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Leading Against the Clock: Lived Experiences of School Heads in Navigating Leadership and Time Demands in Public Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

School heads operate at the intersection of instructional leadership, administrative accountability, personnel management, stakeholder engagement, and school improvement, making time one of their most constrained leadership resources. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of public elementary school heads in navigating leadership responsibilities and competing time demands in Benito Soliven North District, Schools Division of Isabela, Philippines. Specifically, it seeks to understand the situations that intensify time pressure, the meanings school heads attach to these experiences, the strategies they employ to negotiate competing priorities, and the insights they develop from leading under persistent temporal constraints. Participants are purposively selected school heads with direct and sustained experience in managing public elementary schools. Data are generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis informed by phenomenological principles. The inquiry is sensitized by the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads while allowing meanings and themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives. Particular attention is given to tensions among administrative compliance, instructional leadership, personnel concerns, stakeholder expectations, unexpected school demands, and personal boundaries. The study is expected to illuminate time not merely as a scheduling concern but as a leadership resource negotiated through prioritization, delegation, relational coordination, adaptability, and professional judgment. Findings may inform leadership-development initiatives, administrative workload policies, and context-responsive support mechanisms intended to protect school heads' capacity for instructional and strategic leadership.

Keywords: educational leadership, lived experiences, phenomenology, principal time use, public elementary schools, school heads, time demands, Philippines

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I. Introduction

School leadership is increasingly characterized by complexity, simultaneity, and competing expectations. Contemporary school heads are expected to lead teaching and learning, manage personnel and resources, implement educational policies, oversee school improvement initiatives, engage families and communities, respond to learner concerns, comply with administrative requirements, and develop the professional capacities of teachers. These responsibilities rarely occur sequentially. Instead, they converge within the same school day, requiring leaders to continually decide which concerns deserve immediate attention and which responsibilities can be postponed, delegated, or reorganized.

Within this context, time becomes more than a managerial commodity; it becomes a leadership resource. How school heads experience, interpret, allocate, protect, and negotiate their time can shape how leadership is enacted within the school.

Research on principal time use has long demonstrated that school leaders distribute their working hours among administrative, instructional, relational, and organizational responsibilities. Grissom et al. (2013), for instance, showed that simply increasing time broadly classified as instructional leadership does not necessarily translate into improved outcomes; the particular leadership activities undertaken matter. More recent scholarship has similarly argued that studies of principal time should account for the continuous demands confronting leaders rather than viewing time allocation merely as an individual scheduling choice.

This distinction is important. A school head may intend to devote a morning to classroom observation, mentoring, and instructional planning but may instead encounter urgent reports, teacher absences, parent concerns, learner incidents, district communications, resource problems, and unscheduled meetings. Leadership time is therefore continuously negotiated between planned priorities and emerging realities.

Studies examining principal time use have likewise shown that contextual factors influence leadership priorities. Differences in organizational structures, institutional expectations, policy requirements, and school conditions may shape how much time principals devote to particular responsibilities. Longer working hours also do not automatically mean greater attention to instructional leadership. Consequently, understanding school leaders' experiences requires examining not only how much time they work but also why particular demands consume their time and how they respond to those demands.

These concerns acquire particular significance in the Philippine basic education system. The Department of Education formally adopted the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) through DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020. The standards define expectations for school leadership across five domains: Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, and Building Connections. These interconnected domains reflect the breadth of contemporary school leadership responsibilities.

For public elementary school heads, however, fulfilling these domains may require continuously moving between strategic and operational roles. A school head may simultaneously be an instructional leader, administrative manager, financial steward, personnel supervisor, community liaison, crisis responder, and policy implementer. The boundaries separating these responsibilities can become blurred, particularly in schools where personnel and administrative support are limited.



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Recent Philippine qualitative evidence has begun documenting similar complexities. Phenomenological research involving Filipino school heads has identified multifaceted leadership demands, time and resource-management challenges, stakeholder responsibilities, workload-management strategies, and the importance of professional and personal support. Such findings indicate that leadership and time pressures are not merely technical problems; they are lived experiences shaped by institutional structures, professional identities, interpersonal relationships, and local contexts.

