

Instructional Leaders' Practices in Multigrade Schools in Siargao Island

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Abstract

The study investigated the instructional leadership practices of multigrade school heads in the Siargao Island Division. Specifically, it examined the respondents' profiles (age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service) and their practices across five domains: leading strategically, managing school operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, and building connections. Using a descriptive research design, data were collected from 35 multigrade school heads through a validated researcher-made questionnaire. Results showed that most respondents were female, aged 40–45, enrolled in graduate studies, and in service for 0–5 years. They demonstrated well-practiced instructional leadership across all domains. Age and years in service significantly influenced leadership practices, while sex and educational attainment did not. Despite being relatively new in their positions, the school heads exhibited effective instructional leadership. Recommendations included establishing a context-based mentoring program, knowledge-sharing platforms, and MANCOM-led briefing sessions to enhance multigrade instructional leadership.

Keywords: Multigrade Education, Instructional Leadership, School Heads, Strategic Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Professional Development, Resource Management, Educational Management, Siargao Island

Introduction

Background and Rationale

In many developing countries, including the Philippines, the delivery of education in geographically isolated and sparsely populated areas often necessitates the implementation of multigrade instruction. In this system, a single teacher manages multiple grade levels within one classroom. This instructional model addresses issues of access and equity in education, especially in rural communities where learner populations are small, resources are limited, and qualified teaching staff are scarce (Broussard, 2021). In the Philippine context, the Department of Education (DepEd) institutionalized multigrade education through various policies to uphold the constitutional mandate of providing quality education for all, regardless of geographical location (Department of Education [DepEd], 2017).

Siargao Island, located in the province of Surigao del Norte, exemplifies such a setting where multigrade schools are prevalent due to logistical constraints and uneven population distribution. In these schools, instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring that learning outcomes are met despite limited human and material resources. School heads are expected not only to manage operational and administrative duties but also to actively lead teaching and learning initiatives. They are seen as instructional leaders who influence curriculum implementation, teacher performance, and learner achievement (Hallinger & Wang, 2020).

However, existing literature reveals persistent gaps in how school leaders are prepared for and supported in executing their instructional roles, particularly in multigrade environments. Studies by Sahlin (2025) and Cobbinah (2020) emphasize that many school leaders, especially those assigned to rural or multigrade settings, have limited access to contextualized training programs. These limitations often result in difficulties in managing curriculum complexity, supervising diverse learner needs, and sustaining teacher motivation. Moreover, Bantilan, Sy, and Uddin (2023) identified structural and resource constraints that hinder strategic instructional planning in multigrade schools, such as insufficient funding, high teacher-to-learner ratios, and weak stakeholder engagement.

Despite these challenges, some school leaders in multigrade contexts manage to innovate and thrive. This signals the need to investigate the specific leadership practices that enable such resilience and adaptability. Recognizing that instructional leadership is context-dependent (Bush, 2019), there is a growing call to explore how local realities shape leadership practices and, subsequently, school effectiveness. Particularly in regions like Siargao Island, where research on leadership in multigrade settings remains scant, such an inquiry can provide empirical foundations for tailored professional development and support mechanisms.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to assess the instructional leadership practices of school heads in multigrade schools in the Siargao Island Division. It sought to evaluate how school heads implement their instructional roles across five domains—strategic leadership, management of school operations, focus on teaching and learning, professional development, and stakeholder engagement—as outlined in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (DepEd, 2020). Furthermore, the study intended to determine whether these practices differ based on demographic characteristics and to propose a training program responsive to the contextual realities of multigrade leadership.

Research Questions

To guide the investigation, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the profile of the multigrade school heads in Siargao Island in terms of:
 - Age;
 - Sex;
 - Educational attainment; and
 - Years in service?
2. How do the school heads practice instructional leadership in terms of:
 - Leading strategically;
 - Managing school operations and resources;
 - Focusing on teaching and learning;
 - Developing self and others; and
 - Building connections?
3. Is there a significant difference in instructional leadership practices when respondents are grouped according to their profile variables?
4. What training program may be proposed based on the findings?

These questions were designed to yield a comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership in multigrade contexts, informing policy and practice aimed at school improvement.

