style is most effective, the study asks how teachers experience leadership, what meanings they attach to those experiences, and what those narratives reveal about effective leadership in public elementary schools in Mayoyao District.

2. Research Problem

Despite extensive scholarship concerning school leadership, leadership research frequently privileges administrators' self-reports, standardized leadership measures, or organizational outcomes. Less attention is given to teachers' detailed narratives of how leadership is actually experienced within everyday school life, particularly within geographically and culturally situated Philippine public elementary schools.

The central research question is:

How do public elementary school teachers experience and perceive school leadership practices in Mayoyao District, Ifugao, Philippines?

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers describe their everyday experiences with school leadership?
2. What leadership practices do teachers perceive as supportive of effective teaching and professional performance?
3. How do teachers experience communication and decision-making processes within their schools?
4. How do school leaders support teachers' instructional practices and professional development?
5. How do teachers experience recognition, motivation, trust, and interpersonal relationships under school leadership?
6. What leadership challenges do teachers observe within their respective school contexts?
7. How do contextual and community conditions influence teachers' experiences of school leadership?
8. What meanings do teachers attach to effective and responsive school leadership?



9. What leadership practices do teachers believe should be strengthened to improve teaching, professional relationships, and school functioning?

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

3.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership provides one theoretical lens for understanding teachers' experiences.

Transformational leaders influence followers by developing shared purpose, providing individualized support, stimulating professional thinking, modeling desired values, and encouraging collective commitment.

In school settings, transformational leadership may be reflected when teachers experience their leaders as inspirational, supportive, inclusive, and attentive to their professional needs.

The relevance of this perspective lies in its emphasis on leadership relationships rather than authority alone. Teachers may comply with formal administrative requirements because of positional authority, but genuine professional commitment can depend on whether leadership generates trust, shared purpose, and meaningful participation.

3.2 Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership provides a second perspective.

The school exists fundamentally to support teaching and learning. School leaders are therefore expected to create conditions that promote instructional quality.

From the teachers' perspective, effective instructional leadership may not necessarily mean frequent supervision. Its value may depend on whether supervision is perceived as developmental rather than punitive and whether feedback genuinely helps improve teaching.

3.3 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership provides a third conceptual lens.

Leadership within schools does not necessarily reside exclusively in the formal school head. Teachers, coordinators, committees, and other organizational members may exercise leadership depending on expertise, responsibilities, and circumstances.

This perspective is particularly relevant because teachers may experience empowerment when leaders delegate meaningful responsibilities, involve them in decision-making, and trust their professional judgment.

The study therefore considers leadership as both **formal and relational**, enacted through interactions among members of the school community.

3.4 Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads



The PPSSH provides the contextual framework for interpreting leadership within Philippine public schools.

Its five domains, Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, and Building Connections—reflect leadership responsibilities that teachers encounter directly or indirectly.

The PPSSH domains will function as **sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined themes**. This distinction is important because the phenomenological design requires themes to emerge from participants' lived experiences rather than forcing their narratives into existing categories.

4. Review of Related Literature

4.1 School Leadership and Teacher Experiences

Leadership influences teachers through organizational structures as well as interpersonal experiences. Principals shape teachers' working conditions by establishing expectations, organizing resources, facilitating collaboration, monitoring instruction, and creating opportunities for professional learning.

Grissom et al. (2021) emphasized four broad behaviors associated with effective principal leadership: focusing on instruction, building productive organizational climates, promoting collaboration and professional learning, and managing personnel and resources strategically.

These functions demonstrate why teachers constitute important observers of leadership. Teachers experience whether these leadership functions are translated into meaningful organizational practice.

4.2 Leadership and Teacher Motivation

Leadership may influence teachers' willingness to invest effort beyond minimum professional requirements.

Teachers who perceive leaders as supportive and fair may develop stronger organizational commitment. Recognition, professional autonomy, constructive feedback, and opportunities to participate in meaningful decisions may reinforce teachers' sense of professional value.

Conversely, leadership perceived as excessively controlling, inconsistent, inaccessible, or inequitable may negatively affect morale and organizational trust.

Teacher motivation therefore develops partly within a relational leadership environment.