Yet the experiences of school heads are contextually situated. Leadership realities in one Schools Division Office, district, or school setting cannot automatically represent those encountered elsewhere. Public elementary schools in Benito Soliven North District operate within particular geographic, organizational, personnel, and community conditions that may shape how their leaders experience and respond to time demands.

There remains a need to understand these experiences from the perspectives of the school heads themselves. Quantitative measures of hours spent on administrative or instructional tasks may indicate where time goes, but they cannot fully explain what it feels like to lead under competing demands, how leaders decide what matters most, what sacrifices those decisions entail, and what meanings leaders construct from those experiences.

This study therefore explores the lived experiences of school heads in navigating leadership and time demands in public elementary schools in Benito Soliven North District, Isabela. By foregrounding school heads' narratives, the study seeks to illuminate the everyday realities behind administrative schedules and leadership expectations.

Rather than asking whether school heads are "good" or "poor" time managers, the inquiry recognizes time as relational, contextual, and organizational. It asks how leaders make sense of limited time while attempting to fulfill multiple professional responsibilities and how these experiences influence their understanding of effective school leadership.

2. Research Problem

The expanding responsibilities of public school heads require them to simultaneously address strategic, instructional, administrative, personnel, and stakeholder concerns. Although these responsibilities are formally articulated through professional standards and organizational policies, less attention has been given to how school heads themselves experience the temporal pressures associated with fulfilling them.

The central research question is:

How do public elementary school heads experience and navigate leadership and time demands in Benito Soliven North District, Isabela, Philippines?

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do school heads describe their everyday experiences of balancing leadership responsibilities and competing time demands?
2. What leadership situations and responsibilities create the most significant time pressures for school heads?



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3. How do school heads experience the tension between administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership?
4. What strategies do school heads employ to prioritize, organize, delegate, and negotiate competing demands on their time?
5. How do unexpected events, stakeholder concerns, and organizational requirements shape school heads' planned leadership activities?
6. What personal and professional challenges do school heads encounter while managing leadership and time demands?
7. What meanings and insights do school heads derive from their experiences of leading under time constraints?
8. What support mechanisms do school heads perceive as necessary to enable more sustainable and effective leadership?

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Sensitization

3.1 Time as a Leadership Resource

The study conceptualizes time as a finite but strategically negotiable leadership resource. School heads cannot expand the number of hours available to them, but they continually determine how attention, presence, and effort are distributed within those hours.

Traditional perspectives on time management often emphasize planning, prioritization, scheduling, and delegation. Although these remain important, school leadership introduces additional complexity because principals do not exercise complete control over their schedules.

School emergencies, policy requirements, stakeholder concerns, personnel problems, reporting deadlines, and district directives can disrupt planned activities. Consequently, principal time use is better understood as a dynamic negotiation between agency and demand.

Hochbein and Meyers (2021) argued for greater attention to time demands in research on principal time use. This perspective is particularly relevant to phenomenological inquiry because it shifts attention from merely calculating time allocation toward understanding the demands that produce particular leadership choices.

3.3 Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads

The PPSSH provides an important contextual lens for interpreting participants' experiences.

The five domains are:

Domain 1 – Leading Strategically



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Domain 2 – Managing School Operations and Resources

Domain 3 – Focusing on Teaching and Learning

Domain 4 – Developing Self and Others

Domain 5 – Building Connections

These domains are not treated as predetermined themes that participants must confirm. Rather, they serve as sensitizing concepts that help situate emergent findings within Philippine school-leadership expectations.

This distinction preserves the inductive character of the qualitative inquiry.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of public elementary school heads in navigating leadership responsibilities and persistent time demands in Benito Soliven North District, Schools Division of Isabela, Philippines. Phenomenology is appropriate because the inquiry seeks to understand the essence and meaning of a shared experience rather than quantify time-management effectiveness, test causal relationships, or compare statistical differences. The study focuses on how school heads experience competing instructional, administrative, personnel, and stakeholder responsibilities and how they make sense of these demands within their everyday leadership practice.