Hypotheses of the Study

The study tested the following null and alternative hypotheses:

- **H₀ (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant difference in the instructional leadership practices of multigrade school heads when grouped according to age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service.
- **H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis):** There is a significant difference in the instructional leadership practices of multigrade school heads when grouped according to age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service.

Testing these hypotheses helps identify whether leadership practices are influenced by demographic variables, which can inform differentiated professional development programs and leadership succession planning in the region.

Review of Related Literature

Multigrade Education Overview

Multigrade education, wherein one teacher instructs students from multiple grade levels in a single classroom, is widely implemented in remote and underserved communities worldwide as a practical response to limited resources and sparse populations (Little, 2006). Countries like Colombia, India, and Thailand have integrated this model into national policies to promote equitable access to basic education (UNESCO, 2017). In the Philippines, the Department of Education institutionalized multigrade instruction through DepEd Order No. 81, s. 2009 and DepEd Order No. 83, s. 2017, mandating its use in areas with low enrollment and difficult terrain (Department of Education, 2017). DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020 further outlines standards for school heads managing such schools. While this approach supports educational equity, particularly in indigenous and geographically isolated areas (Agbisit, 2024), its implementation is challenged by pedagogical and administrative complexities. Teachers must accommodate varied learning levels, and school leaders are tasked with managing limited resources and supervising instruction. Internationally, models like Colombia's Escuela Nueva and Thailand's differentiated instruction training show how context-based approaches enhance multigrade effectiveness (Rojas-Chaves et al., 2020; Tanwongsva, 2021). However, as Dulguime (2025) found, Philippine school heads often face these demands without sufficient preparation or localized training, underscoring the importance of strengthening leadership practices to ensure multigrade education fulfills its inclusive promise.

Demographic Influences on Leadership

The influence of demographic variables—such as age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service—on leadership practices remains a debated topic in educational leadership literature. While situational and transformational leadership theories dominate, research still explores how individual characteristics shape school leadership. Age has been shown to influence decision-making maturity and strategic competence, with older principals often demonstrating greater emotional resilience (Alemayehu, 2021; Ekaterini et al., 2023). Gender findings are mixed: while some suggest women are more relational leaders (Sahlin, 2025), others, such as Claud and Dalisay (2024), found no significant differences in leadership effectiveness based on sex. Similarly, educational attainment does not guarantee superior performance; Dulguime (2025) and Ampofo et al. (2019) noted that practical experience and in-service training may be more influential than formal degrees. Years in service positively

correlate with leadership capacity, as experienced leaders tend to manage school complexities more effectively (Iqbal et al., 2020; Dulguime, 2025). Overall, while demographics contribute to leadership variation, they interact with institutional context, training, and professional experiences in shaping instructional leadership.

Strategic Leadership Challenges

Strategic leadership remains a critical yet underserved dimension in the operation of multigrade schools, particularly in geographically isolated contexts. Several studies have identified a recurring set of barriers faced by school heads, including limited access to formal training in strategic planning, inadequate mentoring, and insufficient support from higher-level governance structures. Bantilan, Sy, and Uddin (2023) argued that the absence of targeted capacity-building programs for rural school leaders hampers their ability to craft and implement responsive school improvement plans. Cobbinah (2020) similarly observed that school heads often rely on instinctual or reactive leadership due to their lack of exposure to evidence-based planning frameworks. These findings are echoed in Dulguime's study (2025), which revealed that while school heads demonstrated a willingness to initiate strategic actions, their efforts were frequently constrained by bureaucratic hurdles and the absence of localized policy support. Consequently, instructional leaders in multigrade settings struggle to align school operations with long-term educational goals, hindering the overall effectiveness of multigrade education.

Operational and Resource Management

Effective resource management is central to the sustainability of multigrade education. However, school heads often operate under financial and logistical constraints that limit their ability to manage school infrastructure, procure teaching materials, and ensure adequate human resources. Dinler (2024) emphasized that school-based financial planning is essential for educational equity, especially in underserved communities, yet this is undermined by delayed fund releases and unclear budgeting mechanisms. In the same vein, Mchunu, Hlongwane, and Dube (2022) found that infrastructural inadequacies—such as dilapidated classrooms and a lack of learning technologies—significantly impair instructional quality in rural multigrade schools. These resource deficits place additional strain on school heads, who must often compensate through informal community support and ad hoc fundraising. Dulguime (2025) noted that in Siargao Island, the ability of school leaders to mobilize external resources was inconsistent and often depended on personal networks rather than institutional support. This underscores the need for more systematic approaches to resource allocation and infrastructure planning in remote education settings.