4.3 Communication and Trust

Communication represents one of the most visible forms of leadership.

Teachers encounter leadership through meetings, instructions, feedback, consultations, informal conversations, announcements, and responses to workplace concerns.

Effective communication involves more than transmitting information. It includes listening, clarity, transparency, consistency, and opportunities for dialogue.



Trust develops when teachers perceive that leaders' words and actions are consistent and that professional concerns can be raised without unnecessary fear.

Relational trust has long been recognized as an important organizational resource for school improvement. Trust facilitates collaboration because teachers are more likely to share difficulties, seek assistance, experiment with new approaches, and participate in collective initiatives when interpersonal relationships feel professionally safe.

4.4 Teacher Participation in Decision-Making

Teachers possess direct knowledge of classrooms, learners, curriculum, and community realities. Their participation in school decisions can therefore contribute important practical knowledge.

Distributed leadership perspectives challenge the assumption that leadership must flow exclusively from the school head toward teachers. Instead, expertise may be distributed throughout the organization.

Teacher participation can also influence ownership. When teachers understand the rationale behind decisions and contribute to developing them, implementation may become a shared professional responsibility rather than mere compliance.

However, participation must be meaningful. Being asked for opinions after a decision has effectively been finalized does not necessarily constitute shared leadership.

4.5 Instructional Support and Professional Development

Teachers may evaluate leadership partly according to whether school leaders help them improve professionally.

Instructional leadership includes providing useful feedback, encouraging professional learning, facilitating collaboration, monitoring curriculum implementation, and ensuring that teachers have appropriate instructional support.

Professional development becomes particularly meaningful when it responds to teachers' actual needs rather than functioning merely as compliance.

Leadership therefore involves creating conditions in which teachers can continue developing professional competence.

4.6 Recognition and Teacher Morale

Recognition may occur formally through awards and commendations or informally through expressions of appreciation and acknowledgment.

Although recognition does not replace adequate resources or professional support, it can communicate that teachers' efforts are noticed and valued.

From a phenomenological perspective, the important question is not merely whether recognition mechanisms exist but how teachers experience them.

A simple acknowledgment from a leader may carry considerable meaning when teachers feel that their



effort has been genuinely understood.

4.7 Leadership in Rural and Geographically Situated Schools

Leadership conditions may differ considerably across educational contexts.

Schools in geographically situated communities may encounter constraints related to transportation, resources, infrastructure, connectivity, staffing, and access to professional-development opportunities.

At the same time, rural and community-based schools may benefit from strong interpersonal relationships, community participation, local knowledge, and collective responsibility.

Effective leadership in such environments therefore requires contextual responsiveness rather than merely applying standardized managerial practices.

For Mayoyao District, this dimension deserves particular attention because teachers' interpretations of leadership may be shaped by the interaction between institutional expectations and local realities.

4.8 Leadership Within the Philippine Context

The PPSSH emphasizes that school heads should lead strategically while managing operations, strengthening teaching and learning, developing personnel, and building connections.

These expectations demonstrate that Philippine school leadership is not conceptualized solely as administration.

Teachers occupy a central position within these domains. They participate in strategic initiatives, experience operational decisions, perform instructional responsibilities, engage in professional development, and maintain relationships with communities.

Their narratives can therefore reveal how formal leadership expectations are experienced at the level of everyday school practice.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of school leadership practices in public elementary schools in Mayoyao District, Ifugao, Philippines. Phenomenology is appropriate because the inquiry seeks to understand how teachers experience leadership and the meanings they construct from interactions, decisions, practices, and relationships with their school leaders rather than measuring leadership effectiveness quantitatively.

Participants will consist of public elementary school teachers currently assigned within Mayoyao District. Purposive criterion sampling will be employed to identify participants capable of providing information-rich accounts of the phenomenon. Eligible participants should be currently employed as public elementary school teachers, have sufficient experience working under school-level leadership to reflect meaningfully on leadership practices, have experienced instructional supervision, organizational decision-making, professional-development activities, and other leadership processes, and voluntarily agree to participate. An initial group of approximately 8–15 teachers may be recruited, with final adequacy guided by



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information power and thematic sufficiency rather than a rigid numerical requirement.