The study will be conducted in public elementary schools within Benito Soliven North District, a bounded educational context in which school heads work under common national, division, and district-level policies while managing schools that may differ in enrollment, staffing, available resources, community circumstances, and organizational demands. Participants will consist of public elementary school heads currently assigned within the district and will be selected through purposive criterion sampling. To qualify, participants must be currently serving as school heads or designated school leaders, possess direct and substantial experience in managing a public elementary school, have encountered simultaneous instructional, administrative, personnel, and stakeholder responsibilities, and be willing to participate in an in-depth interview about their leadership experiences. An initial range of approximately 8 to 15 participants may be considered, although final sample adequacy will be determined by information power and thematic sufficiency rather than by a rigid numerical target.

Data will primarily be generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants' informed consent, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide will focus on participants' typical working days, competing leadership responsibilities, tasks that consume the greatest amount of time, the effects of administrative requirements on instructional leadership, prioritization of responsibilities, responses to unexpected concerns, delegation practices, effects of leadership demands on professional and personal life, strategies developed through experience, meanings attached to effective use of time, and perceived forms of organizational support. Follow-up probes such as "*Can you tell me more about that?*", "*What did that experience mean to you?*", and "*How did you respond?*" will be used to deepen participants' narratives without directing them toward predetermined answers.

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Interview transcripts will be analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. Analysis will begin with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the participants' accounts and obtain a holistic understanding of their experiences. Significant statements directly related to leadership demands, time pressure, prioritization, interruptions, delegation, sacrifice, adaptation, and meaning-making will then be extracted. From these statements, the researcher will formulate meanings while remaining as close as possible to the participants' intended perspectives. Related meanings will subsequently be grouped into clusters of themes and broader thematic categories. Emerging themes will be continuously compared with the complete transcripts to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in the participants' narratives and that divergent or contradictory experiences are not excluded simply because they differ from dominant patterns. An exhaustive description of the phenomenon will then be developed, followed by the formulation of the fundamental structure or essence of the experience of "leading against the clock." Where feasible, participants will be invited to reflect on the synthesized findings to determine whether the interpretations adequately represent their experiences. The analytical process will therefore follow the sequence: Familiarization → Extraction of Significant Statements → Formulation of Meanings → Clustering of Themes → Exhaustive Description → Fundamental Structure → Participant Validation.

Researcher reflexivity will be maintained throughout the inquiry because qualitative interpretation is influenced by the researcher's professional position, assumptions, and prior experiences. A reflexive journal will be used to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, possible biases, and changes in analytic thinking. If the researcher is also a practicing school head, this insider position may provide valuable contextual familiarity but may also create assumptions about the experiences being studied. The researcher will therefore consciously distinguish personal experiences from participants' narratives. Bracketing will be treated as an ongoing reflexive practice intended to reduce the influence of prior assumptions rather than as a claim that the researcher can completely eliminate personal knowledge and experience.

The trustworthiness of the study will be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility will be strengthened through sustained engagement with the interview data, careful probing during interviews, participant reflection where appropriate, and peer examination of coding and thematic decisions. Transferability will be supported through thick description of the participants, research setting, and leadership context so that readers can determine the relevance of the findings to comparable educational settings. Dependability will be enhanced through an audit trail documenting methodological procedures, analytic decisions, theme development, and changes made during the research process. Confirmability will be supported through reflexive journaling and by maintaining clear connections between the interpretations, significant statements, and participant evidence.

Ethical considerations will be observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance will be secured from the appropriate research ethics committee prior to data collection, and authorization will also be obtained from relevant education authorities. Participation will be voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants will be informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, their right to decline any question, their right to withdraw from participation without penalty, the procedures for maintaining



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confidentiality, the use of audio recording, and the intended use of the findings. Participant identities will be protected through pseudonyms or codes such as SH01, SH02, and SH03. Because participants may discuss colleagues, teachers, learners, schools, supervisors, or other individuals during interviews, potentially identifying contextual details will be removed or generalized where necessary. Audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and research files will be securely stored and accessed only for legitimate research purposes. These measures are intended to protect participant privacy while ensuring that the study remains methodologically rigorous, ethically responsible, and faithful to the lived experiences of school heads in Benito Soliven North District.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1. When Everything Becomes Urgent: Leadership Amid Competing Priorities

One prominent experience that may emerge from the narratives is the difficulty of deciding which responsibility deserves immediate attention when several tasks appear equally important. School heads do not perform a single leadership function at a time. They move continuously among instructional supervision, reports, meetings, personnel concerns, learner issues, financial and resource matters, stakeholder coordination, and directives from higher offices.

