Leadership and Life: Exploring the School Administrators' Experiences on Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of secondary school administrators in Surigao del Norte Division in balancing professional responsibilities and personal life. Anchored in Husserlian descriptive phenomenology and guided by Moustakas' modified Van Kaam method, the study involved nine purposively selected school administrators who participated in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed six emergent themes: navigating the interwoven demands of leadership and life, unsteady balance between work and life, coping anchors in managing stress, sources of strength amid leadership demands, guiding schools through calm and storm, and preserving balance through quiet wisdom. Findings indicated that school administrators face persistent challenges in maintaining work-life balance due to workload, accountability pressures, and limited institutional support, but rely on personal resilience, family support, and professional networks to cope. The results highlight the importance of policy interventions such as flexible work arrangements, leadership training focused on stress management, and strengthening support systems to foster administrator well-being.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance, Lived Experiences, School Leadership, Husserlian Phenomenology, Moustakas, Surigao del Norte

Introduction

School leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effectiveness, culture, and overall performance of educational institutions. In an era of heightened expectations for quality education, accountability, and inclusivity, the demands placed upon school administrators have intensified. In the Philippines, principals are expected not only to manage resources and oversee administrative operations but also to inspire teachers, engage communities, and safeguard learner achievement.

However, research indicates that school leaders experience higher stress levels than teachers and other professionals, often resulting in burnout, job dissatisfaction, and early retirement (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). In Surigao del Norte, logistical barriers, limited resources, and communication challenges further complicate administrators' ability to maintain equilibrium between professional duties and personal responsibilities (Adolfo, 2025). These circumstances underscore the need to investigate how administrators navigate the intersection of leadership and life.

Work-life balance—defined as the optimal blend of work and personal responsibilities that enables individuals to lead satisfying and manageable lives (Wilk, 2013)—has been widely studied among teachers but less so among school administrators. Given that administrators' well-being directly influences teacher performance and student learning, understanding their lived experiences is vital.

Aim of the Study

The study aimed to describe and interpret the lived experiences of secondary school administrators in Surigao del Norte Division in balancing leadership responsibilities and personal life.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of the secondary school administrators of Surigao del Norte Division?
2. What essence and meanings can be derived from their lived experiences?
3. What themes may be formulated from the informants' responses?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will benefit:

- **School administrators** – by offering insights into coping strategies and promoting work-life balance practices.
- **Teachers** – through leadership models that encourage professional support and well-being.
- **Students** – by indirectly enhancing learning environments through improved leadership effectiveness.
- **Department of Education** – by providing evidence for policies that support administrators' mental health and workload management.
- **Families and communities** – by fostering healthier relationships between school leaders and their personal networks.

Literature Review

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is defined as the achievement of fulfilling experiences across different domains of life, including work, family, community, and leisure (Kirchmeyer, 2000, as cited in Khateeb, 2021). It is also described as the optimal blend of work and non-work responsibilities that allows an individual to feel life is satisfying and manageable (Wilk, 2013). Historically, the concept was reinforced when the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established limits on work hours and improved labor conditions, enabling greater flexibility in personal life (Sullivan, 2014; Khateeb, 2021).

Two key theories underpin WLB research. **Spillover Theory** posits that experiences in one domain (work or family) can positively or negatively influence the other, with gender differences in the direction of this spillover (Pleck, 1995). **Conflict Theory** (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) suggests that success in one role often comes at the expense of another, creating role conflict. In modern contexts, striking a balance is increasingly challenging, especially in education (Khateeb, 2021).

Role and Demands of School Administrators

Principals are critical leaders tasked with managing resources, fostering a positive school climate, and promoting student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021). They significantly influence not only academic outcomes but also teacher development and community engagement (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019, as cited in Wu & Shen, 2022). However, the role is demanding—principals report higher stress levels (85%) compared to teachers (73%) and other professionals (35%), with substantial rates of exhaustion and depression (Doan et al., 2022; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2022).

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education's *Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads* (DepEd Order No. 024, s. 2020) emphasizes leadership practices that support teacher improvement and learner achievement. Studies by Borreba and Potane (2024) show that principals who prioritize WLB can enhance teacher well-being and job satisfaction. However, local challenges—such as limited resources and logistical barriers—undermine administrators' capacity to achieve balance (Adolfo, 2025).

Challenges in Achieving Work-Life Balance

Research highlights that administrators often work beyond school hours, extending professional demands into personal time (Toropova et al., 2021). In remote schools, lack of support structures leads to occupational dissatisfaction and psychological strain (Tindowen et al., 2019). Female administrators, in particular, face heightened stress due to administrative constraints and reduced family interaction (Stephen, 2024; Schieman et al., 2021). In Marinduque, Carpio and Dela Cruz (2025) reported significant work pressure and emotional fatigue among public school heads, corroborating findings by the American Psychological Association (2022) that WLB imbalance increases the risk of mental health disorders by 40%.