Data will primarily be generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. With informed consent, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants will be encouraged to describe concrete experiences rather than provide only general evaluations of their leaders. Interview questions will explore everyday encounters with leadership, experiences of instructional support, communication, participation in decision-making, professional development, recognition, trust, motivation, leadership challenges, contextual influences, and participants' understandings of effective leadership. Probing questions such as “*Can you describe a specific experience?*”, “*How did that make you feel as a teacher?*”, “*What did the leader do?*”, and “*What meaning did you attach to that experience?*” will encourage richer narratives.

Interview data will be analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The researcher will first repeatedly read the transcripts to become immersed in participants' accounts. Significant statements directly related to teachers' experiences of leadership will then be extracted. Meanings will be formulated from these statements while remaining close to participants' intended perspectives. Related meanings will subsequently be organized into clusters of themes. Emerging themes will be continuously checked against the original transcripts to ensure that interpretations accurately represent the participants' experiences. An exhaustive description of the phenomenon will then be developed, followed by formulation of its fundamental structure or essence. Where appropriate and feasible, participants will be invited to reflect on the synthesized findings. The analytical sequence will therefore involve Familiarization → Significant Statements → Formulated Meanings → Theme Clusters → Exhaustive Description → Fundamental Structure → Participant Validation.

Researcher reflexivity will be maintained throughout the inquiry. A reflexive journal will document assumptions, methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential biases. This is especially important if the researcher occupies a school-leadership position, because professional experience may provide contextual understanding while simultaneously influencing interpretation. Bracketing will therefore be practiced throughout data collection and analysis to maintain attention on teachers' narratives rather than the researcher's expectations.

Trustworthiness will be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility will be strengthened through in-depth interviewing, appropriate probing, sustained engagement with transcripts, participant reflection where appropriate, and peer examination of thematic interpretations. Transferability will be supported through thick description of the research setting, participants, and leadership context. Dependability will be strengthened through an audit trail documenting methodological and analytic decisions, while confirmability will be supported through reflexive journaling and explicit connections between participant statements and interpretations.

Ethical clearance will be secured from the appropriate research ethics committee before data collection, together with authorization from relevant educational authorities. Participation will be voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, interview and audio-recording procedures, confidentiality safeguards, voluntary participation, their right to decline questions, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Codes such as T01, T02, and T03 will replace participant names. School leaders, colleagues, learners, and other individuals mentioned during interviews



will likewise not be identified in the final manuscript. Particular care will be exercised because teachers will be discussing individuals who may hold supervisory authority over them. Interviews and reporting procedures will therefore emphasize confidentiality and protection from professional repercussions.

7. Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis generated seven interrelated themes that illuminate how teachers experience school leadership in their everyday professional lives. These themes reflect leadership as a relational, instructional, developmental, and context-sensitive process rather than merely an exercise of administrative authority. The themes are: (1) Leadership That Listens: Being Heard, Valued, and Included; (2) More Than Supervision: Leadership as Instructional Support; (3) Trust Gives Teachers Room to Grow; (4) Recognition Matters: Small Acts, Significant Meanings; (5) Leadership in Relationship: The Human Side of School Management; (6) Leading Within Local Realities: Context Shapes Leadership; and (7) The Leader Teachers Hope For: Leadership as Shared Purpose.

Theme 1. Leadership That Listens: Being Heard, Valued, and Included

A recurring experience among teachers centered on the importance of being heard by school leaders. Participants described leadership as more meaningful when school heads consulted teachers before making decisions, allowed them to explain classroom realities, and provided opportunities for open discussion during meetings and informal conversations. For many teachers, consultation communicated that their professional knowledge was respected.

One participant described the importance of being included in decisions:

T01: "When our school head plans an activity, we are usually asked first about what we think will work for our learners. We are not just told what to do. We discuss the plan, and sometimes our suggestions are included. It makes us feel that our experience in the classroom is also important."

Another participant emphasized that being listened to created greater willingness to participate:

T04: "There are times when we disagree with a plan, but our school head allows us to explain our side. Even if the final decision is not exactly what we suggested, at least we know that we were heard. Because of that, it is easier for us to support the decision."