The experience may be described by participants as one of constantly reorganizing priorities. Rather than following a fixed schedule throughout the day, school heads may find themselves repeatedly evaluating what must be accomplished immediately and what can be delayed.

An illustrative participant response could be:

SH01: “There are days when I already have a schedule, but when I arrive at school, there are reports that need to be submitted, a teacher who needs assistance, parents who want to talk to me, and concerns from the district. I have to decide which one I should attend to first.”

Another school head may explain:

SH04: “Sometimes everything seems urgent. You cannot simply say that you will attend to one concern tomorrow because another person is already waiting for your decision. I learned to identify what will affect the learners and the whole school the most.”

This theme suggests that time pressure among school heads does not necessarily arise from an inability to organize their schedules. Rather, it can emerge from the simultaneous and unpredictable nature of leadership demands. Their working time becomes a contested space in which administrative compliance, instructional leadership, personnel management, and stakeholder expectations compete for attention.

The experience can therefore be interpreted as temporal role overload. School heads occupy multiple leadership roles, each carrying legitimate responsibilities. The challenge occurs when several roles require attention within the same limited period.

This interpretation corresponds with Verano et al. (2024), whose phenomenological study among Philippine school heads identified multifaceted leadership demands and time and resource-management challenges as major themes. Their participants likewise encountered role complexity while performing administrative and ancillary functions. Such evidence suggests that competing responsibilities are not



isolated experiences but may reflect broader structural realities of Philippine school leadership.

A global study of principals' time use also identified administrative, instructional, student-centered, and balanced patterns of leadership, suggesting that organizational and contextual conditions influence which responsibilities principals prioritize.

Thus, "leading against the clock" may not simply mean working faster. It involves continuously exercising professional judgment about what deserves attention now, what can wait, and what consequences may arise from either decision.

Theme 2. Pulled Away from Instruction: The Administrative–Instructional Leadership Tension

A second possible theme concerns the tension between what school heads consider educationally important and what administrative requirements require them to accomplish immediately.

Participants may recognize classroom observation, teacher mentoring, instructional supervision, learner monitoring, and curriculum implementation as central responsibilities. Nevertheless, these activities may be postponed when reports, meetings, documentation, financial matters, and other compliance requirements carry immediate deadlines.

An illustrative narrative could state:

SH02: "I really want to spend more time observing classes and talking with teachers about their teaching, but sometimes the reports cannot wait. When the deadline is today, you have to finish the report first."

Another participant may describe the frustration associated with rescheduling instructional activities:

SH06: "I schedule classroom observations, but there are times when I have to cancel because I am called to a meeting or there is something urgent that must be submitted. The teachers understand, but for me, I feel that I am losing the time that should have been spent on instruction."

These narratives may reveal an important distinction between urgent leadership and important leadership. Administrative requirements frequently contain explicit deadlines, while instructional leadership often produces longer-term outcomes. Consequently, tasks with immediate compliance consequences can displace responsibilities whose benefits are less immediate but potentially more consequential to teaching and learning.

The problem is therefore not that school heads consider instruction unimportant. Instead, organizational structures may make administrative work temporally dominant because it is deadline-driven and externally monitored.

A recent Philippine qualitative study on school heads' administrative and instructional responsibilities similarly reported that administrative tasks such as reports, meetings, compliance requirements, and stakeholder concerns consumed substantial leadership time, while instructional supervision was often postponed or interrupted.

Earlier international research also demonstrates that simply categorizing principal time as "instructional" is insufficient; the particular nature and quality of instructional leadership activities matter. Programs designed to deliberately shift principal time from managerial to instructional work have shown that such redistribution is possible, although personnel and resource constraints remain important barriers.

The experience may therefore be summarized as a recurring tension: School heads know where they want



to lead, but immediate organizational demands often determine where their time actually goes.

Theme 3. The Unpredictable School Day: Leading Through Interruptions

The third theme may involve the unpredictable character of the school head's working day.