Strategies and Support Mechanisms

Evidence suggests that targeted strategies can mitigate WLB challenges. Time management, prioritization, and delegation enhance productivity while reducing burnout (Bush & Glover, 2022; Boyd et al., 2011). Support networks—both professional and familial—are critical buffers against stress (Luthans et al., 2015; Wayne et al., 2017). Leadership modeling of balanced behaviors can foster healthier organizational cultures (Foti, 2024), while positive school climates correlate with improved WLB outcomes (Carpio & Dela Cruz, 2025).

Synthesis of the Review

The literature converges on the conclusion that while school administrators play an indispensable role in educational success, the demands of leadership often compromise their personal well-being. Persistent imbalances can lead to burnout, reduced effectiveness, and diminished job satisfaction. Supportive organizational cultures, flexible work arrangements, and leadership training focused on stress management emerge as critical in promoting sustainable school leadership. These insights reinforce the need for qualitative exploration of administrators' lived experiences in balancing leadership and life, as undertaken in this study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **Husserlian Phenomenology**, which emphasizes exploring human experiences as they are consciously lived, without presuppositions, to uncover their essence and meaning. Central to this approach is **epoche** (bracketing), in which the researcher suspends personal biases and preconceived notions to fully engage with participants' perspectives.

The study also adopts a **constructivist ontological stance**, which views reality as socially and individually constructed. This perspective acknowledges that each school administrator's experiences of balancing leadership and personal life are shaped by their unique contexts, social interactions, and personal beliefs.

In addition, the research follows **Clark Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology**, specifically the **modified Van Kaam method** of analysis (1994). This systematic process includes horizonalization, clustering themes, and synthesizing meanings into textural and structural descriptions, culminating in a composite essence of the phenomenon.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates constructivist ontology, Husserlian phenomenology, and Moustakas' methodological approach to explore the lived experiences of school administrators in Surigao del Norte Division. Data from in-depth interviews are analyzed to identify emergent themes, which are then connected to practical implications for stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, families, students, and the Department of Education.
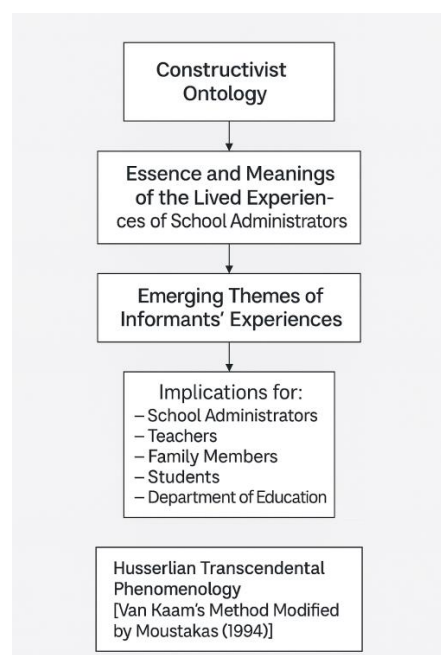

Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Study

Figure 1 presents the schematic diagram from the original study, illustrating the relationship between the philosophical underpinnings, emergent themes, and implications for educational practice.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive transcendental phenomenological design, guided by Moustakas' (1994) modification of Van Kaam's method, to explore the lived experiences of nine purposively selected secondary school administrators from the Surigao del Norte Division. Participants, all full-fledged principals with at least three years of service, were interviewed using a validated semi-structured guide that included a grand tour question and follow-up prompts on challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems. Data were gathered through face-to-face or virtual interviews, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes. Analysis followed Moustakas' eight-step process—horizonalization, reduction, clustering, validation, and synthesis—culminating in a composite description of the phenomenon. Ethical clearance was secured from St. Paul University Surigao, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Themes and Descriptions of Administrators' Experiences
(Research Question 1: What are the experiences of the secondary school administrators of Surigao del Norte Division?)

Theme	Description
Navigating the Interwoven Demands of Leadership and Life	Balancing overlapping responsibilities in school operations, teacher supervision, community engagement, and family roles.
Unsteady Balance Between Work and Life	Struggling to maintain equilibrium due to heavy workloads, frequent deadlines, and administrative reporting requirements.
Coping Anchors in Managing Stress	Using strategies such as time management, delegation, prayer, peer support, and setting priorities.
Sources of Strength Amid Leadership Demands	Drawing motivation from family, faith, professional commitment, and positive school outcomes.
Guiding Schools Through Calm and Storm	Leading with adaptability during crises such as disasters, resource shortages, and sudden policy changes.
Preserving Balance Through Quiet Wisdom	Practicing self-care, maintaining perspective, and seeking harmony between personal and professional life.