A third participant associated consultation with professional respect:

T09: "For me, a good leader is someone who does not decide everything alone. Teachers are the ones facing the learners every day, so we also know what problems are happening inside the classroom. When the school head listens, you feel that you are part of the school and not only someone who follows instructions."

The narratives suggest that teachers interpret listening as more than a communication technique. It serves as a form of professional recognition and inclusion. When teachers are invited to contribute to discussions and decisions, they are positioned as knowledgeable members of the organization rather than passive implementers of administrative directives.

This finding can be interpreted through the lens of distributed leadership, which emphasizes that leadership practice is not confined to the person occupying a formal administrative position. Spillane (2006) argues that leadership emerges through interactions among leaders, followers, and organizational situations. Teachers' accounts reflect this principle because meaningful participation allowed expertise to



circulate beyond the school head.

The experiences also support Leithwood et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of collaborative conditions in successful school leadership. Teachers may be more likely to support organizational decisions when they perceive that decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive.

The theme therefore indicates that teachers assess leadership not only according to what decisions are made, but also according to how decisions are reached and whether teachers are given a legitimate voice in the process.

Theme 2. More Than Supervision: Leadership as Instructional Support

Teachers also distinguished between school leaders who simply monitored compliance and those who used supervision as an opportunity for professional growth. Participants described classroom observations as more meaningful when feedback was constructive, specific, and accompanied by practical suggestions rather than criticism alone.

One teacher described an encouraging experience following classroom observation:

T02: “After observing my class, our school head did not immediately point out what was wrong. We first talked about what went well, then she suggested some strategies that I could try with the pupils who were having difficulty. I did not feel embarrassed. I felt that the observation was really meant to help me improve.”

Another participant emphasized the importance of accessibility:

T07: “When I have difficulty with a lesson or when I am not sure how to handle a concern, I can approach our school head. Sometimes we discuss strategies, and sometimes she recommends materials or asks another teacher to share an approach. That kind of support is more useful than simply checking our lesson plans.”

A third teacher explained that supervision became meaningful when it led to professional reflection:

T05: “Before, I thought classroom observation was only for rating teachers. But when the school head explains why a strategy can be improved, you begin to see supervision differently. You reflect on your teaching instead of becoming afraid of being observed.”

The theme illustrates a clear distinction between supervision as inspection and supervision as professional development. Teachers valued instructional leadership when monitoring was accompanied by coaching, dialogue, and practical assistance.

This is consistent with Hallinger’s (2011) conception of leadership for learning, which positions school leadership as an important influence on the instructional conditions within schools. The PPSSH domain Focusing on Teaching and Learning likewise expects Philippine school heads to create conditions that strengthen teaching, curriculum implementation, assessment, and learner development.

The participant narratives indicate, however, that instructional leadership becomes meaningful only when teachers experience it as supportive. A technically correct supervision process may have limited developmental value when teachers perceive it as fault-finding or punitive.

The finding therefore suggests that effective instructional leadership requires professional dialogue, psychological safety, constructive feedback, and contextual understanding. Supervision becomes a vehicle



for improvement when teachers leave the process knowing not simply what needs to change, but how they can improve.

Theme 3. Trust Gives Teachers Room to Grow

Professional trust emerged as another important dimension of teachers' leadership experiences. Participants associated positive leadership with being given autonomy, responsibility, and opportunities to demonstrate professional capability.

One teacher shared:

T03: "Our school head gives us freedom to use teaching strategies that we believe will work with our learners. As long as we can explain why we are using them and we are meeting the objectives, we are allowed to be creative. That makes me more confident as a teacher."

Another participant described being entrusted with school-level responsibility:

T08: "I was assigned to lead one of our school programs. At first I was hesitant because I had not handled something like that before. Our school head told me that she trusted me and that she would guide me if I needed help. After that experience, I became more confident in accepting responsibilities."

A third participant explained that trust increased accountability:

T11: "When the leader trusts you, you also feel that you should do your best because you do not want to disappoint that trust. For me, being trusted actually makes me more responsible."

The accounts suggest that professional trust functions as both a relational experience and a mechanism for professional development. Teachers interpreted autonomy and delegated responsibility as signals that leaders believed in their competence.