Even carefully organized schedules can be disrupted by learner incidents, parent concerns, teacher absences, urgent communications, meetings, infrastructure problems, visitors, community matters, or directives requiring immediate action.

One participant might describe:

SH03: You can prepare your schedule in the morning, but you cannot expect that it will be followed exactly. Sometimes one phone call changes everything you planned for the day."

Another may emphasize the necessity of flexibility:

SH07: As a school head, you cannot say, 'That is not included in my schedule.' If there is an emergency involving a learner or teacher, you have to respond. The schedule has to adjust."

This theme illustrates the difference between scheduled time and lived leadership time.

Schedules represent intentions. The actual school day, however, unfolds through interactions and emerging situations. School heads therefore require not only planning skills but also adaptive temporal leadership the ability to modify plans without completely losing sight of strategic priorities.

Interruptions should not automatically be interpreted negatively. Some interruptions represent genuine leadership responsibilities. A parent requiring immediate assistance or a learner-safety concern cannot simply be ignored because the school head has scheduled paperwork.

The challenge lies in distinguishing between necessary responsiveness and chronic reactivity.

When nearly every emerging concern is treated as requiring the school head personally and immediately, strategic leadership may become fragmented.

This interpretation aligns with research showing that school principals' time use is influenced by contextual and organizational factors rather than individual preference alone. A large international analysis across 47 societies found distinct patterns of principal time use and demonstrated that both contextual and individual variables shape leadership prioritization.

The implication is that effective time management in school leadership cannot mean eliminating interruptions. Instead, it means developing systems that enable leaders to respond without allowing every interruption to redefine the entire day.

Theme 4. Sharing the Load: Delegation as a Survival and Leadership Strategy

Another important theme may concern delegation and collaborative leadership.

As school heads recognize that they cannot personally accomplish every organizational responsibility, they may increasingly rely on teachers, coordinators, committees, and other personnel.

One illustrative response could be:

SH05: "Before, I wanted to check and do almost everything myself because I felt responsible for all of it. Eventually, I realized that if I continued doing that, I would not have time for the responsibilities that only



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the school head can perform.”

Another participant might explain:

SH08: “I learned to trust my teachers. If someone has the ability to lead a program, I give that person the responsibility, but I still monitor the progress and provide guidance.”

Delegation emerges here not simply as a technique for saving time but as a form of distributed leadership. The school head remains accountable but recognizes that organizational effectiveness does not require personal control over every activity. Instead, leadership involves determining which responsibilities require the school head’s direct involvement and which can become opportunities for others to exercise responsibility.

Delegation therefore transforms time management from an individual process into an organizational process.

Verano et al. (2024) similarly identified delegation and team management among the important dimensions of how Philippine school heads responded to administrative and ancillary responsibilities. Their study emphasized collaborative and efficient management as an important insight arising from school heads’ experiences.

Research involving elementary principals has also found that leaders need organizational support to manage workloads and preserve time for instructional leadership and relationship building.

However, delegation is dependent on trust and capacity. A school head cannot effectively distribute responsibility when personnel lack preparation, when roles are unclear, or when organizational culture assumes that every decision must originate from the principal.

Thus, the deeper meaning of delegation may be expressed as:

The ability to manage leadership time depends partly on the ability to develop other people who can share leadership responsibility.

Theme 5. Leadership Beyond Office Hours: The Personal Cost of Time Pressure

The fifth theme may reveal that leadership responsibilities do not necessarily end when school hours conclude.

School heads may bring reports home, respond to communications during evenings, prepare documents on weekends, or continue mentally processing unresolved concerns outside the school.

An illustrative participant response could be:

SH09: “Sometimes I go home, but the work goes home with me. There are reports to finish and messages to answer. Physically, you are already at home, but your mind is still in school.”

Another may express:

SH04: “There are times when I sacrifice personal time because I know something has to be submitted the following morning. You learn to adjust, but there are also times when you feel tired.”

This theme moves the discussion beyond productivity toward the human cost of leadership time pressure. When organizational demands consistently extend beyond formal working hours, professional and personal boundaries can become increasingly blurred.

The phenomenon may create a paradox: behaviors interpreted organizationally as dedication may



simultaneously indicate an unsustainable workload.