Table 1 presents the six themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of secondary school administrators in Surigao del Norte Division. These themes reveal how administrators navigate the intersection of professional duties and personal life. The first two themes describe the constant interplay and imbalance between leadership responsibilities and family or personal roles. The third and fourth highlight the coping mechanisms and motivational sources—such as time management, delegation, faith, and family support—that sustain them in their roles. The fifth theme reflects their adaptability in leading through crises, while the final theme emphasizes deliberate efforts to preserve personal well-being. Collectively, the themes illustrate that maintaining work-life balance is an ongoing, dynamic process influenced by resilience, support systems, and organizational demands.

Table 2. Essence and Meanings of Administrators' Lived Experiences
(Research Question 2: What essence and meanings can be derived from their lived experiences?)

Essence / Meaning	Description

Essence / Meaning	Description
Resilient Negotiation of Roles	Administrators continuously adjust to fulfill both professional duties and personal responsibilities under resource and time constraints.
Leadership as Duty and Calling	Viewing their role not merely as a job but as a vocation that demands dedication, service, and personal sacrifice.
Work-Life Balance as a Dynamic Process	Recognizing that balance is not static but requires ongoing adaptation to shifting demands.
Sacrifice and Adaptability	Accepting personal sacrifices while employing adaptive strategies to manage challenges.
Need for Systemic Support	Understanding that sustainable leadership requires institutional policies, resources, and support networks.

Table 2 summarizes the distilled essence and meanings derived from administrators' narratives. Their experiences are characterized by resilience in managing dual roles, a deep sense of vocation, and an understanding of balance as an evolving state. Personal sacrifice and adaptability are central to coping, while the recognition of systemic support needs reflects a broader awareness that organizational structures play a vital role in sustaining their effectiveness and well-being.

Table 3. **Formulated Themes from Administrators' Responses**
(Research Question 3: What themes may be formulated from the informants' responses?)

Theme	Sub-Themes / Focus Areas
Navigating the Interwoven Demands of Leadership and Life	Overlapping roles; balancing school management, teacher supervision, and personal obligations.
Unsteady Balance Between Work and Life	Work overload; strict reporting deadlines; difficulty maintaining personal time.
Coping Anchors in Managing Stress	Time management; delegation; reliance on faith; peer support; prioritization.
Sources of Strength Amid Leadership Demands	Family encouragement; spiritual grounding; professional commitment; student success stories.
Guiding Schools Through Calm and Storm	Leadership during crises; resource mobilization; policy adaptation.
Preserving Balance Through Quiet Wisdom	Self-care practices; mindfulness; maintaining perspective on priorities.

Table 3 consolidates the six major themes identified from the administrators' responses, along with their key sub-themes. These themes mirror the results of Research Question 1 but are presented here with more specific focus areas that emerged during data analysis. Together, they highlight the multifaceted nature of school leadership and the diverse strategies administrators employ to manage both professional and personal demands.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

This study investigated the lived experiences of nine secondary school administrators in the Surigao del Norte Division as they navigated the challenges of balancing leadership responsibilities with personal life. Guided by

Husserlian phenomenology and analyzed through Moustakas' modified Van Kaam method, the research revealed six major themes. These were: navigating the interwoven demands of leadership and life, unsteady balance between work and life, coping anchors in managing stress, sources of strength amid leadership demands, guiding schools through calm and storm, and preserving balance through quiet wisdom. Collectively, these themes captured how administrators confronted overlapping professional and personal obligations, the difficulties of maintaining equilibrium in the face of heavy workloads and deadlines, and the coping mechanisms they relied upon—such as time management, delegation, and strong support systems. The essence of their experiences was characterized by resilience, adaptability, and a deep sense of vocation, with work-life balance perceived as a dynamic process that demanded continuous adjustment and was influenced by both personal resourcefulness and systemic support.

Conclusions

The findings of the study indicate that work-life balance among school administrators is a constantly shifting state rather than a fixed condition. Administrators continuously negotiate between professional responsibilities and personal commitments, adjusting strategies to meet the demands of both spheres. Their capacity to remain effective leaders is rooted in resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of calling to serve their schools and communities. The results further demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is not sustained by personal effort alone but requires institutional and policy support to address workload pressures and provide necessary resources. Finally, both personal networks, such as family and friends, and professional support systems within the school environment, play a pivotal role in enabling administrators to sustain their leadership roles while safeguarding their well-being.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For the Department of Education, it is essential to create and implement policies that promote flexible work arrangements and streamline administrative processes to reduce unnecessary workload and enable administrators to focus on instructional leadership and community engagement. School administrators are encouraged to continue strengthening their coping strategies, such as effective time management, delegation of tasks, and practicing self-care, while fostering a positive and supportive school culture that benefits both staff and students. Providers of leadership development programs should integrate modules on stress management, emotional resilience, and work-life integration into their training curricula to better prepare leaders for the complex demands of the role. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of this study to include administrators from other divisions and regions in order to compare experiences and identify strategies that are effective across different contexts. Such studies would provide a broader evidence base for policy and practice aimed at supporting sustainable and effective school leadership.

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