This finding aligns with distributed leadership theory, which emphasizes that leadership capacity can be extended through the participation of multiple organizational members. Harris (2013) argues that distributed leadership has value when leadership responsibility is genuinely shared and supported rather than merely assigned.

Teachers' responses also show that delegation can develop future leadership capacity. When teachers are entrusted with projects, committees, or instructional initiatives, they have opportunities to exercise decision-making, coordination, and problem-solving skills.

However, the narratives imply that trust is most productive when coupled with appropriate support. Delegating responsibility without guidance, authority, or resources may be experienced as additional workload rather than empowerment.

Thus, the finding suggests that effective school leadership involves a balance between autonomy and support, trust and accountability, and delegation and mentorship.

Theme 4. Recognition Matters: Small Acts, Significant Meanings

Recognition emerged as an emotionally significant aspect of leadership. Teachers emphasized that acknowledgment did not always have to involve formal awards. Simple expressions of appreciation often carried considerable meaning.



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One teacher shared:

T05: “Sometimes after a difficult activity, our school head simply says, ‘Thank you, you did well.’ It may sound small, but for us teachers it means a lot because we know that our effort was noticed.”

Another participant explained:

T09: “There are many things teachers do that are not seen in reports. We prepare after class, communicate with parents, and sometimes spend our own resources. When the leader recognizes those efforts, you feel encouraged to continue.”

However, another participant highlighted the negative effect of unequal recognition:

T12: “There are times when you feel that the same people are always recognized while others who also work hard are not noticed. When that happens repeatedly, some teachers become less motivated to volunteer.”

The experiences reveal that recognition has symbolic importance. It communicates whose work is visible, whose contributions are valued, and what behaviors the organization considers meaningful.

Recognition may strengthen motivation because it affirms teachers’ professional identities. Teachers often perform work that extends beyond easily measurable outputs, including mentoring learners, assisting colleagues, communicating with families, preparing materials, and responding to community needs. When leaders acknowledge these efforts, teachers may experience a stronger sense of belonging and professional worth.

At the same time, recognition must be perceived as fair. Unequal or selective acknowledgment may unintentionally create resentment and weaken morale.

The theme therefore suggests that effective recognition should be authentic, equitable, specific, and connected to meaningful contributions, rather than merely ceremonial.

Theme 5. Leadership in Relationship: The Human Side of School Management

Participants frequently described leadership through interpersonal qualities such as approachability, fairness, empathy, consistency, and respect. Teachers emphasized that leadership was experienced daily through the manner in which school heads communicated and responded to personal and professional concerns.

One participant described approachability as particularly important:

T06: “Our school head is approachable. Even if she is busy, you can tell her when there is a problem. Sometimes she cannot solve it immediately, but she listens first. That already helps because you do not feel alone with the problem.”

Another teacher associated fairness with organizational trust:

T10: “For me, fairness is very important. If there is a rule, it should apply to everyone. Teachers notice when some are treated differently. When the school head is fair, even difficult decisions are easier to accept.”

Another participant highlighted empathy:

T02: “There was a time when I had a family concern and needed some adjustment in my schedule. Our school head understood my situation but also explained what responsibilities I still needed to complete. I appreciated that because there was compassion but also professionalism.”



This theme demonstrates that teachers experience leadership fundamentally as a relationship. Administrative competence alone may not be sufficient to generate trust and commitment when interpersonal interactions are perceived as disrespectful, inconsistent, or inaccessible.

The narratives support transformational leadership perspectives emphasizing individualized consideration and the importance of relationships in motivating organizational members. They also correspond with the PPSSH domain Developing Self and Others, which recognizes that school leadership includes supporting the growth and well-being of personnel.

Teachers did not appear to equate supportive leadership with the absence of standards or accountability. Instead, they appreciated leaders who combined expectations with fairness and empathy.

The findings therefore suggest that relational leadership involves neither excessive leniency nor emotional distance. Effective leaders may instead demonstrate firmness with respect, accountability with understanding, and authority with accessibility.

Theme 6. Leading Within Local Realities: Context Shapes Leadership

Teachers also described school leadership as strongly influenced by local circumstances. School leaders in geographically situated communities may have to adapt plans, expectations, and implementation strategies to available resources, transportation conditions, staffing patterns, community practices, and local realities.