Instructional Supervision and Capacity Building

Instructional supervision and teacher capacity development are pivotal to ensuring quality education in multigrade schools. In these contexts, school heads must not only oversee curriculum implementation but also mentor teachers who handle multiple grade levels concurrently. However, existing literature points to irregular and often superficial supervision practices due to the overwhelming administrative load placed on school leaders (Ampofo et al., 2019). Sahlin (2025) highlighted that professional development opportunities are sporadic, unstandardized, and frequently disconnected from the actual needs of multigrade teaching. This misalignment between training content and classroom realities diminishes the effectiveness of supervision. Dulguime's study (2025) confirms that while school heads recognize the importance of mentoring and pedagogical support, their engagement in these roles is hindered by competing administrative demands and the absence of continuous capacity-building programs tailored to the multigrade context. The findings suggest that effective instructional supervision must be accompanied by structured and contextually relevant professional development initiatives to uplift teaching standards in these unique learning environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory, originally conceptualized by Burns (1978) and extended by Bass (1985), which emphasizes the leader's role in inspiring and developing followers to achieve shared goals through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In the context of multigrade education, where school heads face complex instructional and managerial challenges, these leadership dimensions are critical. The theory aligns with the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020), which emphasize strategic leadership, instructional oversight, and stakeholder engagement. Transformational leadership provides a lens to understand how school heads in multigrade settings navigate their roles, adapt to varying contexts, and influence teaching and learning outcomes. It also supports the study's inquiry into how demographic factors—such as age, sex, education, and years in service—may shape leadership effectiveness.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

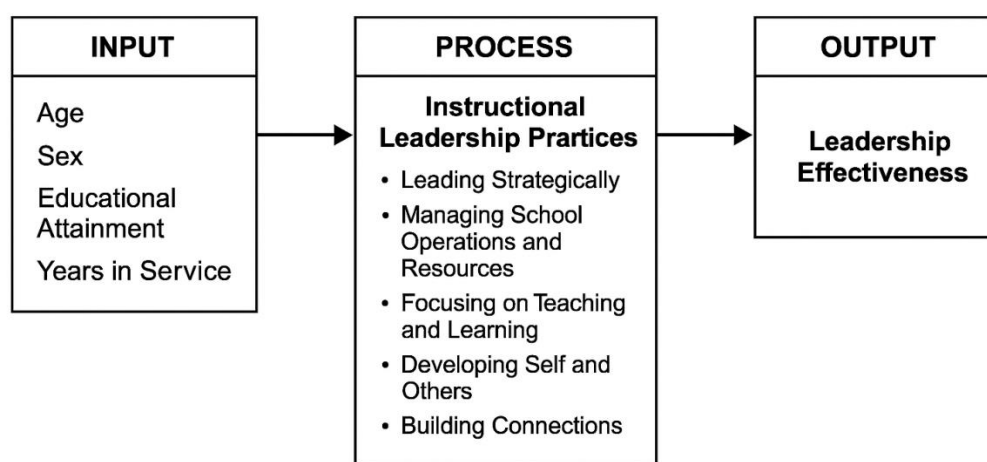


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, structured using the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model. The **Input** consists of demographic variables such as age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service of multigrade school heads. The **Process** refers to the five domains of instructional leadership based on the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH): leading strategically, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, managing school operations and resources, and building connections. The **Output** reflects the overall effectiveness of instructional leadership in multigrade schools. This framework illustrates how personal and professional attributes influence leadership practices, ultimately shaping the quality of school leadership in the multigrade context.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to systematically assess the instructional leadership practices of school heads in multigrade schools. The research was conducted in the Siargao Island Division, which comprises 12 districts, and involved a total of 35 school heads who were purposively selected based on their roles in managing multigrade classes. A researcher-developed two-part questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. Part I gathered demographic data such as age, sex, educational attainment, and years in service, while Part II measured leadership practices across five domains, following the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020). The instrument's validity was ensured through expert evaluation by professionals in multigrade and educational leadership, and reliability was established through pilot

testing using Cronbach's Alpha. Data were collected after obtaining formal permissions from the Schools Division and concerned district offices. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Statistical analysis involved the use of frequency and percentage to describe respondent profiles, mean and standard deviation to assess leadership practices, and ANOVA to test for significant differences in practices based on demographic variables. Throughout the study, ethical standards were rigorously upheld to protect participant rights and data integrity.