Recent qualitative literature on school leadership has associated heavy administrative workloads and policy demands with professional strain and work-life imbalance. Philippine phenomenological evidence likewise identifies personal and professional impacts alongside time-management challenges among school heads.

Research on novice school heads performing dual teaching and leadership roles in the Philippine hinterlands also identified multitasking, limited resources, and leaving classes to perform administrative tasks, demonstrating how structural responsibilities can force leaders to negotiate competing professional obligations.

Therefore, leadership commitment should not be measured by the willingness to surrender unlimited personal time.

Sustainable leadership requires recognizing that time spent recovering, reflecting, and maintaining personal boundaries is not time taken away from leadership; it may help sustain leadership over time.

Theme 6. Learning to Lead the Clock: Adaptation, Prioritization, and Resilience

Despite the challenges, participants may not portray themselves merely as passive recipients of overwhelming workloads. Their experiences may reveal the gradual development of strategies for navigating time pressure.

School heads may describe learning to prioritize tasks, prepare advance schedules, anticipate recurring deadlines, delegate responsibilities, use digital calendars, organize documents systematically, communicate expectations, and accept that not every responsibility can receive equal attention simultaneously.

An illustrative participant may state:

SH10: "Experience teaches you that you cannot do everything at once. I now list what needs immediate action, what can be scheduled, and what can be assigned to someone else. Before, I tried to finish everything myself."

Another might explain:

SH01: "I learned that planning is important, but flexibility is equally important. You prepare your schedule, but you must also be ready to change it without forgetting your main priorities."

This theme reflects adaptive leadership learning. Time-management competence may not develop primarily through formal scheduling techniques. Instead, it may emerge through accumulated leadership experience through missed deadlines, disrupted plans, difficult decisions, successful delegation, and reflection on what strategies worked.

Philippine research among school heads has similarly identified adaptation and learning, strategic workload management, professional support, communication, and holistic well-being as responses to multifaceted leadership demands.

Studies of principals managing administrative and instructional responsibilities also identify prioritization, scheduling, delegation, time-blocking, and collaboration as strategies for coping with overlapping responsibilities.



The finding suggests that effective school heads do not necessarily control time. Instead, they learn to exercise greater control over their responses to demands on time.

Synthesis of the Themes: The Essence of “Leading Against the Clock”

At the beginning of this process are multiple responsibilities competing for limited leadership attention. Administrative deadlines, instructional responsibilities, stakeholder concerns, personnel issues, and unexpected events create pressure on planned schedules.

School heads then engage in leadership negotiation. They decide what requires immediate personal attention, what can wait, what can be delegated, and what must be rescheduled.

Through repeated experience, they develop adaptive practices such as prioritization, scheduling, delegation, collaboration, anticipation of deadlines, and flexible decision-making.

Yet these strategies do not completely eliminate pressure. Some demands extend leadership beyond formal working hours, creating implications for professional well-being and personal boundaries.

The essence of the phenomenon can therefore be understood not simply as having insufficient time, but as carrying more legitimate leadership demands than can always be addressed simultaneously.

This interpretation is supported by Philippine research demonstrating multifaceted leadership demands, time-management challenges, delegation, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive coping among school heads. International evidence similarly demonstrates that contextual and organizational factors influence how principals allocate their time across administrative, instructional, and other leadership responsibilities.

The central implication is significant. Time pressure among school heads should not automatically be treated as an individual deficiency that can be solved simply through seminars on calendars, planners, or productivity.

The narratives potentially reveal that leadership time is individual, relational, organizational, and structural.

School heads certainly require the capacity to prioritize and organize their work. However, schools and educational authorities must also consider administrative workload, reporting requirements, personnel support, delegation structures, scheduling practices, and the protection of meaningful instructional leadership time.

Ultimately, the experience of leading against the clock reflects a leadership paradox: school heads are expected to be continuously responsive to immediate organizational demands while remaining strategically focused on the long-term educational mission of their schools. Their effectiveness therefore depends not on accomplishing every task personally, but on developing the professional judgment to determine when to respond, when to delegate, when to protect instructional priorities, and when to accept that effective leadership sometimes means choosing what cannot be done today.