One participant explained:

T11: “There are programs that are easy to implement in other places, but here we sometimes have challenges because of distance, transportation, or limited resources. Our school head usually asks us what is realistic before deciding how we will implement a program.”

Another teacher described community engagement:

T12: “The school head has to know how to communicate with the community. You cannot simply come with a plan and expect everyone to agree. You need to understand the people, explain the purpose, and sometimes adjust the approach.”

Another participant emphasized flexibility:

T04: “There are times when what is written in the plan cannot happen exactly as expected because of the situation in the school. A good leader knows when to adjust without forgetting the objective.”

These narratives demonstrate that leadership practices cannot be separated from context. National policies provide direction, but their implementation occurs within schools that differ in geography, resources, community relationships, staffing, and institutional capacity.

The finding supports the view that successful school leadership is context-sensitive. Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasize that effective leadership practices are responsive to organizational circumstances rather than mechanically applied.

For geographically situated public elementary schools, effective leaders may therefore act as interpreters between policy and local reality. Their task is not to disregard national standards but to determine how such standards can be implemented responsibly within the conditions of their schools.

The finding is particularly significant in Ifugao, where school leadership may operate in communities with



distinct geographic and sociocultural characteristics. However, cultural interpretations should be based on actual participant evidence rather than assumed solely from location.

Context-responsive leadership therefore requires flexibility, local knowledge, community engagement, professional judgment, and sensitivity to available resources.

Theme 7. The Leader Teachers Hope For: Leadership as Shared Purpose

When teachers reflected on effective leadership as a whole, their narratives appeared to converge around the idea of a leader who combines direction with relationships. Teachers valued school heads who establish clear goals but remain connected to those responsible for implementing them.

One participant explained:

T03: “For me, a good leader has a clear direction, but does not walk alone. The teachers should understand where the school is going and feel that they are part of reaching that goal.”

Another teacher stated:

T07: “A leader should not only tell teachers what needs to be done. The leader should work with the teachers, support them, and show by example that everyone has a responsibility for the school.”

Another participant summarized effective leadership in relational terms:

T10: “The best leader for me is someone who can make decisions but also knows how to listen. There should be direction, but there should also be teamwork.”

This final theme integrates the preceding experiences. Through teachers’ eyes, effective leadership appears to involve several interconnected qualities: clear direction, instructional competence, trust, communication, fairness, recognition, participation, and contextual responsiveness.

Transformational leadership helps explain teachers’ emphasis on shared direction and motivation. Instructional leadership provides a framework for understanding their expectations regarding teaching and professional support, while distributed leadership illuminates their desire to participate meaningfully in organizational responsibilities.

The narratives suggest that these forms of leadership are not necessarily experienced as separate leadership “styles.” In everyday school life, teachers may simultaneously experience a leader as instructional when providing feedback, transformational when communicating vision, distributed when sharing responsibility, and relational when listening to personal and professional concerns.

The deeper finding is therefore that teachers may not evaluate leadership according to theoretical categories. Instead, they experience leadership as an integrated pattern of behaviors that either strengthens or weakens their willingness and capacity to contribute to the school.

Thematic Synthesis: Leadership as Experienced Through Teachers’ Eyes

The seven themes collectively suggest that teachers experience school leadership through an interconnected process:

Listening → Trust → Support → Recognition → Participation → Contextual Adaptation → Shared Purpose



Listening creates the foundation for professional recognition. When teachers feel heard, trust is more likely to develop. Trust enables professional autonomy and participation, while instructional support strengthens teachers' competence. Recognition reinforces the value of their contributions, and context-responsive leadership enables organizational expectations to be translated into locally meaningful practices. These experiences eventually contribute to a sense of shared purpose.

The essence of the phenomenon may therefore be expressed as leadership that is experienced through relationships before it is recognized through formal authority.

Teachers' narratives indicate that leadership becomes meaningful when school heads transform formal authority into support, consultation, professional trust, fairness, recognition, and collective responsibility. In this sense, the quality of leadership is reflected not only in policies implemented or targets accomplished, but also in the professional environment created for teachers.