Results

Demographic Profile: Majority were females (51%), aged 40–45, MA undergraduates (66%), and had 0–5 years in service (46%).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Multigrade School Heads in Siargao Island Division (n = 35)

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	25–30	8	23%
	31–35	6	17%
	36–40	3	9%
	40–45	9	26%
	46 and above	9	26%
Sex	Female	18	51%
	Male	17	49%
Educational Attainment	Bachelor's Graduate	4	11%
	MA Undergraduate	23	66%
	MA Graduate	4	11%
	PhD Undergraduate	1	3%
	PhD Graduate	4	11%
Years in Service	0–5 years	16	46%
	6–10 years	9	26%
	11–15 years	4	11%
	16 years and above	6	17%

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 35 school heads managing multigrade schools in the Siargao Island Division. The data show that the majority of respondents were female (51%), aged between 40 and 45 years (26%), and currently enrolled in graduate studies, with 66% identified as MA undergraduates. Additionally, nearly half of the school heads (46%) had between 0 to 5 years of service, indicating a relatively young leadership cohort in terms of administrative experience. This profile highlights a mix of emerging and experienced instructional leaders, many of whom are still in the process of professional advancement.

Table 2. Instructional Leadership Practices of Multigrade School Heads (n = 35)

Domain	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Leading Strategically	3.71	Well-Practiced
Managing School Operations and Resources	3.64	Well-Practiced
Focusing on Teaching and Learning	3.65	Well-Practiced
Developing Self and Others	3.59	Well-Practiced
Building Connections	3.70	Well-Practiced

Table 2 presents the instructional leadership practices of the 35 multigrade school heads in Siargao Island Division across five key domains. All domains were rated as “Well-Practiced,” indicating consistent and effective leadership behaviors. The highest ratings were in leading strategically ($M = 3.71$) and building connections ($M = 3.70$), reflecting the school heads’ strong focus on aligning school goals with DepEd policies and fostering relationships with stakeholders. The other domains—managing operations, focusing on teaching, and developing self and others—also showed high levels of practice, suggesting a holistic and balanced approach to instructional leadership in multigrade contexts.

Table 3. Significant Differences in Instructional Leadership Practices by Demographic Profile

Profile Variable	Significant Difference	Interpretation
Age	Yes ($p < .05$)	Influenced most leadership domains
Years in Service	Yes ($p < .05$)	Influenced most leadership domains
Sex	No	No significant influence across domains
Educational Attainment	No	No significant influence across domains

Conclusion

School heads managing multigrade classes in Siargao Island exhibited commendable instructional leadership, with notable strengths in strategic planning and fostering stakeholder partnerships. Despite a considerable number being relatively new in their administrative roles, their leadership practices were consistently rated as effective across all domains. Statistical analysis revealed that age and years of service significantly influenced leadership performance, underscoring the importance of professional experience in navigating the complexities of multigrade school management.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several targeted recommendations are proposed to enhance instructional leadership in multigrade school settings. First, the establishment of a peer-based mentoring program is encouraged to support newly appointed school heads, with a focus on enhancing strategic leadership competencies through guided experience-sharing. Second, a digital knowledge-sharing platform should be developed to facilitate the exchange of best practices, strategies, and resources among multigrade school leaders, fostering a community of collaboration and continuous learning. Third, the institutionalization of regular Management Committee (MANCOM) briefing sessions is recommended to ensure that school heads remain updated on current DepEd directives, policy changes, and implementation protocols. Lastly, professional development initiatives must be tailored to the unique demands of multigrade education, with customized training modules that address instructional supervision, curriculum adaptation, and resource management in multi-level classroom environments. These interventions aim to strengthen leadership capacity and promote sustainability in the delivery of quality education in geographically isolated and underserved areas.

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