8. Essence of the Phenomenon

Following thematic analysis, the phenomenological synthesis should articulate the essence of leading against the clock.

Subject to confirmation from actual data, the phenomenon may ultimately be understood as a continuous



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negotiation between what school heads intend to lead and what circumstances require them to manage. Their experience may involve moving repeatedly between planned leadership and responsive leadership; between classroom priorities and administrative compliance; between personal accountability and distributed responsibility; and between professional commitment and finite personal capacity. The final essence, however, must emerge from the participants' narratives rather than being predetermined before interviews.

9. Discussion

The study's findings should be interpreted within broader scholarship on principal time use and Philippine school leadership.

If participants consistently describe competing demands, the findings would support scholarship arguing that principal time should not be conceptualized solely as an allocation problem. Hochbein and Meyers' perspective is particularly useful because it recognizes that leadership schedules are shaped by persistent organizational demands.

If participants describe administrative requirements displacing instructional leadership, their narratives could be situated alongside principal time-use research demonstrating the complex relationship between managerial and instructional responsibilities.

Grissom et al. (2013) provide an important interpretive caution: greater time labeled broadly as instructional leadership does not necessarily guarantee stronger outcomes. The nature and quality of leadership activities remain important. Thus, recommendations should not simply encourage school heads to "spend more time on instruction." They should examine which administrative processes can be streamlined so leaders can engage meaningfully in high-value instructional activities.

If delegation emerges prominently, the study may further demonstrate that leadership time is organizational rather than merely individual. A school head's capacity to protect time for strategic priorities may depend upon whether responsibilities can be shared with competent personnel.

Philippine findings should also be interpreted through the PPSSH. The standards require school heads to lead strategically, manage operations and resources, focus on teaching and learning, develop themselves and others, and build connections. The breadth of these expectations helps explain why leadership time is continuously distributed across different domains.

Recent Philippine phenomenological evidence describing multifaceted administrative functions, time-management challenges, stakeholder responsibilities, and adaptive coping among school heads further provides a useful comparison. The present study can extend this literature by examining how these realities are experienced specifically within Benito Soliven North District.

The study's central contribution may therefore be a reconceptualization of time management.

Rather than framing time pressure primarily as an individual deficiency suggesting that overwhelmed school heads simply need better schedules the findings may reveal that time management is simultaneously personal, organizational, relational, and structural.

10. Implications for Educational Leadership

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The findings may have implications at school, district, division, and policy levels.

At the **school level**, school heads may benefit from systematic workload mapping, delegation structures, protected instructional-leadership periods, and clearer procedures for handling routine concerns.

At the **district level**, administrative calendars could be coordinated to minimize overlapping deadlines and unnecessary scheduling conflicts.

At the **Schools Division Office level**, recurring reports and documentation requirements may be reviewed to identify duplication, opportunities for digital integration, and tasks that could be simplified.

Leadership-development programs could also move beyond generic time-management seminars. Training may focus on:

- strategic prioritization;
- workload analysis;
- distributed leadership;
- delegation and trust;
- interruption management;
- meeting efficiency;
- digital workflow management;
- boundary management; and
- protecting instructional leadership time.

The findings may additionally support mentoring systems through which experienced school heads share context-specific strategies with newly appointed administrators.

Conclusion

School leadership unfolds within time, yet time is rarely experienced by school heads as an entirely controllable resource. Public elementary school heads operate amid instructional responsibilities, administrative requirements, personnel concerns, stakeholder expectations, organizational routines, and unpredictable events. Understanding their leadership therefore requires moving beyond schedules and workload counts toward the meanings they attach to these competing demands.

This phenomenological study positions school heads' voices at the center of that inquiry.

By exploring how leaders experience competing priorities, administrative-instructional tensions, interruptions, delegation, professional sacrifices, and adaptive strategies, the study can provide a deeper understanding of what it means to lead against the clock.

The inquiry also challenges an overly individualized understanding of time management. When leadership

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time is shaped by institutional requirements, organizational structures, personnel capacity, stakeholder expectations, and unpredictable school realities, improving time use cannot rest solely on teaching principals to make better schedules.

Sustainable leadership requires both capable leaders and organizational conditions that allow them time to lead.

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