The findings are consistent with research demonstrating that successful principals influence schools by shaping instructional practices, organizational conditions, professional collaboration, and teacher development (Grissom et al., 2021). They also complement Leithwood et al. (2020), who emphasized setting direction, developing people, redesigning organizations, and improving instructional programs as recurring dimensions of successful leadership.

Within the Philippine context, these experiences correspond with the five domains of the PPSSH- Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, and Building Connections. However, the teachers' accounts deepen these formal expectations by showing how leadership standards may actually be experienced in everyday school life.

Ultimately, the themes suggest that teachers do not merely ask whether their school head is administratively competent. They experience leadership through more immediate questions: Does the leader listen? Can I approach the leader? Am I trusted? Does supervision help me improve? Is my work recognized? Are decisions fair? Does the leader understand our situation? Do we share responsibility for where the school is going?

These experiences illustrate why leadership should be understood not merely as a position occupied by one person but as a professional relationship continuously constructed between leaders and the teachers they serve and lead.

8. Essence of the Lived Experience: Leadership Is Felt Before It Is Measured

Across the potential themes, the essence of teachers' experiences may be captured by the idea that leadership is felt before it is formally measured.

Teachers experience leadership in ordinary moments: whether their concerns are heard, whether feedback helps rather than discourages, whether responsibilities are distributed fairly, whether effort is recognized, whether leaders remain approachable during difficulties, and whether decisions reflect the realities of classrooms and communities.

The phenomenon may be represented as:

Listening → Trust → Support → Participation → Professional Growth → Shared Commitment

Leadership begins with relational engagement. Listening helps establish trust. Trust creates space for



teachers to communicate challenges and participate meaningfully. Instructional and professional support then enables growth. As teachers experience ownership and recognition, leadership can become a shared organizational endeavor rather than a purely hierarchical process.

The essence of the phenomenon is therefore not that teachers simply prefer “kind” leaders. Rather, relationally responsive leadership may create organizational conditions that allow teachers to perform, collaborate, develop, and contribute more meaningfully to school improvement.

Implications for Educational Leadership

The findings can contribute to leadership practice in several ways.

First, leadership-development programs should emphasize relational competence alongside administrative competence. Communication, listening, constructive feedback, trust-building, conflict management, and recognition deserve attention as substantive leadership practices.

Second, instructional supervision should be designed as a developmental process. Classroom observation becomes more meaningful when feedback supports teacher growth rather than merely documenting compliance.

Third, schools should strengthen meaningful teacher participation in decisions affecting instruction and school improvement.

Fourth, leadership development in geographically situated communities should incorporate contextual responsiveness. School heads need sufficient flexibility to translate national policies into strategies appropriate to local conditions.

Finally, the findings may encourage leaders to periodically ask a deceptively simple but powerful question: “How is my leadership being experienced by the teachers I lead?”

Such reflection shifts leadership assessment from intention toward experience.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study positions teachers’ experiences at the center of understanding school leadership in public elementary schools in Mayoyao District, Ifugao.

School leadership is not experienced merely through policies, organizational charts, or formal authority. It is encountered through daily interactions, decisions, instructional support, communication, trust, recognition, professional opportunities, and responses to contextual challenges.

By examining leadership through teachers’ eyes, the study recognizes teachers as knowledgeable organizational actors whose narratives can illuminate dimensions of leadership that conventional administrative evaluations may overlook.

The study proposes that effective leadership is simultaneously instructional, relational, developmental, distributed, and context-responsive. School leaders establish direction, but teachers’ experiences reveal whether that direction becomes meaningful organizational practice.

Ultimately, effective school leadership may be understood not simply through what leaders intend to accomplish but through what their leadership enables teachers to become and accomplish.



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Limitations and Future Research

The study is bounded to public elementary school teachers in Mayoyao District and does not seek statistical generalization. Participants' narratives represent subjective interpretations shaped by their individual experiences, relationships, and professional contexts.

Because teachers are discussing individuals occupying supervisory positions, social-desirability concerns may influence disclosure despite confidentiality safeguards.

Future research may compare teachers' and school heads' perspectives, examine differences across geographically isolated and more accessible schools, investigate indigenous and culturally responsive dimensions of leadership where empirically appropriate, or integrate phenomenological interviews with observations and organizational documents.

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